

DEFINING STANDARDS

A Best Practice for Commissioning Storytelling

“We didn’t know what we were getting ourselves into”

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On behalf of The Crick Crack Club

What is 'Best' Practice? Put simply, it is the most appropriate way for the commissioners and the storyteller(s) they are working with to get from an idea to a fully-fledged performance that fulfils their joint objectives.

This document is a collection of things to think about before embarking on that way. It is an amalgamation of the collective wisdom of some of the professional organisations and performance storytellers already involved in commissioning. It looks at the aims they have set themselves and the processes that they feel have resulted in successful commissions.

Participants completed a questionnaire covering their actual experience of commissioning with the ideas and the reasoning behind their actions, their reflections on that experience, and their hopes and future ambitions for the place of commissioning within the storytelling sector. This was followed by personal interviews with some of the participants.

In pulling together the responses, I have tried to keep as closely as possible to the actual words of the participants in the context in which they were stated, while making this a readable document rather than a collection of quotes. This has made the document a composite essay of thoughts and experiences, so no remarks are attributed, even the direct quotes that accompany each section.

This Best Practice Guide is for commissioning organisations, funders and artists; and for those thinking about commissioning. My hope is that, after reading it, they will know exactly what they will be "getting themselves into".



Ali Quarréll
September 2015

Participants

- Adverse Camber
- Beyond the Border
- Cambridge Storytelling
- Festival at the Edge
- Xanthe Gresham
 - Ben Haggarty
 - 3 Monkeys
 - Mythstories
- York Theatre Royal

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1. Who Benefits from a Commission?

“A commission should ideally lead to a strong piece of work which is fulfilling on some level for the artists generating it, the partners who have commissioned it and the audiences who will experience it. But what ‘fulfilling’ is will depend on all kinds of variables. It could be an experiment which is never performed again”

For the commissioner, a commission is a major marketing opportunity. Commissioning a well-respected or popular storyteller raises their profile within the storytelling sector; while commissioning a work with a local connection will generate publicity within their local area. A new take on a well-known theme will attract new audiences, and rewarding that audience with a good solid commission will help retain them.

A commission can be a catalyst for change. It can be something commissioners will look back on with pride. Being involved in the commissioning process can increase their personal skills and confidence, they get to understand in a more profound fashion the depth of technique that certain storytellers bring to bear consciously on a story. Commissioners working within storytelling can establish deeper relationships with storytellers, especially those who they would not normally get to see. In this sense a commission is also an investment in the commissioner.

A commissioned work might be that final piece of the jigsaw that integrates an overall programme of work or celebratory events, pulling everything together and putting it in perspective.

And managing the commissioning process well with a resulting good piece of work will enhance the commissioner’s reputation within its sector.

Similarly, gaining a commission can be a mark of progress within a storyteller’s career, granting them wider exposure to range of partners and potential future supporters/funders, giving them access to new audiences, increasing their reputation and leading to more work. But that is not their major impact.

Commissions are more about artistic development. A commission may give a storyteller the opportunity to progress or realise a long-held idea, to extend their practice into different areas or spend time testing out a new approach. It’s a learning process.

Storytellers produce their repertoire in their own time, and so the commission fee is a bonus that can be invested in their personal development; letting them buy-in mentoring to improve their own skills.

Commissions can be a catalyst for a storyteller to tell stories that they would not normally have explored or encountered. Working with such material in unfamiliar ways can be a rewarding and challenging experience, leaving the storyteller more able to tackle different work in the future.

Some commissions, especially those designed for celebratory events or site specific events, have a limited potential audience and so will never become part of the storyteller's future fee-earning repertoire. But taking a creative approach to them can still leave the storyteller with a lasting benefit over and above money in the bank. Successful commissions will plant a seed that will keep flowering.

Commission funders may simply want to support a local initiative or a cause they feel passionately about or have some personal connection with. And a successful commission can enhance their reputation and standing in their local community.

Grant Funding bodies can demonstrate their support for innovation or for cutting edge pieces, giving the funder a high profile in the small world of storytelling, and improving a funder's profile with a range of different audiences.

And for all funders getting involved in the process can open a window on the artform; giving them a chance to learn more about the work of storytellers and appreciate the quality that can be achieved via storytelling.

Sometimes commissions premiere to an audience where the majority of people are new to storytelling. As a new audience, they may not appreciate the finer points of the artistry, but targeting a commission at a group who would not normally consider going to see storytelling, acts as an introduction, and shows them that there is something in it for them.

Within existing storytelling audiences, a successful commission should be 'appropriate for the intended audience but still on the edge of challenging their expectations of storytelling'. It should raise the standard of what is offered to audiences, rewarding the audience with something new and different, energising them, inspiring them and taking them on a deeper journey. 'A good commission should raise audience excitement levels, presenting the audience with a piece that may not be what they expected, that might even cause controversy.'

Storytellers know what pleases their audience, and it can be financially tempting to produce another piece that will do just that. Without commissions there would be less opportunity to show the full gamut of professionalism and good practice to an audience.

Commissions help develop the artform. They can be used to address the need for 'risky' new material. They can make a space for voices which have not been heard before. They may produce new collaborations or partnerships, or exploratory work that takes risks within the artists' practice or with the material.

Commissions help develop venues. They make sure there is a body of material on offer to provide a really good balanced programme to build an audience at a venue.

Commissions sustain venues. They are part of the supply of new material which venues rely on to continue their programmes, and to continue to develop and build audiences.

2a. The Artistic Process

“Every commission is different, partly because the circumstances differ, but also because artists are very different in their approach to work. There doesn’t seem to be any one way of working up a commission, it’s a peculiarly personal thing that often the artist doesn’t fully understand themselves”.

Despite this, below is a rough guide to the process for those new to commissioning storytelling:

- The first stage in any work is for the ‘artistic concept’ to emerge: the storyteller’s idea, the areas they want to explore and the other artists or mentors they may want to work with. If the concept for the piece has been simmering with the storyteller for some time then the commission simply allows the more detailed work to be done.
- Then the ‘creative development’. There needs to be time for the story to unravel and then come back together. In a way it’s a process that a story needs to be able to do.
 - The storyteller needs to research their story or stories. They need to find different versions and different versions of different versions. They need to find motifs and explore ideas. They need to take stories apart and put them back together as their own. They need to find material which will allow them to say what they want to say.
 - If the commission is site specific, the storyteller needs time to travel for site specific research, possibly looking at the story location or possibly interviewing local people. And they need time for other research – into historical documents as well as related stories
 - This goes hand in hand with ‘skills development’, external input such as specialist coaching in one or more aspects of composition and or performance.
 - and, if the storyteller is not using the fee for their living expenses, they need to combine the commission work with earning money.
 - And then finally rehearsals with collaborators.
- Then working with creative friends, who help the storyteller to see things that they cannot see in their own performance,
- Some storytellers will naturally include 'try out' shows in their creative process, usually in storytelling clubs. This is their own opportunity to test work in front of

live audiences before the premiere. It is their opportunity to discover what does and doesn't work for themselves.

- Preview performances of the whole show or extracts, before invited or 'real' audiences. Commissioners might choose to use one of the try out shows as their preview, or these test shows may be taking place too early, or too late in the development process.

The general feeling of respondents was that the process should take between 8 months and 2 years.

There is an argument that the longer a storyteller has to do a commission, the more work they will put in, even if they are not directly working on it information is bubbling up and connections are being made. This does not necessarily result in a better commission.

2b. Choosing the 'Right' Artist

'The onus is on the commissioners to do their groundwork'.

There is a school of thought that believes that, with an art form that is so intrinsically about individuals, commissioners should have a clear idea at the outset of who they want to invest in and introduce to their audiences.

This approach allows commissioners to respond to a storyteller's ideas and develop the brief with them. It gives the commissioner confidence in the quality of the storyteller's practice and that is an important consideration in agreeing the project. Sometimes the commissioner wants to give a storyteller the chance to develop that seed of an idea that they have wanted to work on. The main artistic advantage of this partnership approach is that the commissioner is able to support and draw on, in equal measure, the storyteller's own inspiration and skills in shaping the commission as the storyteller is a full partner in the process.

Similarly commissioners approaching a particular storyteller will ensure a quality product suited to their aims. A commissioner often has to work hard to get the money in the first place, they really have to believe the end result will be right or they cannot tell a strong enough story to their funders. And in the end they know who they want for the job and are not going to go for anyone else, and it seems honest to let the funders know that a specific storyteller is part of the commissioners' vision for this particular commission.

Best of all, the commissioner won't have to deal with the disappointment from all the people not chosen for the commission.

So, why waste a lot of money advertising a brief, responding to all-comers, getting a selection sub-committee, etc.?

The main advantage of the open call (to any storyteller) or limited 'call out' (to a selected group of known storytellers) is to generate ideas and responses from storytellers the commissioner may not already be familiar with, who might well generate ideas they would never have come up with. This is a more democratic way of working and can stimulate strong growth within an artform sector, as storytellers often generate really creative ideas in response to stimulus.

Open commissions, especially a brief with a loose theme, help storytelling grow. Many storytellers who respond unsuccessfully to a brief still go on to develop their proposals as performance pieces, even without the support given by the commission.

And there are other advantages for commissioners. Advertising the brief generally allows them to 'do their groundwork' and discover a range of new tellers. Also the open commission process is quite good as a vehicle for creating publicity for the

piece within the storytelling sector. And 'sub-contracting' people to sit on a selection committee is an opportunity to develop relationships with potential partners, for this commission or future work.

By putting a commission out to tender, commissioners are expecting storytellers to take time and fully consider how they would handle the piece. This effort can be rewarded by having a two-stage process, offering the short-listed storytellers a small fee for working up the idea for an interview, or (depending on the experience of the storytellers concerned) a day's mentoring with advice on performance as well as marketing.

Many storytellers themselves believe competitive tendering generally wastes time and energy. How does an organisation judge the proposal without any previous knowledge of the storyteller?

And it doesn't sit well with storytellers to be competing. Storytelling is a small world and what's paramount in it is the support storytellers give each other. However, there can be pretence of friendship as well as association. This makes having an open commission rather like treading on eggshells. It can lead to a great deal of bad feeling from a class of performer who have never really come to terms with their own abilities. Why offend anyone if you can avoid it?

Whichever way commissioners proceed, good commissioning comes out of matching up an artist's skills to the job the commissioner has in mind.

2c. Keeping in Touch (aka Control)

‘ ... it is very little understood, by audiences, artists and funders, that the commissioning process really does add value to the quality of storytelling pieces. It is neither laissez-faire, nor directing, but it takes the creative process and allows it to flourish in a cradle of support and encouragement.’

The ‘initial interview’ (whether or not this is face-to-face) is a key part of the process. It gives commissioners the opportunity to make sure the storyteller understands what they are expected to produce and how much freedom they have to interpret this brief.

Most importantly it allows the right communication structure to be established at the outset. This is not necessarily a joint decision; commissioners might think certain storytellers need more stringent structures. This is not a question of trust, it’s a matter of the storyteller’s personality and how commissioners believe they can best get the storyteller to respond to the brief. Some storytellers love freedom, some storytellers like tight structures around them. Some storytellers don't want to be tied down to a process....but will produce much better work if they are.

‘The commission belongs to the artist’

Some commissioners just want to know that the work is progressing – even if the storyteller is just slowly mulling over things. They want to have the odd conversation be it by telephone, face-to-face or just e-mail.

Contact can be mostly informal conversations with the storytellers concerned. The benefits here are, an intensely interesting insight into the way a major storytelling piece develops, and for the commissioner, reassurance that the money they have invested is really worthwhile!

Some storytellers are very thoughtful and need to find their own approach and probably would prefer not to be bothered by the commissioner. Here contact could be ‘question your commissioner’. Send them questions, get them involved in doing a little bit of background research for you – even if you don’t use it in the final piece – that would keep the commissioner happy and has done so on a number of occasions.

But more normally commissioners ask the storyteller to produce a written report to trigger stage payments. ‘The format for the report is not necessarily specified, the storyteller doesn’t necessarily have to say what they have spent the money on, the commissioner just wants to know how the piece is developing’.

Setting milestones and stage payments seems to establish an honest relationship between the commissioners and the storyteller and there is usually a way of managing it even if things don't go quite as smoothly as everyone had hoped.

Sometimes the finished piece is not at all what the commissioners had been expecting from the written reports, so an 'invite only' preview a couple of months before the premiere performance gives the reassurance that a suitable piece will be ready on time.

“We bring an atmosphere of ‘supportive challenge’ to the whole development process”

Other commissioners work strongly in partnership with the storytellers involved, producing the work with them, supporting and facilitating their ideas. This enables the storytellers to let go of some aspects of 'overseeing' the piece's development because someone is holding onto that with them.

The commissioners will provide structure and support for the creative process, through agreeing contracts, roles/responsibilities, negotiating access to funds, rehearsal space, additional professional development opportunities, organising preview performances often with feedback opportunities for audiences and an evaluation process which enables lessons learned to be integrated into future work. Importantly the commissioners provide support for the process without dictating what must result.

It requires a very high level of skill and experience to develop the trust necessary with all the participants involved and work across people who may not have prior experience of working in that way and/or with other artists in that kind of collaborative process.

“Creative input from us is really important; otherwise it doesn't feel like we have a stake in it.”

Artistic vision is not the prerogative of storytellers alone; it is also something the commissioner has a large input into. So alternatively the commissioners will be involved in parts of the commission that lend themselves to their management team's specific areas of expertise; for example in research & development, directing, lighting or set design. Here finding people who are skilled enough and generous enough to work with storytellers (and musicians) in ways which are compatible with the way the storytellers want to work is an ongoing challenge.

Whatever the degree of contact, a blog (shared in private, though occasionally public) or other shared electronic record can be useful. The commissioners can see what direction the commission is taking and what progress is being made. Some storytellers find it a great format for looking back and evaluating the stages of the

commission, or as a way of ensuring sections of the work are completed within deadlines. Others find it useful only as a collaborative tool.

Whatever communication channels are decided on, the storyteller can contact the commissioner at any time for questions or advice. It is essential that all the management team is on-side, knowing and agreeing with the basic details of the commission (subject matter, length of piece, type of audience, what type of space the premiere performance will take place in, etc). That way the storyteller gets a consistent response.

A good commission will become part of the storyteller's repertoire. And it will develop, sometimes into a piece unrecognisable from that originally performed.

3. Learning From and During the Experience

“the finished piece was not at all what we had been expecting from the written reports”

All commissioners need reassurance that they will end up with a piece on the right day of the right length that isn't a complete embarrassment. The 'invite only' preview gives them the reassurance that the piece will be ready on time. It also gives the storyteller a supportive audience with the opportunity to provide feedback on the work itself, either written or in a post-preview feedback discussion chaired by the commissioner or the storyteller.

Commissioners more closely involved in the development of the work may regularly solicit feedback including inviting people to see early work in progress or previews and give detailed feedback. This depends on skilled feedback-givers, who can shape their feedback so it can be constructive to the storyteller(s). Again this feedback relates to the work itself.

A favourite way for a commissioner to gain feedback on the process is to conduct one-to-one interviews with artists at the conclusion of the process, to talk to them about what they have learned and any recommendations for the future. This work can be carried out by an independent professional, rather than the commissioner. This enables storytellers to reflect on and review their own experience.

Evaluation at the end of the process also ensures positive and critical lessons learned can be passed onto the commissioners 'cleanly', without being muddied by the storytellers' relationship to the organisation

Some commissioners conduct audience evaluation through questionnaires, mainly so they themselves can give feedback to their funders. Some collect the comments feeding into their social media. After all, the most difficult and potentially creative story of the lot is the one the commissioner has to tell in the evaluation to the funder.

Will the commission be remembered by the storyteller and audience for the moment that it was performed? Does it make a positive contribution to the body of performance storytelling work out there? Does it have an impact on the performer's professional development? Does it attract a new audience to storytelling and attendance at subsequent events?

The acid test of a commission comes with the further life of the piece - sometimes the piece really only comes into its own after about ten shows.

4. Funding the Commission

More money does not necessarily lead to a better piece. But the amount of money available will dictate options for ways of working.

“We decided to allocate some of the money for a commission.”

In the keep it simple approach, the storyteller has a fixed fee. Here it really is up to the storyteller to use the fee to cover the costs they feel they need – or to try to negotiate more money. And just as it is up to the storyteller to decide how to use the fee, it is up to the storyteller to decide whether the amount offered is enough to make it worth their while applying for the commission.

Sometimes the fixed commission fee is used as a subsistence payment to cover basic living expenses, as some storytellers say the main thing preventing them from creating new work is the need to pay the bills. They should be aware that commissioners do expect the fixed commission fee to cover the storyteller’s travel and accommodation costs for the preview and premiere.

Sometimes the fixed commission fee is a payment to let storytellers invest in themselves. Storytellers here believe it is part of their role as an artist to create new work and that their time will be repaid by fees for performing that work. So if they want to spend the commission fee on things such as voice coaching or set design or working with another artist, they are free to take that decision. The storyteller will do massive amounts of unpaid work while paying colleagues for their input. Despite it being the storyteller’s choice, it's not easy for others involved who are being paid knowing that the lead artist is not.

Problems can arise when the commissioners’ or storyteller’s ambition for the piece outstretches the resources and often it's a case of having to cut the suit...

Amongst some commissioners there is a belief that the funding needs to be secured before mentioning the commission to the storyteller. They find that getting a level of agreement with the storyteller before the funds are secured is quite a delicate situation. You can raise the hopes of storytellers up and then dash them, and that is not quite fair.

“Firstly we look at what potential funding pots are available, and then decide whether the scale of the proposed commission fits within these pots. If it does we then timetable and map out all the stages that need to happen to bring about the performance and cost out each stage. Then we apply for funding.”

Here there is discussion between the storyteller, the commissioners and other potential partners before the fundraising. Commissioners taking this approach

believe that naming the storytellers on the application significantly helps achieve the funding. Applications get easier once the relationships with commissioners, storytellers and other partners have been developed.

The budget is set in consultation, but also tailored by how much the commissioners could request from that particular fund/funder. Writing the application can help get thoughts in order, and of course sometimes some aspects need to be tweaked to get what the commissioner wants to do in line with the aims of the funders. These 'tweakings' which extend the remit of the commission can be enlightening. If a funding bid is going to stand a real chance of success in today's competitive market it has to be a good story in itself, otherwise it is a waste of time writing it. Funders want to know that the commission fits in with the Business Plan of the commissioners, with the rest of the work that is being done in the sector, and the vision for the progression of the artform. They also want to know that it fits with their own purposes: which can be multifarious.

Setting the storyteller's fee can be an uneasy trade-off between what commissioners feel a performer should be paid, (using recommendations, and their experience of what they pay performers) and what commissioners can afford or realistically feel the funding body will pay.

And in respect of that fee, sometimes commissioners are aware that storytellers put in far more time to development work than has been budgeted for, while occasionally commissioners are disappointed by the laziness of some of the storytellers.

In addition to the fee the budget may include the cost of:

- The storyteller's and other artist's overnight stays, travel, research visits, A daily allowance when working away from home, reflecting the extra costs involved, should be at least considered.
- Rehearsal room hire, and if a number of performers are working together, their travel and accommodation for face-to-face contact.
- External input such as specialist training, direction etc.
- Production: set, costumes and lighting.
- Technical support.
- All the costs of previews or scratch performances, including refreshments for any invited guests.

- All costs involved in staging the premiere, including any special measures needed to make the venue accessible and usable if it is an out of the ordinary venue.
- The costs of a meal (or a drink) for the commissioners and the storyteller and any other artists involved after the premiere performance.
- Food/drink for a special evaluation event.
- The costs of a more formal evaluation – even if only an exit interview.
- Commissioner’s travel and accommodation costs and a fair share of the commissioner’s overheads such as office costs and insurance.
- A project management fee.
- Marketing material, design, print, film and other publicity for the premiere and previews.
- Ongoing design and publicity for the commissioned piece to tour.
- A contingency – up to 5% of the total cost – for the unexpected.

Unless commissioners are funding the commission themselves, they are unlikely to have all the money needed in the bank at the start of the process. Most funders will withhold a percentage of their award pending completion. So it is wise to have a cashflow, based on the expenditure identified in the budget timetable and the income envisaged by the funder’s stage payments, and to stray from the cashflow in very rare circumstances: only when contingency can usefully be used, or when another funding opportunity arises that can add value to the commission.

Even so, many commissioners find themselves not taking a management fee or contributions to overheads until the final payment is received from the funder (if at all). So a cash reserve is essential - commissioners should be prepared to break into this to cover ongoing expenditure.

Storytellers and other artists will expect staged payments, but flexibility when negotiating these is important. (Though any final payment withheld until report should never be more than 10% of the total). 40% up front, 30% midway, 20% on premiere performance and 10% on completion of any artist evaluation is a manageable pattern.

Whatever the funds available are used to pay for, all participants agree that the ‘copyright’ of the piece belongs to the artist. Categorically. The paradigm dictates no one else can perform it anyway. Commissioning fees only cover the creation and

premiere performance - any future earnings are for the artist to exploit. There is no room for royalty or other rights grabs.

APPENDIX 1

Things to Consider Before Embarking on a Commission

'A piece of art is not the product of ensuring the correct data entry'

The commission brief:

Why do you want the piece?

- What is its purpose and who will benefit from it.

What are the parameters of the piece?

- Length of performance, straight through or with an interval.
- Who is the target audience: adult, children, family, specific cultural socio-economic group, existing well-developed, or new audience etc.
- Will you specify a subject or theme or specific stories or other content.
- Will you specify any aspect of the form of the piece or the nature of the performance.
- Will it be a site specific or celebratory piece intended for one-off/limited performance, or a piece intended for touring.
- Does it include an experimental element, and if so, what.

Where and when will the premiere performance take place?

- Indoors or outside, formal stage setting or festival context, etc.
- Time of year and time of day.
- Size of venue, size of audience.

What outcome do you expect?

- A show.
- A show with marketing and production resources ready to tour.
- A show, plus something else (a community project, a series of workshops, an exhibition....).

The commission process:

How will you select your storyteller?

- Will this be a solo or group performance.
- Will it require a storyteller to work with a musician or in another collaboration.
- Who will decide who the collaborators are.

What additional expertise will be needed?

- How should this be identified and sourced.

- Who should decide what experts have input into the commission, in terms of what is needed, and in terms of who is needed.

How involved do you/your committee want to be in the artistic process?

- How do you want to manage the commission.
- How will you communicate the brief to the storyteller(s).
- How will you make sure the quality of the commission is to the standard you expect.
- How will you make sure the commission is 'on-track'.
- How much freedom will you give the storyteller to interpret the brief in their own way.

The Resources:

Do you have enough money for what you want to do?

- If not, how will you 'fund the gap'.

Do you have enough time to achieve what you want?

- If not, should you abandon the project, or is it worth doing in a simpler way.

Do you have enough people with the right skills and knowledge?

- If not, do you know where to go for help.

And afterwards:

- How would you like the commission to be credited in the future.
- How are you going to make sure the artist has access to all the resources you developed within the commission for them to tour and perform the work in the future (lighting plans, marketing materials, set, costume etc).
- How are you going to ensure that your learning from the commission isn't forgotten by you or your organisation.
- How are you going to share your good practice to help others and, through that, the continued development of the wider sector.

APPENDIX 2

Things to Consider Putting in the Legal Contract

‘All requirements of the artist and obligations of the organisation should be included in the contract - the more clearly stated, the less chance of future misunderstandings’.

Commission parameters – or attach a copy of the brief.

- An agreement to engage in proper ongoing discussion regarding any changes to the brief or the process that might be required.

Details of the premiere performance.

- That the commissioner will organise advertising and publicity.
- That the artist is committed to producing a high quality finished piece.

The fee, when and how it will be paid and what it is expected to cover.

- That the commissioner will pay the artist and other artists and/or specialists on time provided they have met their obligations
- That the commissioner will pay the other agreed expenses direct, or a method to repay these

Whether the artist or the commissioner is responsible for sourcing the additional support, if any, the artist is to receive.

The communication structure to be adopted.

- That each will let the other know immediately if they are not going to be able to fulfil part of the contract.

That copyright belongs to the artist.

- And the artist should acknowledge the role of the commissioner and funder for a specific period when performing the commission after the premiere.

The evaluation requirements.

What happens should the relationship break down.

- Arrangements for resolving any dispute.
- In what circumstances pro rata payments will be made.

APPENDIX 3

The Storytelling Economy

‘Artforms do not exist without dedicated, visionary, promoters. Their input is to share their enthusiasm with an artform with their audiences, even without commissioning, programming is crucial to the way the audience receive the message of what storytelling is.’

There is no public strategy for funding storytelling; no promoter nor venue that receives core public financial support for presenting storytelling pieces. Nor is there an infrastructure of private investment with its network of venture capitalists and publishing houses willing to gamble on a piece becoming a commercial success.

Normally storytellers will develop work in comparative isolation and promote it to the best of their ability through personal contacts in storytelling clubs, theatres, festivals or the rural touring circuit. And here is the dichotomy: a piece suited to one environment is unlikely to be appropriate for the others. The economic reality is that it will take many years to get a commercial payback on the time and resources invested in a piece.

Being a performance storyteller on professional public stages alone, is not a full-time career option. To earn their living storytellers will have to develop the different skills needed for work in schools, museums, art galleries and community arts projects. They may branch out into the corporate worlds of narratives for change or sales, they may briefly become workshop leaders or conference speakers.

This is not unknown in the arts. Composers have been choir masters, visual artists teachers. But this is no reason not to try to create a vibrant performance storytelling sector, which attracts and nurtures new talent and rewards gifted and hard-working individuals. Essential to this is a ready supply of professional public venues, whose management teams know, or have access to informed opinion, about storytelling and audiences who understand and appreciate it. This supply is notably lacking.

The storytelling sector is small. There are few ‘learning opportunities’ in front of live adult audiences for emerging storytellers. There are currently some 79 storytelling clubs across England and Wales. Some have a regular programme of performance storytelling, most provide their members with a chance to participate in telling. More needs to be done involve these clubs within the development of the professional sector: to develop audiences and encourage potential professional storytellers.

Commissions have a part to play in this. Commissioners may support storytellers' development and they will bring their work to the attention of venue managers, promoters and audiences, new and old. The scale of current commissioning is unlikely to do more than maintain the existing sector, if that. Like any venture in a commercial world, performance storytelling needs investment to grow into a sustainable enterprise.

APPENDIX 4

Ten Top Tips for a Well-Organised and Successful Commission

'Do it. The opportunity and support to create new work is vital, or it all stagnates'

ONLY commission something/someone you really want to hear: there is no point putting all that work in for something you won't enjoy. Be ambitious, optimistic, imaginative and collaborative in your thinking - take on board ideas from elsewhere, ask expert advice, from everybody.

BE realistic in terms of time and resources, people and skills. Make sure you have all you need to get you through the process.

CHOOSE who you think will be the right person for the job, but necessarily don't limit yourself to 'top named' performers or the most popular or obvious candidate.

BE firm and clear about expectations and desired outcomes at the start, anything and everything on which everyone needs to agree. Record this in writing and get everyone to agree it and sign it.

ESTABLISH a quality development process; provide a nurturing environment in which artists feel safe to create. Give them all the creative freedom you can. Listen to their thoughts, reservations, requests and preferences, but challenge them in their comfort zone.

AGREE with the artist from the outset, a method and frequency of communication. Put check-in points throughout the process to create stepping stones/a sense of progression. Keep in contact with the artist and respond to emails and phone calls at any time.

LEARN how to wear a calm smile convincingly. Don't get disheartened (or allow anyone else to be) if it all starts looking a bit muddled in the middle of the creative work.

BE as generous as you can be with money and be prepared to spend your contingency fund.

MAKE sure that the show has been performed informally or semi-formally before it is presented to the public.

MAKE the commission the highlight of your programme. Use it as an opportunity to market your organisation, the storyteller and storytelling.