

# Response to DCMS Select Committee inquiry into the social impact of participation in culture and sport June 2018



The Society of Authors is the UK trade union for more than 10,000 writers, illustrators and literary translators, at all stages of their careers. We've been advising individuals and speaking out for the profession since 1884.

We welcome the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee's decision to hold this inquiry. Whilst the economic impact of the UK's culture sector and the creative industries is well understood by Government, we don't believe that the same understanding and recognition exists across Government about the social impact of culture. We hope that this inquiry can be a step towards correcting this problem.

## Executive summary

- Participation in cultural activity brings a range of social benefits, related to areas such as social mobility, education, community engagement and diversity.
- In order for these benefits to be spread throughout all social groups, it is imperative that the culture on offer reflects the diversity of our society. If children 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.
- Reading is vital for improving literacy. Low literacy levels carry a considerable social and economic cost, holding back children from low socio-economic groups in particular. More must be done to encourage reading and boost literacy for all children from a young age to increase social mobility and diversity in the workforce.
- Reading for pleasure also has a considerable social impact. Research has found clear links between recreational reading and a range of benefits, including educational attainment, mental and physical well-being, and the development of curiosity, imagination and empathy.
- Libraries are unique amongst cultural institutions in having high levels of participation from less privileged social groups. In order to ensure that the benefits of reading can be realised by all, the library service must be protected and expanded.
- It is vital that creative subjects are taught as part of the curriculum, and that all pupils are exposed to various forms of culture through the education system. A curriculum with a strong emphasis on creative subjects ensures that all children will realise the benefits of culture, boosting social mobility and diversity.

## 1. Introduction

1.1 Engagement with art and culture fosters empathy, curiosity and imagination, turning us into more well-rounded and creative human beings. Participation in the arts is a source of pleasure and fulfilment, and teaches us to think and question the world around us.

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- 1.2 These attributes make us more innovative and economically productive, but they also have an immense social impact. They improve our mental health and well-being, and they are vital for boosting educational attainment and therefore social mobility.
- 1.3 Culture also creates and reinforces communities, bringing people together in physical spaces and engendering shared experiences. It tells stories that enable us to better understand who we are as a society and a nation, strengthening our community identity and sense of belonging.
- 1.4 Participation in cultural activity has the potential to break down social barriers and make us a more inclusive society. Art and culture must be made accessible to everyone to participate in, irrespective of class, race, gender, sexuality and geography. Literature and other forms of culture can also enhance the diversity of our society by enabling a plurality of voices to be heard, and particularly minority or marginalised voices.
- 1.5 In order for the benefits of cultural participation to be spread throughout all social groups, it is imperative that the culture on offer reflects the diversity of our society. If children 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.
- 1.6 Our response will focus on forms of cultural participation related to **reading, libraries and creative education**. Out of the key themes that make up the inquiry, we will argue that these forms of participation are particularly valuable for **social mobility, health, education, community engagement and diversity**.

## 2. Literacy

- 2.1 The social impact of reading is considerable. Reading both for pleasure and with the aim of boosting literacy brings a wide range of benefits for individuals and society, and is particularly important for health, education and social mobility.
- 2.2 Literacy levels in the UK are frequently found to be lower than in comparable countries. Analysis conducted in 2013 found that in England 16 to 24 year olds have lower levels of literacy than those in 21 out of 24 OECD countries.<sup>1</sup> 16% of adults (around 5.8 million people) in England and Northern Ireland score at the lowest level of proficiency in literacy (at or below Level 1).<sup>2</sup>
- 2.3 Poor literacy standards carry an immense social and economic cost. Research has shown that low levels of literacy cost the UK an estimated £81 billion a year in lost earnings and increased welfare spending.<sup>3</sup> This is damaging people's life chances and employment opportunities, with a knock-on effect on their health and well-being.
- 2.4 Low literacy levels tend to be most prevalent amongst the lowest socio-economic groups. Five year-olds who are eligible for free school meals score 19 percentage points lower in their literacy

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<sup>1</sup> OECD (2013) Skills Outlook: First results from the survey of adult skills p.72

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2013) England & Northern Ireland (UK) - Country Note -Survey of Adult Skills first results p.6

<sup>3</sup> Sullivan and Brown (2014) Vocabulary from adolescence to middle-age WP 2014(7) - Vocabulary from adolescence to middle age - A Sullivan, M Brown - November 2014.pdf p.5

skills than their peers.<sup>4</sup> Unemployed adults are twice as likely to have weak literacy skills as those in full-time employment.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that poor literacy standards are a great driver of inequality, stifling social mobility and reducing diversity in the workforce.

2.5 It is therefore vital that children are read to from a young age and are encouraged to develop the habit of reading themselves. There must be a firm emphasis in the curriculum on improving literacy, and opportunities for children to read in schools and libraries must be maximised.

### 3. Reading for Pleasure

3.1 Reading is about much more than just literacy, and it is important that children are also encouraged to read for pleasure. Research from the Reading Agency has shown that reading for pleasure brings a range of benefits for individuals and society.<sup>6</sup>

3.2 The research found clear links between recreational reading and broader educational attainment. It also found that reading for pleasure can promote mental and physical well-being, particularly in tackling common mental health issues such as anxiety and stress. The report compiled evidence that reading can increase empathy, improve relationships with others, reduce the symptoms of depression and improve wellbeing throughout life.

3.3 As Diana Gerald, CEO of Book Trust, says:

*“We know that reading for pleasure has a dramatic impact on life outcomes - and this is as much about confidence and wellbeing as it is about educational achievements. Quite simply, children who read for pleasure are happier, healthier and do better in life than those who don’t.”*

3.4 Reading for pleasure has the potential to increase social mobility and iron out socio-economic inequalities. Research has shown that reading for pleasure is more important for children's cognitive development than their parents' level of education and is a more powerful factor in life achievement than socio-economic background.<sup>7</sup> 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.

3.5 However the benefits of reading for pleasure will only be felt by people from all backgrounds if a diverse range of literature is published and made available. As 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.”*

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<sup>4</sup> DfE, Early years foundation stage profile attainment by pupil characteristics, England 2014 and DfE, GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England, 2012/13

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2013) OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results From the Survey of Adult Skills p.26

<sup>6</sup>

<https://readingagency.org.uk/news/The%20Impact%20of%20Reading%20for%20Pleasure%20and%20Empowerment.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://readingagency.org.uk/about/impact/002-reading-facts-1/#fn22>

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## 4. Libraries

4.1 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.”<sup>8</sup>

4.2 This view is backed up by the DCMS *Taking Part focus on: Diversity* statistics from 2016. 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.
- Libraries engage more people on lower than higher incomes, unlike any other part of the sector.<sup>9</sup>

4.3 Public libraries enable the benefits of reading – as outlined above – to be spread across a diverse range of social groups. Developing the habit of reading for pleasure has a considerable impact upon children’s life chances and children who use libraries are twice as likely to be above average readers.<sup>10</sup>

4.4 Library stock must reflect the social diversity of library users. Libraries are more likely to entice readers from a range of social backgrounds if the books they stock reflect that range of experience. As author Paul McVeigh has said:

*“We read because we want to experience lives and emotions beyond our own, to learn, to see with others’ eyes – without new working class voices, without the vital reflection of real lives, or role models for working class readers and writers, literature will be poorer.”*

4.5 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.

4.6 Despite this, libraries have suffered disproportionately from funding cuts in recent years, and in many parts of the country library services have been completely decimated. We believe that this

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/workinginpartnership>

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/593993/Focus\\_on\\_diversity\\_final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/593993/Focus_on_diversity_final.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/workinginpartnership>

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situation needs to be urgently reversed, with public funding to local authorities increased and ring-fenced for libraries. In addition, every library should:

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

4.7 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.

4.8 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.

## 5. Schools and the curriculum

5.1 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. If participation in culture is going to boost social mobility and inclusivity, and if people from a range of backgrounds are going to pursue a career in culture, it needs to be accessible for all and not just for a privileged few.

5.2 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."<sup>11</sup>

5.3 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. As Darren Henley, Chief Executive of Arts Council England writes:

*"Some young people will learn about art and culture – how to create it, enjoy it and appreciate it – and it will enrich their lives intrinsically... Others will learn skills that they will put to good use in whatever walk of life they end up pursuing. Some, meanwhile, will end up with careers that directly utilise their learning from studying cultural education subjects. All three outcomes are equally as valid, but they can only be outcomes if cultural education actually forms part of a young person's life."<sup>12</sup>*

5.4 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

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/The\\_value\\_of\\_arts\\_and\\_culture\\_to\\_people\\_and\\_society\\_an\\_evidence\\_review.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/The_value_of_arts_and_culture_to_people_and_society_an_evidence_review.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Darren Henley, *The Arts Dividend*, p.50

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such as music and drama falling to the lowest level in a decade. This comes as a result of a combination of cuts to school budgets and the narrow focus on EBacc subjects. Even though the teaching of English remains a priority under the current curriculum, the teaching system places too much emphasis on phonics and grammatical structure, stifling a more imaginative, creative approach to learning.

5.5 As our members who write for children said in 2016 in their statement on the teaching of writing:

*“We want teachers to be allowed to give all children the chance to love language, play with words, be bold and creative, express themselves - and to learn proper control of language alongside these joyful experiences. Teachers must be allowed to teach the rules of writing in the context of supporting expression and control, not affording primacy to those rules.”*

5.6 We believe that public funding (channelled through Arts Council England) should support authors to make school visits in England. At a time when the number of public libraries are 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.

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