



Position Paper

The Way Forward

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WELSH BOOKS COUNCIL POSITION PAPER

THE WAY FORWARD

Executive Summary

- The WBC enthusiastically welcomes this thoroughgoing report's recommendations and such of its findings as relate to its work.
- In doing so, it assumes that sufficient additional funding will be made available to ensure effective implementation of them.
- It recognizes that the services to be transferred to its care dovetail perfectly with its current programme of provision.
- Not only will they significantly strengthen current provision but also allow several of its present schemes to be adapted to meet constantly developing needs.
- They will thereby enable the Council significantly to reinforce the publishing sector it exists to serve.
- In anticipation of this, many representatives of that sector have already expressed their very strong support for the recommendations.
- Full implementation of the report would also better enable the Council both to deliver its own strategic plan (*Looking Forward*) and to fulfil the strategic priorities of Welsh Government (as outlined in *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021*; *Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*).
- The core response of the WBC to the Report has already been very warmly endorsed by both its Executive Committee and ruling Council.
- The WBC now looks forward to working with its partners to ensure an efficient and speedy transition of responsibilities

Overview

The Welsh Books Council welcomes in the very warmest terms the findings of the recent Independent Review of Support for Publishing and Literature in Wales and accepts its recommendations in their totality. In doing so, it assumes that sufficient additional funding will be made available to ensure effective implementation of them. It looks forward to working with others to effect the transfer of responsibilities as speedily and efficiently as possible.

The established sole aim and purpose of the WBC is to serve the publishing sector in Wales in all its different aspects so as to enable it to nurture Welsh writing talent and to allow it to maximise its market potential. Particularly significant, in the present context, has been an acceptance by a succession of past Ministers, most notably Jenny Randerson and Alun Pugh, of the WBC's core argument that grants/bursaries to writers are most productive when tied directly to an assessment of the likely market impact and performance of the work that is being financially supported and when combined with mentoring and training opportunities.

For more than two decades the work of the WBC for the publishing industry in Wales has repeatedly been commended in the warmest of possible of terms by a whole series of independent reviews and reports:

- ‘Evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of the Grant Support Scheme for Welsh Language Publishers’, D.R. Thomas and D.N. Martin (Cardiff Business School on behalf of the Welsh Office), 1995.
- ‘Review of the Publishing Grant administered by the Welsh Books Council’ (Grant Thornton on behalf of the Welsh Language Board), 1999.
- ‘Report of the Task and Finish Group on Publishing for [Jenny Randerson AM] The Minister for Culture, Sport and the Welsh Language’, chaired by Delyth Evans AM, 2002
- ‘Welsh Writing in English’ Report for the Culture Welsh Language and Sport Committee, Rosemary Butler AM (Chair), 2004.
- ‘Review of Support for Books from Wales’, Report by Martin Rolph for the Culture and Sport Department, 2015.

It is extremely doubtful whether any other Welsh body active in the fields of writing, literature and publishing has undergone such sustained scrutiny and emerged with such flying colours. And it is further worth noting that the recommendations in this report are completely consistent with the findings of these previous assessments.

As was to be expected, the examination of the WBC by the panel of this latest review was appropriately testing and rigorous, with a number of challenging issues being raised by panel members in accordance with their particular expertise. However, the Chair and Chief Executive of the Welsh Books Council welcomed the opportunity to respond, believing the occasion provided an excellent opportunity for it to showcase its work and to reflect on how the Books Council’s services could be adapted and extended to meet future anticipated needs.

The recommendations of the review have met with enthusiastic support from the Welsh Books Council as not only are they a clear recognition of its distinguished record of service to the publishing industry but also represent an exciting new opportunity for that service to be significantly augmented and strengthened in a number of important respects. They have been equally warmly welcomed by key players right across the publishing sector in Wales excited by the possibilities for development, growth and enhanced performance that they represent.

The recommendations focus on activities that lie at the very core of literary endeavour. These would benefit from WBCs exclusive focus on books and publishing since within the WBC framework they would not face internal competition either from other more cost-intensive if more glamorous art forms or from high-profile performance events with the advantage of being prominently public-facing.

The proposed transfer of functions would also clearly align with the strategic priorities of Welsh Government (as outlined in *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021*) and its commitment to the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* and it would also reflect key aspects of WBCs own strategic plan *Looking Forward*. In this context WBC would wholeheartedly embrace a name change which would not only more accurately reflect its present status but also clearly signal the widening of its current remit; the change would also be reflected in a changed mission statement to signal a clear intent to embrace and embed the new responsibilities fully, especially with regards to authors and talent development.

Writers' Bursaries: Developing & promoting talent

The publishing industry is underpinned by the creative output of writers; the careful nurturing of emerging talent and professional development opportunities for more experienced authors are central to ensuring a diverse and engaging content; content suitable for publication in book or magazine form is currently supported through our grants system. However, writing manifests itself in many more diverse forms, such as games, scripts, spoken word and live performance, apps, web content, networks and social media. We believe that Writers' Bursaries play a vital role in developing talent, but that the current bursary system is short of ambition and lacks structure.

Using tried and tested principles currently deployed by the Welsh Books Council we envisage a new bursary function that:

- Is established through consultation with writers and their representative bodies
- Attracts high profile panel members with deep expertise and from diverse backgrounds
- Facilitates and encourages risk-taking by authors and at times publishers which is rarely possible within the present confines of the WBC grant system
- Operates two separate panels to ensure equity in opportunity for both languages
- Has a transparent application process designed not only to facilitate the creative process but also to provide real focus with regard to the aims and outcomes desired by the writer
- Embeds mentoring and training as well as follow up and assessment with access to publishers, editors, agents, marketing and digital experts facilitated
- Enables a suitable partner to re-establish the much missed writers' database
- Is national in outlook, working proactively to attract applications from disadvantaged areas
- Is located in North-East Wales, allowing for a wider geographical presence of WBC

Writers on Tour

Events where authors can engage with readers, other writers and particularly disadvantaged communities or young people are central to widening reach and encouraging participation. The inspiration, especially for young people, gained by meeting an admired author should not be underestimated, nor should the marketing opportunity for books. The WBC grant system is very targeted and specific in the support it currently gives for events; a more culturally focussed activity in the shape of Writers on Tour is a natural extension of our current work and also offers new marketing opportunities for all kinds of content and formats.

We therefore envisage a more joined up and holistic approach to Writers on Tour by:

- Acknowledging that very few writers actually earn a living from their writing and that participation at events needs to be supported at an appropriate level
- Ensuring that books are on sale, through a local bookseller where possible, by encouraging applications to WBC's outreach grant scheme
- Considering Author tours in context and ensuring they form part of a structured development of community engagement by reaching out to existing local organisers

- Considering the diverse demands and interests of different communities and proactively encouraging publishers to collaborate
- Making appropriate provisions for young and emergent writers
- Maximising the international potential through joining up with initiatives from British Council Wales and Wales Arts International

For the potential and ambition of the Writers' Bursaries and Writers on Tour schemes to be fully realised careful consideration will need to be given to the current level of funding, which has decreased over the last few years.

Promoting and awarding the best of Welsh writing

Literary awards are an important recognition of excellence; they provide career development prospects for authors and promotional/commercial opportunities for publishers. Whilst the Wales Book of the Year award has a long and distinguished history, the reduction in prize money, and lack of sense of occasion and resultant visibility, has diminished its importance in the eyes of many in recent years. Whilst literary awards are not central to our core services and in themselves do not offer the same structured intervention possibilities of the grants system we appreciate their relevance in the publishing landscape and not least their national symbolism in showcasing the best of Wales. We envisage a revived Wales Book of the Year by:

- Establishing a working group that includes representatives from publishers, authors booksellers, media, broadcasters, libraries, education sector, and sponsors
- Seeking to establish commercial sponsorship or patronage similar to other prizes (this may not be immediately possible in the first and second year of the prize, so appropriate funding would need to be forthcoming initially)
- Seeking to involve the broadcast media from its inception to ensure coverage and maximum exposure within the English-language media in Wales
- Establishing a robust and transparent selection and judging process with high profile expert judges, ensuring quality and independence
- Considering the current genre categories, formats permitted and how to align with the Tir na n-Og awards, particularly with regard to the category 'Young Adult Fiction'
- Consider the introduction of an award category to recognise achievement for design and illustration in children's publishing, possibly in collaboration with HE institutions
- Developing a cohesive marketing strategy, including international opportunities, by collaborating with other organisations such as Welsh Literature Exchange, Literature Across Frontiers, British Council Wales, Wales Arts International
- Establishing a new "Author of the Year" scheme which will be joined up to Authors on Tour and the activities of the marketing and sales department
- Locating its administration in South-East Wales, allowing for a wider geographical presence of WBC

Provision for children and young people

This particular recommendation is very broad in its reach and would greatly benefit from further discussion with the aim of developing a coherent strategy through collaboration with a number of different stakeholders. We are keen to build on the already existing activities of our dedicated Children's and Reading Promotion department (World Book Day, World Biggest Book Show, Great Summer Reading Challenge, Quick Reads, BookSlam) to further our "Reading for Pleasure" agenda, with a particular focus on disadvantaged regions. Reaching reluctant or non readers especially in the 10-18 age group is a key concern and we envisage increased collaboration with schools, libraries, Urdd Gobaith Cymru, S4C and BBC Cymru/Wales to develop innovative ways to engage young people, akin to already existing partnerships such as Bardd Plant Cymru. The strategic interventions available through the current grants systems with regards to content creation would form part of the strategy as would a complete re-think of the way in which we reach young people through our digital and social media presence.

Conclusion

The Council is confident that the transfer of the functions outlined above would serve to strengthen the sector as a whole and that it is uniquely placed not only to develop a clear and focused strategy for the promotion of publishing and literature in Wales but also, crucially, to implement it successfully. The recommendations for an augmentation of the WBC's programmes and services will be considered in the context of a number of other observations and suggestions in the Review as to possible improvements of our work

Within our senior management team, staff, trustees and panel members we possess a deep and comprehensive understanding of the sector both within Wales and internationally. We have a robust governance structure and our decision making processes are transparent and stand up to scrutiny. We also enjoy an excellent reputation as an open and collaborative partner, experienced at giving equal consideration to the varied priorities of its stakeholders.

We firmly believe in our role as enabler and dispenser and therefore more than two thirds of our funding is awarded to grant recipients, thus cementing our reputation as providing "good value for money" and this is a principle we would wish to adhere to going forward.

Those skills and principles underpinning our current work will be applied to all new functions, ensuring maximum impact not only culturally, but also commercially and socially. The WBC's reading of the Review has been strongly and widely endorsed and supported throughout Wales and is reflected in the numerous public comments and testimonials. They underline the WBC's own recognition that these recommendations dovetail perfectly with its own strategic plan and Welsh Government's strategic priorities.