

Submission to ‘An Equal Recovery’ inquiry

Introduction

The Authors’ Licensing & Collecting Society (ALCS) is a not-for-profit organisation for the benefit of all kinds of writers. Set up in 1977 and owned by its members, ALCS collects money due for licensed secondary uses of authors’ work and currently has over 113,000 members. At Westminster, it is also proud to provide support for the All Party Parliamentary Writers Group (APWG).

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had an acute impact on the creative sector and its workforce, in particular writers, who prior to the pandemic were already struggling to be remunerated fairly for their work. ALCS believes that as authors continue to make a vital contribution to the UK economy and culture, it is important to inform the Committee as to how it has impacted the group individually and regionally across the country.

Overarching theme of the inquiry

What are recent trends in income and wealth inequality in the face of the pandemic?

Writers have been experiencing a downturn in incomes for over a decade; with a study conducted by ALCS pre-pandemic finding that authors’ annual earnings had fallen by 42% in real terms since 2005. This contrasts with the creative industries, of which writers form a vital part, which had increased in value year on year and are now estimated to be worth £115.9 billion to the economy.

Coronavirus has only exacerbated this discrepancy. According to a Society of Authors survey, 65% of writers had lost income during the first half of the pandemic, with 1 in 3 reporting that events were already being cancelled into 2021. And this trend continued with further lockdowns.

We have gathered testimonials from our members on how COVID-19 has impacted their livelihoods and what access they have had to Government support. Simon Whaley, for instance, who lives in Shropshire, typically writes outdoor and British travel features, but because of the pandemic and lockdowns, this work has come to a standstill. The 50/50 rules of the support schemes meant he was ineligible for either the JRS scheme, or SEISS. He said of his experience:

“I am, though, extremely fortunate in that I have some savings behind me - enough to make me ineligible for Universal Credit, too. So, I’ve spent most of the COVID pandemic, trying to develop other writing projects, while spending as little as possible of my savings, because I don’t know how long I need them to last.

I think what has disappointed me the most is the Government’s complete disregard for a re-look at the self-employment scheme. I fully understand that coming up with the perfect solution was not going to happen first time round, but we’ve had second and third rounds of grants being offered - but still no change to the eligibility criteria. It feels like nobody is listening.”

As we recover, how do we combat the inequalities that have been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic?

The problems ALCS members faced in accessing support and their general exposure to the insecurity that accompanies mainly freelance work could have been helped if there was an open channel of dialogue with Government and those who represent the different parts of the creative workforce.

The sector does have a Creative Industries Council, but this has not been a vehicle for meaningful dialogue about the challenges faced by freelancers, in particular, as representatives of the creative workforce simply do not have a voice at the table. In all the ten years of its existence, indeed, not a single workforce membership body has ever been invited to sit or contribute to a CIC meeting.

Better engagement and communication will be necessary going forward, for a meaningful recovery across the sector, giving support to freelance workers who have found themselves increasingly unable to make a living from their work. This is why ALCS and many other groups welcomed the DCMS Select Committee's recommendation in its Covid-19 report last summer for the establishment of a 'UK Creators Council', with Government support, to improve engagement.

We would like the Government to follow through, too, on its manifesto promise to 'level-up' communities across the UK, ensuring that regional economies can support the writers of today and tomorrow. A more equal distribution of opportunity will be key to ensuring we do not lose diversity in the literary field, which is vital to giving voice to the different communities that make up the UK.

Regional imbalances

How has the crisis impacted on regional inequality?

A significant concern from the creative sector throughout the pandemic, and as we move into the recovery phase, is a loss of diversity to the workforce due to economic reality and access to career support. According to DCMS' own 'Sector Deal', nine out of 10 jobs in the creative industries have been 'occupied by more advantaged socio-economic groups'. On top of falling incomes for writers, the lack of Government support for individuals - as opposed to grants mainly for venues and institutions - threatens the diverse makeup of the sector and the works it produces. This is certainly the case regionally; London has historically been the centre of publishing in the UK and steps towards addressing this imbalance certainly need further encouragement and support.

How can the Government address regional imbalances and mitigate the impact of scarring in regions?

Writers exist and live in all parts of the UK, contributing economically to all our local areas. Of our estimated 66,000 members in England, for example, over 48,000 reside outside London. To address the regional imbalances exacerbated by the pandemic, it is important for this vital part of our creative sector that the Government bolsters the existing infrastructure that already exists for writers throughout the UK, as we move towards recovery. ALCS is currently working with regional writing agencies on a two-fold project to address imbalances throughout England in a report analysing levels of investment in different areas and to highlight the work being done by agencies to cultivate local talent.

The pandemic can provide the opportunity to rebalance the industry and to mitigate further damage, as part of the levelling-up agenda with Government to redistribute opportunity equally and ensure that writing is not the preserve for the elite.