

NZSWG

New Zealand Writers Guild
Puni Taatuhi O Aotearoa

SUBMISSION

IRIRANGI TE MOTU NZ ON AIR

TRANSITIONAL STRATEGY

2023-2024

DECEMBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

WHO ARE WE?

New Zealand Writers Guild Puni Taatuhi o Aotearoa (NZWG) is the professional membership association and registered trade union of Aotearoa New Zealand script writers, established in 1976. NZWG is committed to working in a way that adheres to the spirit and the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. NZWG is a member of the International Affiliation of Writers Guilds (IAWG), Council of Trade Unions (CTU NZ) and WeCreate.

NZWG thanks Irirangi Te Motu NZ on Air (NZOA) for the opportunity to respond to the proposed NZOA Transitional Strategy 2023-2024.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Below are the NZWG aims and objectives relevant in this submission to NZOA.

- To protect, represent and further the interests of New Zealand writers.
- To be the national and international voice of New Zealand writers.
- To establish, maintain and improve minimum conditions of work and rates of compensation for writers.
- To promote policy, legislation, and legal and economic rights for the benefit of writers, including but not limited to the issues of copyright, moral rights, and status of the artist.

NZWG STATEMENT ON PROPOSED STRATEGY

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Consultation on strategic, long-term changes to policy and funding from NZOA give an opportunity for screenwriters to voice concerns and add weight to those things that support, nurture, and grow their careers and outputs for a culturally vibrant Aotearoa. A fresh vision and conversation in these changing times is welcomed.

With that said, NZWG are disheartened by the need for such a drastic change of funding policy by NZOA. It is difficult to strategise while the future of funding in the local screen industry is so uncertain. Is there any way NZOA could consider a staggered approach to this proposed strategy once the details of the merger become clear? We are still in the dark about spend on independent scripted content beyond June 2023.

NEW WAYS OF WORKING AKA CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

NZWG does support the direction of the content development scheme.

NZWG would like to see a continuation of Kōpere Ake, high-quality content focusing on international partnerships. Kōpere Ake received 161 applications to the writer- only scripted development fund. This truly highlights the need for more investment in open calls for high-quality script development. This is the type of work that is more likely to attract international investment that NZOA could then potentially “gap” fund, as suggested in this proposed strategy document.

The ‘Ideas Factory’ section of the ‘2023 and Beyond’ paper contains valuable ideas that will benefit the screenwriting community. Screenwriters are the originators of the ideas and stories that become new projects and have long felt the lack of development funding available to writers to do this work independently of producers.

This is not to deny the need for producers – writers and producers work together, and both need one another as they do different, complementary things – but in most cases in scripted drama, the writer brings the idea and does the significant work of developing an idea into a viable project that a producer can then package and market to attract further investment.

That writers are THE FIRST WORKERS in development makes it logical that they can directly access money to do this work before the packaging and marketing begins, and the ‘Ideas Factory’ section specifically endorses investing in talent development and project creation. This will benefit the screenwriting community at all levels of experience, and provide the investment that writers need to develop slates.

NEW WAYS OF WORKING AKA TRAINING

NZWG is in support of utilising some NZOA funding for training as suggested.

NZWG is in favour of training in the context of project development. Following are some suggestions that NZWG believes would best support the NZOA outcomes of laser focused content for audiences, while ensuring that the funding supports teams with viable projects that will go into production:

- Teaming Producers and Writers together, hothousing or local pitching markets
- Pairing emerging writers with experienced writers as mentors so that the newer writers can increase their skills in a practical working environment
- Facilitation of market attachments - networks, platforms, and streamers

DRAMA FUNDING

NZWG represents the working screenwriters of Aotearoa New Zealand. Currently broadcast drama has a halo effect over all screenwriters. And without them in our ecosystem there is a possibility that 70% of our screenwriters will be out of work.

This seismic shift in funding not only reduces ‘premium’ content creation, but it also suffocates the production of all adequately funded drama, including the popular FTA series which are the bread and butter of the scripted industry, e.g.: Panthers, Vegas, Fresh Eggs, One Lane Bridge. None of these can be funded from NZOA now and there's no indication yet that the new entity will ringfence or protect any domestic scripted drama content creation.

NZWG want to take a moment to challenge the term "Premium Drama" in this discussion. This phrase suggests an elitist level of highly funded drama but in reality, our most expensive local productions have long been made for a fraction of what they cost in other territories. All scripted drama aims to be premium in quality, and that so much of it succeeds despite the historic underfunding is a credit to the industry's professionalism and innovation. In recent years NZOA considered the one-off telefeatures too expensive and started calling them “premium”, like it was a dirty word. We believe we can do better. Our ecosystem needs all types of content to thrive and be sustainable.

This proposed \$2.5M cap per drama means the loss of all series drama except for extremely low budget.

Under this proposed new model, where the maximum funding level is reduced to \$2.5m per drama, only one outcome for domestic screenwriters, and other screen practitioners, is possible – lower fees, fewer opportunities, and considerably worse working conditions (truncated scripting time, less writers, fewer story table, less work) due to the constraints of smaller budgets. We are facing the fact that screenwriters cannot consider earning a living wage.

Because there will be so little money available for adequately scripted drama, it is vital that funding agencies including NZOA are mindful of the next steps in project creation. Part of the funding of creative development should be promoting and facilitating access to the market - networks, platforms, and streamers - so that producers can find financial partners and eventual outlets for this content to be seen.

All creators want to connect with the largest possible audience - the first part of this journey is to CREATE the project (this means supporting writers) and the next part of the journey is to CONNECT the project to its potential audience (this means supporting producers, and writers as they continue to develop the work.)

NZWG members have also expressed that it is key that writers of original work with a strong and distinct point of view, be a priority for NZOA support at the premium drama budget level.

Commercially driven networks and platforms are naturally conservative as they are driven first and foremost by considerations of popularity. This can exclude voices or points of view that are outside the mainstream and have the potential to be game changers, so it's vital for writers that work that is original, distinctive, and different, will continue to be supported by NZOA, the agency with a remit to tell the stories of Aotearoa New Zealand.

NZ ON AIR KEY QUESTIONS FOR FEEDBACK

QUESTION 1.

HOW USEFUL WILL IT BE TO SYNC SOME OR ALL OF OUR SCRIPTED AND FACTUAL FUNDING ROUNDS WITH THOSE OF OTHER AGENCIES?

NZWG had a diversity of views on this point, to highlight this we have quoted responses from working screenwriters who apply to the NZOA current funding rounds:

"I think this could create a potential train smash of trying to get multiple projects ready at the same time for different agencies. But a plus side would be useful for production funding / budgets to access bits of pie from multiple sources and have the funds all land around the same time. So, pros and cons."

"I think it could put too much pressure on producers. It's a question of resources too. With multiple deadlines hitting at once, if you're simultaneously in production at that time, for example, then with a small team (and for many of us, we are a 1-2 person team) you'd likely just choose to skip those deadlines because you don't have the resources, whereas the big guys have the personnel to cover all bases. I think it's detrimental to the little players, especially when you look at the requirements for some funding rounds."

QUESTION 2.

DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FUNDING ALLOCATION WEIGHTING OF THE THREE PROPOSED FUNDING ROUNDS?

NZWG would like to see more information about the breakdown of these rounds. What types of content will be applying in these budget bands, over these rounds?

With these reductions in funding, the following consideration need to be applied:

- Project Caps per round
- Smaller rounds could promote budget shrinkage and undercutting
- More even distribution of funds per round

A \$5.5m round appears to be a targeted round for smaller projects with a maximum number of projects to be funded. This type of funding round encourages producers to pitch low budgets that keep everybody underpaid and overworked and potentially stunts the growth of the domestic sector, as individuals and as an industry. Which in turn sets a precedent: that these small budgets are acceptable and will become “the norm”, leading to the people making the work, pay with their own resources, energy, and mental health.

\$5.5m could be seen to be irresponsible in the sustainability of our domestic sector. An outcome of trying to fund as many projects as possible is that the only way to do that is for producers to shrink budgets and for areas like rates of pay, working conditions, health and safety and career progression to take a back seat.

QUESTION 3.

DO YOU AGREE WITH THE PROPOSED NUMBER CAP ON APPLICATIONS BY PLATFORMS AND PRODUCERS? (FOUR PER PRODUCER AND SIX PER PLATFORM EACH ROUND)

NZWG agrees with a proposed cap on applications by platforms and producers, assuming here that the word producer also means a production company.

NZWG want to see our established producers out there hunting for NZSPG projects. While also enabling the development of broader content and diverse voices for New Zealand audiences.

CONCLUSION

NZWG looks forward to becoming a partner in conversation regarding future NZOA strategies, as the voice of the screenwriters of Aotearoa New Zealand, we can best help to identify the issues and solutions that the original IP creators of New Zealand content have and want!

On behalf of the screenwriters of Aotearoa.



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