

**SPL Poets Advisory Group
Meeting I: 9 December, 2017
Minutes**

In attendance: Katie Ailes (chair), Beth Cochrane (note-taker), Jay Whittaker, Harry Smart, Calum Rodger, Samuel Tongue, Rachel Rankin, Diana Hendry, Henry Bell, Stephen Keeler, Kevin Cadwallender.

Apologies: Nadine Aisha Jassat, Caroline Johnstone

The agenda for this meeting was set by the participants. They emailed KA their priorities for poetry in Scotland and points they wished to discuss at the meeting, and from these suggestions KA put together the agenda.

In the first hour, the group considered the following agenda points:

Outreach Beyond Barriers & Cross-Population Collaboration

• *Guiding ?s: How can the SPL reach those who encounter barriers to accessing poetry in Scotland, whether these boundaries be geographical, socioeconomic, due to health/ability, age, sexual orientation/identity, race/ethnicity, and/or language? How can we bring diverse populations together to learn from one another?*

SK began the discussion by raising the question of access to SPL resources across Scotland. He noted a feeling of isolation being based in Ullapool given the difficulty of traveling to events in the Central Belt. He praised Ullapool's thriving literary scene: two indie bookshops, Ullapool Book Festival, multiple writers groups. He observed that there are two bookshelves in an Ullapool hotel labelled "Scottish Poetry Library" and considered whether this might be a possibility in other locations across Scotland, in public settings and schools. He also noted that there is only one reference to outreach in the SPL business plan.

KC observed that this problem isn't limited to Ullapool but exists across Scotland. Discussion that the problem extends to any location outwith the Central Belt.

HS raised the issue of financial barriers to accessing poetry re benefits: the cost of travel to events is impossible for many.

KA noted that Neu! Reekie! conducted an "Anywhere but the Cities" tour to reach outwith the Central Belt and questioned where this might be a model for the SPL to replicate.

KC proposed a "Reading Squad" rather than a tour of poets around the country. This could be setting up reading groups in different locations under the SPL logo. KC considered the importance of getting the SPL logo outside the Central Belt. JW agreed that the "Reading Squad" model might encourage local people in to read the SPL material.

CR proposed creating a network of poets locally in each smaller town, rather than pulling people in from elsewhere. KC and others observed that there are organisers in many locales that could plug in to the SPL.

HS observed that establishing resources under the SPL name outwith the SPL (such as the SPL shelves in Ullapool) can be a double edged sword. HS suggested that we need to be careful about terms such as 'outreach' as they can be patronising. As soon as any corporate logo is put on something it becomes inaccessible to those who feel as though it's not for them.

Group discussion regarding the purpose of the PAG. Is it to suggest activities that get the SPL name out there so more are aware of it and feel comfortable using the resources? Or is it about 'bringing people and poems together' (from the SPL mission) regardless of whether users are aware that the SPL is behind those activities? KA clarified that the purpose of the PAG is to suggest any activities that it feels would benefit poets/poetry in Scotland. KA observed that perhaps there may be a perception of the SPL as a 'middle class' organisation and welcomed suggestions for evolving that perception to a more welcoming one.

Discussion regarding names. CR wondered if having localised branches (i.e. Ullapool Poetry Library, Montrose Poetry Library) might help. HS observed that any institutional logo can create a barrier.

SK returned discussion to geographical isolation. Acknowledged that SPL does great activities but that it can't run all of them outwith the Central Belt.

DH asked KC for clarification re the Reading Squad idea. KC envisions squads who go into areas/libraries etc. to do readings. DH observed that the SPL already does programming in care homes with the elderly. Maybe an extension of that? KC observed that this idea could do away with the ideas of just poets doing readings, as non-poets could be in the squad doing readings.

JW observed that there is an appetite for poetry in many communities, and themed events/readings may be a way to access them.

KC proposed the SPL sponsoring/hosting events at book festivals across Scotland and perhaps outside of Scotland as well.

KA observed that the SPL has a Postal Library service - if you're a SPL Friend books can get sent to you for free. To publicise this service, the SPL could have stalls at festivals/gatherings around Scotland where people can register for an SPL library card.

Discussion regarding how the SPL can engage with diverse/widespread communities. SK suggestions having local representatives around Scotland who are in direct contact with the SPL and can facilitate activities for the SPL. JW suggests that the SPL have a local representative at events across Scotland. KC suggests having representatives from SPL going into schools etc, to enhance presence. KC observes that the SPL name doesn't mean anything to people under a certain age, and steps should be taken to amend that.

DH notes that *Tools of the Trade for Teachers* is being published by the SPL and this could be a mechanism for the SPL doing more work in schools.

RR stated that her priority for this group was increasing access to poetry in schools, especially schools in deprived areas. Noted that there are programmes like Foyle Young Poets but they don't operate in Scotland. Acknowledged programmes like Poetry By Heart but argued that that primarily appeals to those already interested in poetry. There is a need for programming to reach those who don't know they like poetry yet.

KC proposed that the SPL could get involved in programming slams in schools and that this could be a vehicle for bringing in younger, more relatable poets for students to identify with.

ST argued that Poetry By Heart needs to have more elements to it, should be opened up a bit more. Observed that schools who win it tend to be fee paying; they have more time etc. Don't hear from a broad enough range of students.

HS quoted from the SPL Business Plan: "SPL is moving towards an evidence based programme." HS queried: How do we create evidence? How many of the students in Poetry By Heart have families on benefits? How do we get those numbers?

HB observed that schools' participation in Poetry By Heart and similar programs depends on having ambassadors (poets, poetry lovers, people aware of the SPL) at schools. Can we reach more English teachers in areas of deprivation?

HS shared insight from his research on poverty in Scotland: when GP surgeries and their immediate catchment areas are mapped, the areas outside these catchments tend to be high-poverty areas. HS suggests that we map the schools in Scotland.

DH shared her priority: that younger people need opportunities to play with words, and that these opportunities should involve in-face interactions with poets and readers.

CR expressed interest in learning the figures for users of the postal library system: may be a way of gauging SPL reach across geographical and socioeconomic boundaries. Possibility of running the postal system as a correspondence type system. Proposed redesigning the online library catalogue to look more like Amazon, with recommendations: more user-friendly and accessible than a normal catalogue system.

HS returned to DH's priority of building in a personal contact/buddy system etc.

KC cited existing programming where older students partner with younger students.

SK noted that celebrity status can be useful to get kids involved.

KA flagged up that the SPL website is being redesigned and that the second hour of discussion will focus in part on how the SPL can improve digital resources. Suggested that the group look at the last three agenda points in this section (how to provide resources to those across a diverse

range of sexual orientations & identities, races & ethnicities, and languages). KA observed that no group members stated that gender diversity/exclusion was a priority, which can either mean it's no longer a problem or that group members weren't aware of or focused on it. Queried how do we make the SPL a more welcoming place for all, in terms of gender/sexual orientation/racial/language barriers?

KC claimed that welcoming diverse individuals into the poetry community in Scotland has become less of a problem over time. Raised the question of groups designed for specific identities (i.e. women's only groups) to make those groups feel safe vs. integrated groups.

JW shared a recent experience of speaking at an event at the LGBT Healthy Living Centre. This event was a women's only space (inclusive of trans and cis women) and was one of the more racially diverse platforms she's been at. JW praised exclusive spaces for feeling safe and supportive, and for confidence-building.

KC praised Marjorie Lotfi Gill's work with all-women groups of refugees at the SPL and Maryhill Community Centre.

JW: The Healthy Living Centre is great, but is contained within the Central Belt. Can the SPL find similar organisations to work with throughout Scotland?

RR proposed having themed readings, i.e. poetry by LGBTQ+ poets and poets of colour, at the SPL's regular reading sessions (Open Book, Nothing But the Poem). Having themes can be useful, even just if in book displays at the library.

JW expressed interest in how library books are catalogued, i.e. which keywords are used, to broaden access.

HS: Coordinating with 'non-bookish' organisations is important so people feel comfortable accessing these services. JW proposed the SPL building links with cancer centres, such as Maggie's or Marie Curie.

KA wondered if the SPL is tied into or could better tie into festivals such as Absent Friends and the Scottish Mental Health Festival.

KA pointed out that the SPL as a venue is physically accessible, which is rare for poetry venues in Scotland. How can we support grassroots poetry nights getting accessible venues?

KC wondered if this is a useful discussion for this group, as we/the SPL don't have much control over increasing accessible spaces in Scotland.

HS suggested that to increase access the SPL should put pressure on its partner organisations, as should other literary organisations, to give them support in increasing access. DH suggested that it may not be in the PAG's or SPL's remit to challenge their partners re accessibility, but agrees that fees and other barriers need to be reduced.

ST suggested that it would be useful for the SBT website to host a database of venues in Scotland with information on accessibility. JW observed that often the venues that are accessible charge prohibitively high rates.

KC observed that there is a reduced rates ticket programme at the EIBF. HS replies that it's a cultural barrier first and foremost preventing those on benefits from accessing many literary events/organisations. KC observed that EIBF programming such as their evening event Unbound is trying to overcome that barrier. But given the cultural barrier, is it a better idea to set up separate, more accessible events? HS: I'd like it to be part of our culture to ask 'What are you doing for people on benefits'?

HB addressed the point on reaching across language barriers. Aware there are Urdu, Polish, and more poetry reading groups in Scotland - how can the SPL reach them? HB proposed that every 3 or 4 events at the SPL should have a non-English language poet.

SK reiterated that the SPL should commit to having a presence at all the festivals across Scotland.

Discussion of how the SPL can increase accessibility for D/deaf poets. Multiple group members shared how events which featured BSL interpreters were enhanced for the hearing as well as made accessible for the D/deaf. KC praised the work of Rachel Amey, a poet and BSL interpreter. CR suggested organising live translation/collaborative events of BSL into the spoken word.

KC asked whether the SPL can apply for funds outwith Creative Scotland, and BC confirmed that it can. KC proposed having an SPL publishing arm which could publish anthologies, made easier by its access to all of the work in its collections.

CR pointed out that the danger of this idea is that it positions the SPL as the official/sanctioned publisher of poetry in Scotland: it couldn't be perceived as objective.

KC proposed instead the idea of an anthology in which entries are voted on, like the model of 'The nation's 100 favourite poems.'

DH observed that the SPL has been in collaboration on publication projects in the past. DH cautioned that making the SPL a publisher would involve excluding many entries for publication, which could upset people and prevent them from engaging with the SPL again.

HS shared the model of the One O'Clock Gun, a paper freely available in pubs in Edinburgh which publishes a range of material. Others pointed out the issues that that paper only publishes on a certain theme, and that it is only available in certain geographical locations.

HB raised concerns around the SPL becoming a publisher because it would be a gatekeeper, and that shouldn't be its role, particularly given the concerns re accessibility.

KA mentioned that the SPL currently publishes the Poetry Reader.

HB: There's currently a big lack in Scottish poetry publication. Rather than becoming a publisher itself, the SPL can support publishers with space to work, information etc.

KC and others agree: it's a case of getting the SPL to provide poets with contacts with publishers, more support making zines, resources for self-publishing, etc.

JW observed that online poetry mags can be more accessible, as paper format of poetry can be quite exclusive. HS reminded us that online isn't always accessible to everyone as it is dependent on having a computer or phone and internet access, which not all have.

HS: Can we make it a motion to map postcode in order to gauge progress through an evidence-based approach? Particularly with schools and other institutions and venues/festival involvement. Group agrees.

BREAK

In the second hour, the group considered the following agenda points:

Professional Development for Poets

- *Guiding ?s: How can the SPL better support poets at all levels of their careers through providing certain resources? How can the SPL assist in liaising between organisations/businesses and poets in Scotland to establish collaborations and partnerships?*
 - a. *Founding New Databases*
 - b. *Website and/or App Development*

ST stated that the SBT provides a good package of professional training services for those who win their New Writers' Awards: web presence, performance training, week at Moniack Mhor, a mentor and workshops. ST envisioned that the SPL could provide similar services, though acknowledged the budget restrictions. This could include industry advice including how to fill out self-assessment tax returns. System of passing on knowledge.

DH queried whether the SBT provides those services to all or only the New Writers Award winners. ST replied that it's only the awardees, so it would be great if the SPL could provide those services to all interested users.

SK shared that the most helpful element of his New Writers Award was the mentorship, and advocated the SPL facilitating more mentor-mentee relationships for poets in Scotland. JW agreed regarding the transformative potential of mentoring, and added that online mentoring is also a possibility.

ST stated the importance of making access to these resources open to as many groups as possible, from school right up the way. JW noted that some are willing and able to pay for mentorship programmes.

HS raised the issue that people on benefits can jeopardise their benefits through participation in such programmes (or any artistic activities) because this activity may be considered evidence that they are fit to work. Discussion regarding these issues and the related issues of immigrants who may face barriers to full participation in the arts.

HS wants people to have a chance to perform without being afraid of losing their benefits. HS suggested that one way that the SPL can help with this is by ensuring that the vocabulary for programming is very carefully edited and includes the venue, the name of the project involved, how often it is. For example, 'Professional Development' is problematic.

DH identified two strands in this discussion: poets who do have an income and who need a little more help (i.e. 'professional development'), and the people HS are talking about that dare not start making a living for fear of losing their benefits.

HB noted that the SPL pseudo-operates as a professional poets trade union. Could it do a bit more? SBT sets their rates: is there something the SPL could do for poets?

KC observed that New Writing North has set rates, and others added that other organisations have also proposed set rates.

The group agreed that it is important for poets to be paid.

HS wondered whether the SPL could get the DWP to support poets receiving fees who are also on benefits.

KC suggested that the SPL could work with the Citizen's Advice Bureau to set up advice sessions on these matters. JW raised the question of where these sessions would take place.

KA moved the discussion forward to the question of the SPL establishing databases useful to poets in Scotland.

RR: Considers herself an emerging writer, feels she only has contacts, mentoring etc because of educational privilege. Feels that making it as a professional poet it's all about who you know. That can be very alienating to many, particularly those not in higher education. There's a lot of online information, but mostly isn't up to date. Would be good to have a database of running events/current pamphlets online.

DH raised the point of writing good poetry as a priority. Suggested a small workshop group. RR agreed, but replied that the issue is that people are already writing good poems: they just don't know where and how to get them out into the world. It can be difficult to get a break in.

KC suggested that the website needs to be updated with all the events running, as at the moment not all poetry events are publicised through the SPL events calendar. Event organisers need to fill in the online submission form.

KA shared that she and Carly Brown as SPL Ambassadors set up a comprehensive list of all live poetry events in Scotland, but it's already out of date. Keeping the SPL events calendar comprehensive takes so much time and resources. Maybe there is a way of publicising the SPL events calendar more so that more events organisers submit their events and more people use the SPL events calendar to find events (rather than social media).

KC suggested that this needs to be one person's job. KA raised that BC is currently on a part-time contract but potentially if she were full-time this might fall under her remit as Programme Coordinator.

CR noted that there is a database of poets/poems on the SPL website and raised the idea of that database being accessible through an app or other easier user interface. This could include a poem a day app or events push notifications.

DH returned the discussion to the question of how the SPL can support poets in advancing their craft. DH proposed gatherings of writers to discuss craft and practice.

CR agreed: We're talking about really important things, but what is the state of Scottish poetry today? We're actually in a thriving scene in Scotland, both in performance and on the page. Although 'the scene' is stratified – stage v page etc. Can we merge different traditions?

HS shared the model of the manuscript wishlist in the fiction community. Once a month an agent goes through queries in their inbox and talks about that (over Twitter). Has created a really great community. On the back of that there's a great website with a database of information.

CR: Sounds good, but emphasises bringing together different scenes. Need to have these things in a space as a live event – dangers of online interaction. Also the possibility of having a live event for emerging poets or whatever – SPL is a great environment to get these things on the go. Idea of a performance night with a Q&A at the end.

JW queried whether the SPL offers advice or resources for starting workshop groups across Scotland, and proposes that it should.

Discussion regarding whether settled versus pop-up groups are the better model. KC queried whether the SPL can affiliate with writers groups that already exist.

SK suggested that this could happen around the whole country: SPL could be an umbrella to connect these groups. Raised the question of how to attract new people to these groups.

HB proposed having a list of writers groups in Scotland on the SPL website with details of how open the groups are, when/where they meet, etc. Group agreed.

Discussion of SPL's podcast service and questions regarding whether this could be expanded to include film. CR brought up the film-poem project from last year, including the 48-hour Film-poem Challenge, which engaged poets in Scotland and internationally. Proposed idea of the

SPL being involved in/coordinating a film-poem challenge next year, perhaps in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of Margaret Tait birth in 2018.

ST proposed the SPL borrowing the SBT's model of the Live Lit database but exclusively for poets. This would mean external partners can log in and see bios of poets and are able to contact them.

KA raised the issue that in order for poetry organisations/events to access funding, they need to understand the applications and the required language. Can the SPL offer resources to poets to learn these grant-writing skills?

Discussion re grant writing. SK observed that every arts organisation has a grant-writer and proposed having a list of these online. Others noted that this is a competitive industry and most organisations might be reluctant to share that resource. KA noted that there are independent grant writers and proposed the SPL website having a list of these people and other resources on how to apply for arts funding.

HB reminded us that there are other funding bodies and opportunities beyond Creative Scotland, and it would be useful for the SPL website to host a list of these.

Wrapping up of meeting

Discussion regarding how the minutes and suggestions from this meeting will be disseminated. KA will send this abridged version of the minutes to the group for edits and thoughts before they are published online. One purpose of this group is for its discussions and ideas to be transparent and available to all.

Discussion regarding how the group will communicate moving forward. General agreement that KA will set up an email thread between all group members. The next face-to-face meeting will be in the spring, and KA will share that date with members as far in advance as possible.

Query regarding the power this group has to influence SPL policy. KA clarified that the group has no enforceable power as we aren't aware of the budgetary restraints, etc. However, hopefully these suggestions will be useful to the staff in planning and implementing activities, and all suggestions will be made public on the SPL website.

BC mentioned that the SPL staff are always available and approachable for any specific project ideas or queries.

Query regarding how non-group members who are interested in also sharing their views can view in. Will there be a comments section on the website? No. HB proposed sharing an email address at the conclusion of these minutes for people to share their comments. The group agreed. KA offered that we can use the splambassadors@gmail.com email.

Query regarding whether the SPL will reply to these minutes and suggestions. The group agreed that they would like to see a response from the SPL.