

10th September 2017

Bethan Jenkins AM,
Chair of the Culture Committee.

<mailto:SeneddCWLC@assembly.wales>

Dear Bethan Jenkins,

I write with regard to the recent Independent Review of Support for Publishing and Literature in Wales. I am very pleased to hear that the Culture Committee is looking into this report. I sent a similar letter to this one to the Cabinet Secretary, Ken Skates, and I would be very grateful if you are also able to consider my points below.

As a teacher and emerging writer in Wales, I simply wish to outline here how important and wonderful the work that Literature Wales does is, in the hope that this can help balance the misrepresentations in the report. The organisation is about the best thing about being a writer in Wales, the writer's best friend, and any erosion of the funding or responsibility of Literature Wales would be an erosion of the ability of current and future writers in Wales to flourish. My experience of Literature Wales has been in connection with their Writers on Tour funding, their Dylan's Big Poem project, the Writing Squads, the writing centre at Tŷ Newydd, their writers' bursaries and Wales Book of the Year. I hope to give some idea here of just how amazing these aspects of their work are.

Firstly, as a teacher, I have found the Writers on Tour funding invaluable. Because of it, we have been able to give our pupils access to inspirational workshops and events with wonderful Welsh writers including Mike Jenkins and Rhian Edwards. English as a school subject has to be about so much more than the daily routine of the classroom and exams, and opportunities like this are crucial in terms of pupils developing a passion for English and seeing writing as a potential career. Equally, I have been very lucky because of this funding to visit a number of schools and writing groups in various parts of Wales to deliver workshops, so this funding creates an incredible development opportunity for teachers and writers as well as for pupils. Though I always loved writing, until the age of about twenty I thought that real writers were sort of winged, vaguely mythical beings, and that it was no more possible to become one than it was to fly to the moon. Because of the work of Literature Wales and the increased access to writers that young people have because of it, this is not the case for young people now, and this is an absolutely wonderful thing.

In connection with this, I would like to mention the Dylan's Big Poem project. This involved pupils writing a few lines of poetry on a given theme and submitting them, following which high-profile writers in Wales, including Owen Sheers, compiled a large community poem using the lines. This was a great thing to do in the classroom, as it allowed even pupils who can struggle

with English to produce something they were proud of and had enjoyed working on. The reward of seeing their work included in the final poem was a brilliant thing for them, and it is experiences like these which help develop a passion for English.

As well as delivering workshops in schools, I have worked on a number of occasions with a couple of the Literature Wales Writing Squads. These groups, which meet a couple of times each school term and give pupils access to writing workshops, are a wonderful thing. Those at the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea are a particular success story, as attendance is constantly expanding and creating the demand for more workshops. Pupils who attend these sessions throughout their school career have gone on to study Creative Writing at university and to be successful entrants in the Terry Hetherington Award for Young Writers, so the development opportunity these groups provide is incredible. I would urge anyone who wants to fairly understand the importance of what Literature Wales do to attend one of these workshops and to see pupils engaging with the magic and fun of literature. It is impossible not to attend these sessions and to grin and grin at the joy of what students produce, and for the opportunity the students are given I applaud Literature Wales.

In terms of Tŷ Newydd, I have delivered workshops there for both adults and school groups. Tŷ Newydd is a magical place, which allows people to make real breakthroughs in their writing. I know that there are a number of published writers in Wales who have honed their work through repeated Tŷ Newydd courses, and the impact of Tŷ Newydd stays with people for years. Focusing intensely on writing in those beautiful surroundings allows writers to achieve something they would not otherwise be able to. It is particularly rewarding to see how school groups respond to the experience, as they discover something about writing, about themselves, for the first time, in a way they will never forget.

If Literature Wales has given me amazing opportunities to develop as a teacher, what it has given me as a writer is of course even more invaluable. I have benefited hugely from their bursaries programme. This funding, and the way that it is managed by them, offers life-changing opportunities for writers. This is true not just in a practical sense in terms of the time it gives writers to work, but also the way that it makes writers feel that their work has value. Developing an audience, a reputation and a sense that what you are doing has worth, in my own field of poetry, is enormously difficult, so to receive a bursary like this is an extraordinary thing for writers to hold up against the voices which are telling them their writing will go nowhere. For me, the time was invaluable not just in terms of the poems I wrote during this period but also for the stylistic breakthroughs which continue to be crucial in my work years later. Very simply, I would not have been able to write what I have without the great gift of this time.

Finally, I would like to mention the Wales Book of the Year. My book was very lucky to be shortlisted for this award in 2015, and to receive the Wales Arts Review People's Choice Award, and everything about this process was wonderful. The attention given to a shortlisted book means of course an expanded audience, which is crucial for a poet, the enhanced opportunities for future publication, the sense of being part of a literary community. The awards evening in Caernarfon was a wonderful experience – an amazingly professional and special event in a beautiful location – and given the difficulties of any sort of writing career it is crucial that writers have such glorious opportunities and memories if we are to keep working.

Overall, I very much hope it is clear that Literature Wales make Wales a significantly more fantastic, joyous place in which to write. Indeed, it is unimaginable that our vibrant and exciting literary culture can continue to grow with any erosion to their role. While I am only able to give you my own experience, I know that I am among an enormous number of writers and teachers who feel exactly the same about how lucky we are to have such an energetic, ambitious, friendly and passionate organisation in Wales. I very much hope that these experiences can be taken into account as part of any reflections on the report.

Yours sincerely,

Jonathan Edwards