

*Planet: the Welsh Internationalist*  
magazine (Berw Ltd.)

17 April 2024

Dear Delyth Jewell,

Thank you very much to you and your colleagues for the Zoom meeting this week and for listening to our concerns. I'm getting in touch from *Planet* magazine as suggested with a formal correspondence regarding the issues discussed. These issues have emerged from the recent Books Council of Wales decision to stop funding *Planet* (and *New Welsh Review*). I felt it was important to raise these issues in a constructive way not only for our sake, but also on behalf of funded magazine and website publishers more generally, as we would not want any other publisher to experience what we have undergone in the last few years, and for how we have been treated to set a precedent.

This correspondence follows the 2023 open letter campaign to highlight how desperate funding conditions for magazines and websites had become following successive cuts and more demanding targets, and the impact of this on working conditions. Accounts from *Planet's* experience were included as illustrative examples of issues that affect so many publishers. The open letter was signed by 174 writers (including Rachel Trezise, Laura McAllister, Jon Gower, Richard Wyn-Jones, Charlotte Williams, Eric Ngalle Charles, Niall Griffiths, Mike Parker, Menna Elfyn and Gillian Clarke) plus the National Union of Journalists, Society of Authors Wales, WalesPENCymru, Cymdeithas yr Iaith and the Association of Welsh Writing in English. The letter can be read here: <http://mikeparker.org.uk/openletter.html>

Since the letter was published, the removal of funding from the two magazines which happened to be most prominent in the campaign has deepened the extent to which magazine and website publishers feel so demoralised and undermined as a consequence of the funding regime, which can only be described as Kafka-esque (or perhaps Orwellian double-think – either literary allusion would suffice).

I have attached a pdf of the final *Planet* editorial, which gives insights into the BCW funding decision and wider issues. You and the committee are welcome to forward, quote, file or re-publish the editorial if needed.

After we went to press with the final issue, we discovered a document on the Senedd's website which raises further concerns, a response to your letter from BCW CEO Helgard Krause: <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s143583/Response%20from%20the%20B>

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Particularly problematic are these sentences from Helgard Krause: ‘During the current tender round some, but not all, of the magazines, made the case that their business model was no longer sustainable. This would have remained the case even if the grant could have been increased. Within the current tender guidelines, as well as the budgetary context, the requested increases were not feasible’.

This clearly alludes to the two magazines that lost their funding – *Planet* and *New Welsh Review*. As the latest editorial makes clear this is not the case. (To understand more context, the editorial would need to be read in full.) To clarify further here are some additional points below.

The unsustainability of our organisation has nothing to do with our ‘business model’, in fact it’s the way we are structured and run that kept us alive despite cuts to our BCW core grant from 2008 onwards so it ended up being *less than half* it was pre-devolution, and in Thatcher’s era (not even factoring in inflation) for reasons unrelated to need. It was £93,892 in 2008 and £45,000 now. We successfully generated extra income streams and contributions-in-kind and partnerships in the meantime, and well exceeded the ‘gearing ratio’ grant condition introduced by BCW for raising additional income, and demonstrably never lacked expertise, ideas and experience for this, but such activities (such as mentoring students unpaid in exchange for rent) inevitably led to ever longer unpaid overtime hours for staff who are directors. It’s also the case that in the current economic climate, it’s increasingly difficult to secure stable additional income streams and partnerships for the long term as potential partners (e.g. universities etc.) face such acute pressures themselves.

The increasing unsustainability of working conditions is a direct consequence of these reductions in combination with more demanding and time-consuming BCW funding targets each new franchise period, plus rising costs – we demonstrated how this is the case in all our annual reports and franchise applications to BCW since 2012.

Despite these huge external pressures, and while wages are low and unpaid hours for staff who are directors are very long as a consequence, we have always fulfilled our legal obligations to staff, and done everything in our power to support each other – as detailed further in the editorial and an earlier one in issue 248. There is absolutely nothing more we could have done to ameliorate the situation further with regard to working conditions.

It’s *not* true that ‘This [unsustainability] would have remained the case even if the grant could have been increased’ as Helgard Krause put it in her letter. In our most recent grant application we broke down how the upper amount we applied for (the second budget referred to in the final editorial) of £75,500 would be adequately sustainable, (albeit we made it clear this would be the *minimum* amount to be sustainable). We were told that due to the limited funding available and the quality of the applications across the scheme we could not receive £75,500, and so we’d lose our grant completely, as we had demonstrated we couldn’t enable adequate working conditions on the ‘maximum’ of £55,000. **Crucially, and obviously, our business model would be even**

**more sustainable if we had received the £95,000 that it was later revealed was being held back by BCW from this scheme's budget for a brand new magazine (with a more limited remit than *Planet*) that hasn't been launched yet and which hadn't applied to the competitive tender in 2023.** This also renders untrue, or at least deeply problematic, the claim that we couldn't receive the full amount we applied for (£75,500) due to the limited funding available and the quality of the applications across the scheme, and that 'within the [...] budgetary context, the requested increases were not feasible', as Krause put it.

As a consequence of this decision a magazine that has been running for over half a century (apart from a break between 1979 and 1985) will come to an end, and its staff are being made redundant and have lost their livelihoods. This is also the case for *New Welsh Review*. There has been an outpouring of dismay at this decision from readers, writers, publishers and cultural organisations within Wales and far beyond our borders. A glimpse of what *Planet* means to our readers can be found here <https://www.planetmagazine.org.uk/endorsements> and here <https://www.planetmagazine.org.uk/planet-extra/our-readers-respond-half-century-planet>

Whether or not *Planet* and *NWR* taking the most prominent role in the open letter campaign for fairer funding conditions for magazines contributed in any way to our funding being removed (we are unlikely to ever know definitively either way, not least as BCW do not accept FOIs as a charity) it's a legitimate concern that the simple fact these two magazines lost their grants will lead to other funded publishers becoming fearful of critiquing funding bodies, and of speaking out openly in the public interest about the working conditions determined by grant regimes. Such self-censorship and dampening down of debate around magazine funding would be very damaging to the sector, and we'd encourage those in the industry to keep contributing to these debates.

There was not space in the editorial to discuss the internal review into English-language magazines that took place in 2022, that Helgard Krause refers to here: 'A panel of the English-language Publishing Development Subcommittee along with two external experts (themselves publishers of small independent magazines) met during 2022 to discuss in general terms what the context of the 2023 tender might look like. They produced a report for the Subcommittee which informed their discussions and the subsequent tender process'. However, we had significant concerns about this review as publishers, writers and readers were never formally consulted. The results of the review were never published (albeit I had a very informal summary of the findings from our BCW grants officer when I asked her for more details). When I asked twice of the BCW who was on the panel for the 2022 internal review (including which external experts) there was no response. This all suggests a lack of transparency, and can be contrasted with the previous review into English-language magazines carried out in 2013, headed by Tony Bianchi. (While from my perspective a number of the conclusions of the 2013 review were problematic, it did at least consult in depth with everyone who cares the most about Wales's magazines, and published the findings in a transparent way.) This lack of transparency and consultation is particularly damaging in light of the radical – and deeply destructive – changes that ensued from the review and tender

process, and which have led to huge outcry from readers at the loss of magazines they value so much, being widely characterised as 'cultural vandalism'. It's possible that the two external experts were the same as those on the interview panel itself. While I'm sure they are very well qualified in their specialist fields, as experts from and based in England they are unlikely to be aware of the particular cultural, literary and political context of Wales in all its diversity, and the unique structural challenges Welsh media and publishing faces (I say this as someone who was brought up in England myself).

Another point that there was not space in the latest editorial to discuss, is a concern that BCW's 'business sustainability' agenda, and increasingly neoliberal approach to 'marketising' Welsh cultural/public interest journalism publications (for which there is obvious market failure, thus justifying adequate core subsidy) will undermine the ability of publications to challenge powerful interests and maintain freedom of expression. This is the case, especially in a small nation where there are multiple conflicts of interest, as press freedom 'without fear or favour' is only truly possible for grassroots 'indie' publishers if they can remain structurally independent and own themselves, rather than being under pressure from funders to be bought up by or receive significant sponsorship from larger entities for financial reasons. I can say definitely that we would not have been able to publish many key features that 'speak truth to power' in the public interest about Wales's institutions in *Planet* (e.g. those scrutinising and exposing issues within the HE sector, funding bodies, arms industry, media, political parties and the government) had we not been a (micro-)organisation with a co-operative ethos where staff are always the majority at board level (alongside non-staff expertise), and where sponsors, partners and funders have no board presence. This would either be due to direct pressure to not publish on certain topics or through the emergence of an environment of self-censorship in the context of the precarity of livelihoods in the sector and ownership hierarchies.

The dilemma at present is that while there is much I would like to challenge re. the decision, and its longer term implications for the public sphere, right now I am pretty overstretched as the last remaining member of staff, with the administration required to close the magazine before I need to be made redundant and we cease trading and go dormant as a company, while also needing to rest as I recover from cancer.

My immediate objective for contacting you was to correct the record and challenge BCW's points as expressed in Helgard Krause's letter to you - especially the claim that we would not have been sustainable as a business even if we had received a larger grant, as this is potentially damaging to us as a company, especially as we hope one day to be able to re-launch in a different funding environment. (I know that *New Welsh Review* have also challenged this claim.) Secondly, I wanted to raise the wider, longer term issues, as this could constructively inform campaigning for a more progressive funding environment for the media and publishing more generally. Once I've closed down the magazine and found alternative employment I hope to be able to continue to campaign as part of the wider open letter campaign for fair funding conditions for magazines and reform of the funding system. I'm keeping my union the NUJ informed of all these issues.

Cofion gorau,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emily Trahair', with a stylized, cursive script.

Emily Trahair, Editor *Planet: the Welsh Internationalist* magazine