

Summary of response to Arts Council England's consultation, 'Shaping the next ten years'. December 2018



The Society of Authors is the UK trade union for more than 10,500 writers, illustrators and literary translators, at all stages of their careers. We've been advising individuals and speaking out for the profession since 1884.

This document is a summary of the key points we have made in our response to Arts Council England's consultation on its future strategy, 'Shaping the Next 10 Years'.

The case for change

Socio-economic and geographic variances in levels of engagement with publicly funded culture.

As the Government's Taking Part Survey 2017/18 highlights, engagement with the arts is significantly higher for the upper socio-economic group (85.7% in 2017/18) than for the lower (66.9% in 2017/18). It also shows that arts engagement in the South West (86.2%), the East of England (83.4%), and the South East (83.3%) was significantly higher than in all other regions.

Despite ACE's efforts to direct its funding to organisations across the country, there is undoubtedly a concentration of cultural activity in London. This inevitably leads to a sharp geographic variance in levels of engagement. As ACE's report on the findings of 'The Conversation' highlights, there is a perception that funding is still focused in London and a desire to see greater distribution of funding across the country.

Two ways in which this disparity could be evened out would be to ensure that creative subjects are widely taught in schools and that a comprehensive library service is in operation across the country. There has been a severe decline in the number of pupils taking creative subjects in schools in recent years, not least because of the narrow focus on EBacc subjects. Library services have been run down as a result of cuts to local authority budgets. There has also been a reduction in school libraries, and at present it is not compulsory for a school to have a library or a librarian.

This has exacerbated a situation where children from more privileged backgrounds have greater opportunities to participate in culture. See our answers to 'Achieving the Outcomes' section below for more detail.

Lack of diversity across the creative industries and in publicly funded cultural organisations.

The cultural sector and wider creative industries are not representative of society at large. It is widely recognised that action needs to be taken to ensure that

Summary of response to Arts Council England's consultation, 'Shaping the next ten years'.

December 2018



England's culture reflects the diversity of its population. As well as negating ACE's stated aim to provide 'great art and culture for everyone', the current lack of diversity is a missed opportunity for the sector to grow its audience base and therefore become more successful. If people feel that culture reflects and speaks to their own experience, they are more likely to engage and feel empowered to pursue a future career in the culture sector themselves.

Research by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education found that just 4% of children's books published in 2017 featured a BAME character; in contrast 32% of pupils of compulsory schools age in England are classed as BAME. In a survey carried out as part of ACE's 2017 report 'Models of Support for Literary Fiction', 73% of respondents felt that there was an issue with the representation of BAME voices in literary fiction. Similar concerns were raised around class and regional representation. Author Paul McVeigh, who comes from a working class background, has said, 'when I was a child I loved reading but I remember thinking "where are the stories about people like me?"'.

It is therefore hardly surprising that there is a lack of diversity amongst cultural audiences. Young people in particular are much less likely to engage in culture if they do not feel it speaks to their own experience.

As the Government's Taking Part Survey 2017/18 highlights, arts engagement is significantly higher among adults from the white ethnic group than among adults from black and minority ethnic groups. Worryingly, this gap has widened every year since 2014/15. The same survey reports that engagement with the arts is significantly higher for the upper socio-economic group (85.7% in 2017/18) than the lower (66.9% in 2017/18).

All organisations involved in the cultural sector should invest considerable time and effort into diversifying their cultural offer. As mixed-race author Kit De Waal says, 'publishers should consider new readers and new audiences. We don't know who doesn't buy books because they don't see themselves represented on the page. We need more voices, different voices to attract those new readers.' Arts Council England must continue to challenge these prevailing inequalities and support a diverse range of cultural organisations and creative practitioners.

Summary of response to Arts Council England's consultation, 'Shaping the next ten years'. December 2018



Achieving the outcomes

Support for libraries

Increased support for libraries from Arts Council England would go a long way towards achieving its desired outcomes.

Libraries are unique in the sector for attracting a higher proportion of people from less privileged and under-represented backgrounds. Given Arts Council England's role as the development agency for libraries, we believe it needs to work with local authorities to restore library services where they have fallen into decline.

Both public libraries and libraries in schools are essential for cultivating a love of reading for all people, irrespective of their background. As free and accessible spaces, the preservation and expansion of libraries are paramount in ensuring that the benefits of reading are not just felt by children from more privileged backgrounds. As the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) states, libraries attract "the most diverse audiences in the arts, culture and heritage sector."

This view is backed up by the Taking Part Survey 2017/18. The figures show that libraries are unique in the arts, culture and heritage sector in having higher levels of participation from people from less-privileged backgrounds and under-represented characteristics:

- Libraries engage proportionately more of the black and minority ethnic adult population than white adults.
- Libraries show no difference in engagement between those with a long-standing illness or disability and those with no disability.
- Although library use is greater for people with higher incomes, libraries engage a larger proportion of people on lower incomes than other areas of the cultural sector.

Libraries are also important in providing a community space for reading, an activity often viewed as a solitary one, as well as providing a venue for events and performances. This helps to tackle social isolation and enables people to meet and be inspired. Even in an age when we consume more online, it is vital that these physical spaces are preserved, engendering a sense of shared experience and collective learning. For this reason we do not believe ACE funding should be directed towards virtual libraries and e-book lending.

In addition, every library should:

- Provide free access to books in safe, comfortable, convenient and accessible space.

Summary of response to Arts Council England's consultation, 'Shaping the next ten years'.

December 2018



- Collect, curate, preserve and make available our literary and cultural heritage.
- Be knowledgeably managed and curated by trained professional staff.
- Foster imagination, create readers and enhance reading for pleasure.
- Educate readers and help develop research skills.

Despite the considerable benefits of public libraries, and the critical contribution they make to the desired outcomes of Arts Council England, they have suffered disproportionately from funding cuts in recent years. We believe that this situation needs to be urgently reversed, with public funding to local authorities increased and ring-fenced for libraries. Given Arts Council England's role as the development agency for libraries, we believe it needs to work with local authorities to restore library services where they have fallen into decline.

Teaching creative subjects

Ensuring that all children and young people have access to culture at school is central to achieving all of ACE's desired outcomes.

Children from more privileged backgrounds are likely to have greater exposure to the arts from a young age than those from less privileged backgrounds. The education system therefore has a vital role to play in ensuring that all pupils receive a creative education and are exposed to various forms of culture, irrespective of class, race, gender, sexuality and geography.

As research from Arts Council England has shown, "students from low income families who take part in arts activities at school are three times more likely to get a degree than children from low income families who do not engage in arts activities at school." The benefits of creative education are wide-ranging. It is essential for fostering an interest in the arts and culture, as well as cultivating the creators and innovators of the future.

We are therefore concerned at the considerable drop in the number of pupils taking creative subjects at school, with the proportion of 15 and 16 year olds in England studying arts subjects such as music and drama falling to the lowest level in a decade. This is due to a combination of cuts to school budgets and the narrow focus on EBacc subjects. Even though the teaching of English remains a priority, the curriculum places too much emphasis on phonics and grammatical structure, stifling a more imaginative, creative approach to learning.

We would like to see Arts Council England do more to make the case to Government about the importance of teaching creative subjects in schools, in order to nurture the creative talent of the future and ensure that young people from all backgrounds have the opportunity to participate in culture and the arts.

Summary of response to Arts Council England's consultation, 'Shaping the next ten years'. December 2018



School libraries

Libraries in schools have also suffered from spending cuts. This has a detrimental impact upon children who have limited or no access to books at home, and widens the gap between the best and the least 'well-educated' and 'well-read'. Unless all children are given access to books in schools and reading habits are nurtured, the benefits of reading will only be felt by those from more privileged backgrounds.

A school library also needs a trained librarian, in order to improve reading proficiency, grow children's confidence and inspire a love of reading. In too many schools librarians' hours are being reduced or eliminated altogether. This trend needs to be reversed. We support the three aims of the Great School Libraries campaign: to secure school library funding; to produce a national framework for school libraries and recognition of school libraries within the Ofsted framework.

Support for literature and individual authors

Authors have made an unparalleled contribution to the cultural life of England and the UK. The continued success of authors and the publishing industry will be vital if Arts Council England is to meet its objectives, and particularly outcome 7 to ensure that "England continues to increase its global reputation for the quality of its creative industries".

Despite this literature is underfunded and the low financial return from writing poses a threat to great works of literature being produced in the future. ALCS' 2018 survey found that authors in the UK earn an average of £10,500 a year, a 42% real-terms fall since 2005. Anna Burns, winner of the 2018 Man Booker Prize, relied on the benefits system while writing her prize-winning novel *Milkman*. In the acknowledgements to the book, she thanked her local food bank, various charities, the SoA, and the Department for Work and Pensions for the support they had given her.

This demonstrates just how precarious the financial position of an author is. The decision to embark on a creative endeavour often means eschewing the security of employment, and unless authors receive proper returns the supply of quality work will inevitably diminish. There is also a danger that such low financial returns will discourage authors from less privileged backgrounds from pursuing their creative projects. This will detract from the overall diversity of published material and therefore the breadth of the audience, undermining Arts Council England's aspirations.

It is therefore imperative that ACE supports authors in order to increase the supply of quality writing for everyone. We strongly welcome Arts Council

Summary of response to Arts Council England's consultation, 'Shaping the next ten years'.

December 2018



England's commitment to develop proposals 'with a view to strengthening the literary fiction sector in England during the 2018-22 investment period'.

Authors, translators, scriptwriters and illustrators currently receive relatively small amounts of Arts Council funding compared to other creative sectors. In between 2015-2018, the Arts Council expects to spend approximately £46m on literature from a total budget of over £1.3bn, which represents just 3.5%.

These are some of the ways in which Arts Council England could support individual authors:

- Supporting authors to make school visits. We believe that Arts Council England should support authors to make school visits in England. At a time when the number of public libraries is dwindling, it is more important than ever that children hear from established authors, in order to encourage reading and inspire the next generation of writers from a range of backgrounds. When the Society of Authors surveyed schools in 2013, 99.4% of respondents considered author visits to be "high priority and valuable in encouraging reading for pleasure and/or creative writing". Funding for author visits already exists in both Scotland and Wales.
- Skills training for authors. Most authors are self-employed freelance workers, and it is vital that this part of the workforce receives professional development as well as employees. This could include mentoring projects, as well as training on digital skills and industry developments. One way to reach this almost invisible workforce is through professional organisations and trade unions like the Society of Authors, which offer their members access to training and updates. Emerging authors often have little expertise in business and marketing skills, and it is important that training is provided in these areas as well.
- Mentoring schemes. Writing can be lonely and getting started can be difficult. ACE should support mentoring schemes which help emerging writers with both the creative and business aspects of their craft. By paying both mentors and mentees ACE can assist a wide range of entrants to writing while supporting mid-list or mid-career authors.
- Funding for prizes. As Canelo's report for Arts Council England identified, 'large prizes have become even more important to literary fiction'. Determined by expert judges, prizes are an important mark of quality in literature. They boost authors' earnings through prize money and increased sales, and enhance overall discoverability. Prizes provide opportunities for literary events, for example the readings from shortlisted authors held at the Southbank Centre for various prizes in recent years. Prizes can be used to celebrate diversity and under-represented groups in literature, for

Summary of response to Arts Council England's consultation, 'Shaping the next ten years'. December 2018



example translation prizes raise the profile of translated works from other countries and cultures. The Society of Authors is launching a new prize for debut novelists over the age of 60, in recognition of the fact that many people turn to writing only after having other careers.

Wider support for literature and reading

- Initiatives around storytelling and reading. The Reading Agency has compiled evidence to show that reading for pleasure can increase empathy, improve relationships with others, reduce the symptoms of depression and improve wellbeing throughout life. Reading for pleasure also has the potential to increase social mobility and iron out socio-economic inequalities. As children from less privileged backgrounds are less likely to be read to from a young age, schools and libraries have a vital role in ensuring that the habit of reading for pleasure is nurtured in all children. Arts Council England must promote reading both in schools and libraries, and can support initiatives such as Egmont's work with WH Smith, who hosted in-store sessions with a professional storyteller to try and inspire reading and book buying.
- Funding literary festivals. We support the funding of literary festivals and other performance events, although we believe that Arts Council England should have an explicit policy that it only funds festivals that pay speaking authors.
- Funding for small publishers. We support ACE's commitment to 'broaden and strengthen support for independent publishers over the 2018-22 investment round'.
- Supporting bookshops. Bookshops are important in bringing books and culture to the high street, as well as a venue to meet authors and hold literary events.

84 Drayton Gardens London SW10 9SB
E nsolomon@societyofauthors.org
T 020 7373 6642
www.societyofauthors.org

President Philip Pullman CBE
Chief Executive Nicola Solomon

The Society of Authors is a company registered in England No. 19993 and an independent trade union