

Written evidence submitted by the Publishers Association

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
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Tuesday 21st July 2020

Dear Robert,

I am writing in response to the Education Select Committee's request for evidence into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services. I will be addressing the role of the UK's publishing industry in light of the pandemic and our asks of government going forward.

Industry Action

Our members have acted with a sense of public responsibility that goes far beyond commercial imperative when responding to school, college, and university closures. As you may already be aware, Bloomsbury, Cambridge University Press, Cengage, Collins Learning, Hodder Education, Oxford University Press, Pearson, Penguin Random House, Scholastic and Taylor & Francis are just some of the organisations now underpinning the UK's home learning environments. A full audit of individual publisher actions can be viewed on the Publishers Association's [website](#), and a summary can be found below.

Free education resources for schools, colleges and universities

Publishers continue to offer free access to interactive materials, digital textbooks and education platforms, along with large proportions of their e-book catalogues – and have already given away tens of millions of pounds worth of content over the course of the summer term. Publishers have also temporarily extended their existing licensing arrangements with different institutions, to ensure learners of all ages are fully equipped with the resources they need.

Supporting teachers through the transition to remote learning

In conjunction with these free resources, publishers are offering an immense amount of support to teachers and parents as they adjust to new ways of schooling. This assistance extends across online networks and open phonelines, which provide specific guidance on leading virtual classrooms, remote lesson planning and continuing with professional development in the new circumstances. In the early weeks of school closures, publishers saw, on average, a 150% rise in emails, phone calls and messages from teachers requesting support. The teaching community has warmly received this assistance, and we continue to run at maximum capacity to offer further guidance to our educators.

Supporting higher and further education institutions

More specific to higher and further education, publishers are continually in contact with library staff to ensure that their institutions have sufficient access to online resources whilst campuses are closed. Publishers have already assisted in making rapid improvements to libraries' digital infrastructure and are also offering an extensive catalogue of academic research for free. In helping library users achieve secure, remote access, publishers hope to provide some continuity for those working and studying from home; especially as universities make significant changes in their delivery mechanisms for their coming academic year.

Recommendations

As schools, colleges and universities prepare for the new academic year, the publishing industry proposes the following recommendations. These seek to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on education and ease the return of face-to-face learning in the autumn.

1. *Maintain a robust marketplace for education resources:*

It is imperative that policymakers recognise the expertise behind publisher-made resources, and the role they play in improving students' attainment whilst reducing teacher workloads. Commercial providers should continue to have fair and competitive opportunities to participate in the UK's education resources market – with the understanding that competitiveness drives quality, innovation and the resilience to face unprecedented challenges (such as a pandemic).

2. *Provide targeted funding for physical resources:*

Physical resources such as textbooks and workbooks will be essential for learners who do not have the connectivity or access to the necessary devices for online learning. After polling 7,000 teachers, we found that:

- Only 5% of headteachers at the most disadvantaged schools (Free School Meal Quintile 5) said all their pupils could access digital content such as digital textbooks.
- 35% of teachers in state schools do not believe their pupils have the physical resources they need to learn (roughly 3.1m children in England).
- This rises to 41% (723k children in England) in deprived schools (Free School Meals Quintile 5) compared with 27% of affluent schools (FSM Q1).
- 57% of headteachers do not believe they have funding available to buy the emergency print materials their pupils require.

Publishers are making significant discounts to these products to help schools and colleges make the purchases that are needed, but targeted funding would go a long way to help adequately equip learners from all backgrounds. This funding will be critical to prevent the attainment gap from widening even further, where children from disadvantaged homes simply do not have the materials they need to keep up with their studies.

3. *Develop clear guidance on safely sharing books and physical resources:*

There is currently confusion and anxiety amongst learning institutions as to how learners can safely access books and other physical learning resources. This exacerbates the problems outlined above in point 1.

For context, schools and colleges heavily rely on shared resources. Current stocks of textbooks and workbooks rarely allow for 1:1 use, even in GCSE and A-level year groups. In English and Maths, textbooks are typically shared at a 1:2 ratio – and in foundation subjects, this can decrease to as low as 1:4.

While there has been some evolving guidance in this space, we suggest that the Department for Education immediately offers updated guidance, along with creative case-studies, to ensure that schools and colleges feel able to safely share essential learning resources and reading books when they are required.

4. *Support reading for pleasure:*

Reading is the cornerstone of health and happiness. The publishing industry has a clear incentive to promote literacy and reading for pleasure. However, beyond ensuring a pipeline of future readers, literacy levels can have a huge impact on people's life chances.

- According to research conducted by Save the Children, if every child left primary school with the reading skills they need, the UK economy could be more than £30 billion bigger by 2025.

- Low literacy levels also create a barrier to social mobility, as adults without functional literacy earn 16% less than those with functional literacy.

It is difficult to anticipate the specific skills that will be required in a future workforce: but imagination, empathy and flexibility of mind are transferable qualities derived from literacy and reading for pleasure, that will surely remain valuable for future generations. Reading for pleasure should therefore be encouraged at every stage of a child's development, and particularly as an activity that readily transfers to the home learning environment.

5. Axe the Reading Tax on audiobooks:

Earlier in the year, the government removed a tax discrepancy that saw VAT applied to ebooks but not their physical counterparts. It is fantastic that MPs and Peers supported this move, and that the government took some action to remedy the illogical tax on reading. However, audiobooks have not received the same benefit.

A study conducted by the [National Literacy Trust](#) shows that audiobooks have the potential to be a key resource for children's literacy and wellbeing.

- 7 in 10 (69.5%) children and young people find that listening to audiobooks makes it easier to understand the content of a book. This number is even higher for boys (71.7%) and children on free school meals (74%).
- Nearly 1 in 4 (23.4%) children and young people said that they have listened to audiobooks more than before lockdown.
- 1 in 2 (52.9%) children and young people say that listening to audiobooks got them more interested in reading

Even if children struggle with reading, audiobooks allow them to access the benefits of books including developing their vocabulary, developing empathy, helping them learn how to express themselves and accessing educational content.

The government must therefore complete what they have begun and Axe the Reading Tax for audiobooks, to incentivise more young people to read for pleasure via this format, and to ensure those living with sight loss in the UK are not unfairly penalised by an outdated tax regime.

Next Steps

The Publishers Association continues to gather data regarding the impact of Covid-19 on the publishing sector and our customers. We will share our findings with the Select Committee as soon as we are able. In the meantime, please do get in touch if our team or our members can answer any further questions you might have.

Yours sincerely,



Daniel Conway
Director of External Affairs, Publishers Association

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