

New Writing North and Northumbria University: A Creative Partnership

Anna Disley

Executive Director, Programme and Impact, New Writing North

Keywords

*Creative partnership
Publishing, Innovation
Talent development
Cultural infrastructure
Inclusion
Regional growth*

Dr Helen Williams

Associate Professor of English Literature, Northumbria University

Summary: New Writing North and Northumbria University have built a long-term, values-driven partnership that combines talent development, research, skills innovation and major cultural infrastructure to transform the North East's writing, publishing and creative industries ecosystem.

DOI: 10.82593/pm66-3s23

Introduction

This case study reflects on the innovative partnership between New Writing North and Northumbria University representing a significant moment in the cultural and civic life of Newcastle and the wider North of England. The two organisations have collaborated for many years; and the depth of their partnership has resulted in an ambitious venture that brings together shared values and commitments to creativity, inclusion, and regional development. At the core of the collaborative partnership is a belief that writing, reading and publishing are not only artistic practices but engines of social mobility, cultural democracy, and economic opportunity.

The partnership offers a compelling example of how universities and cultural organisations can collaborate at infrastructure scale to reshape regional creative ecosystems. It demonstrates how shared values around access, excellence, and civic responsibility, can be transformed into long-term investment in new cultural infrastructure, and a vision for a more equitable literary landscape.

Background and Context

New Writing North (NWN) is an arts organisation based in Newcastle upon Tyne and works across the North of England. It is a charity and an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. As a leading writing development agency for the North, NWN has long championed writers whose voices are under-represented in mainstream publishing. Its programmes nurture talent from early stages through to professional practice, creating pathways into writing and creative industries that are often inaccessible to those outside the metropolitan centre. NWN helps writers build their careers, get published or produced and find their readers, listeners and viewers. Its team develop and deliver creative opportunities for children, young people and communities to support every level of ambition and delivers events and festivals that connect world-class writers and thinkers with communities.



*MA Publishing students
©2026 Will Mackie*

NWN's mission to democratise reading and writing aligns closely with Northumbria University's identity as a post-92, research-intensive institution committed to civic engagement, inclusive economy, social mobility, and the creation of new knowledge that benefits its region.

The university aims for transformative experiential learning that can lead to students achieving highly skilled work in the region, empowered by education to achieve social mobility, within an institutional culture of research excellence with far-reaching and pervasive impact.

Northumbria University and the Creative Industries

New Writing North is one of Northumbria University's five designated cultural partners, alongside Live Theatre, North East Museums, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, and the British Film Institute. Northumbria's strong relationship with the Creative Industries is evidenced in its long-term development and growth of these partnerships. Each industry partner makes important contributions to the university's teaching and learning across programmes and faculties, helps foster new collaborative research and experiential learning opportunities, and supports the university's commitments to social mobility and the diversity of the UK's creative economy. Northumbria's ambition is that its alumni need not leave the North East to seek rewarding creative careers.

Northumbria's strategic cultural partnerships evidence the institution's commitment to and participation in local creative industries. They aim to widen participation in sectors notorious for inequality of access, to foster a thriving regional creative economy, and to prepare graduates for creative careers therein. They do so by providing an interdisciplinary infrastructure for collaborative research and research bidding, providing access to new funders and increased capacity for partners to co-develop and co-deliver shared research projects. They reflect Northumbria's identity as a civic institution, committed to skills development and the growth of the regional cultural sector.

Beginning in 2012, the relationship between Northumbria University and New Writing North has, over time, matured into a sustained, trust-based collaboration that supports Northumbria's strategic priorities in world-leading research, an inclusive economy, and social mobility. In turn, the university has provided NWN with the institutional stability, intellectual environment and civic reach needed to innovate, build new partnerships and extend its impact across the region.

The distinguishing feature of this partnership is its co-creative character: programmes and initiatives have emerged from a long-standing, relational understanding of each organisation's values, strengths and ambitions. The collaboration has grown organically over time, producing co-creative work that is responsive, imaginative, and grounded in a mutual commitment to increase and widen participation in writing, reading, and other creative opportunities. This shared ethos has resulted in a joint venture to purchase and redevelop the Old Post Office in central Newcastle. The building will become the Centre for Writing and Publishing, a landmark cultural space with writing at its core.

A New Collaborative Venture: The Centre for Writing and Publishing

The Centre for Writing and Publishing is a £10.5 million capital project supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Newcastle City Council, the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority, and Northumbria University. It will be a unique cultural hub dedicated to writing across media and will house the teaching of Northumbria University's English department programmes.

Drawing on the partnership's expertise, networks and commitment to innovation, the Centre will help drive a creative industries-led inclusive economy in the North.

The Centre will serve as a hub for writers, creatives and students, bringing them together alongside commissioners, publishers, broadcasters and production companies to build careers and create content from the region. It will offer a welcoming space for students, local communities and young people, and an inspiring venue for a significant public events programme, workshops and festivals. Through promoting literacy and constructive engagement with ideas, it will use reading and writing across media to strengthen social capital in shared communities. All of this will be underpinned by partnerships across the public, commercial and voluntary sectors.

*In Conversation with
Nathan Bryon*
©2026 Jonny Myatt



Students and staff from the English department will be based alongside NWN colleagues, Hachette publishers and other creative industries organisations, creating rich opportunities for collaboration and immersing students in an industry facing environment. Students will be placed at the heart of the North East's creative industries, with significant opportunities for experiential learning. They will graduate into high-quality pathways for further study, work experience, and start-up opportunities. The centre will attract more Creative Industries employers, thereby facilitating networks and providing more graduate employment opportunities in the region.

The Centre will also provide high-quality opportunities to deepen research partnerships with academic colleagues. NWN's networks of writers, aspiring writers and readers, together with its relationships with local schools, will support inclusive recruitment to Northumbria University courses and contribute to the University's widening participation agenda. The ambition is that Northumbria's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Publishing, Creative Writing, English and related disciplines will be taught from the Centre from October 2028, with doors opening to the public in 2029.

The Four Strands of Partnership Working

New Writing North's work is organised around four complementary strands, each of which is underpinned by its longstanding partnership with Northumbria University. Together, these four strands form a coherent ecosystem of talent development, cultural programming, and skills innovation across the region:

- Writer Development
- Cultural Programme
- Skills and Innovation
- Young People and Communities

Across all four strands, collaboration with Northumbria University enhances opportunities for writers, students, communities and industry partners, and provides a shared foundation for the new Centre for Writing and Publishing. The four programme strands provide a pathway for people to develop their skills, knowledge and networks and to fulfil their creative or career ambitions. NWN's offer a range of ways for people to engage whatever their background or circumstance, from courses in local libraries, work in a school, geographically targeted grassroots programmes, through to open access awards and placement opportunities. The partnership means that there are more development routes available via NWN to people through university courses and research opportunities and vice versa. There is also scope for more impactful research close to the front-line across social, cultural and commercial sectors, with stronger dissemination routes for that work.

1. Writer Development: Transforming Opportunities

Throughout the partnership, Northumbria University and NWN have developed a wide range of research collaborations focused on regional creative industries, writing and publishing, and access and inclusivity. This began with work on *Common People*, an anthology of working-class writing, and Professor Katy Shaw's subsequent report *Common People: Breaking the Class Ceiling in UK Publishing*. That research led to A Writing Chance (<https://newwritingnorth.com/a-writing-chance/a-writing-chance-research/>), a UK-wide development programme for aspiring writers from working-class and under-represented backgrounds, delivered with partners including *The Daily Mirror*, Faber, Substack, Audible and *The New Statesman*.

Industry insight days and mentoring gave participants vital contacts and knowledge, while partners gained a clearer understanding of the barriers facing working-class writers and how to address them.

“A Writing Chance and Common People have transformed opportunities for writers, readers and publishers, breaking down class barriers to one of the UK’s biggest creative industries. This kind of sector innovation – and lasting change – is only possible through long term partnership” - Professor Katy Shaw, Northumbria University

Michael Sheen, *A Writing Chance* ©2026 Rob Irish



An Impact Case Study on *Common People* and *A Writing Chance*, demonstrating the project’s benefits for participants and the wider cultural economy, was rated 4* in the 2021 UK Research Excellence Framework. A 4* case study can generate around half a million pounds for an institution over an assessment cycle, making this not only a significant accolade but a major source of income for the University.

A Writing Chance also led to NWN’s online literary magazine *The Bee*, (<https://thebeemagazine.com/>) dedicated to working-class writing, and the Working Class Library podcast (<https://newwritingnorth.com/journal/the-working-class-library/>), which explores the ‘working-class canon’ with contemporary writers. Both are supported by literary research from two AHRC-funded PhD placement students.

NWN also served as industry supervisor for Katherine Greenwood's AHRC-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award, *Common People: Working Class Writing in the Twenty-First Century*, which used the anthology to analyse contemporary working-class writing. These research partnerships have enabled NWN to establish a new post - Programme Manager, Talent Development and Research Lead - tasked with generating collaborative research opportunities with universities. At Northumbria, these relationships are held with individual researchers and supported by the Associate Head of International and Partnerships.

Northumbria University is a key sponsor and host of New Writing North's flagship *Northern Writers' Awards*, which attract thousands of submissions each year from poets, fiction writers and creative non-fiction authors across the north of England. Held annually on campus and live-streamed, the Awards support outstanding works-in-progress through tailored development packages that include financial support, mentoring, industry introductions, editorial feedback, masterclasses and workshops. A suite of portfolio awards targets specific writing forms and demographics, including the Northumbria University Alumni Award. (<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/news/victoria-flemming/>)

"Winning a Northern Writers' Award was the first crucial step in my writing career" - Benjamin Myers, award winning writer of novels including *Cuddy*, *The Offing*, *The Gallows Poll*

A defining feature of the *Northern Writers' Awards* is the sustained after-care offered to awardees: NWN works closely with writers to broker industry introductions, and many notable book deals and critically acclaimed publications have emerged from this pipeline. This reputation has enabled NWN to cultivate robust relationships with publishers and agents, forming a key part of the growth strategy underpinning the new Centre for Writing and Publishing. It has also led to collaborative research projects examining the cultural and economic impacts of long-term investment in writers through the *Northern Writers' Awards*.

NWN's *Screen Development* programmes extend this talent work into film and television. Through the Channel 4 Awards and industry placements, writers from the North gain direct access to leading production companies including Quay Street, Hat Trick, Film Nation, Merman and Warp, who mentor selected writers in paid placements.

In addition, NWN delivers skills programmes with Channel 4 and development initiatives such as the recent Comedy Lab with the BBC, where twelve writers worked intensively with an experienced showrunner to develop new ideas for commissioners. Furthermore, NWN hosts the North East Screenwriting Weekender, a major conference bringing together leading writers, agents, commissioners and producers.

Channel 4, Writing for Television
©2026 Guzelian Media



Sounds Good, NWN's audiobook studio, is based at and run in partnership with Northumbria University. As the only facility of its kind between Sheffield and Edinburgh, it supports the regionalisation of publishing by producing audiobooks locally with northern voice actors paid at industry standard. The studio underpins research, training and outreach at the University by:

- driving skills development for staff and students
- supporting research collaborations with Dr Helen Williams and Dr Beth Brigham on northern voices in UK audiobooks
- contributing to Dr Richard O'Brien's audio storytelling module
- enabling the popular Sleep Stories podcast with Dr Diletta De Cristofaro

NWN has trained a Northumbria PhD student in freelance audio production and delivered intensive podcasting workshops for staff and students. In addition, NWN runs targeted development programmes designed to reach communities often overlooked by the creative industries, including place-based initiatives such as *Durham Writes* and *Sunderland Screenwriters*, and *Significant Ink* for writers of colour. *The World Writes* multi-lingual creative writing programme has been shaped with support from Northumbria postgraduate Malya Bhattacharya, an expert in colonial histories.



Durham Book Festival
©2026 Rob Irish

2. Cultural Programme

In the Centre for Writing and Publishing, a year-round programme will bring major writers and thinkers to audiences, alongside reading initiatives designed to encourage more adventurous reading and help address declining literacy levels. The Centre will be a venue that recognises the central role reading and writing play in a thriving democracy. NWN has recently launched *Right to Read* as part of the national Year of Reading, and within the Centre for Writing and Publishing the aim is to develop a rich programme of events and reading initiatives in partnership with Northumbria University colleagues and students.

The Centre will also deliver a public programme of talks, exhibitions and creative projects centred on the literary and cultural history of the North East. Impactful research will be integral to this work, developed with Northumbria colleagues to reveal, celebrate and help preserve the region's rich, complex and varied literary and cultural heritage.

3. Skills and Innovation

Together, Northumbria University and New Writing North provide a comprehensive talent pipeline, supporting writers from their earliest creative encounters through to international success. A budding local writer might encounter one of New Writing North's award-winning programmes for young people and communities before enrolling upon a collaboratively delivered undergraduate or postgraduate degree in Creative Writing or the MA Publishing. The *Northern Writers' Awards* also offer writer development and support for those whose careers have achieved global recognition, including Peter Straughan (*Wolf Hall*, *Conclave*), Benjamin Myers (*The Offing*, *The Gallows Pole*, *Cuddy*), and Eliza Clark (*Boy Parts*, *Penance*, *Granta Best of Young British Novelists*). The partnership between Northumbria and New Writing North strengthens the northern talent pipeline by co-creating new points of entry for people at different stages of development, piloting new work streams, and ensuring that progression routes into the creative industries are accessible to a wider and more diverse range of participants, as informed by the latest Creative Industries research.

The longstanding relationship between New Writing North and Northumbria University has been built around skills development and is exemplified by more than a decade of co-delivered expert teaching for students. The most significant educational collaboration is the MA Publishing, co-led by Northumbria University and New Writing North and designed and delivered in partnership with global Publisher Hachette UK. Students are taught both by a team of expert academics, led by novelist and former Faber and Penguin Random House editor Richard T. Kelly and by New Writing North's Will Mackie, and by specialists and staff from Hachette UK and New Writing North.

Students benefit from the week-to-week presence of senior-level Hachette UK staff as visiting instructors and mentors, which gives this Masters a uniqueness in the informed access it offers students to the publishing industry.

The MA is expressly designed to address skills gaps within the publishing industry and is the first in the UK to offer students a guaranteed placement with a global publisher and the opportunity to work with New Writing North on live writing development projects.

“Working closely with Northumbria University has been an incredibly important part of our Changing the Story initiative, our commitment to the vital work of diversity, equity and inclusion, ensuring we include all voices, perspectives and ideas in people and publishing. Right from the start, along with New Writing North we wanted to revolutionise the Publishing MA to include practical hands-on experience with access to industry experts and a cutting-edge understanding of how the industry works. We want every student to complete the course ready for employment in our industry.” - Richard Kitson, Deputy Chief Executive of Hachette Book Group and Hachette UK

“Whilst my role at Hachette is constantly developing and evolving as I learn and take on new responsibilities, I still use the skills and knowledge I gained as part of my placement. The time I spent with Hachette was invaluable in giving me the best chance possible as I started my career here and I know I will keep coming back to what I learned and the connections, I made as part of this opportunity as I continue to progress in this industry.” - Victoria Howard, Rights Executive Hachette UK and Graduate of MA Publishing at Northumbria University

New Writing North teaches on and programmes a module for Northumbria University’s MA Creative Writing, enriched by high-profile guest lecturers who provide students with unique insights into the publishing and wider creative industries. These sessions enable students to build networks with agents, publishers and funders, and ensure that Northumbria graduates enter the sector with both industry knowledge and meaningful professional connections.

4. Young People and Communities Programmes

Northumbria University helps to support New Writing North's work with young people and communities in several ways. These programmes are deeply embedded in local places and sustained through long-term engagement in some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas of Newcastle and Gateshead.

NWN's community work is expanding, especially around its partner schools, through *World Writes* creative writing programme, a writing group based at a local food bank, and family creative sessions in primary schools. NWN also runs weekly Young Writers Groups, providing sustained support for young people to develop their creative practice. As part of its mission to expand opportunities in publishing across the north, NWN delivers an annual *Careers in Publishing Day* for local schools in partnership with and hosted by Northumbria University. Staff from Hachette lead workshops on editorial, rights, PR and design, giving young people direct insight into the breadth of roles within the publishing industry and helping to diversify future talent pipelines.

"It was wonderful to hear about careers in this field as students often learn about STEM opportunities and feel jobs linked to English are just teacher, journalist or lawyer." - Longbenton High School Teacher

Challenges and Lessons

Strong relationships and clear institutional pathways are essential: Productive university-cultural industry partnerships rely on trust, continuity, and well-defined points of contact. Northumbria's corporate-level partnership model provides a formal framework that enables collaboration across departments and academic disciplines.

Different organisational cultures and tempos require flexibility and long-term thinking: Universities operate on fixed calendars, slow approval processes, and annual funding cycles, while cultural organisations like NWN are more agile. Effective collaboration requires patience, careful timing, and a willingness to work within these contrasting rhythms to achieve deeper, more meaningful teaching and research outcomes.

Structural barriers can slow progress, but they also create opportunities for richer, more embedded collaboration: Although university systems can make it difficult to seize opportunities quickly, they also open access to new audiences, funding streams, and long-term programme development.

The Centre for Writing and Publishing will help address these challenges by building relationships at multiple levels and establishing innovative ways of working from the outset.

Future Direction and Legacy

When it opens in 2028, the Centre will transform humanities teaching by enabling students to work directly with practising writers, producers, podcasters, agents and publishers. It will also create new points of contact between the University and young people and aspiring writers across the North East, diversifying and widening future student intake. By fostering these relationships, the Centre will help drive growth in the region's cultural industries. It will design pathways for graduates to participate in that growth through work experience, employment, skills development and investment in promising ideas. Ultimately, the Centre will demonstrate that culture and the creative industries - core tenets of the UK Industrial Strategy - can act as powerful engines for growth, innovation and civic pride.

Key Takeaways from the Project

A long-term, values-driven partnership between New Writing North and Northumbria University has created a coherent ecosystem for talent development, research, skills innovation and cultural infrastructure across the North East.

The Centre for Writing and Publishing represents a major cultural investment that will embed students, writers and industry professionals in a shared creative environment, transforming humanities education and strengthening the region's creative industries economy.

Co-creative working is the partnership's defining strength, with programmes emerging organically from shared values around inclusion, access, civic responsibility and regional development.

The partnership delivers **deep sector impact**, from nationally recognised talent development programmes (e.g. *A Writing Chance*, *Northern Writers' Awards*) to collaborative research that has achieved 4* REF recognition and shaped industry understanding of access and inequality.

Skills and innovation pipelines are strengthened through co-delivered teaching, including the industry embedded MA Publishing with Hachette UK, ensuring graduates enter the sector with practical experience, networks and clear progression routes.

Challenges in organisational tempo and structure can be turned into opportunities, with the Centre for Writing and Publishing designed to streamline collaboration, deepen relationships and create new, innovative ways of working across the university–industry partnership.

Further Information

<https://www.newwritingnorth.com>

<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/news/centre-for-writing-and-publishing-march-2026/>