

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE WELSH GOVERNMENT, CREATIVE WALES AND THE BOOKS COUNCIL OF WALES TO SAVE WELSH MAGAZINES & WEBSITES.

Without exception, since the dawn of devolution a quarter of a century ago, every review of the Welsh cultural or political landscape has mentioned the **paucity of Welsh media**. For many historic reasons often restated, it has proved stubbornly difficult to sustain an economically viable independent media sector within this small nation.

For decades, a **minuscule amount of funding** – only ever a tiny proportion of the full amount spent on culture – **has gone a very long way**. It has helped build cultural connections within a fragmented public sphere, provide platforms for vital dialogue and pave the way for the political and perceptual development of the nation. It has helped foster publications and periodicals in both national languages that have commanded attention and considerable respect far beyond Wales.

Despite its financial limitations, the small subsidised Welsh magazine and periodical sector has developed into a **model of good practice**. Publications are their own unique and **dynamic micro-businesses**, progressive in outlook and upholding the highest ethical values from the grassroots up. They strive to be sufficiently structurally independent from undue, top-down influence from a sponsor, funder or the state in order to be a crucial voice **speaking truth-to-power**. They attract **loyal and committed teams** of staff, freelancers and contributors, happy to go the extra mile in pursuit of excellence.

In recent years however, that extra mile has become untenably long. Successively **worsening grant levels** and often **more stringent funding conditions** have become normalised, creating a precedent which has led to a race to the bottom in working conditions for magazine and website employees, and low contributor fees. This not only affects those currently in operation, but also any potential new entrants into the sphere.

Four years ago, the Welsh Government published *Fair Work Wales*. A detailed commitment to decent employment conditions, it defined their characteristics:

Fair reward; employee voice and collective representation; security and flexibility; opportunity for access, growth and progression; safe, healthy and inclusive working environment; legal rights respected and given substantive effect.

Furthermore, it recommended that

Public money should be provided only to organisations fulfilling, or working towards fulfilling our definition and characteristics of fair work (organisations meeting the Fair Work Wales standard).

It is hard to see that the current working conditions for many of these Welsh micro-businesses fulfil the ambitions of their ultimate funding source, not due to any fault of their own but explicitly due to successive cuts to the funding made

available since 2008. In the case of one example, *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, the hugely respected periodical founded in 1970, its **core funding is now less than half of what it was in the pre-devolution era**, not even factoring in inflation. In other cases, existing publications have often experienced standstill funding for years, despite fast rising costs, and newer entrants have not received viable grant levels at the outset. The funding reductions bear no relation to need nor performance, and are largely a legacy of a pre-Brexit misinterpretation of EC state aid regulations from within Welsh Government. This endured despite the Head of Office at the European Commission Office in Wales and his colleague at the Directorate General for Competition in Brussels concluding that such magazines would have been exempt from these regulations to begin with.

In her editorial in the November 2022 edition of *Planet* arguing for better funding conditions for all magazines and websites, editor and *Planet* board director Emily Trahair detailed how, despite being paid to work only 27 hours a week, she was in fact working between 40 and 70 hours, “and occasionally well over 80 ... necessitated by the grant franchises and cuts”. In the last decade, grant conditions have stipulated that publications raise over a certain amount of additional income in order to receive this (reduced) core funding: publishers don’t lack expertise in how to address this, rather the problem is the **unpaid hours** needed to *implement* these activities, at **huge cost to staff wellbeing**.

The situation she outlined is similar to that experienced by many other funded publications. She wrote that not only have all *Planet* staff received the same wage per hour (£12) since 2012, but that without a huge grant boost it would be impossible to fully provide pensions or statutory sick pay, or in most cases working hours suitable for a parent, carer or someone recovering from an illness. With rising costs, it’s now more difficult than ever for publications to balance their budgets at all. While efforts by BCW to lobby Welsh Government for improved funding are to be very much welcomed, as was emergency funding in 2023 to partially address the cost-of-living crisis in the short term, all bodies responsible for grant provision need to recognise that **the current settlement is not sustainable**.

Things must change rapidly. **Increased core funding is essential**. To do so is the stated policy of the current Senedd administration. The December 2021 Co-operation Agreement between the Labour government and Plaid Cymru says it clear:

As an initial intervention, we will provide additional investment to develop existing and new enterprises seeking to improve Welsh journalism and to support Welsh-based media to tackle the information deficit.

Not only would sustainable core funding help tackle the information deficit, and enable publications to reach more than a fraction of their potential readership, it would also enable ethical working conditions, make the sector far more open to entrants from non-traditional backgrounds and fulfil many more of the noble ambitions of the Fair Work Wales strategy.

Throughout this century, much emphasis has of course moved into the digital arena. The plethora of Welsh news, culture and current affairs sites online is testament to a new national confidence and self-expression, one for which print media has unquestionably acted as a seedbed. **It is important that public funding goes into online and multimedia publications**, for this is how we so often consume our news and opinion, but the value of print media is becoming increasingly clear and urgent.

Long-form print endures. It is of a standard to have lasting value: readers keep copies of our political and cultural magazines for posterity. They are a crucial resource in education, libraries and archives in Wales and worldwide, telling the ongoing stories of an evolving nation. Writers know the value of this intimately. Even more importantly, there is an experiential factor. We read print differently. **The words are often written with greater care, and read that way too.** Fifteen years ago, book publishers were in freefall panic that their business model was fast disappearing. The opposite has happened; the number of independent bookshops is at its highest in history. **People need print and digital.** Indeed, the complementarity and distinct qualities of print and digital media are all reflected in how most Welsh print publications also provide digital editions and online content.

It often takes decades to build up projects of serious cultural value, but they can be lost in no time. **We in Wales aspire to do things differently, to do things better than the austerity-driven Westminster model.** This must mean something, and in the instance of funding for magazines, periodicals and websites, it must mean that we unashamedly proclaim their value, so very much greater than the sum of public money seeded within them. If we fail to challenge the miserable orthodoxy, intellectually as well as materially, we will have failed the nation.

- We call on all bodies responsible for the funding of magazines and websites – the Welsh Government, Creative Wales and the Books Council of Wales – to come together and co-ordinate efforts to improve core funding as a matter of urgency.
- Core funding for all magazines and websites successful in the forthcoming English-language grant franchise needs to be increased per publisher to a level that enables ethical working conditions for each employee, freelancer and contributor, in exchange for producing exemplary content; and core funding for Welsh-language magazines and websites needs to be boosted to also achieve this objective. All funding targets and conditions need to factor in the paid hours required to fulfil complex operations to a professional standard.
- A new fair funding settlement for magazines and websites needs to be based on core funding pledged for the duration of the forthcoming English-language grant franchise, the remainder of the Welsh-language

grant franchise, and beyond: ad hoc funding is not sufficient for the survival of a viable media. A boost from supplementary project funding alone, tied to external policy priorities, and undue intervention via targets (beyond requisite scrutiny) would not serve the needs of a grassroots media that for the health of our democracy needs to remain structurally independent of the state and funding bodies.

Yours sincerely,

1. Mike Parker
2. Michelle Stanistreet, General Secretary of the National Union of Journalists
3. Christopher Meredith, on behalf of the Society of Authors Wales Steering Group
4. Emeritus Professor Charlotte Williams OBE
5. Patrick McGuinness
6. Laura McAllister
7. Gillian Clarke
8. Jay Griffiths
9. Rachel Trezise
10. Professor Richard Wyn-Jones
11. Eric Ngalle Charles
12. Menna Elfyn
13. Jon Gower
14. Gwyneth Lewis
15. Niall Griffiths
16. Ifor ap Glyn
17. Andrew Green (Chair of *New Welsh Review*)
18. Dr Daryl Leeworthy
19. Amy Wack
20. Owen Shiers (musician)
21. Katell Keineg
22. Pascale Petit FRSL
23. Mabli Siriol Jones
24. Dr Dan Evans
25. Dr Kieron Smith
26. Steve Griffiths
27. Leanne Wood
28. Pamela Petro
29. Norena Shopland
30. Dr Peter Wakelin
31. Nia Davies (poet)
32. Eluned Gramich
33. Sophie McKeand
34. Iwan Bala
35. Peter Stevenson
36. Dr Mary-Ann Constantine
37. Gareth Leaman
38. Polly Manning

39. Professor Tony Curtis
40. Helen Sandler
41. Alison Lochhead
42. Nigel Jarrett
43. Mike Joseph
44. Rebecca Roberts
45. Taz Rahman
46. Siân Melangell Dafydd
47. John Geraint
48. Shara Atashi
49. Myfanwy Alexander
50. Bethan Miles
51. Sam Adams
52. Sharon Morgan
53. Francesca Rhydderch
54. John Barnie
55. Carole Hailey
56. Lottie Williams
57. Richard John Parfitt
58. Ifor Thomas
59. Peter Finch
60. Steve Andrews
61. John Osmond
62. James Stewart
63. Wiliam Owen Roberts
64. Dr Gemma June Howell
65. Sarah Tanburn
66. Greg Hill
67. Jane Fraser
68. Rebecca George
69. Mike McNamara
70. Gaynor Funnell
71. Geraint Lewis
72. Nick Murray
73. Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch
74. Gorwel Owen
75. Anthony Evans (artist)
76. Emeritus Professor David Ian Rabey MA MA PhD CCDC/FLSW
77. Colin Thomas
78. Sara Penrhyn Jones
79. Darren Chetty
80. Adam Johannes
81. Dylan Huw
82. Harriet Protheroe-Soltani
83. Emily Blewitt
84. Harry Waveney
85. Charmian Savill
86. Huw Williams, Dean for the Welsh Language at Cardiff University
87. Stevie Davies

88. Bridget Keehan
89. Frances Williams
90. Ant Evans
91. Katie Gramich
92. Michelle Deininger
93. Steven Lovatt
94. Prof. Paul O'Leary, FLSW, FRHistS
95. Jonathan Edwards (poet)
96. Prof. Deri Tomos
97. Catrin Evans
98. Catrin Elis Williams
99. Elinor Wyn Reynolds
100. Dr Elen Ifan
101. Aled Islwyn
102. Geraint Lewis (composer)
103. Elin Llwyd Morgan
104. Tracey Rhys
105. Dr Tim Rhys (playwright and Creative Writing lecturer)
106. Rita Singer
107. Kaite O'Reilly
108. Adam Coward
109. Iestyn Tyne
110. Robert Minhinnick
111. Aled Llion Jones
112. T. Robin Chapman
113. Rhianwen Daniel
114. Carl Morris
115. Steve Thompson
116. Mark S. Redfern
117. Selwyn Williams, Cwmni Bro Ffestiniog
118. Martin Wright
119. Morgan Owen
120. Aidan Byrne
121. Rhian E. Jones
122. Kathryn Gray
123. Ben Gwalchmai
124. Lynne Rees
125. Dr Sioned Pearce
126. Meic Birtwistle
127. Professor Jeremy Hooker FRSL
128. Joshua Jones
129. Dr Nia Edwards-Behi
130. Dr Carrie Etter
131. Vicky Morris
132. Dr Sam Christie
133. Ed Garland
134. Jim Pratt MBE
135. Graham Mort
136. Paul Cabuts

137. Gwen Davies
138. Ness Owen
139. Richard Gwyn
140. Jo Dahn
141. Katherine Cleaver
142. Mark Blayney
143. Russell Todd
144. Liz Jones
145. Dr Ceri Thomas (artist, art historian, curator)