

Planet: the Welsh Internationalist

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28.10.24

[For publication]

Dear Chair and Members of the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee.

Thank you very much for your continued engagement with the issue of funding for magazines and websites. I have now read the transcript of the evidence session with the Books Council of Wales from 17.10.24 and have a few points to follow up from earlier correspondence. For anyone reading who is new to the issues in question, you can read more about our perspective here, which also includes important context for the additional points I make below, for example the ‘rationale’ given for removing our grant:

<https://www.planetmagazine.org.uk/planet-online/253/editorial/emily-trahair>

The urgency for sustainable publisher funding and system reform

Firstly, I’d like to lend support to the urgent call from Wales’s publishers and from BCW itself for immediate financial relief for publishers of books, magazines and websites from Welsh Government. The existence of a viable contemporary Welsh literature and media in both languages is clearly under threat, at incalculable loss to Welsh citizens, writers and publishing staff.

As soon as sustainable funding can be delivered to publishers, there’s a strong argument that a process of in-depth scrutiny and reform of current publishing strategy, funding management and ethos needs to begin – led by the publishing grassroots, and perhaps also at governmental and Senedd level. If such a process of reform could be also undertaken within the structures of BCW itself that would be very welcome. There would be limited point in injecting more money into BCW if there was still a risk that when their funding came up for renewal in a few years time publishers would then be vulnerable to debilitating cuts, or even having their grant removed completely, as *Planet*’s was, for wholly unfair and illogical reasons, with very little transparency, and (in the absence of any coherent explanation for the loss of grant) leading to publishers fearing punishment for raising concerns about effects on working conditions from grant cuts and BCW funding targets. Additional funding would be most efficiently spent for the benefit of Wales’s readers if publishers did not need to expend a huge amount of time and energy challenging all the variously impracticable, irrational, unethical and erroneous facets of the approach to funding strategy and targets that have emerged in the last few years.

Such areas requiring reform are beyond the scope of this correspondence, and of the two editorials I have written on this subject. With regard to reform of magazine and website

funding (this being the area we're most familiar with) *Planet* will be happy to initiate a discussion. Our dormant status gives us a freedom to publicly challenge the current approach and strategy, and pool ideas for reform and alternatives, a freedom which is not shared by publishers and other organisations in receipt of BCW funds (but who have so often expressed their support for our stance in private). This would be a positive and constructive outcome from our current experience of being defunded. Plans for how this discussion will be initiated are already underway, and we'd be very happy to feed back the outcomes of the discussion to the Committee and all other relevant bodies, including BCW.

The factors behind poor working conditions for publishers

The second point I'd like to raise is with regard to Helgard Krause's reflection on 'self-exploitation' in the Welsh publishing industry. I'm glad that she appears to acknowledge that declining grant levels have an impact on working conditions. However, I would challenge her point that 'there's only so much you can do'. In *Planet*'s case – and I know other publishers have experienced very similar – the decline in working conditions was due partly to successive reductions in our core grant (so it became less than half it was in 2008). However, it was also due to multiple increasing demands on our operations and increasingly (and often counter-productively and unduly) interventionist measures in the form of BCW targets and conditions in this same period (2009 to 2020) with partial respite with regard to targets only in response to the pandemic. We were never in a position, as could perhaps be interpreted from Krause's response, where we were allowed to 'do less' as a consequence of receiving less of a grant – quite the opposite. From 2018 until the pandemic in particular we were very much in the position where we were threatened with losing our grant if we did not meet ever more stringent (and often very problematic) targets.

Transparency and objectivity

The third point is in relation to the welcome question raised by Laura Anne Jones as to how BCW ensure transparency and objectivity in the funding process for magazines. My correspondence with the Committee from 17.04.24, 02.07.24 and 23.09.24 includes multiple points demonstrating that BCW's funding process is lacking in transparency, independence and/or objectivity. I would like to add additional points for public record with regard to BCW's appeals process and the confidential 'internal report' from July 2022 which fed in to the sub-committee's decisions.

BCW's appeals process is not independent or objective at all, but internal. The two individuals who investigated our Stage 2 complaint were the Chair of BCW's Magazine Panel – i.e. the Panel which interviewed us and makes decisions re. the grant franchises (this is Alan Watkin, who is the Vice-Chair of the BCW English-language publishing development subcommittee) and BCW's Head of the Publishing Development Department (Arwel Jones). In this way they were essentially investigating themselves. (Our stage 1 complaint was less formal correspondence with our BCW Publishing Development Officer – so again was internal to BCW.)

As mentioned previously, the July 2022 internal report was drawn up without any formal consultation with publishers, writers or readers (in contrast with the earlier 2013 report into English-language magazines chaired by Tony Bianchi). Publishers were not allowed to know who were the external experts on the review panel for the report, nor to see the internal report itself (which was only revealed this year in correspondence with the Committee). Indeed, not even the Committee were allowed to see the crucial 'external experts' report' which fed in to the internal report, let alone the publishers. BCW refused the Committee access to this on the grounds that it 'contains commercially sensitive information'. This secrecy raises alarm bells

in relation to the ludicrously unfair, illogical ‘rationale’ that was later given for removing *Planet*’s funding.

What is also noteworthy is that the topic that formed the crux of this rationale is one of the key criteria in the July 2022 Report, and it's noted there that their external experts explored this with ‘research’ (no more details were given). However, this topic was not mentioned at all in the tender documents. Nor was it mentioned at all in the very informal and partial feedback I had from our grants officer about the outcome of the internal review back in 2023 when I asked her for information. In this way, publishers who applied to the 2023 franchise did not have the opportunity to know all the criteria that were being factored in to the decisions, nor in their application to respond to positively, give greater context about, or potentially redress any misconceptions the panel may hold about this topic.

Nor is it the case, as could potentially be interpreted from Krause’s response on 17.10.24, that the independent sub-committee are the only individuals to influence funding decisions. The panel meetings for the July 2022 internal report were led by a BCW staff member – Arwel Jones, who from email correspondence with our (soon to depart) grants officer Lucy Thomas, clearly had been tasked with an influential role in shaping the content and parameters of the report, and that our grants officers would have a role to play in this process too. Staff members from BCW (including Helgard Krause, Arwel Jones and our grants officer Ashley Owen) were present throughout the publisher franchise interviews and subsequent discussion. Staff members an opportunity (through their involvement in sub-committee meetings) to shape sub-committee outcomes - for better or worse. Moreover, there should surely be a set of mechanisms by which BCW staff can intervene and set certain parameters if there is a danger that the independent sub-committee is making any decisions lacking in impartiality and fairness, or if the subcommittee or their colleagues stray beyond their proper remit without justification: BCW as an organisation is ultimately responsible for maintaining these standards, after all. In a small nation, and an environment where publishers sometimes need to give robust constructive critique of funding decisions, it’s vital that those decision-makers – both the subcommittee and staff – maintain scrupulous standards of impartiality, objectivity and fairness.

Scrutiny

I thank the Committee for their ongoing scrutiny. After the evidence session with BCW the two main questions for BCW with regard to *Planet* remain the following:

How can they justify their untruth that *Planet* couldn’t receive the minimum £75,500 we applied for due to limitations on the BCW budget and the strength of submissions to the 2023 tender (when in fact there was c. £95,000 left over) and so could not receive any funding at all?

Secondly, how can they justify the sole ‘rationale’ given to us for the *Planet* grant decision, which, I would argue, effectively amounts not only to victimising us as employees for raising concerns about the impact of successive grant cuts on working conditions, but also victim-blaming us for these very same concerns as were articulated in the open letter campaign, a *Planet* editorial, our grant application – and now indeed the evidence session discussion between BCW and the Committee?

I would like to conclude by paying tribute to Welsh publishing and media staff of both languages – they are among the hardest working (and most poorly remunerated) people in Wales, who go to exhaustive lengths to give a voice to Welsh citizens, ensure the survival of a distinctive and pluralistic Welsh culture, and be a vital vessel for issues of conscience

during a prolonged period of economic and political turbulence. They make considerable personal sacrifices to this end, often at significant risk to their wellbeing. They deserve to be protected and fostered in the most capable way possible, rather than undermined and defunded.

Alongside all the excellent arguments given by publishers, and indeed by Helgard Krause herself in the evidence session for why Welsh publishing needs greater financial support, there is also the point that the written word (whether as creative writing or journalism) is essential for Welsh democracy, and its unique, world-class literature plays a huge part in upholding Wales's claim to be a distinct nation to begin with – and has done from at least the 6th century to the present day.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emily Trahair', with a small apostrophe at the end.

Emily Trahair
(Editor of *Planet* 2012-2024)