

ALCS Submission to DCMS Select Committee inquiry: ‘Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda’

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).

ALCS routinely carries out research into authors’ earnings, with the most recent update currently being carried out this year. Our last report, in 2018¹, found that there had been a steady fall in writing income in real terms of 42% since 2005, and 15% since 2013. Respondents comprised writers across the country, who contribute to the UK’s cultural output across several different genres including film, TV and literature. Many have since, of course, been affected by the Covid pandemic in terms of a further fall in earnings, according to surveys by the Society of Authors.²

The levelling-up agenda provides the opportunity to place culture at the centre of policy and funding initiatives, which could alleviate this strain on earnings and help the Government achieve its aims across the framework of the six measures of capital investment identified in the White Paper. Authors and writers, as individuals and as part of the wider literary eco-system, are an essential part of cultural placemaking and will play a role in informing local conversations about this agenda.

1. How can culture help reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?

1.1 Bookshops form an integral part of local communities, acting as literary and cultural hubs. These businesses have expanded and adapted beyond just the sale of literature to add further social and economic value in their local communities – by encouraging, organising and hosting creative events such as literary festivals, book launches or charity fundraisers, for instance. This has been the case throughout the pandemic, with bookshops now recovering as an area of SME growth; the Booksellers Association (BA), indeed, found that fifty-four new independent outlets had opened in the year to last November. A recent report by the BA found 77% of all booksellers contributed to a minimum of 20 out of the 25 priorities for successful high streets, with 96% of bookshops also contributing to the ‘liveability’ of town centres.³

1.2 Bookshops can reanimate local public spaces by continuing to engage their communities in different cultural and literacy events. One case in point is [The Hastings Bookshop](#), an independent business which opened as recently in November 2020. It has since become the host to different social groups, offering discounts to minority interests and encouraging literacy through accessibility to books. Reading groups provide space for communities to look at different social issues and offer

¹ [Authors Licensing and Collecting Society, Authors’ Earnings Survey, 2018](#)

² Society of Authors’ members surveys [April](#), [June](#) and [October](#), 2020 and [May](#), 2021

³ [Booksellers Association, Booksellers as Placemakers, February 2022](#)

the opportunity to discuss and debate, acting as spaces for better social cohesion and understanding. It also holds a local writers' workshop, which aims to develop the skills of up-and-coming authors from all genres, and organises the Hastings Poetry Festival, attracting talent to the area to celebrate culture and creativity and introducing local people to authors in person.

1.3 Beyond bookshops as local businesses and cultural hubs, the UK has an impressive history of staging internationally recognised literary festivals. These attract high levels of tourism to many different areas across the country, reanimating public spaces and high streets in the process, and bringing extra spending to local shops and small businesses. The renowned festival at Hay-on-Wye, straddling the English and Welsh border, achieves this year on year, for instance, spreading its success beyond the week it is held by using the profits for investment in the local community.

1.4 Underpinning all bookshops and literary festivals are the writers. Authors make it possible for local areas to develop their individual identities and relate to the regions and countries around them. Through a kaleidoscope of stories from a rich variety of very different people, writers have the ability to bring communities together, be it around poetry, plays or books.

1.5 Writers should and will be central, therefore, to the agenda of the cultural levelling-up of public spaces, high streets and less advantaged areas generally. The Government has identified investment in 'social capital' as part of the framework to enhance people's satisfaction with their local area - their collective 'self-esteem', indeed. If local creators, including writers, are empowered, therefore, to produce works and help 'place-make' through cultural events, as well as lifting social capital, it will improve human, institutional and financial capital in consequence, too.

2. How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?

2.1 As one of the recommendations in its *Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors*⁴ report, the Committee agreed that forming a 'Creators Council' for the Government to better engage with representatives of the creative and cultural workforce would boost confidence across the sector. Such a body would function as a dialogue mechanism to better understand the views of creative individuals, many of whom are freelance, and the challenges they face, not least after Covid.

2.2 This proposal could be expanded to Mayoral Combined Authorities and local Councils, as well: the formation of local 'Creators Councils', made up of representatives from different creative fields, including writers, would allow for inspirational artists to inform local decision-making.

3. How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?

3.1 In the case of writers, 'artistic infrastructure' begins from an early age with the development of literacy levels and access to reading. Libraries are often overlooked, but remain an integral means of accessing culture in schools and local communities, as well as developing literacy skills during and beyond formal education. Libraries provide an opportunity for lifelong learning and self-

⁴ [House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 'Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors' inquiry, July 2020](#)

development, which is more important than ever, with the UK increasingly becoming a “knowledge economy”. An estimated 39 per cent of all UK businesses, indeed, have been classed as ‘knowledge-intensive’, generating a net return in excess of £95 billion for the overall economy.

3.2 According to Arts Council England⁵, libraries are levers for inclusive growth and have the capacity to contribute to the place-shaping of a local area. It found that libraries are used by all age groups and equally by all, regardless of levels of deprivation. This public service provides an essential foundation for the Government to better support places without artistic infrastructure.

3.3 A case study of St Helens demonstrates this in practice. There, the library has involved the local community in co-producing its ‘Arts in Libraries’ programme, which has included commissioning a community cinema to put on a season of film screenings around the theme of ‘young people’. A necessary component of building up local artistic infrastructure, of course, is to actively involve the local community in its development, to gain ‘buy-in’ and ensure that Government support measures have a self-sustaining effect on cultural place-making in areas identified for investment.

3.4 Arts Council England has also pointed out the economic ‘return on investment’ of local library services, which is both direct and indirect. Developers have cited the ‘halo effect’ of library usage for surrounding businesses which are reliant on passing footfall; in some cases, the presence of a modern library venue has resulted in increases of up to 10 per cent in revenues for local businesses.

3.5 Libraries are increasingly providing direct support to business communities, too. Since 2016, the British Library has established 14 ‘Business & IP Centres’ in city centre libraries across the UK (with more in the pipeline), with fantastic results. These ‘BIPC Libraries’ have supported the creation of 12,288 businesses and 7,843 jobs – giving a ‘gross value added’ (GVA) of £78 million.

3.6 Evidence shows that the public service provision of libraries is a ready-made tool to help artistic infrastructure, and can be used in conjunction with local Council partnerships to build inclusive, individual cultural identities in different areas, with their unique histories and varying interests, across the UK. Enhancing libraries would help the Government implement its levelling-up agenda, alongside other measures to develop social capital, invest physically and financially in place-making and to further devolve local decision-making and responsibility.

4. How might changes to the UK’s broadcasting landscape affect investment in cultural production outside the capital, and what could the consequences be for artists and communities?

4.1 Public Service Broadcasting in the UK has had a strong recent history of engaging different cultural and creative partners across the country, from local production companies to commissioning British writers from varying backgrounds for television and film. Public Service Broadcasters have made a concerted effort to invest outside the capital and to be at the forefront of the levelling-up agenda by setting an example for others in the cultural and creative industries.

⁵ [Arts Council England, Re-writing the story: The contribution of public libraries to place-shaping, July 2017](#)

4.2 In a recent report by the APPG for Northern Culture⁶, for instance, the Managing Director for Nations & Regions at Channel 4 detailed the broadcaster's efforts to invest outside London, which has included moving its headquarters to Leeds, creating local jobs and workforce skills-development in the process. As part of this, Channel 4 has also been working with Leeds City Council, the Local Enterprise Partnership and Screen Yorkshire to establish a partnership board to implement a joint strategy in the area.

4.3 The Government declared privatisation of Channel 4 as its preferred option in the consultation on the future of the broadcaster, which closed in September 2021. This runs the risk, however, of destabilising the efforts of Channel 4 to imbed itself into the local economy in Leeds and wider Yorkshire. Alex Mahon, Chief Executive of Channel 4, stated this, indeed, in her evidence to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee on the 'Future of Channel 4' inquiry:

*"It would have a negative impact on the production sector, as we have talked about. We have to be clear about that, because it impacts SMEs and out-of-London producers. We have been clear that there would be a real risk of impacting our work in the regions, which we have only just started."*⁷

4.4 The levelling-up agenda is vital as it goes beyond direct investment in culture and helping those already working in the field, but aims to improve access for the writers and artists of the future, by focusing on skills within the local workforce and opportunities for entry for young people. A change to private ownership, in the case of Channel 4, might mean a change of focus to maximise profit, impacting on the broadcaster's ability to stimulate the pipeline of up-and-coming talent.

4.5 In similar vein, in March 2021, the BBC published a six-year strategy report detailing its blueprint for further moving operations outside London and distributing jobs, skills and creativity across the UK with focus points including Salford, Birmingham and Cardiff. The BBC is also now aiming for at least 60% of network TV commissions, in value terms, to be made in the nations and regions outside the capital by 2027.⁸ Writers are central to this goal and, as one example as part of this, ALCS was pleased by the announcement to expand the Writersroom hub in Salford, embracing, as Channel 4 has, a commitment to nurturing new talent in the North.

4.6 The All Party Writers Group Supplementary Inquiry report on *Supporting Writers through the COVID-19 Crisis*⁹ found, in evidence heard throughout, that insecurity about income risks the potential loss of new talent. The BBC's commitment to investing in regional hubs such as Salford helps to provide stability to the creative jobs market, alleviating the drain on the cultural workforce. It is important, therefore, that the BBC's funding remains stable. The Secretary of State's freezing of the licence fee in January, and the uncertainty about future funding, is a great concern, as cuts might well inhibit the BBC's regional aims. Any such cutbacks will directly impact writers and creators, who have already been hit hard by the pandemic, and put the Government's levelling-up agenda at risk, not least as regards inclusion and greater opportunity in our nations and regions.

⁶ [APPG for Northern Culture, The Case for Culture: What Northern Culture Needs to Rebuild, Rebalance and Recover, January 2021](#)

⁷ [House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, 'The Future of Channel 4' inquiry, October 2021](#)

⁸ [BBC, The BBC Across the UK, March 2021](#)

⁹ [All Party Writers Group, Supporting Writers Through the COVID-19 Crisis, May 2021](#)