

Commissioning differently

In 2020 the Covid-19 crisis led many in Dorset's cultural sector to start asking how we could do things differently and make things better for organisations, artists, and audiences.

In response, The Arts Development Company asked:

'how can we improve commissioning?'

Through connecting with What's Next? Dorset, and with artists from Dorset Creatives, shared conversation helped us understand the challenges and opportunities freelancers and commissioners are faced with.

This led to The Arts Development Company piloting a different way of commissioning, informed by freelancers at all stages, called **'The Good Life'**.

What The Arts Development Company did

Three freelance artists were paid to review and redesign the commission brief
Two freelance artists were paid to support the recruitment of the commissioned artists, feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

They provided producer/mentor support to both each other and the artists.
They evaluated the process and wrote this summary report.

*"I would like a mentor to keep me going now.
I think you always have to be willing to learn, it doesn't matter
how far you are in your career, you might always need help to
get out of a rut."*



Artist Feedback

TIPS: How to write a good brief



Ask an artist to help you

To attract different artists, empower them to apply. Offer encouragement, welcome brilliant ideas and enthusiasm, alongside more traditional fully formed proposals.

Actively invite conversations with prospective applicants, and offer support to apply. Online info sessions, and FAQs sheets are a good start

(Full report including more tips for writing a brief on
The Arts Development Company Website)

What happens when you commission differently?

Different artists apply
Creative outcomes are improved
Wider audiences are reached
Artists are supported to grow professionally
Networks are developed
Organisations can be better connected to
local communities and artists



How commissioning differently supported artists better

One of the outcomes for this project was the impact of bringing artists together with producer support. This project has confirmed the need for greater levels of artist development at all career stages across Dorset and BCP to allow them to thrive within their practice.

This 'commissioning differently' model provided mutual peer support and encouraged new networks to form.

Working with artist-producers offered:

Support and development for early career artists to increase their skills as professional artists within the County

Encouragement for them to have greater ambitions for their creative work

Support to grow their audiences and promote their practice further

At the end of the project the result is three artists, who are better networked, more confident, have wider audiences, and are making progression in their creative careers.

"It's been great to know that support is there for dialogue, I've not felt that overwhelming isolation"



"When I showed you the poem, to me it was done, but then you said, what about this, what about that, I don't think it would be as good as it is, without ... you helping me refine it."

"I never would have had the confidence to think of a launch event... that could really change how I do things in future."

Thinking of making a change?

Now is the time to start commissioning differently

We've used the 5 Guiding Principles to inform and suggest how you might start to do this:

Fair Pay

Review the levels you commission at – are you attracting the artists you want? Are you rewarding the work fairly? Be clear about what the fee includes and the number of days you expect that to cover.

Inclusion

Access, inclusion, and diversity should be considered at every step of your process. Include equality monitoring forms in all call outs to help you gather data so you can adapt and refine inclusive approaches to commissioning.

Could your organisation create a plain English 'commissioning and programming statement'? This would make things more transparent for everyone.

Representation

Invest in the right expertise – work with freelance artists to develop, inform and enhance your organisation's commissioning processes – what would happen if every organisation that programmes or commissions artists in Dorset could undertake this process at least once?

Sustainability

Add in a budget line for a 'mentor support/producer' role when applying for the funding you use to commission artists.

The value of peer to peer learning and mentoring is considerable – find ways to embed it into what you offer.

Always offer feedback. Value the conversation, or potential for future collaboration this may bring. Consider creating short-term freelance artist positions within your organisation, they can bring new insights, act as critical friends, grow your networks and support your overall capacity. Consider how commissioning differently can contribute to better and increased levels of artist training and development for artists at all career stages in Dorset.

Transparency

Could your organisation create a plain English 'commissioning and programming statement'? Adopt and commit to implementing the 5 Guiding Principles. Tell everyone that you do this. Make it clear on your website. When you write a brief, be welcoming, open and clear.

State in simple terms what the project is, who it is for, what information they should provide or answer, what assessment criteria you will use to decide who is successful.

Give your artists contracts

Be clear about all expectations lines of communication and responsibilities



The Freelance / Producers who delivered this Pilot Commissioning Project and Produced this report are:

Gemma Alldred and Megan Dunford.

The Artists who received this commission are Jen Vincent, Corrianna Clarke and Sophie Fretwell, [read more about their projects HERE](#)

Who were paid by The Arts Development company.

Link to the full report will be shared soon.