

March 2023

**Scoping the viability of a national/international showcase or festival of work for young audiences in the North of England.**

**Executive Summary**

**Commissioned by PYA England**

**Funded by Arts Council England**

**Written by Zannah Chisholm & Rosalind Conlon of Lim Associates.**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Brief**

PYA England received investment from Arts Council England to scope the viability of a new showcase or festival of work for young audiences in the north of England. They commissioned Lim Associates to undertake the exercise between October 2022 and February 2023. The brief was to review a cross section of existing UK and international festivals to understand best practice in relation to:

- formats (including a hybrid of digital & live components)
- presentation settings i.e. traditional theatre spaces and/or community settings
- curatorial voice and selection processes
- target audiences
- professional development opportunities (including strengthening networks).

Consideration needed to be given to the role of festivals in developing talent, showcasing homegrown work to national and international delegates, and to adhere to PYA England's commitment to improving diversification, inclusivity, and accessibility of the sector both through leadership and representation on stage.

PYA England was keen that a fresh, independent perspective is brought to this work. One that considers regional priorities, infrastructure demands and the possibilities of new partnership approaches alongside assessing the viability of expanding existing festivals. Underpinning the work was the interrogation of appropriate financial models, funding sources and management structures.

### **Methodology**

Lim Associates used the PYA England and Assitej UK networks to research the context, existing festival models and plans and new potential.

Our methodology was :

- An online sector survey, facilitated by Assitej UK (53 respondents)
- Facilitated group discussions(x 5), including PYA England open zoom meeting
- 1-1 interviews (x 56)
- Review and analysis of 133 pages of notes taken from all of the discussions and interviews
- Desk research of evaluations of previous festivals, previous ideas for new festivals and academic research
- Involving Critical Friends to check and advise on the methodology

Through the research we defined the festival as a programme of shows and events available to the public and the delegate programme as a parallel series of events specifically tailored to engage sector delegates in discussion and networking springing from the festival.

## Findings

Several PYA (Performance for Young Audiences) festivals are held within a year round organisation- eg Krokus within Cultur Centrum Hasselt; Edinburgh International Children's Festival within Imagine; Belfast International Festival within Young at Art; Spark Festival within Spark Arts. The festivals have a sector developmental role through commissions, residencies, artist support. This is particularly possible if the event sits within a year round programme: 'Vital Spark' run by Spark Arts; 'Imagine At' residencies; Krokus' 'Het Lab' artist development programme. *"If a festival only has a presentation function it is difficult to have impact, but if they have a developmental role outside they can do something."*

The Dominant Model is a festival which is run over several days with a live performance programme and a parallel delegate programme of discussion and networking. It is held in one location by a publicly funded organisation and with a consistent team which enables it to develop festival expertise, a clear curatorial brand and relationships. Consortium-led models exist and rely on a core staff team to manage and deliver the festival. In these models, even if the members of the consortium contribute financially, there tends to be one main financial stakeholder and values and vision are clear and equally shared. In addition, the PYA sector is advocating for inclusion of PYA within nationally significant projects and events such as Horizon.

It was reported that the PYA sector from England has a low profile internationally. Accessing the international context of the sector and experiencing international work abroad and in England is perceived as vital to drive ambition and the development of the artform. *"If we want our artists to flourish on international stages, we need to create opportunities for foreign artists to present their work here - reciprocity will fertilise our performance ecology."* Aaron Wright

Our research shows a consistent level of spend of PYA festivals - between £300-500k. If you take into account inflation the average cost of a festival now would be nearer the £500k mark. Internationally, public investment is crucial to PYA festivals and the economic downturn is beginning to impact the scale and timing of some festivals e.g. the Assitej Annual gathering in Serbia. One reason that previous festivals in England stopped is the drain on the host organisation's capacity and resources and the financial impact as school trips, box office and delegate attendance fell to an unsustainable level and there wasn't sufficient public investment to offset the costs.

A smaller or cheaper festival format for a new festival was discussed but there was common feedback that a national festival needed to have breadth and scale of ambition and programme. The support of a key funder, such as Arts Council England and/or local authorities, needs to be secured to lever other funding and enable the ambitious vision that the sector has for a festival of international importance. There was a sense that these ambitions are needed to address the perception that *"Many people use performance for young audiences as a stepping stone to adult work."* The sector wants to be a destination not a stepping stone.

There is unanimous desire for live events and shows for this live art form but a recognition that a curated digital programme should be included to ensure access and reach.

Environmental sustainability is important to the sector and to events for young audiences. There is access to good advice and toolkits, both in the sector and in specific locations, and a new event can build it in from the start across all of the management and delivery activity.

Diversity and Inclusion was a shared value throughout discussions and was cited by international partners as something that is distinctive about work from the UK though sector workers in England mainly talked about the need to do more. It was suggested by two international promoters that this may be a point of interest to draw international delegates to a new Festival. There were strong representations from interviewees and through the Survey responses that there needs to be diverse leadership and management of the festival, in any selection panels and across the programme and advice that an Access budget should be built in from the start. There is no appetite to replicate or endorse festival models that rely on artists paying their own costs to be featured in a programme and respectful pay was an important access factor.

Investment for this scoping exercise came from Arts Council England North and following their directive it focussed on northern locations identified through PYA England networks and the scoping conversations. There is growing expertise in running co-created and co-produced programmes with young people and an opportunity to use this expertise in planning a new PYA festival e.g. Blaze, Rotherham Children's Capital of Culture, Burnley Youth Theatre, Children & Young People's Network North (NSCD).

An Artistic Director approach to curation is still predominant and can offer a singular aesthetic voice which delegates and audiences learn to trust. However, having a wider curatorial or selection panel or using a quota system more clearly meets the desire to ensure diverse work is included. *"It needs to be bold from the start. Setting bold targets from the get-go. Seeing who is under-represented in the sector and answering that."*

### **Recommended model**

After consideration of different models with PYA England steering and lobby groups, Lim Associates proposed model is a Partnership Festival between PYA England and a place based host organisation, or organisations, in the North of England.

PYA England and the host(s) would form a National Festival Board providing leadership nationally and internationally. The board would create the vision and values for the festival, write the business plan and bids and hold the reporting. PYA England would fundraise for and manage a new PYA England post to drive this forward, identify the host partner(s) and establish the Festival Board and Partnership Agreement. It would lead the delegate programme with responsibility for sector development and (inter)national networks. The host organisation would lead the delivery of the festival, the production of the event and the involvement of local

infrastructure and audiences. Their formal entity will provide the vehicle to financially manage the festival and submit the bids. A Local Partnership Board would be led by the host and made up of key local stakeholders, such as PYA representatives, Cultural Education Partnership, culture organisations, local authority, mayoral authority, community stakeholders, libraries, museums.

The consideration of location was directed by the sector based on PYA England links, the presence of interlinked cultural and education strategies and infrastructure to host a national festival. The scoping looked at Bradford, Leeds, Doncaster, Rotherham and Manchester. The recommended model could work with one organisation or with a consortium of organisations in any of these areas.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the economic context, this is a good time to introduce a new energy to celebrating and sharing PYA. The emphasis on placemaking and access of Arts Council England's "Let's Create" Strategy and the need of the sector to celebrate and stimulate new shows, are a logical evolution of PYA, building on the foundations of Theatre in Education, community arts and theatre touring. The Partnership Model presents a way to combine the localised place-based and nationalised sector development potential of a new festival.

A festival of this scale is viable if it is placed in a location with a great strategic fit and with the support of public authorities and the host and PYA England. There are strong arguments for it to be planned to mitigate the negative impact of recent hard times on children and young people. A recent report by Curious Minds stated : "Now, more than ever, young people need the escape, inspiration, connection, fun and wellbeing that arts and culture provide." The sum of £500k is modest when looked at against the sums allocated to other major events and festivals or capital projects and the commitment of a PYA Festival to work with children and young people and build knowledge and skills gives it the potential to create strong legacies.