
Literature: achievements, challenges and opportunities

Consultation paper appendix

England has an outstanding literary tradition. It is recognised worldwide and forms an important part of our national identity. Reading and writing continue to thrive today. Many of our writers have global reputations and more people read for pleasure than participate in any other arts activity.

Reading and writing are fundamental to education and learning, and creative writing is often a core part of many other artforms and creative industries, particularly film and television. The UK has one of the largest commercial publishing industries in the world. In 2007 UK publishers sold an estimated 855 million books, with an invoiced value of £2.995 billion.

Literature accounts for a relatively small proportion of our investment and we focus on areas of the sector where we can have the greatest impact. We work closely with other public agencies in the literature sector, including the BBC, Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, Society of Chief Librarians and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

Our role in relation to production is to focus on areas that are not commercially viable, such as contemporary poetry and literary translation. We support a diverse range of writers at crucial points in their careers. We also work to develop opportunities for more people to enjoy reading and writing. We support live literature performance, prizes, festivals and partnership projects to increase opportunities for people to take part in, distribute or create new work. We also support organisations such as the Book Trust and the Reading Agency which promote reading.

The changing face of literature will influence our future role. Digital technology poses challenges to current business models in publishing, but also offers great opportunities to widen participation and deepen engagement. Online buying has transformed the availability of books, and writing is increasingly being published on digital platforms, adding to the already vast diversity of work that is produced and distributed.

Private and public players are responding. HarperCollins has launched Authonomy, a digital peer-to-peer writers' review service; groupthing.org is a space for young people to talk about what they read. The Poetry Archive has made the voices of more than 100 poets accessible online, while PEN World Atlas maps writing around the world.

There are other challenges and opportunities. English is firmly established as a core subject in our curriculum, with 78 per cent of young people studying for an English Literature GCSE in 2009. But at the same time, opportunities to write creatively in schools are limited and Ofsted has raised concerns about the quality of poetry teaching.

Conversely, creative writing has grown exponentially in higher education, with more than 200 undergraduate courses now on offer and more than 100 at MA level. This presents rich new possibilities for partnerships between higher education, arts organisations and schools to create a stimulating environment for young people to build their creative writing skills, and contribute to the arts more broadly. The development of genres of writing outside the mainstream also presents new opportunities for writing, with the spoken word increasingly making its presence felt.

Finally, there's reading to encourage. We have worked with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, in partnership with public libraries, to enable many local communities to engage with talented writers and to experience a richer range of literature. The number of reading groups in libraries has more than doubled over the past four years. The number of literature festivals has grown and some now have international status and are commercially successful. We have more to do to ensure that funded festivals showcase the most exciting new writing, are more international in scope, broaden their audiences and learn from each other.

Our ambitions for literature

Goal 1: Talent and artistic excellence are thriving and celebrated

We want to support our most talented emerging and established writers.

We want to continue to support excellence in areas that the market would not otherwise support, particularly poetry. Our funding is crucial to poetry publishing – more than 85 per cent of contemporary poetry publishing work is subsidised. Much specific mentoring, profile and support is provided through funded organisations

We want to support the emergence of a more diverse range of artists so that a wide variety of writing represents different voices. We need better networked programmes across the country offering talented writers help at early stages in their careers. This will include chances to work with experienced writers, editors, producers and broadcasters and the profiling of work by new writers through publication, live performances, online platforms and prizes.

We want a group of strong public and private organisations to develop opportunities for mid-career writers and literary translators.

We also want the best literature from around the world to be available for British writers and readers and will continue playing a role in introducing translated work to England.

Goal 2: The arts leadership and workforce are diverse and highly skilled

We want funded literature organisations to be representative of England's demographic mix, leading change from within the publishing industry. We want working in the funded literature sector to be seen as a viable and rewarding career.

We want to build skills in areas that are critical to the future of the literature sector, particularly digital skills.

We want literature leaders to have a more sophisticated understanding of readers. We want them to involve their users and reach excluded groups.

We want more excellent writers to be trained to work with and inspire young people to write creatively.

Goal 3:
More people value and enjoy the arts

We want more people to value reading in their lives. We want readers to have the skills and confidence to read more widely from the astonishing range and quality of work available.

We want to focus on building a more inclusive critical debate about what people read and what they might read in future. We want to continue to work with partners on the development of libraries as places able to engage with diverse communities.

We want to continue to support festivals and editors as sources of trusted authority on literary excellence as a means of introducing, distributing and promoting new and international work – including that of new writers.

Goal 4:
Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts

We want to see an increase in the writing skills and appetite for creative writing among young people.

We want to advocate shared standards of good practice and more consistent collaboration between schools and literature organisations, libraries and writers.

We want to expand opportunities for young people to engage with literature outside school, particularly at secondary school level. We want to explore the potential for aligning resources for writing, building a richer context in which young people can develop their skills.

Goal 5:
The arts sector is sustainable, resilient and innovative

We want to focus our funding on organisations with the capacity to be the most influential.

We want leaders of those organisations to develop more entrepreneurial skills.

We want more skills and knowledge shared between commercial and public sectors, as well as greater efficiency within funded literature organisations.

We want public agencies to work closely to provide better local services for communities. The collaboration between writers, arts organisations, libraries, schools and further and higher education is critical to our vision.

We want to build understanding in the funded literature sector of how best to support writers and readers and to build an evidence base that allows us to make a clear and powerful argument for our approach.

What next?

Proposed areas of focus, 2011–14

Area of focus

Supporting

Support promising writers:

- identify a network of lead organisations working with partners (higher education, publishers, broadcasters) to provide unique opportunities for writers at early and mid-career
- consolidate our investment in poetry by supporting poets and the production and distribution of work

Goals 1 and 5

Develop writing skills and creativity for young people:

- support teachers to engage young people in creative writing and spoken word
- build informal provision for young writers outside school, recognising opportunities presented by the Cultural Olympiad

Goal 4

Encourage a rich experience for readers:

- increase the capacity of producers and festivals to present international work, poetry and diverse new writing
- work with partners to enhance the reading offer, in public libraries and online, responding to the needs of local communities and to opportunities offered by new digital environments

Goals 1, 3 and 5

Support the literature sector in adapting to the future:

- seek to diversify further the workforce
 - develop skills to respond to economic, digital and climate change
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Goals 2 and 5