

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales
Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / The Culture, Welsh Language and
Communications Committee
Independent Review of Support for Publishing and Literature in Wales
Ymateb gan Clare Potter / Evidence from Clare Potter

I would like to express real concern at the Independent Review for Support of Publishing and Literature in Wales that was made public earlier this year—I believe it was published before being shown to Literature Wales, thus denying them their right to respond and correct inaccuracies; this meant that even though errors in the report have since been proven, much damage has been done not only to the reputation of Literature Wales, but I imagine to the staff too who have been unfairly misrepresented.

Having been supported consistently by Literature Wales for many years, and published in Wales, I feel able to comment, although my opinion was never sought for the review. None of the many professional writers I know who work in a multitude of LW projects, fostering literacy and expression, were asked either. Furthermore, I don't believe staff at Ty Newydd were invited to comment. I'm struggling to understand how this report was 'independent.'

Putting aside the poor presentation of the report, misspellings of names, grammatical errors and so on, I feel strongly that the document and its accusations should be seriously scrutinised.

I met Ken Skates last year during the Literature Wales South Wales Valleys Showcase at the Senedd. I remember him commenting how impressed and moved he was by the work of the refugee women, the elderly people with dementia, and the vulnerable women who had produced and published children's books.

He quoted Baroness Andrews in his *Light Springs through the Dark: A Vision of Culture in Wales*, as saying 'culture can empower disenfranchised and alienated people, and give them a voice;' it was clear from his reaction that he witnessed such empowerment and the raising of voices at the Senedd. Literature Wales has evidenced this empowerment of the disenfranchised. Staff have worked to dismantle barriers to literature and have made significant relationships in the process with countless schools, charities, councils and other professional and grass-roots collectives in Wales, the wider UK and overseas. This was missing from the report. A few casual remarks about the good work were undermining, and I felt, insulting. I fail to see how after years of building these crucial partnerships, that taking away Literature Wales' ability to do its work will be of benefit to anyone. It would be a huge undertaking for the Welsh Books Council to take up this role

and a great loss to the people who have benefited (and will benefit) from Literature Wales' outreach initiatives.

For almost a decade, I have been fortunate to work on remarkable projects through Literature Wales, which have been enriching for the participants and myself in equal measure. This is why I am writing to you; the report did not adequately reflect the incredibly important work done by Literature Wales and the writers and organisations that have collaborated to reach typically excluded people, as well as nurture the promising talent of more able youngsters through writing squads.

There seemed little mention of the South Wales Literature Development Initiative, headed by Louise Richards for the past eight years. Many of the projects she has implemented have won awards which include an Arts and Business Award for the Captured Memories Project; the young mothers who made the children's books won a NIACE Inspired Award for Family Engagement; and Silver Hoodies (an inter-generational film project in the Gurnos) won a TPAS Award; another project reaching isolated people won a Library Service Users Award. I'm sure you have heard about the successful collaboration with Parc Prison which was showcased at the Hay Festival this year? This project has been engaging prisoners and their families in writing, sharing stories, elevating literacy and self-worth (this project recently won an award too). The SWLDI has engaged over 37,000 people in the last ten years with over 200 projects aimed at ensuring that all people in Wales have access to expressing themselves, working with professional writers to help them shape those stories in film, theatre, the written and spoken word, audio, and in community installations.

Ken Skates' 'Light Springs' document defines culture as 'all creative activities that give people purpose, and a sense of belief and identity.' The projects through Literature Wales do not seek to merely enable people to tell stories, to make a mark with the intention of ticking a box, these projects are aimed at making literature accessible to all, about increasing social cohesion, enabling people to make serious changes in their lives both politically and personally. Literature Wales understands that to advance that, people must believe their voices are worthwhile, and in today's political climate where many people feel disenfranchised and unheard, their many projects provide a platform for Voice and well-being.

I left academia in order to pursue more work in community art-engagement because, due to working on projects with LW, I have experienced how life-affirming and essential this outreach is in our constantly fracturing society. This

kind of work has also made me a better writer. I have been supported in my profession by Literature Wales in many ways, having been sent to America to represent Welsh culture at the Smithsonian Folk–Life Festival; as one of the Hay Festival’s Writers at Work; through various professional development projects (such as training to work with vulnerable, socially excluded children); I have been afforded the opportunity to collaborate with artists in other genres in various projects; I was awarded a writing bursary which helped me to write a second poetry collection; I have had help with forms for funding applications, and because of being encouraged to develop my Welsh language skills by Lleucu Siencyn at Literature Wales, I now work bilingually and have been on several television and radio programmes speaking about various projects and have been translating for the National Poet of Wales. Therefore Literature Wales not only works to improve the lives of workshop recipients, but is an organisation able to assist writers to develop their own talent and employment. This has been essential to me.

I feel an opportunity for productive discussion has been lost. There are probably elements of Literature Wales that could have benefited from some fair and constructive feedback; I’m sure the staff would have welcomed that. However some of the harsh criticisms levelled at this body, were already part of forward planning. For instance, I believe that LW was in the process of redeveloping bursaries and mentoring and a new funding scheme at the time of the review.

Despite what must have been an uncertain time, LW have continued to do what they do best, to give access to literature for all, to promote a love of reading and writing, particularly with our little ones—the readers and writers of the future. Bursaries have been applied for, as have other awards, along with many other opportunities for established writers since the report was published. I’d say Literature Wales and its staff are doing a most excellent job. I look forward to an investigation into the report.