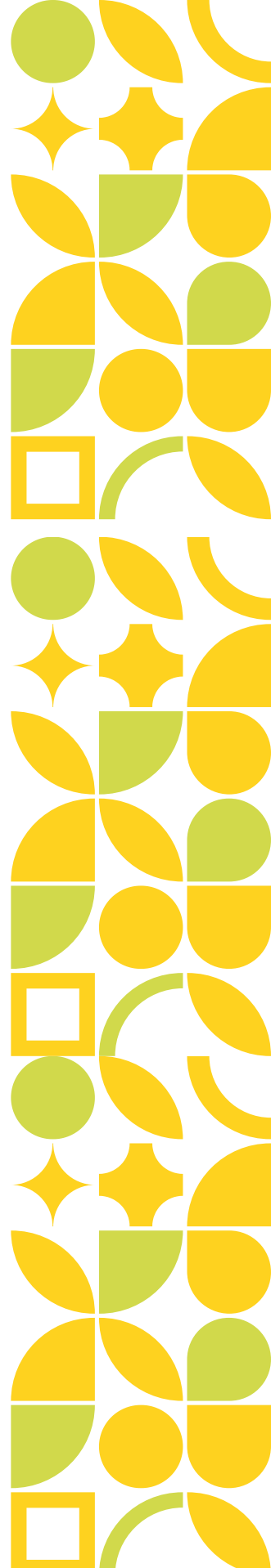




Let the Island Speak: A Proposal for an Isle of Wight Poet Laureate

Celebrating culture, creativity, and community through poetry



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Introduction

Hello,

My name is Lottie Begg, and I'm a writer, editor, and founder of Lemon Jelly Press CIC, a small independent publishing company based here on the Isle of Wight. We champion unheard voices and create opportunities for writers of all backgrounds to develop their confidence, craft, and creative expression.

I've lived on the island all my life. I know its beauty and challenges, its pockets of creative brilliance, and the communities that often go unheard. I've worked in libraries, schools, and community spaces for many years, supporting people to connect through reading, writing, and storytelling. Again and again, I've seen how poetry has the power to transform: to lift, to include, to make sense of things, and to celebrate what matters most.

That's why I believe we need a Poet Laureate for the Isle of Wight. A role that puts poetry in the heart of our public life, schools, and shared moments. A voice that reflects the richness of our landscape and our people. Someone who can work with children, older people, isolated communities, and everyone in between—to remind us that our words, and our stories, matter.

This isn't just about art. It's about education, wellbeing, identity, and pride of place. It's about weaving poetry into the rhythms of island life so that everyone, no matter their background or experience, has a chance to see themselves reflected in the cultural life of where they live. Thank you for taking the time to read this proposal. I hope you'll feel excited about the possibilities and consider joining us to bring the Isle of Wight Poet Laureate role to life.

Lottie Begg
Founder, Lemon Jelly Press CIC

Overview

Lemon Jelly Press CIC propose the establishment of a Poet Laureate role for the Isle of Wight: a public-facing, inclusive position that champions poetry, fosters a sense of place, celebrates local voices, and brings the transformative power of creative expression to schools, community groups, and public events across the island.

This role will offer a cultural focal point for the Isle of Wight; commissioning poems that capture the essence of the island's identity, supporting creative education, and promoting wellbeing through storytelling and language. It will embed poetry in the rhythms of island life, responding to events, heritage, people, and place.

This proposal is grounded in the belief, championed by organisations such as The Poetry Society, that poetry is a vital and accessible art form with the power to reflect, connect, and transform communities. Poetry gives people a voice, encourages self-expression, and helps individuals of all ages and backgrounds to make sense of the world around them. The Poetry Society notes that poetry thrives when it is rooted in place and experience—when it responds to local lives, landscapes, and histories. By establishing a Poet Laureate embedded in the Isle of Wight's civic and cultural life, we are proposing a place-based creative role that reflects the island's unique identity while reaching out to those who may not otherwise engage with the arts.

A Poet Laureate can serve not only as a cultural ambassador, but as a creative conduit for dialogue, inclusion, and transformation, particularly when working with underrepresented or marginalised groups across the island. Through words, shared meaning, and creative celebration, this role has the power to foster pride, visibility, and connection for all residents of the Isle of Wight.

Why a Poet Laureate for the Isle of Wight?

The Isle of Wight is a place rich with story, symbolism, and landscape, a place where creativity flows through chalk cliffs, coastal winds, historic landmarks, and vibrant communities. A Poet Laureate role would honour this legacy while helping to shape a shared cultural future, connecting past and present, place and people, voice and visibility.

Across the UK, local Poet Laureates have demonstrated the immense value of poetry in public life. Yet, despite the Isle of Wight's proud artistic heritage, including its links to Tennyson, Dickens, and Swinburn, there is currently no public poetry role that represents or reflects the island's identity in an ongoing way. Establishing a Poet Laureate post would change that, creating a dynamic platform to celebrate the voices of our communities, nurture creative education, and commission meaningful new work that responds to island life.

A Poet Laureate for the Isle of Wight would be a creative ambassador, a public figure rooted in the rhythms of our local life. They would write commissioned poems for key events, visit schools to spark imagination and language play, and work with communities that often face barriers to cultural participation. Through readings, workshops, public commissions, and outreach, the laureate would become a bridge between the arts and everyday life.

This role would also celebrate and preserve the distinctive identity of the Isle of Wight, capturing everything from our seasonal cycles to civic events, iconic landscapes like The Needles and the chines, and community traditions like the Garlic Festival, Isle of Wight Day, and Cowes Week. The laureate would help us write ourselves into the record, not in statistics or policy briefs, but in the language of memory, metaphor, and meaning.

Continued: Why a Poet Laureate for the Isle of Wight

The appointment of a Poet Laureate also creates space for reflection and response. Whether during times of celebration or challenge, poetry offers a way to bring people together, honour shared experience, and offer comfort, insight, or joy. This has been particularly clear in recent years, as poetry has played a growing role in supporting mental wellbeing, community cohesion, and civic pride.

In addition, this role would:

- Support literacy, oracy, and creative confidence in schools and colleges
- Offer new opportunities for intergenerational engagement through poetry events and workshops
- Enhance the cultural visibility of the island through regional and national recognition
- Provide a platform for underrepresented voices, ensuring a broader range of island experiences are seen and heard
- Create meaningful connections between arts, education, and inclusion agendas at a local level

Finally, a laureateship is not just about the words written, it's about the people reached. A carefully designed Poet Laureate role would provide social return on investment by improving literacy, wellbeing, community engagement, and cultural infrastructure. It offers a way to embed poetry where it belongs: in everyday places, spoken aloud at local festivals, found on library noticeboards, tucked into ferry seatbacks, performed by schoolchildren, and shared in community halls.

By launching a Poet Laureate for the Isle of Wight, we affirm the value of creativity, community, and local voice, and we make space for poetry to do what it does best: to notice, to celebrate, and to connect.

Case Studies: Local Poet Laureates in the UK

Sheffield: A Model of Civic Engagement and Youth Empowerment

Sheffield's Poet Laureate program exemplifies how poetry can be interwoven into the fabric of a city's cultural and educational life. The role has been held by poets such as Otis Mensah, who, as Sheffield's first Poet Laureate, aimed to make poetry accessible to younger audiences by blending it with elements of rap and spoken word. He emphasized that poetry is a folk art, essential for storytelling and reflecting communal experiences.

Subsequent laureates have continued this tradition of community engagement. For instance, Danae Wellington collaborated with the Mercia Learning Trust on the "Who I Am" project, working with students across seven schools to enhance their oracy skills, poetry writing, and performance techniques. This initiative aimed to boost students' confidence and self-belief through creative expression.

The laureateship is closely tied to the city's annual Off the Shelf Festival of Words, one of the UK's largest literary festivals. This festival provides a platform for the Poet Laureate to showcase their work and engage with a broader audience, further embedding poetry into the city's cultural landscape.

Sheffield's approach demonstrates how a Poet Laureate can serve as a cultural ambassador, fostering community cohesion, supporting youth development, and enhancing the city's cultural offerings.

Continued: Case Studies

Hampshire Poet Laureate Programme

The Hampshire Poet Laureate Programme is a biennial initiative jointly managed by the Winchester Poetry Festival and Hampshire Cultural Trust. Established in 2008, the programme aims to promote poetry across the county by appointing a Hampshire-based poet to undertake commissions, lead workshops, and give readings and talks throughout the region.

In 2024, Damian Kelly-Basher, a poet and performer from Brockenhurst in the New Forest, was appointed as the Hampshire Poet Laureate. With a background in public health and extensive experience in creative facilitation, Kelly-Basher brings a unique perspective to the role, emphasizing community engagement and the exploration of local narratives.

Key Activities and Initiatives

During his two-year tenure, Kelly-Basher is involved in various projects that integrate poetry into community life:

- **Heritage Open Days:** Participating in events that celebrate Hampshire's rich history and cultural heritage.
- **Hampshire Young Poets' Competition:** Serving as a judge for the annual competition, encouraging young writers to express themselves through poetry.
- **Winchester Poetry Festival:** Engaging with festival events, including "Winchester Poetry Day" and the "Hampshire Poet Presents" showcase.
- **Jane Austen 250th Anniversary:** Contributing to celebrations marking the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth, connecting contemporary poetry with literary heritage.
- **Community Workshops:** Leading sessions focused on mental health, wellbeing, and inclusivity, aiming to reach diverse audiences across the county.
- **Collaborations with Conservation Groups:** Working with organizations like the Whitchurch Conservation Group to explore the intersection of poetry and environmental awareness.

Aims and Benefits

Cultural Enrichment

The Isle of Wight boasts a rich cultural heritage, yet many communities face barriers to accessing the arts. By commissioning original poems for local events, commemorations, and celebrations, the Poet Laureate can bring poetry into public spaces, making it an integral part of the island's cultural fabric. This initiative aims to celebrate the island's unique identity and foster a sense of pride among residents.

Literacy and Learning

Educational attainment on the Isle of Wight presents significant challenges. In 2024, only 51% of pupils met the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths at Key Stage 2, the lowest rate among all local authorities in England. Furthermore, one in three children are below their reading age upon entering secondary school, compared to the national average of one in four. The Poet Laureate will address these issues by conducting school visits, workshops, and participating in festivals to promote reading, writing, and creativity, thereby supporting literacy development across the island.

Place-making

The Isle of Wight is characterized by its diverse landscapes and rich history. However, socioeconomic disparities exist, with 12 areas ranking among the top 20% most deprived in England. The Poet Laureate will create works that connect residents to their environment, heritage, and identity, fostering a stronger sense of community and belonging.

Representation

The island's population includes communities that are often underrepresented in cultural initiatives. With over half the population living in areas within the three highest deciles of deprivation, it's crucial to amplify diverse voices. The Poet Laureate will work to elevate stories from all backgrounds, ensuring inclusive representation in the island's cultural narrative.

How You Can Help

We believe the Isle of Wight Poet Laureate should belong to the whole community, and that means working in collaboration with those who care about the island's culture, education, and wellbeing.

We are now seeking to engage with key stakeholders across the Isle of Wight to shape, support, and champion this initiative. Whether you are from a local authority, school, library service, cultural organisation, community group, funding body, or arts and heritage network, your voice and experience can help us build something meaningful and sustainable.

You can help by:

- Joining the conversation – Share your insight, ideas, or concerns about how the role could best serve our communities.
- Becoming a partner – If you represent an organisation, we'd love to explore how we can work together on programming, outreach, or fundraising.
- Offering support in kind – From hosting events to promoting the programme, any practical help strengthens our impact.
- Helping us reach others – We want this to be inclusive from the outset. Please help us connect with other organisations, practitioners, and communities who might want to be involved.

Together, we can ensure the Isle of Wight Poet Laureate reflects the full range of island experiences and speaks to all who call it home.

Role of the Poet Laureate

Term: 30 months (2.5 years), with a potential for renewal or a handover to a new Laureate.

The Isle of Wight Poet Laureate will be a public-facing ambassador for poetry and creativity on the island. Their work will reflect the diverse voices, landscapes, histories, and communities of the Isle of Wight, using poetry as a tool for celebration, reflection, and connection.

Core Responsibilities:

- **Commissioned Poems:** Create original poems in response to local events, seasonal milestones, cultural celebrations, and public themes. These could include poems to mark civic occasions, environmental projects, exhibitions, anniversaries, and social justice campaigns.
- **Community Engagement:** Design and lead poetry workshops and creative writing sessions for a range of groups, including schools, libraries, community hubs, care homes, and youth centres. Emphasis will be placed on inclusion, accessibility, and encouraging new voices.
- **Public Representation:** Act as a literary ambassador at island-wide events such as the Isle of Wight Story Festival, heritage open days, or poetry readings. The Laureate will also have opportunities to connect with regional and national poetry platforms through Lemon Jelly Press CIC and our partners.
- **Collaborative Projects:** Work alongside artists, educators, and community groups to co-create interdisciplinary or site-specific work, such as poems in public spaces, exhibitions, or performance pieces.
- **Legacy Contribution:** Contribute to a long-term legacy project during their tenure. This might include a printed anthology of island poems, a digital audio archive, a travelling exhibition, or a public installation featuring community-created poetry.
- **Mentorship and Inspiration:** Offer informal mentorship to emerging poets, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, through talks, one-to-one sessions, or drop-in clinics.

Selection Process

The selection process will ensure transparency, fairness, and inclusivity. It is designed to reach poets with strong ties to the Isle of Wight or those who resonate with the island's values of creativity, community, and care.

- **Open Call:** Publicised via literary networks, arts organisations, social media, and local press, the open call will welcome applications from poets of all backgrounds.
- **Application Requirements:** Applicants will be asked to submit a CV, personal statement detailing their vision for the role, and a selection of sample poems.
- **Judging Panel:** A diverse panel will be formed, including representatives from Lemon Jelly Press CIC, Isle of Wight Libraries, local arts and heritage organisations, and an invited poet, critic, or creative professional from outside the island.
- **Key Selection Criteria:**
 - Originality and literary merit.
 - Demonstrated experience in community engagement and public-facing projects.
 - A clear and inclusive vision for how poetry can make a difference.
 - Ability to deliver engaging workshops and connect with a range of audiences.
 - Commitment to equity, diversity, and amplifying underrepresented voices.

Shortlisted applicants may be invited to an informal interview or creative conversation with the panel. The selection process will be supported with accessible formats and application guidance to ensure a broad range of candidates feel confident applying.

Fundraising and Income Strategy

To ensure the success and sustainability of the Isle of Wight Poet Laureate project, Lemon Jelly Press CIC will adopt a mixed-income strategy that blends public funding, local sponsorship, and earned income.

1. Public Funding

The cornerstone of our financial plan will be an Arts Council England (ACE) Project Grant application, submitted in August 2025. This will cover the majority of delivery costs, Laureate fees, workshops, and legacy project expenses.

We will also explore smaller-scale public grants such as:

- Isle of Wight Council's Community and Cultural Investment Fund
- Local Trusts or heritage schemes (e.g. Hampshire and Isle of Wight Community Foundation)
- Potential partnership with schools or libraries via their education or enrichment budgets

2. Local Sponsorship and Business Support

We will approach a range of Island-based organisations and businesses to support the project through financial sponsorship, in-kind contributions, or promotional partnerships. Sponsorship packages will include benefits such as public acknowledgement, logos on promotional materials, opportunities for commissioned poems or bespoke workshops, and VIP access to launch events or showcases. Potential local sponsors may include:

- Waterstones Newport (as the Island's key chain bookstore)
- Medina Bookshop, Cowes
- Boojum & Snark, Sandown
- Ventnor Exchange
- Quay Arts, Newport
- Rapanui Clothing, Freshwater
- The Garlic Farm, Newchurch
- The Wildheart Animal Sanctuary, Sandown
- Dimbola Museum and Galleries, Freshwater Bay
- Towna and Parish Councils
- Local Press and Radio

Fundraising and Income Strategy

3. In-Kind Contributions

Cost savings will be sought through partnerships that offer:

- Free or discounted venue space (libraries, schools, arts venues)
- Volunteer support for event delivery
- Printing/design support from local studios
- Marketing via partner mailing lists and social media channels

4. Earned Income

Where appropriate, the project will generate modest income through:

- Ticketed events (e.g. workshops, poetry performances)
- Sales of legacy anthology or merchandise
- Optional donations from audiences and workshop attendees

5. Long-Term Development

To support the sustainability of the Laureateship model, we will:

- Create a sponsorship pack for future Laureate terms
- Seek rolling contributions from private individuals or patrons
- Develop an online donation portal on the Lemon Jelly Press website
- Explore future ACE applications and collaborations with national partners

Budget Overview

The budget for the Isle of Wight Poet Laureate project is designed to fairly compensate the Laureate, ensure wide community impact, and support high-quality delivery and evaluation.

Laureate Fees:

- £500 per year honorarium for the first two years (£1,000 total)
- £250 honorarium for the final 6 months
- £50 per commissioned poem (estimated 30 poems over 30 months = £1,500)
- Total Laureate Payment: £2,700

Workshop Delivery and Community Engagement: £2,000

- This includes venue hire, transport, materials, and access needs (e.g., BSL interpreters or printed materials in Easy Read).

Legacy Project: £2,000

- Costs for a printed anthology, digital archive or travelling exhibition, including printing, design, and event costs.

Marketing and Promotion: £2,000

- Design of posters, flyers, press releases, social media content, and paid promotional boosts.

Digital Platform and Blog: £1,500

- Creation and maintenance of a dedicated Laureate page on the Lemon Jelly Press website, including blog functionality, audio/video hosting, and accessibility tools.

Evaluation and Accessibility Measures: £1,500

- Mid-term and final evaluation reports, plus budget for feedback collection, case study development, and accessible reporting.

Project Administration and Coordination: £2,500

- Time and costs for Lemon Jelly Press CIC to manage the project, liaise with partners, coordinate the steering group, and ensure smooth delivery.

Contingency and Overheads: £1,250

- A small buffer to address unexpected costs or additional access requirements.

Total Estimated Budget: £15,420

Proposed Timeline

August 2025

- Application submitted to Arts Council England Project Grants.
- Outreach to local businesses, councils, and community groups begins to seek sponsorship and letters of support.

September–November 2025

- Awareness campaign begins (press releases, social media, local events).
- Development of promotional materials and website landing page.
- Establishment of steering group to oversee recruitment and delivery.
- Awaiting ACE decision (typically 8–10 weeks).

December 2025

- If successful, ACE funding confirmed.
- Final preparations for launch, panel members confirmed.
- Application guidance published.

January 2026

- Open call for Poet Laureate applications begins.
- Public engagement and outreach to support and encourage submissions.

February 2026

- Application window closes.
- Judging panel meets and reviews submissions.

March 2026

- Interviews and selection.
- Laureate appointed and public announcement made.
- Launch event and introductory public poem.

April 2026 onwards

- Delivery of workshops, commissions, and legacy projects begins.
- Regular reviews and promotional updates throughout the 30-month term.

A detailed delivery plan will be drawn up with the Laureate post-appointment, tailored to their strengths, availability, and the needs of the communities they will serve.

Evaluation and Impact

Funders and national organisations such as the National Poetry Centre and Arts Council England will expect a clear and meaningful strategy for evaluating the success and reach of the Isle of Wight Poet Laureate project. Evaluation will be built into the project from the outset, not only to demonstrate accountability but also to ensure that learning is captured, shared, and used to shape future initiatives.

Key Evaluation Indicators:

- Workshop Delivery and Participation
 - Number of workshops delivered across the 30-month term
 - Total number of participants
 - Demographic data, including reach into underserved or underrepresented communities (e.g. young people, disabled participants, rural residents, low-income households)
 - Feedback from attendees on enjoyment, confidence, and creative outcomes
- Audience Reach for Commissioned Poems
 - Number of poems published or performed
 - Live event attendance and engagement (e.g. launches, readings, festivals)
 - Online reach via the Laureate blog, digital platform, social media shares, and audio/video views
 - Media coverage and public visibility of Laureate activity
- Community and Partner Feedback
 - Testimonials from local groups, schools, libraries, and project partners
 - Reflections from the steering group and Lemon Jelly Press CIC on impact and lessons learned
 - Opportunities for informal feedback collected via surveys, post-event forms, and creative responses
- Legacy Project Outcomes
 - Publication and distribution figures (e.g. number of anthologies printed or downloaded)
 - Attendance at exhibitions or travelling displays
 - Use of materials in schools, libraries, and community settings beyond the Laureate's term

Evaluation and Impact

- Qualitative Impact
 - Stories of change, such as new poets emerging, communities reconnecting through creative expression, or an increased presence of poetry in public life on the island
 - Personal development outcomes for the Laureate, including increased networks, publications, or professional opportunities

Evaluation Methods Will Include:

- Regular progress reviews by the Lemon Jelly Press team and steering group
- Participant feedback forms (paper and digital)
- Tracking digital engagement analytics (website, social media, audio platforms)
- End-of-term surveys with community partners and stakeholders
- A formal mid-term and final evaluation report with case studies

National Sharing:

Findings from the project will be shared with the National Poetry Centre and may be used to help shape national guidance on regional Laureateships. Key insights, examples of best practice, and challenges faced will be collated and published in a short report at the close of the project term.

Next Steps

To turn this vision into a reality, we propose the following strategic next steps:

1. Form a Working Group

We aim to bring together a core group of committed partners and advisors from sectors including education, libraries, the arts, youth services, and community wellbeing. This group will guide the planning process and ensure the role is inclusive, well-structured, and impactful.

2. Identify and Secure Funding

Initial funding will be essential to support the poet laureate project. We will explore funding from Arts Council England, local authority grants, private sponsorship, and partnership contributions.

3. Develop a Detailed Delivery Plan

Once the working group is in place, we will co-create a delivery timeline including:

- Role description and application process
- Public launch and announcement
- Community and school engagement programme
- Commission schedule and public events
- Evaluation framework

4. Define Outcomes and Measures of Success

We will develop a simple, meaningful set of outcomes to track the Poet Laureate's impact.

We are excited to take this next step in the island's creative story, and we hope you'll join us.

If you'd like to be part of the working group or discuss potential involvement, please contact:

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