

FIRST STAGE:

**A Report into Provision for New Theatre Writing and
Playwright Talent Development in the Tees Valley**

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1.1.

Introduction

The Tees Valley Combined Authority is home to twelve theatres. With Darlington Hippodrome to the west of the area and Saltburn Arts Centre to the east, these theatres cover a wide geographic spread. There is also variation in their ownership, with the likes of ARC Stockton holding National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status, Billingham Forum under the ownership of a not-for-profit leisure trust and Middlesbrough Theatre being run by the local authority. Some theatres seat around a hundred people, while others have capacity for over a thousand. Programming may be commercially driven, focused on live music, devised work, or theatre for young people; designed to serve an audience with a considerable amount of disposable income, or those living in some of the country's most deprived wards.

Yet for all of the variation between Tees Valley theatres, they hold something notable in common: a striking lack of provision for new theatre writing and playwright talent development. With government figures demonstrating that the theatre industry is part of a sector which contributed £109bn to the UK economy in 2022, this lack of provision does not only have implications for the sorts of theatre which Tees Valley audiences are able to access, but also the career prospects of the combined authority's writers (House of Lords Library 2022). Denied opportunities to write new scripts for performance within their local area, Tees Valley writers have difficulty becoming playwrights, gaining professional credits and exporting work. This situation has led to an under-representation of Tees Valley voices within North East theatre, and has placed the combined authority's playwrights in an unfavourable position to capitalise upon recent investment in the region's screen industries. The lack of new playwriting and talent development opportunities currently available for Tees Valley writers is therefore not only worrying for the development of talent, but also its retention within the combined authority.

First Stage is a report which investigates the reasons behind the current lack of new theatre writing and playwright talent development provision within the Tees Valley. It will begin by outlining the report's methodology and current new theatre writing and playwright talent development provision within the Combined Authority

area. The report will then present findings of consultations held with theatres, cultural organisations and stage and screen industry professionals, as well as Writers' Focus Groups. It will conclude by making a series of recommendations as to how the current levels of new theatre writing and playwright talent development can be improved within the Tees Valley, so that writers are not only supported to grow their creative careers, but also to live within the combined authority area while doing so.

1.2

Methodology

The *First Stage* report has been written following a number of consultations with theatre, screen, cultural and educational professionals. Twenty nine individuals were contacted via an e-mail which summarised the project and enquired as to the recipient's interest in acting as a consultee. Twenty seven individuals initially agreed to act as consultees, twenty four of whom followed through to consultation stage. Of these twenty four individuals, ten worked as theatre professionals, seven of whom were Chief Executives of the theatre they represented, and the other three of which held senior positions in theatre companies. Five of the consultees worked for cultural organisations, while a further four were employed by local authorities within Creative Programming, Library Development or Events. A further four of the twenty four consultees were screen industry professionals who held senior positions in sector or talent development organisations, or ran their own production company, and one consultee held a senior position at a Further and Higher Education provider.

Consultations with the twenty four participating individuals took place either online or in-person between January and July 2023. Lasting for thirty to sixty minutes, the consultations consisted of a series of sector-appropriate questions about new theatre writing and playwright talent development. Theatre professionals, for example, were asked about their methods and experiences of identifying and working with Tees Valley playwrights, as well as their programming strategy and producing model. For cultural organisations and local authorities, enquiries were made about how they identified and worked with talent from within the combined authority. Screen professionals were asked questions about their talent identification methods, their perception of playwrights and the current relationship between theatre and screen within the Tees Valley. The educational provider, meanwhile, received enquiries about the extent of new writing provision on the courses they offered, as well as questions about how they prepared their students to navigate the creative industries upon graduation.

In addition to these twenty four consultations were Focus Group sessions with ten Tees Valley writers. The writers were divided into two different Focus Groups:

Early Career and Mid-Career. ‘Early Career’ was taken to refer to writers who were starting to build up a body of work in theatre or prose, but were yet to secure a professionally produced run of performances or a book deal. ‘Mid-career’ writers, meanwhile, had a strong track record within theatre or prose, as evidenced by multiple plays being staged for professionally produced runs, or the publication of novels. With the exception of one writer with limited availability who was consulted on a one-to-one basis in March 2023, the Early and Mid-Career Focus Groups alike were held in May 2023. Writers from both Focus Groups were asked questions about their writing careers and their experiences of navigating the creative industry as a Tees Valley writer. The Early Career Focus Group writers were then questioned about the support they needed in order to develop as playwrights, while the Mid-Career Focus Group writers were asked to identify current gaps in Tees Valley playwriting provision.

With twenty four consultees and ten writers recruited for Focus Groups, the First Stage project therefore engaged with thirty four individuals working within the creative industries.¹ Of this thirty four, twenty seven individuals were based within the Tees Valley Combined Authority, six within the North East region, and one in Yorkshire. Over half of the individuals who contributed to the project identified as female, and there was also diversity in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic background, disability and age. Taken together, the thirty-four consultees and Focus Group writers had a range of professional and lived experience which made it possible to gain a variety of perspectives on new theatre writing and playwright talent development provision, theatre-screen relationships and barriers faced by writers within the Tees Valley Combined Authority.

In tandem with the consultations and Focus Groups, desk-based research was also undertaken. This research examined current levels of provision for playwright talent development within the Tees Valley. The findings were collated into a document alongside notes from the consultations and Focus Group sessions. This document was then analysed in relation to two key research questions: what is the current provision for new theatre writing and playwright talent development within the Tees Valley, and what impact is it having upon the career development of writers within the Combined Authority area? Taken together, these research questions allow for an in-

¹ A list of all of the individuals who engaged with the project can be found on p. 38.

depth examination of new theatre writing and playwright talent development within the Tees Valley, and pave the way for recommendations as to how it might be improved.

1.3

Existing Forms of Tees Valley New Writing and Playwright Talent Development

Desk-based research reveals that there have been a small number of schemes to support Tees Valley playwrights in the development of new writing, or their craft, since the Covid-19 pandemic. Pilot Theatre's *Northern Girls* (2021), for example, saw the development and performance of several short plays at Redcar's TunedIn! venue (Northern Girls 2021). The theatre company less is MORE Productions held three Scratch Nights (2021) at Middlesbrough Theatre, which again showcased short plays (Middlesbrough Theatre 2021). Papatango Theatre Company, meanwhile, offered Tees Valley writers the opportunity to gain an introduction to playwriting through their *GoWrite Playwriting Course* (2022). The hybrid course was delivered between Darlington Hippodrome and Zoom, and consisted of five sessions on such topics as structure and subtext (Darlington Hippodrome 2022). At the end of the course, participants were able to submit a 3-5 page extract from a script, which was performed as a rehearsed reading by professional actors at The Hullabaloo.

Whether they were enabling Tees Valley writers to develop their playwriting craft or see their short plays performed, these schemes were all initiatives which came from theatre companies. Rather than forming a core part of a theatre or venue's artistic strategy, each scheme was created by the company and then delivered with the support of the partnering theatre or venue. It is also notable that of the three schemes mentioned above, only one recruited writers through an Open Call Out. The manner of post-Covid new theatre writing and playwright talent development within the Tees Valley has therefore been a somewhat ad-hoc, theatre-company-driven model, where opportunities are not always made available to all writers within the combined authority area.

In terms of opportunities available during the duration of the *First Stage* research project, there were three schemes related to the development of new work across the Tees Valley. Two of these initiatives were run by ARC Stockton, and one by Pilot Theatre, with the latter opportunity most geared towards the development of new writing. Commissioned by Borderlands and funded by Creative People and Places, Pilot Theatre's 'Under a Redcar Sky' is offering free writing, music and dance

workshops to Redcar individuals between September and October 2023. With no prior creative experience necessary, the project aims to empower local people to tell stories about Redcar through writing, music and dance (Pilot Theatre 2023). The project is due to have a performance output, but it is not yet clear what form the writing element of it will take.

In September 2023, meanwhile, ARC Stockton issued an Open Call Out for applicants to their 'Make New Work' Programme. There were two awards of £10,000 and three awards of £2,000, plus accommodation, space and other support (ARC Stockton Arts Centre 3 2023). The programme is designed to commission artists to engage with communities in Stockton and create new performance-based work. With provocations such as 'Money' and 'Climate', the scheme undoubtedly offers artists opportunities to make meaningful, relevant, community-led new work (ARC Stockton Arts Centre 2 2023). Its stress on 'performance-based work' and its offer of accommodation suggests, however, that the opportunity is not aimed at playwrights, but theatremakers from outside of the Tees Valley.

ARC Stockton also accept rolling applications to their 'ARC Getaway' scheme, which awards up to a week's free R&D or rehearsal space at the theatre, as well as local accommodation. With an in-kind support value of a minimum of £500 plus £200 per participant, it is undoubtedly a helpful scheme, but its lack of support for the writing or development of a script again indicates that it is aimed more at those who, in line with ARC's programming policy, devise rather than write their work (ARC Stockton Arts Centre 1 2023). The offer of accommodation also once more suggests that an ARC Getaway is designed for individuals based outside of the Tees Valley Combined Authority area.

Provision for new writing and playwright talent development within the Tees Valley area therefore operates on an ad-hoc, company-driven basis. It does not originate from a theatre's artistic strategy and is not always made open to applications from all interested Tees Valley writers. While a lack of new writing and playwright talent development provision is not specific to the Tees Valley or indeed the post-Covid era (see Kennedy 2013), it is a highly problematic one. As the careers of established Tees Valley writers Ishy Din and Carmen Marcus demonstrate, support to develop new work can result in increased opportunities and national recognition. Din was supported to

develop his craft through such schemes as the BBC TV Drama Writers Programme and the Bush / Kudos New Writing Scheme. He has since gone on to write for the likes of ‘Shakespeare and Hathaway’ and ‘Ackley Bridge’, have two feature films in development and receive commissions from the RSC and National Theatre (JT Management 2023). Marcus, meanwhile, was commissioned by the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain New Play Commission Scheme to write ‘And The Earth Opened Up Under Her’ (Writers’ Guild of Great Britain 2023). The play was commissioned for production by Pilot Theatre and was announced in October 2023 as the winner of the Faber New Play Award, meaning that the script will be published to coincide with the premiere (Faber 2023).

As if these two case studies are not evidence enough of the value of supporting new writing and playwright talent development, economic figures also suggest that it is time to give the issue further investigation. With government figures showing that music, performance and visual arts contributed £11.5bn to the UK economy in 2022, as part of a larger creative industries sector which contributed £109bn in the previous year, there is a financial benefit to supporting local writers to develop their skills and experience (House of Lords Library 2023; 2022). What is more, a Tees Valley Combined Authority commissioned report identified potential in the development of local writers (The Fifth Sector 2021), and the BBC recently invested £25m in the region’s screen industries (BBC Media Centre 2021). These economic benefits, coupled with the positive mental health effects of creative expression, mean that provision for new writing and playwright talent development has the potential to equip local writers with the practical and emotional skills they need in order to build creative careers. The question is why Tees Valley theatres are not offering such provision.

2.1.

“We Know We Should Be Doing More”: Tees Valley Theatre Consultations

Consultations were held with theatres in every borough of the Tees Valley Combined Authority area except for Hartlepool. As well as this variation in geographic area, theatres showed variation in their ownership, with some owned by local authorities, others having National Portfolio Organisation status, and still others being run by charities or not-for-profit organisations. There was also variation in artistic strategy between consultees, ranging from theatres which produce specialist work to those which focus on devised work, and others which programme on a purely commercial basis. Irrespective of their geographic location, ownership or artistic strategy, however, consultees were asked the same set of questions about their methods and experiences of identifying and working with Tees Valley playwrights, their programming strategy and producing model.

When asked whether they identify and work with local playwrights, roughly two-thirds of consultees responded with ‘yes’. When the consultees who replied in the affirmative were questioned further, however, it became apparent that the levels of support for Tees Valley new writing and playwright talent development are not as strong as the bare percentages suggest. As explained in Section 1.3, theatres had partnered with theatre companies in order to deliver Scratch Nights and introductory playwriting courses, but neither of these initiatives are currently active. A further two theatres stated that they offered commissions, but one consultee explained that they require such a specific skill-set for such a specialised audience that these commissions are almost always awarded to individuals based in other parts of the UK. Another theatre stated that they had commissioned new writing from two local playwrights in the past, and had set aside funding to re-commission one of these playwrights again. This tendency to work with familiar faces was also evident in consultations with another theatre, which did not offer commissions, but opportunities to run workshops. They remarked, ‘we know we should be doing more to work with new people, but we end up going back to the same people year after year’.

There was also an overwhelming tendency for theatres to make distinctions between writers and other theatre creatives when it came to supporting their work.

One consultee commented, 'we don't work with writers, but if a [theatre] artist comes to us, we can work with them', while another theatre stated, 'we rarely work with a script; we work with theatremakers'. When asked to elaborate on the nature of these working relationships, answers varied from small pots of seed funding for R&D, to support in venue hire; from small financial guarantees for a performance to venue hire for a Box Office split. In all of these instances, however, responsibility for the project sits with the theatremaker rather than the theatre, and the working relationship will have been initiated by the theatremaker themselves. As one consultee explained, 'the artists approach us and we decide whether or not to support them'.

When asked about their decisions to work with theatre artists as opposed to playwrights, consultees gave a wide range of responses. One theatre explained that they supported theatremakers to develop devised work because their audiences responded well to interactive pieces which broke the fourth wall, and they felt that this form of performance was enjoyed by people who did not believe that theatre was 'for' them. Another consultee commented that their very small engagement team meant that they had no capacity to produce new writing, and this sentiment was echoed by another theatre, who explained that the size of their organisation meant that they could only programme tour-ready work. There was also uncertainty as to whether a sustainable producing model for new writing could be found, particularly in light of a decline in post-Covid audiences and the ongoing cost of living crisis.

The association between new writing and risk was particularly strong in the consultees who stated that they did not identify or work with playwrights. One theatre commented, 'we have to programme commercially in order to make a profit, so we buy in touring product which we know will sell'. This 'product' consists of the likes of tribute acts, comedy, celebrity events and dance, and forms the backbone of much of Tees Valley theatre programming. One consultee stated, 'I don't believe that audiences want a week of drama', and this sentiment was echoed by another theatre's comment that 'regional productions don't sell well'. It was contradicted, however, by one of the smaller theatres, which recalled having 'good audiences' for high quality touring new writing, as well as a larger theatre's observation that 'audiences like plays with local relevance'. Although opinion was split over how attractive new writing is to Tees Valley audiences, there was a consensus that theatres struggle to subsidise the risk it poses.

One consultee summed up this feeling by commenting, ‘when I first came here, I had a £5K buffer for experimentation. I don’t have a penny now!'

Despite the pressures which they face and the risk which they associate with new writing, all of the consulted theatres stated that they would be interested in doing more to support the staging of new work by Tees Valley playwrights. Some consultees made it clear that they would need to have producing support or have the venue hire subsidised in order to participate, while others suggested that they would be able to offer their space and staff in-kind. There was a definite appetite for partnership working and the sharing of staff time, venue space or other resources among consultees, with a programme which moves from theatre to theatre. Consultees felt that this agile form of programming would help to dilute the risks attached to the staging of new writing, while allowing each venue to programme work which played to their strengths. It was also observed that giving Tees Valley playwrights the opportunity to stage their work at different venues would attract a greater variety of voices.

Consultations with Tees Valley theatres therefore further demonstrate a scarcity of opportunities for new writing and playwright talent development within the area. The very, very few commissions offered by theatres are either awarded to individuals outside of the Combined Authority area who have a highly specific skill-set, or to playwrights with whom a venue has had a long working relationship. There is a marked preference for working with ‘artists’ or ‘theatremakers’ as opposed to ‘playwrights’, as well as an expectation that said artist or theatremaker will approach the theatre. New writing is viewed as a great financial risk on account of its lack of assured audience, which means that many theatres feel unable to programme it.

While the consultees all expressed willingness to expand current levels of provision for the performance of new writing within the Tees Valley, it is striking that playwright talent development was not part of the conversation. ‘New writing’ was taken to mean a tour-ready product, rather than a script which has to go through a development process of its own, and therefore takes a significant amount of time to create. With only one Tees Valley theatre consistently producing new work, albeit for a specialised audience, this oversight is understandable, but concerning. As consultations with other theatre professionals demonstrate, dramaturgy is a vital part of a play’s development – and the development of the person who writes it.

2.2.

“Writing a Play is Hard”: The Value of Dramaturgy

The term ‘dramaturgy’ refers to the process of working closely with a playwright in order to ensure that the constituent parts of a script are as strong as they can possibly be. Undertaken by a literary professional, dramaturgy involves the close reading and analysis of a play’s plot, character, structure, dialogue and narrative arcs, among others. The playwright is issued with a script report or set of ‘notes’ which they work with during the redraft of their script. Although the length of time allocated for dramaturgy can vary wildly depending on the duration of the play, the scale of the commission and the resources of the theatre or theatre company producing it, the process is not only key to the development of new writing, but also a playwright’s career.

Consultations were held with four theatre professionals who had experience of dramaturgy. Three-quarters of consultees worked for theatre companies which had extensive experience of developing and producing new writing for community, regional and national audiences. The remaining consultee meanwhile had a long track record of working with new writing as the former Associate Literary Producer and Associate Literary Manager of a new writing venue, and their current position as CEO of a specialist producing house. Between them, these four consultees were well-placed to discuss why dramaturgy is so important to theatre and to a playwright’s professional development.

As one consultee explained, ‘writing a play is hard’ because a script is the foundation upon which all other theatre professionals must collectively build. It is not only the source of story and dialogue, but also set, lighting, sound and costume design, as well as the basis of all directional, production and acting decisions. With so many creatives taking their cue from the script, it is vital that the text is strong enough to support them – but this is a process which takes time. The consultee with experience of developing and producing new writing for national audiences recounted how they took a critically-acclaimed, award-winning play through a dozen drafts in eighteen months, and explained that it is not uncommon for West End plays to take three or four years to go from commission to production.

This need for a sustained period of dramaturgy is not, all consultees were keen to stress, a judgement on the playwright's skill, but rather an investment in their professional development. Dramaturgy was repeatedly referred to as an opportunity for a theatre or organisation to give a playwright a safe space in which to stretch themselves and their work. One consultee explained that 'the more potential a story has, the more there's a need to explore alternative choices' – and support the playwright to learn how to cope with the pressure of needing to make the correct ones. As a period of sustained work on plot, structure, dialogue, subtext and character, dramaturgy was praised for its ability to accelerate a playwright's craft development and career progression. Once the dramaturgical process was over and the production staged, playwrights had a high-quality professional credit which would act as a 'calling card' for other opportunities. With such opportunities also requiring writers to be able to respond to notes, redraft scripts and develop a rich, believable story world, playwrights who had been through the dramaturgical process had the skillsets required to successfully rise to new challenges.

As well as arguing for the importance of dramaturgy, consultees also stressed the need to pay playwrights fairly for their time. In an industry which has not traditionally supported those from working-class backgrounds, as well as individuals with other under-represented identities, payment for writing and rewriting makes the dramaturgical process accessible and sends the message that theatre is open to all writers. It is also, on the playwright's part, a recognition and validation of their expertise, as well as a mark of distinction between writing as a hobby and writing as a career. Consultees made it very clear that they considered a writer's fee for dramaturgy to be money well spent, because payment for participation in the process acted as a kind of 'insurance' against script-based stoppages in the rehearsal room. With questions, weaknesses and inconsistencies ironed out, creative teams were able to get on with their designing, directing, producing or acting without having to wait for substantial rewrites – a situation which is stressful for all involved.

It is also notable that multiple consultees referred to a lack of dramaturgical opportunities within the Tees Valley Combined Authority area. One theatre professional stated that this form of playwright talent development was only available in London or, as they put it, 'big regional theatres', while another expressed frustration at the current lack of provision. They commented that 'there is no current funding

stream to develop playwrights or their work', which means that these writers are unable to make the 'hard jump' between smaller and larger venues, or short and full-length plays. This situation, consultees argued, led to writers being unable to develop their craft or the skills which they needed in order to take up other opportunities. As a consequence, playwrights experienced feelings of frustration and poor mental health, to the extent where some very talented individuals stopped writing altogether.

What the consultations with theatre professionals reveal, then, is that dramaturgy is integral to the development of new writing and a playwright's craft. The process of receiving and responding to notes enables playwrights to strengthen their storytelling abilities and gain valuable experience of the realities of being a professional writer. It is therefore concerning that Tees Valley writers are not being afforded opportunities to experience dramaturgical support which would not only aid their playwriting development, but also stand them in good stead for transitioning into other forms of writing. As the following section of this report demonstrates, the need to equip Tees Valley playwriting talent with skills transferrable to screenwriting is a particularly timely one.

2.3.

“Playwrights Make Great Screenwriters”: Screen Organisation Findings

In 2021, the BBC signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work alongside the Tees Valley Combined Authority, two other Combined Authorities and twelve more Local Authorities to invest in talent, skills and infrastructure to support the screen industries within the North East. Alongside a raft of plans to film and produce programmes in the region, the BBC also pledged to spend at least £25m there over the next five years (BBC Media Centre 2021). Around nine months after this announcement, North East Screen launched the North East Screen Industries Partnership (NESIP), an initiative to enable the strategic development of the film and TV industries within the region (North East Screen 2022). £11.4m of investment was earmarked for this project, £4.5m of which was committed by the Tees Valley Combined Authority. Designed to ‘level up’ the screen industries within the region, NESIP also focuses on the development and retention of creative talent, particularly in conjunction with Further and Higher Education providers (North East Screen 2023).

The need to nurture talent within the region has been made especially evident by the 2022 opening of The Northern Studios in Hartlepool. Supported in part by a £3.8m investment from TVCA, The Northern Studios describes itself as ‘the only large-scale studio complex in the North East’, and the recently released feature film *Jackdaw* made use of its facilities (Tees Valley 2022; The Northern Studios 2023). In further evidence of the growth of the North East screen industries, early 2023 saw FulwellCain Studios announce plans to develop Crown Work Studios in Sunderland (Fulwell 73 2023). Envisaged as one of the largest film studios in Europe, the development is estimated to create around 8,450 jobs in the North East, many of which will be in the creative industries.

In light of these plans for the development of the North East screen industries, as well as the knowledge that such Tees Valley playwrights as Ishy Din have successfully transitioned from stage to screen, the decision was taken to consult with representatives of four screen organisations working in the region. Three of the consultees were concerned with sector or talent development, while the fourth consultee was an independent production company based in the Tees Valley. With a

wealth of experience in supporting writers from idea stage to production, the screen consultees were well-placed to discuss their perceptions of playwrights' suitability to transition into writing for screen. They were also able to discuss the kind of support which they feel playwrights need in order to make the stage-screen transition a successful one.

All four consultees agreed that playwrights are valuable to the screen industry, with one remarking, 'playwrights make great screenwriters'. A number of desirable skills were identified, including the ability to write naturalistic dialogue, to create a strong sense of place and to work collaboratively. As screenwriting is often dialogue-heavy and developed through writers' rooms, theatre is understood by consultees as a space to allow playwrights to hone the technical and soft skills which are essential for visual storytelling. Screen professionals stated that they enjoyed working with playwrights as these writers had already spent a significant amount of time developing their craft, and were able to handle the responsibility of writing for professional production. There was also appreciation for the more diverse perspective which playwrights could bring to screen, with these writers often bringing under-represented stories to the fore.

While playwrights hold a significant number of skills transferrable to screenwriting, consultees stressed that they need support to adjust their expectations about the form. Screen professionals explained that screenplays were not filmed versions of stage plays, but complex forms of visual storytelling which require huge story engines. While lived experience alone may be able to drive a 30 minute play, one consultee argued, it is unable to generate 6-12 hours of screen time, so 'it's about supporting the writer to retain their voice while scaling up their ideas'. Consultees also observed that playwrights require support to understand career progression within the form, particularly that their first jobs may be writing gags for a comedy show or scripts for YouTube videos. As another consultee observed, 'coming into screenwriting expecting to write your own [series] is like walking into the office of a multinational corporation and expecting to instantly be made CEO'.

Consultees also felt that on account of their geographic location, it was necessary to support Tees Valley playwrights to gain representation by screen agents. With their ability to make introductions to production companies, knowledge of writers'

rooms and experience of negotiating deals, agents can aid career progression in the writers they represent. As the screen consultations revealed, however, it is difficult to attract London-based agents up to Tees Valley theatres to watch playwrights' work, which makes it more difficult for the aforementioned writers to gain representation. One of the best ways to support Tees Valley playwrights who wished to transition into screenwriting, consultees argued, was to design and implement a strategy for placing their work in front of agents. Such a strategy would substantially increase the visibility of Tees Valley playwrights to agents in London, and vastly improve their opportunities of gaining representation, building professional credits and transitioning to screenwriting.

What the screen consultations demonstrate, then, is that playwrights possess a skillset which is much in demand for the screen industries. With their ability to write naturalistic dialogue, create scripts under the pressures of professional production and work collaboratively, playwrights have the potential to become the next generation of screenwriters – if they are given the support to do so. The transition from playwriting to screenwriting requires an adjustment to expectations and attitudes to visual storytelling which take time to occur, but when they do, they can unlock a whole new career pathway for Tees Valley playwrights. In light of recent investments for the North East screen industry, supporting playwrights to develop their skills and transition into screenwriting would be an important step towards retaining local talent and increasing the sustainability of creative careers within the Combined Authority area.

2.4.

“Writers Get Stuck in a Loop”: Other Consultation Findings

Consultations were also held with eight representatives of seven other organisations, all of whom had experience of working with Tees Valley writers. Three of the consultees worked in writing or talent development, while another two were involved with a Creative People and Places (CPP) programme. A further two consultees were employed by Local Authorities to programme and develop cultural events, while the remaining consultee occupied a senior position at a Tees Valley Further and Higher Education provider. Taken together, these consultees had extensive experience of working with Tees Valley playwrights in cultural and educational settings, so they were asked questions about how they identified and supported local talent. They were also invited to reflect upon broader perceptions surrounding the Tees Valley cultural sector.

Consultees reported different ways of working with Tees Valley playwrights. The educational provider, for example, supported students to write scripts for coursework, then perform their plays as part of the assessment process. One of the talent development professionals supported new graduates across a range of creative disciplines to develop skills and find opportunities. A further two writing development consultees worked with playwrights through workshops and commissions, but it was notable that these opportunities required playwrights to work in other forms than scripts, such as prose, non-fiction and poetry. In a similar vein, the CPP organisation had also worked with playwrights in non-script forms, or had paid them to facilitate community workshops. One local authority consultee, meanwhile, had supported the performance of new writing by acting as Front of House staff, while the other had not knowingly worked with Tees Valley playwrights at all.

When some consultees were asked why they worked with playwrights in non-script forms, or had not worked with them in any capacity, responses varied. The CPP organisation stated that their remit was not to commission creatives to make work in isolation, but rather to connect creatives with communities in order to enable said communities to experience cultural activities. One of the writing development organisations had always been associated with a particular, non-script form of writing, while another writing development consultee explained that they had once invested

heavily in playwriting within another Northern area. They had commissioned short plays and run developmental schemes which were popular with audiences and playwrights alike, but as local theatres were not investing any of their resources into these schemes, they decided that they could no longer make these programmes their strategic priorities. They therefore took the decision to develop and commission writers in forms other than playwriting, meaning that they now focus on such areas as poetry, non-fiction or prose. It was also prose and poetry writers with whom one of the local authority consultees is used to working, primarily because they feel unaware of playwrights operating in the Tees Valley area.

The vast majority of consultees expressed concern over the impact which a lack of talent development and new writing provision is having upon Tees Valley playwrights. One professional remarked, 'it's about bringing playwrights through and giving them the skills and credits they need to go on to write for film and TV or podcasting, but now writers get stuck in a loop because there are so few opportunities for full-length plays'. This situation is problematic, consultees argued, for writers with various levels of experience. The educational provider commented that 'it's hard to graduate round here', and explained that their students often showed great enthusiasm for writing scripts while studying, but this enthusiasm was dampened by a lack of post-graduation opportunities. Another consultee spoke at length about the negative impact which a lack of opportunities has upon freelance writers of all forms. They remarked that 'the endless grift of applying for tiny commission pots' creates levels of stress and uncertainty which are not conducive to the creative process.

There was also a general consensus among consultees that the Tees Valley is a difficult place for creative careers to flourish. Multiple professionals admitted that they found it difficult to attract individuals from outside of the Combined Authority area to attend events, host workshops or give readings. There was a nationwide perception, consultees argued, of the Tees Valley as a bigoted, insular cultural backwater which is only able to tell stories about its industrial past. There were also discussions regarding the geographic spread of the Combined Authority area itself, and the diversity of experiences among different towns, villages and suburbs. Consultees believed that this situation was compounded by audiences' unwillingness to travel relatively short distances to events over concerns about the affordability and availability of public transport, as well as the safety of after-dark travel.

Consultations with this final group of organisations therefore revealed that when playwrights are being offered creative work in the Combined Authority area, it is in non-scripted forms. While the reasoning behind this situation was varied, there was a general agreement that it was preventing Tees Valley playwrights from developing the skills which they require in order to transition to such other forms as film, TV and podcasting. This lack of opportunity, combined with the relative isolation of local audiences and a nationally pervasive negative stereotype about the Tees Valley's cultural potential, adds further gloom to what the consultations with theatre and screen professionals have already shown to be a bleak environment for the area's playwrights.

2.5.

Conclusions from Consultations

A combination of desk-based research and consultations with theatre, screen and other cultural professionals reveals a lack of provision for playwright talent development and new writing within the Tees Valley Combined Authority. There were no active new writing commissions, scratch nights, rehearsed readings, mentorships or playwriting courses available during the nine month research phase of this project, and less than a handful of opportunities since the Covid-19 pandemic. With all of these scarce (and not always openly recruited) opportunities being led by theatre companies, it is apparent that Tees Valley theatres are not strategizing the development of local playwrights. It is therefore not only opportunities which are lacking, but also an infrastructure which embeds new writing and playwright talent development into the Tees Valley Combined Authority cultural scene.

Consultations with representatives of Tees Valley theatres suggest reasons behind this lack of infrastructure, while the responses of other theatre professionals, screen industry representatives and cultural organisation consultees reveal the dire consequences of it. In an already challenging post-Covid landscape which has been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, theatres feel unable to invest already limited resources into the risk that is new writing. While they are rightly trying to protect their venue, however, theatres are inadvertently harming the prospects of Tees Valley playwrights. Denied the chance to build up professional credits and develop the all-important skills of receiving and responding to notes, local playwrights are unable to capitalise upon recent investment into the North East screen industries by exploring paid opportunities to transition into screenwriting. As the following part of this report demonstrates, Tees Valley playwrights are all too aware of the battle they face to build and sustain creative careers while living in the area.

3.1.

Writers' Focus Groups: The Rationale

Two Focus Groups of Tees Valley writers were recruited as part of the *First Stage* project, with one formed of early career writers and another made up of mid-career writers. 'Early career' was taken to refer to writers who were starting to build up a body of work in theatre or prose, while 'mid-career' concerned writers who had strong track records in these forms. The writers who were recruited for the Early Career Focus Group therefore had experience of self-producing plays, winning national or regional writing competitions, and writing paid content for websites. The Mid-Career Focus Group writers, meanwhile, had seen full-length plays professionally produced at many theatres, written for film and TV, published critically acclaimed novels, won awards and secured multiple commissions. With a range of genders, ethnicities, abilities, sexualities, socioeconomic backgrounds and ages among them, the recruited writers also had experience of navigating a creative industry which has not traditionally represented them.

The Early Career Focus Group writers were asked questions about their motivations for writing, their experiences of trying to build a creative career as a Tees Valley writer, and the support they felt they needed in order to progress. Writers in the Mid-Career Focus Group, meanwhile, were asked to speak about their career trajectories, their experiences of sustaining a career as a Tees Valley writer, and their perception of current levels of support for new writing and playwright talent development. Taken together, both sets of Focus Groups allowed for an investigation into the realities of both building and sustaining a writing career within the Tees Valley. The Focus Groups also made it possible to interrogate whether experiences of navigating the creative industries altered with career progression, and to identify the needs of local writers at different career stages.

3.2.

“We’re Not Heard”: The Early Career Writer Focus Group

As part of the preliminaries to the Early Career Focus Group, writers were asked to introduce themselves and give a potted summary of their experience to date. While there was great variation in the amount of time for which they had been actively self-producing or publishing their work, there was an overwhelming consensus that participants had always felt an affinity with writing. Several individuals recalled how, growing up working-class in the Tees Valley, writing was viewed as an indulgent hobby rather than a craft, meaning that they were well past school leaving age when they realised that careers in writing actually existed. While one of the participants was in a Higher Education setting when this realisation occurred and was able to access support, other writers had to use their initiative to find other entry routes, such as workshops and entry to competitions.

It is unsurprising, then, that participants argued that the day-to-day realities of being a writer are shrouded in mysticism. They recalled taking time to realise that having their plays, short stories or poetry rejected is a normal part of a writer’s life, rather than a sign that they are a ‘bad’ writer. One participant commented, ‘I fear that people are being burned off at an early stage because they just don’t realise that [rejection is] part of the game and so subjective’, while another stated, ‘I feel like there’s a logic to the arts world, but no one is being made aware of it’. This lack of transparency has led, participants argued, to a situation where writers are creating work with an eye to performance or publication without knowing how to achieve their end goal. More than once, the comment ‘it’s who you know’ was made, but there was an overwhelming sense of not knowing ‘who’ to ‘know’. There was also uncertainty over how to build relationships with Tees Valley theatres and cultural organisations, and how to find a peer network with which they could share experiences and ask questions.

Participants also identified playwright-specific barriers to developing their craft and experience: the support offered by theatres and cultural organisations within the Tees Valley, and the attitude adopted by those located on Tyneside. Time and again, participants expressed disappointment at the lack of funded opportunities to write and stage new work which Tees Valley theatres fail to offer local writers. They also

considered such current provisions as free rehearsal space to be wholly inadequate, with one writer remarking, ‘that’s no different to what I could get from a church hall’. As a consequence of the perceived lack of funded, genuinely helpful opportunities from Tees Valley theatres, writers stated that they felt disillusioned and undervalued – emotions which were only magnified when they attempted to build relationships with theatres and cultural organisations on Tyneside.

There was an overwhelming sense among participants that opportunities were, as one writer put it, ‘ringfenced’ for Tyneside writers, leading to an under-representation of Tees Valley voices within North East theatre. Another writer expressed their belief that ‘there’s a huge prejudice against Tees Valley writers – we’re not seen to count and we’re not heard’. Participants described being met with radio silence when contacting Tyneside theatres and cultural organisations, or never being longlisted or interviewed for developmental or performance opportunities. Worryingly, several participants felt that it was not worth submitting work to Tyneside theatres and cultural organisations, with one now sending work to London and another asking in frustration, ‘why should we go forty miles out of our way to engage with theatres who don’t want to engage with us?’

The Early Career Focus Group concluded with questions as to what support writers felt that they needed in order to progress their careers, and what they would most like to change about the current Tees Valley cultural scene. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the nature of the previous answers, responses were concerned mainly with an increase in funded new writing and talent development for Tees Valley playwrights. One participant commented, ‘I want to see a genuine commitment from our theatres’, while others suggested the creation of a development fund to which local playwrights could apply for time to write and redraft a script with dramaturgical support, stage an already written script, or cover such self-production costs as venue hire. Successful applicants, participants argued, could then become part of a peer-support network which would enable the sharing of knowledge and the raising of awareness about the difficulties which Tees Valley writers from under-represented backgrounds face when attempting to build a creative career. Participants felt that the establishment of a development fund and network would allow them to improve their craft, build professional credits and gain the skills they need to make the leap from an early career writer to a mid-career one.

3.3.

“I Wouldn’t Be Where I Am If I’d Started in Teesside”: The Mid-Career Writer Focus Group

The writers in the Mid-Career Focus Group were all raised in working-class Tees Valley households, and had no recollections of seeing lives like theirs represented in theatres or books. While they all felt that they had an affinity for storytelling, a lack of educational writing pathways, combined with the perception of writing as a middle-class hobby, meant that all participants felt that they were not ‘allowed’ to be writers until they were well past school leaving age. One writer commented, ‘if I had seen this place represented, I would have started [writing] earlier’, in reference to the fact that opportunities for ‘new’ writers are almost always targeted at the 18-25 demographic. Even once they had found an ‘in’ into the creative industries, participants reported struggling with impostor syndrome, finding it difficult to believe that their work is good, and having to battle to be taken seriously both inside and outside of the Tees Valley.

Participants in the Mid-Career Focus Group recalled how they have had to have their plays performed or work commissioned in other areas in order to progress their careers. One writer commented that ‘I wouldn’t be where I am now if I’d started in Teesside’, while another spoke at length about how working in London had made local organisations perceive them as ‘legitimate’. Participants located this struggle in a lack of paid opportunities for playwrights to write and stage work within the Tees Valley, and the unsuitability of local theatres to stage mid-scale work. They also spoke of an industry perception that staging new writing within the area was something of a wasted opportunity, as broadsheet reviewers and production companies were unwilling to travel to see it. One writer who had an impressive track record of local and regional productions supported this claim by discussing their difficulties in building meaningful relationships with theatres outside of the Tees Valley, while another observed that the vast majority of their playwriting work comes from Tyneside theatres.

Participants argued that the onus is always upon self-producing individuals to stage new writing, as opposed to theatres, with one writer commenting that ‘the problem with the Tees Valley is that unless you have time, energy and resource, it probably won’t happen’. This situation, the Focus Group explained, placed

unsustainable pressure upon the aforementioned individuals, leading to physical and mental health problems, burnout and vastly reduced creative output. Participants also observed that methods of relationship building with Tees Valley theatres and cultural organisations also have a negative impact upon their mental health. One writer explained the lengthy and unpaid series of meetings they had attended with an individual who worked at such a venue – only to find that the individual moved jobs and they were once more unknown to the place for which they had worked. In another example of the perceived unreceptive nature of Tees Valley theatres and organisations, another writer recounted her attempts at trying to offer them help – only to be met with radio silence. ‘If I’m struggling to make connections as a [mid-career] writer,’ they commented, ‘what chance has a [new writer] got?’

The Mid-Career Focus Group concluded with the question as to what participants wanted to change about the cultural scene in the Tees Valley. Although the writers were asked to give individual responses, it was clear that their answers resonated with the whole group, indicating the sense that a package of interventions was needed, as opposed to one single measure. Participants argued that for playwrights to truly flourish, it was necessary to make levels of support for theatre equivalent for those available to the visual arts and fine arts. While opportunities and funding for these latter two forms were offered on a regular basis through such avenues as the Middlesbrough Cultural Partnership, there was a total lack of them in relation to playwriting or any form of theatre. Participants showed a strong belief that greater investment in theatre would not only create development opportunities for Tees Valley playwrights, but also directors, producers, technicians and actors, while demonstrating that there is a local audience which needs and wants new writing.

Participants also expressed the desire for a centralised ‘collective’ of Tees Valley playwrights and theatremakers. This community of early- and mid-career creatives would enable the sharing of knowledge and expertise, and engender collaborations between the people who write scripts, and those who make it possible for them to be performed onstage. Participants argued that such a collective would not only encourage the development of new writing and reduce feelings of isolation, but also create a group of professionals who would be able to advocate for theatre to policymakers. Through their combined skills, theatre credits and connections, this collective would work to increase opportunities for Tees Valley playwrights and

theatremakers, with a remit to stage more new writing in the area as well as in other regions.

While the first two answers to the question of desired improvements to the cultural scene in the Tees Valley were concerned with affecting change for early- and mid-career playwrights, the third related to the playwrights of the future. It was argued that if the Tees Valley is to become an area with a flourishing cultural sector, it is vital to move away from a ‘hobbyist’ way of thinking about playwriting, theatre and other artforms, and towards one which is centred around industry. In the same way that schools and colleges enable young people to develop the skills they need in order to become electricians or engineers, it was argued that they should also give these young people opportunities to prepare for a career in the creative industries. Through educational programmes in theatre, film and other art forms, young people would firstly realise that it is possible to have a career as a writer, director or other creative professional, and secondly be given a safe space in which to build up the experience they need to gain entry-level jobs or go on to further education. Coupled with pathways for early-career writers and young graduates, such an intervention would, as one participant commented, ‘make an eleven-year-old’s interest into a twenty-five-year-old’s career’.

3.4.

Conclusions from Focus Groups

Taken together, the findings from both Focus Groups paint a grim picture of the realities of being a Tees Valley playwright. Irrespective of their career stages, participants reported being unable to develop or stage new writing with Tees Valley theatres, let alone be funded to do so. Writers in both Focus Groups spoke of the difficulty of building relationships with theatres in the area, partly because knowledge about local writers is held at an individual rather than an organisational level, and partly also because their current offers of support are deemed inadequate. All participants also felt the lack of a network of Tees Valley playwrights who could pool resources and advocate to policy makers, resulting in feelings of isolation, confusion and frustration.

Faced with a dearth of new writing opportunities within the Tees Valley, writers from both Focus Groups felt that it was necessary to take their work outside of the area if they were to progress their careers. While there was an understanding that having plays staged or work commissioned elsewhere would ‘legitimate’ the writers within the eyes of Tees Valley theatres and cultural organisations, their attempts to achieve this goal were often blighted by a lack of receptivity to stories from the Combined Authority area. From being ‘ghosted’ by Tyneside organisations to being told that their novel was too ‘regional’ to warrant broadsheet reviews, writers recounted multiple instances when their geographic identity made creative professionals in other parts of the country make negative value judgements about their work. In addition to the feelings of worthlessness and self-doubt which such attitudes engendered in the writers, there was also frustration and distress at having to move away from the Tees Valley in order to build a career in the creative industries. One participant commented, ‘my family is here, my friends are here, my home is here – why should I have to leave all that to earn a living?’

What is also striking – and highly concerning – about the feedback from both Focus Groups is the length of time it took participants to realise that they could become writers. Across a range of genders, ethnicities, sexualities, abilities and ages, the writers reported growing up with an awareness that they had an aptitude for writing,

but not knowing that they could turn their skill into a career. Working-class writers in particular recounted being made to feel that writing was the hobbyist preserve of middle-class individuals, as opposed to a highly skilled craft which forms part of the creative industries. Each participant was well beyond school leaving age when they began to gain professional credits, and each writer had great difficulty understanding how the creative industries worked. From being unaware that rejection is the norm to struggling for networks and contacts, the Focus Group participants highlighted an utter lack of career pathways for anyone living in the Tees Valley who wishes to become a writer. Whether they are a schoolchild, a new graduate, a fortysomething or a retired person with an aptitude for writing, there is currently no provision available to support individuals to build and sustain a career which makes use of their talent.

What the Early and Mid-Career Writer Focus Groups reveal, then, is a staggering lack of infrastructure and investment for Tees Valley playwrights at all levels of experience. Individuals from working-class backgrounds grow up believing that they are not 'allowed' to be writers, and there is nothing in the Tees Valley educational or cultural programme to tell them otherwise. There are no opportunities to learn about the craft of playwriting, be paid to develop scripts or receive funding for their performance. There is a perceived lack of interest from Tees Valley theatres not only in staging new writing, but also in building relationships with those who create it. When writers try to take their work outside of the Tees Valley, they are subject to geographic prejudice, and because they do not have access to a network of peers, they do not realise how common this occurrence is. With no collective to advocate for them to policymakers, the onus is placed on individual playwrights to self-produce, but the time, energy and financial resources required are highly prohibitive. Denied the opportunity for career progression and without pathways, funding, networks and meaningful relationships with theatres, it is remarkable that the Tees Valley manages to produce any playwrights at all.

4.1.

Recommendations: the Rationale

It is clear from consultations with theatre, screen and cultural professionals, as well as Focus Groups with writers, that the present lack of new writing and playwright talent development provision within the Tees Valley is a complex issue. With the only producing theatre in the Combined Authority area focusing on the highly specialist audience of babies, toddlers and children, no one venue has the resources to consistently produce new writing for adults or invest in playwright talent development. In the post-Covid struggle to regain audiences and the current cost of living crisis, theatres are understandably focusing on keeping themselves afloat, which leads to commercially-driven programming. As new writing and talent development schemes require a significant outlay of finance and staff time which is not guaranteed to be repaid with a large audience, theatres do not strategize the development of local writing talent. While they may offer a theatre company in-kind venue hire for a one-off event, the present belief is that new writing and playwright talent development pose too much of a risk for one theatre to take.

Yet while theatres acknowledged their inability to offer provision for new writing and playwright talent development as individuals, they also consistently stated that they would be interested in partnering with other venues in order to do so. Several theatre consultees expressed discomfort with the present lack of opportunities to develop local playwriting talent, and felt that a pooling of resources and venues would somewhat mitigate the risk posed by new writing. It would also, they argued, allow for the development and programming of a variety of stories and voices from Tees Valley playwrights, and offer writers opportunities to build relationships with multiple venues. While more detailed discussions about the types of resources theatres might pool did not take place, it was highly encouraging to learn that even the most risk-averse of venues felt prepared to be part of a broader scheme to increase provision for new writing and playwright talent development in the Tees Valley.

It was also encouraging to discover that screen and cultural professionals were keen to partner on programmes to develop Tees Valley playwrights at all stages of their career. Consultees who worked for local authorities, for example, were interested

in exploring how Library and Youth Services might support new writers and young people to learn how to write plays. Screen professionals expressed an appetite for a programme which would offer Tees Valley playwrights with existing credits the opportunity to explore a transition into screenwriting. Other consultees stated that they were interested in supporting Tees Valley playwrights not only to stage their writing within the Combined Authority area, but also to export it elsewhere.

As well as revealing a current lack of new writing and playwright talent development schemes within the Tees Valley, then, consultations for the First Stage project demonstrate that there is a desire to improve it. Yet consultees' responses show that the question of how to support local playwrights to create scripts, develop transferrable skills and build sustainable careers is one which is too big for a single playwright, producer, theatre, screen professional or cultural organisation to work on alone. Partnerships are therefore key to solving several of the problems which the *First Stage* report has outlined, and form the basis of the recommendations it makes in order to increase provision for new writing and playwright talent development within the Tees Valley.

4.2.

Recommendations

Consultations with theatre, screen, cultural, educational and writing professionals uncovered a lack of new writing and playwright talent development opportunities within the Tees Valley. In order to improve provision, the *First Stage* report makes the following recommendations:

- 1. The Creation of a Strategic Group for Tees Valley New Writing and Playwright Talent Development:** with current provision operating on an ad-hoc, company-led basis, the Tees Valley Combined Authority area lacks any form of strategy relating to new writing and playwright talent development. The establishment of a Strategic Group would allow for the development of a centralised vision for playwriting provision within the Tees Valley, and an action plan for its implementation. Consisting of Tees Valley theatre, screen, cultural, educational and writing professionals as well as a representative of TVCA, the Group would meet on a regular basis and form a space for honest conversations about the support which Tees Valley theatres are able to offer, as well as the needs of new graduates and playwrights at varying career levels. It would also allow for regular monitoring of the state of new playwriting provision within the Tees Valley, and enable members to work together to resolve any issues in a timely, collaborative fashion. In recognition of the fact that some members will attend as part of their paid employment but others will have to take time away from freelance work, it is also recommended that those who are not in salaried positions are compensated for their attendance.
- 2. The Creation of a Funded Tees Valley Playwriting Infrastructure:** with theatres feeling that provision for new playwriting poses too much of a financial risk, and playwrights missing out on opportunities for career progression, it is recommended that theatres work in partnership with cultural organisations, TVCA and the aforementioned Strategic Group to develop a funded playwriting infrastructure. The creation of this infrastructure would allow for a regular,

structured programme of paid opportunities and commissions for new, early- and mid-career Tees Valley playwrights. Consisting of a series of playwriting courses, playwrights' groups, script-in-hand readings and Scratch Nights, it would culminate in an annual New Writing Festival. This day-long event would programme the best of short and longer plays from Tees Valley playwrights, as well as playwriting masterclasses, rehearsed readings and workshops. This combination of craft, short- and long-form opportunities and commissions for Tees Valley playwrights would encourage the creation of new writing within the area, as there would always be opportunities to learn and submission windows to aim at. The partnership model of such an infrastructure would allow for the 'risks' associated with new writing to be shared, as playwriting courses could be delivered through existing Library and Youth Services, educational providers could help to form creative teams for performances, and venues for script-in-hand readings, Scratch Nights and the New Writing Festival would rotate. While more detailed conversations about the funding and make-up of such a structure would obviously need to take place, the principle behind this recommendation is to offer consistent and meaningful paid opportunities for Tees Valley playwrights to experience dramaturgy, gain professional credits, develop transferrable skills and build meaningful relationships with local theatres – while sharing risk and resource between theatres and organisations.

3. **The Creation of a Theatre-Screen Talent Development Strategy:** with the £25m BBC investment, the opening of The Northern Studios in Hartlepool and FulwellCain Studios' plans to develop Crown Work Studios in Sunderland, it is recommended that theatres, screen agencies and TVCA collaborate to identify and support Tees Valley playwrights with potential to transition into screenwriting. Agents and representatives of screen organisations could, for example, be invited to such flagship theatre events as the New Writing Festival mentioned in Recommendation 2, or offered introductions to playwrights who are building a track record of full-length credits. Playwrights with screenwriting potential could then be invited to participate in a talent development programme which offers an introduction to visual storytelling, and ideally also gives them experience of sitting in a writers' room and attending a development meeting.

While more detailed conversations about funding and the nature of such a strategy would obviously need to take place, the principle behind this recommendation is to furnish Tees Valley playwrights with the skills, experience and networks they need in order to take up entry-level screenwriting opportunities, and capitalise upon recent investments. It is also designed to motivate new and early career playwrights to keep developing their craft and building up credits, as well as increase the sustainability of Tees Valley playwrights' careers.

4. **The Creation of a Support System for the Export of New Writing:** with Focus Group writers identifying a strong link between the staging of work outside of the Tees Valley and career progression, it is recommended that theatres pool resources in order to support the export of new writing created here. Building upon such pre-existing networks as Venues North, theatres could assist playwrights with budgeting and bidding for tours of the highest quality new Tees Valley writing. This recommendation would enable local playwrights to build meaningful relationships with theatres inside and outside of the Combined Authority area, and improve their chances of being offered other commissions or development opportunities. It would thereby strengthen both the sustainability of their careers, and the reputation of the Tees Valley as an 'engine room' for high quality new writing.

5. **The De-Mystification of Writing Careers:** with Focus Group writers recalling their struggles to believe that they were 'allowed' to be writers, and speaking at length about their subsequent struggles to build careers, it is recommended that efforts are made to explain the day-to-day realities of being a Tees Valley writer. From working on commissions to pitching ideas and dealing with rejection, it is essential that new writers understand how the creative industries work, and that local people are educated to realise that writing is a highly skilled career. In partnership with theatres, cultural organisations, Library and Youth Services, Tees Valley playwrights could demystify writing careers by giving talks, participating in Q&A Sessions or making 'Day in the Life' short films. This

recommendation would help to raise awareness of writing as a craft and valid career choice, as well as its accessibility to people from all backgrounds.

- 6. The Creation of a Playwriting Collective:** with all Focus Group participants reporting a lack of playwriting networks, it is recommended that Tees Valley playwrights are given support to form a playwriting collective. This group would meet on a regular basis to share experiences, ask questions and identify their needs. They would then liaise with the New Writing Strategic Group, outlined in Recommendation 1, in order to measure the progress of Tees Valley playwriting provision, and advocate for further support. This recommendation would strengthen the networks of Tees Valley playwrights and improve their ability to navigate the creative industries, while also reducing feelings of isolation.

Taken together, these six recommendations are designed to improve new writing and playwright talent development provision within the Tees Valley Combined Authority area. The mixture of strategies, infrastructures, commissions, pathways and networks is designed to enable Tees Valley playwrights with varying levels of experience to access opportunities to develop their craft and gain professional credits. Instead of struggling along in isolation, playwrights would be empowered to build relationships with each other and a variety of theatres as they write short and longer-form plays. They will also be able to make connections with theatres outside of the Tees Valley area, and develop transferrable skills which will stand them in good stead to capitalise upon recent investments in the North East screen industries.

Plays, of course, do not make it to the stage of their own accord. Actors, directors, producers, stage managers, sound engineers, set and lighting designers also play vital parts in bringing new writing to life. An investment into new writing and playwright talent development therefore does not only create opportunities for writers, but a range of other theatre professionals. While the *First Stage* report has focused by necessity on playwrights, then, its recommendations are very much intended to start a conversation about how a broader group of theatre professionals may be supported to build sustainable careers in the creative industries while living in the Tees Valley.

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LIST OF CONSULTEES AND FOCUS GROUP WRITERS

Consultees:

Annabel Turpin, ARC Theatre, Stockton-on-Tees (Now Storyhouse, Chester).
Heather Tarran-Jones, Darlington Hippodrome.
Miranda Thain, Theatre Hullabaloo.
Ben Dickenson, Theatre Hullabaloo.
Wilma Gardiner-Gill, Saltburn Arts Centre.
David Lindsay, Middlesbrough Theatre.
Leon Jones, Tees Active (ref. Billingham Forum Theatre).
Gaye Kirby, Middlesbrough Council.
Holly Glover, Middlesbrough Council.
Chris Foxon, Papatango Theatre Company.
Harriet Ghost, Blowin' A Hooley Theatre Company.
Lisa Laws, North East Screen.
Adam Bouabda, Sea and Sky Pictures.
Jess Loveland, BBC Writersroom.
Roxy McKenna, Film Hub North (now New Writing North).
Shahda Khan, Borderlands CPP.
Emily Treadgold, Borderlands CPP.
Anna Disley, New Writing North.
Ella Brewster, Tees Valley New Creatives.
Dan Mitchelson, Redcar and Cleveland Council.
Kirsten Luckins, Tees Women Poets.
Emma Tennant, Stockton Borough Council.
Becci Sharrock, Playwright and Producer.
Jonny Bussell, Northern School of Art.

Early Career Focus Group Writers:

Shazia J Altaf.
Kieran Barker.
Sandra Falconer.
Dominic Nelson.
Philip Sculthorpe.

Mid-Career Focus Group Writers:

Lisette Auton.
Ishy Din.
Carmen Marcus.
Deborah O' Connor.
David Tuffnell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Louise Marie Powell is an award-winning, working-class Middlesbrough playwright, author, director and filmmaker. She writes plays, short films, podcasts, audio drama, poetry and prose. She was the winner of the Sid Chaplin Northern Writers' Award 2023 for her novel-in-progress and was the joint recipient of the Peter Lathan Prize for New Playwriting 2022 for her one-act play *Grown Up Writin'*. Her scripts have been performed at nine theatres, including The Customs House, Live Theatre, Bolton Octagon and The Tristan Bates Theatre, and broadcast on BBC Radio 4 Extra. She has been commissioned to write multiple short films, podcast series and prose pieces, as well as the book *Coal Face*, which was published by Redhills CIO.

A three-time recipient of Arts Council funding and a BBC New Creative, Louise is a member of New Writing North's Northern Talent Network for Screenwriting and is working with a production company to develop screen ideas. Louise has participated in talent development schemes with the BFI, BBC, Papatango Theatre Company and New Writing North, among others. She was also interviewed for BBC Northern Voices 2022 and Screen Yorkshire's Flex 2021, and was a Finalist for the North East Culture Awards' Writer of the Year 2023 Award.

An internationally and domestically published scholar, Louise has a PhD in English from Sheffield Hallam University. Her research into twins in seventeenth-century drama has appeared in journals, encyclopaedias and educational magazines, and has also been featured by the Wellcome Trust. Her current research practice is centred around oral storytelling, social histories and improving pathways into the arts for individuals from under-represented communities.

Louise is represented for prose fiction by Elise Middleton at YMU Literary, with her debut novel due to go out on submission in the first half of 2024. She is also working on several projects across various forms for multiple funders and commissioners.

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