

WALES ARTS **review**

8th November 2023

FAO: Chair of the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee

Dear Delyth Jewell,

I am writing in light of the recent decision by *Wales Arts Review*, our country's leading cultural journal, to disengage with the Books Council of Wales and its English language magazine funding facility that has provided *Wales Arts Review* with core funding since 2014. The effect of this action puts the future of the organisation in jeopardy, but we felt we had no alternative. The decision was a point of principle, but, first and foremost, it was a clarion call for the magazine and wider English language publishing sector in Wales which finds itself in increasingly dire financial health, one that we have become sure is unsustainable.

I am writing to the committee in order to help shine a light on a sector that has been dramatically let down by the body that should be working to sustain it, and which has also been crucially underfunded by Welsh Government. **I am writing in the hope that the Committee may pick up some of the questions that *Wales Arts Review* has been forced to ask of the Books Council of Wales.**

Background

Founded in 2012, *Wales Arts Review* has been in receipt of funding from the English language magazine fund administered by the Books Council of Wales since 2014. As a spotlight on the arts and culture of Wales for a global readership we are now being read by 300,000 people in 200 countries. *Wales Arts Review* has published over 5,000 reviews, essays and interviews by over 500 Welsh and Wales-based writers. The success of *Wales Arts Review* is a remarkable story of dedication, resilience, and passion for the arts and culture of Wales, created and published by a team who work far beyond the resources available to us. We have operated during this time, partially, on BCW grants of between £20,000 and £27,500pa.

Within this, we have given opportunities to many individuals (over forty at the last count) in the publishing industry, through internships, paid positions and structured work experience programs. Our BCW grant has been an investment, not just in the core team at *Wales Arts Review*, but in the wider creative sector in Wales, that has returned much more in terms of social and cultural capital. Furthermore, we have also provided guidance and an artistic

space to aspiring authors, artists, producers, and writers to showcase their talents on a global platform.

Concerns

We have become increasingly dismayed at messages coming out of BCW in the last few years signalling that there would be no increase in money available, given the **24% decrease in real terms value of the grant money in the 5 years since the last allocation**. BCW has also made it very clear that the coming years will be harder, with an increased squeeze on resources and funding. *Wales Arts Review* came to the enormously difficult decision that we would be better off closing down than trying to sustain a publication in such circumstances, and thus damaging the legacy of the work we have produced in the last decade.

Our main concerns over the systems of funding established by BCW can be broken down to these:

- The cap on what a publication can apply for in the 2023 round of funding means that *Wales Arts Review* could have only applied for less than we needed to operate on a budget commensurate with real terms increases in budgetary demands since the last round of funding was allocated. It means that applicants are not even being permitted to make our strongest case.
- The culture of conservatism at the BCW means that they are unable to make the tough decisions. Instead they keep their existing portfolio on life-support. The evidence is clear in that two of their biggest recipients of funding had to hold existential fundraisers in the last cycle.
- We believe the model for funding is a clear sign that BCW is failing in its duty to encourage and nurture innovation and creativity.
- It became clear during our initial preparations for the application that BCW has not revised, renewed, or reconsidered the remit for the application to the English language magazines fund in the past 5 years that has seen epochal cultural, political, and economic shifts in the United Kingdom and beyond. BCW has issued a near-identical set of documents pertaining to the funding as it did in 2018. We believe this is evidence of a dereliction of duty by BCW.
- *Wales Arts Review* has proven over and over that it operates a vital cultural public service and that it should be correctly funded as such. What BCW was offering instead was a system that would neither support growth nor properly fund a public service business model. I ask if that is a responsible position to take for an organisation charged with the support of the sector.
- BCW has dismissed the concerns of *Wales Arts Review* in these matters, concerns that are widespread across the sector, as evidence by Emily Trahair's editorial for Planet Magazine in 2023 in which she detailed the stresses of operating under BCW budgets, including effects on work ethics and wellbeing, contradicting Welsh Government's own Healthy Working Wales pledges.

Questions

I would like to encourage the Committee to consider the following questions in relation to the Books Council of Wales' funding of English language magazines.

1. Is it morally defensible that In 2022 Welsh language magazines benefitted from a pot of £385,000, whereas in 2023 English language magazines have their corresponding fund amounting to just £180,000?
2. Why has there not been an opportunity for a sector-wide debate on the need (or not) for radical restructuring as proposed in my article of Sept 23, "[A New Future is Needed for Magazines in Wales](#)"? I believe a creative and radical overhaul of the magazine sector in Wales could use the limited resources in innovative ways and produce a vibrant and robust magazine sector. BCW has shown no willingness to engage in discussions about doing things differently.
3. Given that there has been no review of the funding model, guidelines, or application remit in five years, is BCW guilty of negligence toward the English language magazine sector in Wales?

Reflections

We believe it is a reasonable evaluation that BCW's model for funding is a clear sign that BCW is failing in its duty to encourage and nurture innovation and creativity, and that this funding approach will only manage the decline of the English language magazines in Wales.

I would be happy to make myself available for further and deeper discussion on these points, in particular the potentialities and possibilities of reshaping the English language magazine sector.

Your sincerely,



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