



The Writer's Compass

Briefing 3: Planning a project and funding it Steve Dearden

This information sheet was co-commissioned by literaturetraining and litfest from a series of writer development seminars run by litfest in autumn 2008. For more details of the litfest seminar programme see www.litfest.org.

About the author

Steve Dearden has seen both ends of funding applications. As Literature Officer of Yorkshire Arts he assessed them, and he has made plenty of applications as an organisation when Director of Ilkley Literature Festival, as a producer running projects such as www.writingsquad.com and www.light-transport.net, and as a writer www.foundland.net. He believes in applying for what you want to do rather than what you think the funder wants you to do.

Preparing the ground

This information sheet relates specifically to my practical workshop on applying to the Arts Council England *Grants for the Arts* scheme. However, I hope you'll find the advice relevant to any project or professional development application.

From my experience as a Regional Arts Board officer, and I believe this is still the case with officers working for Arts Council England (ACE), what funders long for is strong, well thought through ideas.

Before you even consider making a funding application, think through your idea and decide, completely in your terms:

- what you want to do
- why you want to do it
- who are you doing it for
- how you are going to tell them about it
- how this fits in with art form practice and local provision
- what evidence have you got that what you want to do is needed/a good idea
- who will do what to make things happen
- what it will cost and who will help pay for it
- what impact will the project have on you/your organisation
- what are the risks if it happens/does not happen
- how are you going to evaluate your project

When you are clear about all this, nothing in a funding application should come as a shock.

Some things to bear in mind

The Arts Council is there for you, you are not there for the Arts Council. It is you who delivers the art and without you ACE would be a pretty useless public body. They are the **Arts Council** and it is their job to fund the arts. However, they do have an overview – they try and achieve a balance in the distribution of funding, by geography, demographic and (so it is rumoured but hard to credit) by art form.

Arts Council England also has an increasingly controlling agenda imposed by government through the Department of Culture, Media and Sports from whom they get their funding. That's just a fact of life; they have to report against social as well as artistic criteria and we have to play a part in that game.

They have finite resources. Having said all that, despite the credit crunch and the Olympics, there is still a lot more money around for project funding than there has been in the past. And with Grants for the Arts, the touch is as light as it has ever been. You make an application. You get the money. You account for how you spent it and get the little bit they keep back until you have. What is more, they give you an application form and a proposal outline which, if you have done your preparatory thinking, tells you exactly what to put.

And remember, the Grants for the Arts scheme is for individuals as well as organisations. Literature officers have a particularly good record of making grants to individual artists.

Make contact

Making an application is not like sitting an exam. You don't have to get it right first time or keep it secret until you hand it in. You may have friends and colleagues you can test the proposal with. Use them.

Also make contact with the appropriate officer at Arts Council England. They will give you advice on how to make your application as good as it can be, they might also put you in touch with potential project partners.

They are not supposed to tell you the likelihood of your application being successful, but a good officer will give you a sense of whether you fit into their priorities.

A staff list with contact details for your local Arts Council England office can be found in the My Region section of the ACE home page (www.artscouncil.org.uk). You can also find case studies of successful grant applications on the site.

Human nature plays a part too. If they have been involved in the development of an idea, if something comes across their desk which is familiar, they are far more likely to be sympathetic than towards something coming out of the blue.

Making the application

As stated above, most Arts Council officers long for strong, well thought through ideas and are particularly frustrated when literature applications fail because the idea has not been thought through or has not been clearly expressed!

Ideas are always much more strongly expressed when you express them in your terms, rather than how you think the Arts Council want you to express them. Although there is more emphasis on social targets, and ACE objectives, the core of any proposal is the strength of your idea. Make the agendas fit your idea, not vice versa.

There is no substitute for reading the guidelines carefully. They tell you simply and clearly what to write in each section. With the information you have already assembled, you should be able to provide all the information Arts Council England (or anyone else) is asking for. You may find that you have to repeat yourself, don't worry about that, it's in the nature of these things.

When you have filled in the form, double check against the guidelines and the criteria by which they make their decisions. Have you been as clear as you can be, and is there anything that might help your case that you have missed out?

Here are some other points to bear in mind:

Tell the truth. Many officers have been reading applications for years so they can spot exaggerations, bluffs and obfuscation. Much better to say where you are and where you want to get to and how, than to pretend you are already there.

Be realistic. Better you have a clear idea of how you are going to work with thirty people intensively than claim you are going to turn all young men into readers or make the north a swathe of storytellers, or even lovers of storytelling.

Be straightforward. Like in writing – let nouns and verbs do the work. Avoid adjectives. Particular adjectives to avoid are innovative, creative, unique, unlike anything else – if the first two are not innate to your application, think deeper, by using the second pair you may seem unaware or dismissive of the context you work in.

Assume no specialist knowledge from the assessor. Your application might be being assessed by an officer whose specialism is another art form, or who has no art form expertise. So don't use short hand, acronyms, or assume that they understand how your work relates to your art form's practice, or that you have a track record. Assume they know nothing about you and what you do. Spell it out.

Write simply. Use bullet points. Think how much print – policy documents, position papers, guidelines, applications, emails – is revolving round their heads. Don't be gimmicky, but do write simply, well, clearly. As I have already said, it is surprising how many applications from writers and literature organisations are poorly written and fail to put across their idea.

Use space.

Use quotations to back up your case. Anything you claim sounds better when said by someone who benefits from or appreciates your activity.

'After attending Steve Dearden's inspiring funding workshop, I felt confident putting in my application. My wife and I are now looking forward to spending the next six months researching beach reads in Kerala.' Dan Deckchair, Sefton Library & Information Service

The officer assessing your application makes a decision but not the final decision. Even if they want your application to be supported, they have to make the case to their higher-ups, when all the applications on the table at that moment are considered against the available pot. So look on your application as an enabling document, enabling your officer to make the best case of your behalf; give them the arguments, the ammunition.

And finally ... Allow yourself time. ACE gives an undertaking to respond to your application in the timescale stated in the guidelines, but allow yourself more time in case the application is sent back before it is assessed because of a technicality (i.e. your budget doesn't balance, or you have forgotten to fill in box 47 Y). Allow yourself more time in case your application is rejected but ACE is interested in talking to you about altering the emphasis of your project or a scaled down version. Allow time for Plan B.

Allow yourself time because you might get the money. For the 'Oh my god they've given it me!' moment, when it is useful to have time to take stock, reassess, prepare yourself to actually do whatever you wrote so glibly about doing in the application.

Double check and ring

Well triple, quadruple check spelling, that the budget adds up, that you have sent everything they have asked for, everything you have said you have included. It might not be an exam but best look efficient.

Then ring, or email, the officer and let them know it is in the system. They are all handled centrally. If you have a supportive officer, you have more chance of them assessing your application if they know when it is coming.

GOOD LUCK and if you find this useful, and you get your money, please do let us know what you did and how it went.

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