

SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY: AGM 2021

Report from the Co-Chairs

This was a year like no other we can recall. From the start of April 2020, we were in the beginning stages of the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Board decided to meet more frequently (monthly at first), and we quickly adapted our operational budget to support home-working for staff, and to identify which services we could continue online and which ones we would have to temporarily suspend. When the library re-opened in August we invested in more cleaning services and Personal Protective Equipment.

We welcomed Jill Mackintosh as our new Head Librarian, whose introduction to the library was cut short after only three days, when lockdown kicked in March 2020. Jill possesses 30 years' experience working in public libraries in Perth and Kinross, with specific expertise in systems management and championing equalities. One of Jill's first tasks on re-opening the library was to conduct a stock-check of the collection and initiate a much-needed weeding process.

Loan issues were extended, and we shifted our creative writing and reader development workshops online through a Zoom account, which we also made available to external groups to continue their meetings where possible. We also partnered with the Edinburgh Fringe Society on a new box-office system managed through our website to improve the customer experience of booking our online events and workshops. An unforeseen benefit of the online programme was the participation of people from as far afield as Canada and Australia. We increasingly focused on health and wellbeing themes; for example, from September 2020 we have supported creative writing activity with people experiencing Long Covid.

Where services could not be delivered from home, identified staff were put on furlough as part of the Job Retention Scheme. When the scheme offered more flexibility from November 2020, we put some staff on part-furlough and the organisation worked at approximately two-thirds capacity of the staff team's available working hours. Whilst the staff were on furlough, we took steps to ensure that their welfare was prioritised and we strived to keep worker morale high despite the stresses associated with the pandemic.

We recognised the sterling work that staff had made to keep the SPL operational and the library open during the year by rewarding them with additional annual leave over the Christmas period.

When the first lockdown was lifted in August 2020, we were the first library to open to the public in Edinburgh. We made the library available for public visits on reduced hours on weekdays. When the Government guidelines permitted indoor venues to resume their activities, room hires and hybrid meetings began to return from April 2021.

The pandemic had a big impact on our commercial revenues from events, room hires and retail. As you will see from the audited accounts, this shortfall was mostly covered by the Job Retention Scheme, without which we might have had to consider more drastic saving measures. The surplus from the financial year has been designated to a budget to sustain our programme of commissions and partnership projects, with organisations including Capability Scotland and Africa in Motion film festival.

We pivoted our programme to online commissions, ably supported by the first intake of our new Poetry Ambassadors' programme. This was a Board-inspired initiative to help extend the SPL's reach across Scotland, and to provide a platform to writers that might otherwise have gone under the radar.

In November 2020, we welcomed two newly-elected Board members, Claudia Daventry and Chris Wardhaugh. Claudia, based in Fife, worked in advertising before turning to poetry and translation teaching work, as well as academic study. She is a former Board member of Poetry London. Chris, based in Dumfriesshire, brings business acumen to the Board. He is the Chief Business Officer of MGB Biopharma Limited, a clinical-stage antibiotic company, and Chris is also a founder of Sercader Limited, a life sciences advisory firm.

Our colleague Marcas Mac an Tuairneir stepped down from the Board in the summer of 2021 to apply for the role of Scottish Gaelic services co-ordinator. We thank Marcas for his equalities advocacy, including the championing of resources and activities for the LGBT community. We look forward to seeing the ways in which Marcas develops strategic partnerships with Scottish Gaelic organisations and public bodies.

We had introduced a Co-Chair model in September 2019. Charlie Roy replaced Jane Ryder as the Co-Chair alongside Gordon Munro. We give thanks to the sterling work that Jane provided the organisation in leading on the modernising of our governing policies and strategic development.

We also acknowledge the contribution of Stuart Paterson, who stood down after one term. Stuart was a strong advocate for our equalities work, and the development of support for Scots and Scottish Gaelic languages in particular. He hosted a members' drive in Dumfries in the autumn of 2019.

Nuala Watt also stepped down from the Board at the AGM. Nuala's contributions included advocating for a reduced membership fee for students and low-income people, along with supporting the development of our equalities, diversity and inclusion plan.

In August 2021, we were delighted to host the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon for the announcement of Kathleen Jamie as Scotland's new Makar (national poet). In what was her first public engagement after the second lockdown, the First Minister emphasised that we are a poetic nation, and her Government valued the work that the SPL did in developing and showcasing Scottish writers at home and on the international stage. We took the invitation to stage this high-level engagement as a sign that the SPL was regarded in high esteem in the most senior levels of the Scottish Government.

At the Board meeting in November 2021, we were pleased to sign-off on a new three-year business plan, which we hope will strengthen our case for continued core funding from Creative Scotland's regular funding programme. Our strategic focus will be on supporting wellbeing activity, promoting poetry as an inspiring art form for people from all walks of life reaching out across all of Scotland, and creating pathways to poetry with partner organisations in the arts, voluntary sector and public bodies.

We would like to thank the Board and staff team for their endeavours and passion in keeping the SPL's services and commissions impactful during the pandemic, and to our audiences and borrowers for keeping in touch and engaging with our collection and programmes.