

Annual Report 22/23

POS Pauses for Consultation

The way we were 2021

Perthshire Open Studios (POS) has been running for over 13 years with a single annual event run entirely volunteer-run. The event attracted visitors and residents, supporting economic and cultural growth as well as cultural benefits.

The organisation was based on five ideas of equal importance, that stand to this day:

- Supporting Perthshire artists (whatever their methods) in promoting access to their art
- Drawing visitors into the area and residents to visit artists' studios
- Volunteer-run but commercial services are paid for at a market rate
- The focus of activities is around foot fall and not sales
- An acceptance that nothing will please everyone all the time

The need for change 2022

POS faced several key internal problems including: a lack of funding and volunteers; high intensity of effort required from existing volunteers; and high production costs for a short period of usage, A need for fundraising and the *further* development of organisational sustainability measures such as -

- Strong understood policies, agreed and implemented covering all aspects both legal and required by project management systems and donors.
- Finance – controls in place and accessible management information as well as income and pricing mechanisms.
- Transparency and inclusivity across the membership.
- Knowledge management and storage to enable learning, handovers and context reviews.
- Activities that contribute to key agreed objectives and are managed well.

Externally much had changed in Perthshire and for creatives as well. It was time to "Pause POS" and take stock.

The Consultation Process

In trying to understand the rapidly changing context in which POS exists, the following activities were undertaken:

- A desk review of other open studios organisations in Scotland.
- An online survey of artists who had previously taken part in POS.
- A desk review of other organisations serving the artist community in Perthshire.

- A review of internal systems e.g. finance, knowledge management, board minutes, etc.
- Town Hall meetings with artists at three hubs in Perthshire (Comrie, Blairgowrie, Perth) during which discussions were held around how POS might move forward.

Topics reviewed:

- Survey results.
- Membership costs and business model.
- Standards/curation of work.
- A creative trail.
- A hands-on festival.
- An open studios festival.

Results of reviews

Recent experience suggested that the environment POS exists in, had changed:

- Perthshire residents' contact with artists is as important as tourist contact.
- Increased number of arts and crafts selling events in the area.
- Increased number of organisations providing support to artists in the area.
- Joint artist events are popular with artists and involve people who do not have studios or are not keen or able to open their homes.
- The tourist season is changing and is less focused on a specific time of year.
- While the internet is used far more, there is still a value in publishing in print.
- Increasing numbers of artists in the area wanting to take part.
- Audiences want both geographical guidance and to view studios by type of art.
- Perth has become a UNESCO City of Craft.

Recent experience has also indicated that the organisation of POS needs to change:

- The POS event has grown in size and complexity, and it seems now to need more time and effort than a voluntary group of artists and a few paid specialists can provide over a relatively short period of the year and for the previous cost.
- Sales have become increasingly important to participants and customers tend to have less disposable income, yet sales are not something that POS can be held accountable for, given the artists' decisions around promotion, price and product.
- The costs of running POS are increasing.
- The 'routes' need a rethink as they have become longer and, in some cases, more densely populated while in others more sparse.
- Fundraising needs to be stronger focus if costs are to be covered. Funds need to be raised from a diverse range of sources and in an increasingly timely manner.
- A lack of volunteers prepared to join the board at the time.
- There has been decreasing involvement of artists in the AGM and the POS board.

The survey results indicated that with nearly 50% of previous participants completed the online survey giving a total of 98 responses and therefore we believe there is some statistical validity in the results.

- 70% are female and 20% male.
- Part-time artists are in the majority, with 61% vs 39% full-time artists.
- Amongst women, about two-thirds are part-time; while amongst men, about half are part-time.
- There is an even split between painters (including drawing) and makers with 17 different types of making activity being reported.
- 56% have or do sell on-line in some way. 70% of the male respondents sell online, compared to 50% of the female.
- 70% of respondents attend between 1 and 9 selling opportunities a year.

A way forward for POS 2023

POS needs a regular income that covers costs that are incurred throughout the year, such as licence fees, accountancy fees, web hosting, etc. By popular agreement at the town hall meetings, membership cost for 2023 was set at £50, payable by anyone wanting to be involved in any of the POS activities or who wishes to support POS. This would allow members a flexibility around what they want to do and yet still be part of the organisation.

Membership fees will offer access to benefits exclusive to members. These might include:

- Invitations to take part in dedicated activities.
- Two showcase exhibitions a year.
- Discounts from suppliers.
- Link-ups with other organisations and opportunities.
- Marketing and promotional support for events.
- Skill-share opportunities.
- Attendance at AGMs.

Artists clearly wanted POS to stay open to all artists and focus more on becoming a paid membership organization that is active all year including:

- An all-year-round Perthshire Creative Trail.
- A Summer Show.
- A shorter Open Studios Festival and show case.
- Increased membership benefits.
- Increased skill-share opportunities.
- An all year round website and communication of opportunities etc.

In the long run, the vision is for POS is to have a permanent staff member who would ensure continuity and carry some of the organising strain. However, this would be a

significant cost that is not realistic immediately. The business model identified for this vision is the one used by Uplands in Dumfries and Galloway, where a range of individual projects gain economies of scale and thus were each able to contribute to a core administration.

In order to reflect these changes the decision was taken to shorten the organisation's name to POS and develop a corporate logo reflecting Perthshire and separate but visually related logos for the Creative Trail and the Festival.

Conclusion

As the small POS team headed into January 2023 it was clearly going to be a difficult year and not everything was going to be completed perfectly. The biggest challenge lay in managing the change in identity and activity – not everyone, members or visitors, was going to be comfortable with the changes but the team recognised that going forward things could develop and improve over time.