

Writers' Guild of Great Britain

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting
Held on Friday 17 June 2016 from 10.00 a.m.
At the Clarence Centre, 6 St George's Circus, London, SE1 6FE

1. Quorum: the Chair of the Guild welcomed members to the Meeting and confirmed it was quorate with at least 28 full members present at the start of the Meeting.
2. Standing Orders Committee reported it had met and agreed the agenda should go ahead as circulated. In response to a request to hear item 13 earlier a vote was taken and it was agreed it would be brought forward.
3. Appointment of Tellers: Nicky Abbot, Lisa Holdsworth, and Bernie Corbett were appointed unanimously as tellers with no abstentions.
4. The minutes of the AGM 2015 were unanimously approved without amendment.

The motion was approved unanimously with 29 votes in favour and no abstentions.

5. The Chair's Report

The Chair advised the AGM that Bernie Corbett had stepped down as General Secretary and was now working as the Guild's Finance Business Manager. Ellie Peers was now Acting General Secretary. The Chair spoke of Bernie Corbett's valued contribution to the Guild as General Secretary, proposing a vote of thanks that was expressed through applause. The Chair then presented Bernie Corbett with the Guild's 'Gold Star' as a mark of appreciation for all his work.

Bernie Corbett thanked the Meeting and the "great people of the Guild" who had helped make the job the best of his life. He spoke of the progress he had witnessed the Guild make through the years to protect writer's rights. He spoke of the work still to be done to prevent writers working for free and to have their work acknowledged more widely.

The Meeting voted unanimously to accept the Chair's Report by "common consent" with no abstentions.

6. Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer referred members to his report posted on the Guild's website. He advised that the report was prepared before the accounts were finalised and that there was a slightly bigger deficit than referred to in the report. He said subscription numbers had fallen but an increase in subscription amounts had balanced out the situation. Dropping the magazine had been a difficult decision

but was needed to “help get a grip” on the Guild’s finances. He said he looked forward to more positive times ahead as the Guild brings on more administrative support to help the Guild’s staff in its office, as well as other staff changes.

He reminded members that the Guild is the Union for Writers in Great Britain and its work has led to writers’ pay increasing. He also wanted to remind members of the connection between income and subscription levels. Greater income allows writers to increase the subscriptions they pay to the Union. Increases in income enable the Guild to do more for writers. If there are no members there is no union and, without the union there is no support for its members. He thanked people for participating.

David Edgar asked about membership numbers; whether there is evidence of members paying less in subscriptions amounts proportionate to their salaries. He paid tribute to Kate Glasspool for her work to develop the membership.

The Treasurer said the Guild had seen an overall increase in membership but a small and noticeable drop in members’ income. He said the challenge was to establish actual membership numbers. Of course members’ actual income is not known but the Guild has been fortunate to recruit a number of higher profile and higher earning writers and this had helped support the Guild’s income. While there has been a drop in income for the Guild across the membership the number of members in each bracket appears relatively stable.

The Chair commented that the fall in the Guild’s income might be a reflection of writers’ income falling in part due to the substantial amount of work they are being asked to do that they are not getting paid for.

The Chair thanked the Treasurer and the Finance Committee for all their work.

A question was asked from the floor as to whether direct debit was available for subscription payments. The Treasurer said while it is a reliable way to collect subscriptions not everyone wants to join up. In addition it costs more to collect by monthly direct debits so the balance between income received and the expense to collect in this way needs to be balanced. The Treasurer encouraged members to spread the word about the Guild and its work. He also suggested members can contribute by joining Craft Committees and this is also a way to recruit.

One member advised that some banks charge reduced direct debit charges on community accounts and that might give the Guild some options. The Treasurer thanked the member for the suggestion and said the Guild would look into it.

The Guild’s President asked about plans to add to the Guild’s staff. The Acting General Secretary said the Guild had advertised for an Office Administrator and interviews would take place the following week. The Treasurer added that beyond these roles nothing could realistically be discussed until after the new Executive and Craft Committees were appointed.

The Meeting voted unanimously to accept the Treasurer's Report by "common consent" with no abstentions.

7. Presentation of and Adoption of the Audited Accounts

The Treasurer referred the AGM to the Accounts as corrected and asked that they were accepted.

The Meeting voted unanimously to accept the Audited Accounts by "common consent" with no abstentions.

8. Appointment of Auditors

Katharine Way proposed and Piers Beckley seconded and it was passed unanimously by common consent to reappoint Gillespie and Inverarity and Co (London) Limited as the Guild's auditors.

9. The official business of the AGM was suspended to hear from guest speakers representing BBC Studios.

The Chair reconvened the meeting and invited members to break for lunch after which the agenda would be continued.

After lunch the Meeting heard from guest speakers from Project Diamond, which was an equality monitoring project involving all the main UK broadcasters.

The official business of the Meeting was then reconvened.

10. The General Secretary's Report.

The Acting General Secretary, Ellie Peers, said she was a committed Trade Unionist and believed that writers should be paid for their work. This drives her in her own work protecting writers. EP commented that the Guild is the only affiliated union with agreements covering film, television, radio, theatre and scripted work on websites. EP added that work on pan industry agreements is intended to get the best deals for writers and that the Guild would not sign off deals that would be detrimental to writers.

EP said the Guild wants to update the film agreement with PACT and those with ITV and BBC as well as broadening the recognition of agreements with theatres that the Guild is a signatory to. Focus is also needed, she said, on travelling theatre and smaller groups to ensure good terms and conditions are in place to protect artistic integrity and writers' work.

Also going on behind the scenes, EP said, is work on improving diversity and inclusion. She expressed concerns that equality has dropped off the radar with many employers focusing on diversity and failing to recognise they are two different issues. EP detailed the results of the Guild's work in looking at commissioning across primetime television and long running series and theatre writing. EP commended the work being done by the Diversity and Equality Committee and said its work is often overlooked.

In response to a question from the floor, EP said she believes setting targets is a good place to start and if that fails then proposing quotas would be a good next step. Both approaches have the benefit of raising awareness of the issues. She observed that the BBC has difficulties, possible due to a lack of monitoring, in addressing diversity issues in relation to its own productions. That said the BBC is imposing requirements on the production companies it commissions.

The Chair proposed the Guild brings these matters back to the Executive Committee so a policy can be developed.

Another member commented that resolving the problems discussed is made more difficult due to a lack of continuity resulting from television executives changing their jobs every few months.

The Treasurer said that the Guild also lobbies in Parliament. He said in his area of experience, video game writing, there is a palpable decline in the number of women wanting to enter the sector. This filters through to the job market leading to a reduction of women participating even if the number of opportunities overall is increasing.

David Edgar added from the floor that the number of theatre adaptations by women is going down which he is surprised at. This is something that is in the power of theatres to address. He added that women are usually interested in adaptation work and this area therefore represents 'low hanging' fruit that is not being ceased on. He added the Guild should be raising this with the theatre community.

11. Results of Elections and Announcement of Vacancies

The Treasurer recapped on the structure of the Guild for new members, explaining the roles of the Guild's Committees.

The Acting General Secretary said nomination forms had been sent out. EP explained the roles of Chair, deputy Chairs and Treasurer are elected on an annual basis while the President, Regional and Craft Committees' Chairs fall to be elected every three years.

EP noted that: The President, Chair, Deputy Chairs, the Treasurer, Theatre co-Chairs; Film co-Chairs; TV Chair and Regional Chairs for Yorkshire and the North East; Merseyside; Scotland; and London and the South East had all been elected.

Vacancies for: the Radio and Video Games Craft Committees; and Regional Committees of East Midlands, Wessex, SW Devon and Cornwall will all be re-advertised after the AGM.

The Chair said all appointments would need to be brought to the Executive Committee for ratification.

Richard Pinner suggested that, mindful of the regional committees and that the Guild is an organisations covering the whole of Great Britain, the Guild might consider holding the AGM outside London in future years. He noted the Guild had done it before and could do it again.

The Chair said that it should be discussed at the Executive Committee. Tim Stimpson commented that digital solutions might be possible.

David Edgar proposed and Katharine Way seconded acceptance of the Acting General Secretary's report. It was unanimously accepted by common consent without abstentions.

12. Motions

Item 13 was heard as item 12 so it could be partially heard before lunch. The Chair reminded the Meeting of the rules in the Guild's Rule Book relating to process for the consideration of "motions" at an AGM.

The Guild's President, Olivia Hetreed, thanked the Chair for her explanation of the Rules and asked if any members of the Committees affected by the proposed motions were present. OH raised a concern that if only the Chairs were present true consideration of the effect of the rule changes may not be considered to have taken place. The Chair confirmed that Committee members were present to contribute to the discussion.

"13"(a)

The Treasurer remarked on the Guild's enthusiasm and members' support for a Committee specifically to represent Comedy writers. The Chair added that the needs and issues of comedy writers are very different from drama writers.

A question from the floor asked whether a radio comedy writer would take an issue to the Radio Committee or the Comedy Committee? The Chair said such a writer should go to either or both Committees. She added that the Guild having a Comedy Committee offers and opportunity to the Guild to recruit comedy writers. The Meeting discussed the proposal brought by Piers Beckley and seconded by the Treasurer. The motion was carried by a two-thirds majority given 26 Members voted in favour; one voted against with no abstentions.

(c) The Treasurer who was seconding the proposed motion said that a representative of the Editorial and Communications Committee already attended the Executive Committee from time to time and the intention of this motion was to make that attendance official and regular.

OH question why the motion stipulated the Chair would act as the Chair of the Committee for this post but this was not stipulated in respect of the previous motion. Piers Beckley responded saying it reflected a Rule Book requirement. The Meeting discussed the proposal brought by Piers Beckley. The motion was carried by a two-thirds majority as 26 Members voted in favour, with no votes against and no abstentions.

The Meeting broke for lunch at 1.15pm and reconvened 45 minutes later. The Chair said she was happy to continue with the Meeting's official business, as it looked quorate.

13 (b) Piers Beckley said the intention was not to abandon children's matters but to see them dealt with in context by the relevant Guild Committee. The proposal, he added, did not prevent an ad hoc committee being formed should a specific issue arise that needed such focus. The Treasurer added that the proposal was intended to promote efficiencies in the way children's matters are dealt with and overcome the challenge that there were few members able to commit to attending a Children's Committee.

The Chair said she too wanted to offer reassurance to the members that experts negotiate for the Guild on matters relating to Children's writers.

The Meeting discussed the proposal brought by Piers Beckley and seconded by the Treasurer. The motion was carried by a two-thirds majority as 27 Members voted in favour, with no votes against and no abstentions.

13 (d) The Motion's proposer Adrian Beckingham addressed the Meeting on the subject of second hand booksellers failing to pay appropriate royalties. He explained blanket postage fees of £2.80 are often applied to 'used' books that are sold at a face value of 1p. Carriage for these books is often less than the £2.80 charged allowing the vendor to pocket the difference as profit. The penny charged for the book and not the amount made in automated postage charges is assessed for royalties meaning, the vendor of a book does disproportionately better out of its sale than the writer. Katharine Way who seconded Mr Beckingham's motion suggested it was a matter that ought to be considered by the Executive Committee.

The Chair added she had found it cheaper to buy books on line to sign and resell at festivals than to use the author discount provided by the book's publisher.

The Meeting discussed the issue and Steven Smith proposed an amendment to the motion to require the Guild to "take any necessary action".

Piers Beckley declared that he believed the motion was fine as it stood and that the Executive Committee could report back next year. Mr Smith remarked at the potential for a year to pass before any update or action.

The Treasurer suggested the Books Committee should be trusted to deal with this matter rather than create a legal requirement for the Guild to act. Stipulating a legal requirement would require clarification of what "necessary" meant in this context.

Mr Smith said he would withdraw his amendment on the basis of a commitment that the Books committee would take the matter forward.

The motion as originally stated was carried by a two-thirds majority as 28 Members voted in favour, with no votes against and no abstentions.

14. Annual Report.

The Chair suggested, to save time, that each Craft and Regional Committee should speak to its report and a vote should be taken at the end of the presentations to approve the reports altogether.

The Chair asked if there were any questions on: the Acting General Secretary's; the Chair's; the President's; and the Treasurers Reports. There were none. As regards the Finance and Business Manager's Report, the President asked for clarification over the administration arrangements for the Guild's pension. Bernie Corbett explained the background to the difficulties the administrators have had in reconciling the money paid by the BBC and others into the pensions of Guild writers and the lists the Guild has of sums due. BC suggested terminating the use of a pension management company in favour of inviting contributors to deal with the Pension provider directly. The Guild has been advised that it doesn't have the necessary licences to enable this and is trying to find another solution.

Turning to the Craft and Regional Reports:

The Chair asked if there were any updates to the craft reports submitted as part of the Annual Report.

Radio: Katharine Way told the Meeting that she has to stand down from the Radio and South East Regional Committees. She said other Radio Committee members can't stand as Chair and sought fresh members for the Committee. The Chair proposed a vote of thanks to Katharine Way and the Meeting applauded.

Theatre: David Edgar commented that the Committee had been jointly chaired with Jenifer Toksvig for a year. He raised concerns on both their parts about issues raised by writers of musicals. He spoke of compliance failings by the UK Theatre Group and remarked that the industry was evolving. He said the Guild had no wish to name and shame those individual theatres not in compliance with Guild agreements. He said a reception was due to take place the following month at which issues would be raised to make writers aware. David Edgar said a 'Rights card' would be given out (and subsequently sent out to members writing for Theatres) containing 8 elements that contracts should contain. These points would also be added to the Guild's website and the Guild would encourage its members to share these points with their agents.

David Edgar went onto say the high point of the Guild's year was its awards ceremony and he thanked David James for all his work.

Katharine Way proposed, William Gallagher seconded and 27 Members voted unanimously to accept the Annual Reports with no abstentions.

15. Election of Standing Orders Committee for 2016-2017.

Nothing was raised.

16. President's Closing Remarks:

The President, Olivia Hetreed, remarked on the pressure for efficiency that lands at writers' doors, commenting that it is difficult for writers to avoid the need to work for free at some point in the process. She continued by recounting the recent experience she had of working on a film where a senior member of the production team bullied a junior member whilst others did nothing. OH said she was struck by the absence of a mechanism to protect someone in that position, but with the Guild, writers' have that. She added that it could be frightening to report such treatment but it was needed in order to improve things.

On the Guild's Awards she thanked everyone who had supported the event and asked everyone on the Guild's Craft Committees to start preparations for the next year's ceremony. OH added that the Guild would welcome sponsorship pledges and whilst she is very willing to make contact with any potential sources herself, she noted the value of personal connections should not be underestimated.

17. Any Other Business

OH spoke of the event due to be held the coming Monday on climate change and sustainability. Four specialists, who have already produced or written on the topics, were due to speak to raise awareness and encourage further work on the subject. She added that the Guild is keen to link its members with such informative events.

The meeting ended at 15.45pm
