

22nd August 2022

Dear Robert Halfon MP,

We are writing to you in your role as Chair of the Education Select Committee to request that the Committee revisit the matter of the continuing ebook crisis that libraries are facing.

Alex Chalk MP (Cheltenham) wrote to you in October 2020 on behalf of the campaign we lead, #ebooksos¹. Included in the correspondence Mr Chalk sent was an open letter written by #ebooksos detailing the challenges libraries and educators were grappling with when trying to provide key resources students need access to, to succeed in their education. The letter has been signed by several thousand people including librarians, academics, researchers and students asking that the Education Select Committee investigate the issue.

Given the extraordinary pressures the UK was under at the time, we were disappointed but not surprised, that the response of the Education Select Committee was that, while aware of the issues, there was not the capacity to take the matter on.

We will not rehearse the problematic nature of the ebook market here in detail as we have done this in previous correspondence, but the key issues in brief are as follows ²

1. Prohibitive increase in ebook licence costs (as much as 500%)
2. Ebooks can be as much as 1000% more expensive than the hardcopy alternative
3. Bundling practices by publishers
4. Expiring Licences
5. Increasingly restrictive licence terms
6. Paid for content subsequently withdrawn by publishers.

The pre-pandemic ebook market was already problematic for libraries but the lack of access to hardcopy books during lockdowns significantly highlighted the difficulties and saw price-gouging practices take hold. Since Alex Chalk MP initially raised the matter, while pandemic restrictions have eased, the ebook situation has worsened. For example, Pearson raised ebook prices for libraries by 500% with only one week's notice in November 2021.³

We request that the Education Select Committee revisit the matter because learners still cannot access the education resources they need and, while the momentum behind the campaign has gathered at pace, the authoritative action required to ease the crisis is still lacking.

To illustrate why we think it appropriate that the Education Select Committee revisit our request we will provide some context regarding the ever increasing prominence of our work.

- Following the response we initially received from the Education Select Committee, the #ebooksos campaign took the matter to the Competition and Market Authority,

¹ [Campaign to investigate the ebook market for libraries](#)

² [Ebook campaign examples](#) collected by librarians nationally

³ [Outrage as Pearson increase ebook prices by 500% in one week](#)

who were very interested in pursuing an investigation but have thus far had their resources taken up with other issues.

- We wrote to the Higher Education Minister (then Michelle Donelan MP) with our concerns but her responses were disappointing and, with respect, did not appear to grasp the implications of issues. Further, due to recent and imminent changes to the holder of the HE ministerial role, we will need to start again in informing whoever is in post of the complexities of ebook provision to libraries. Therefore, we think we would be best served by raising it with the Education Select Committee again.
- Several MPs and a member of the House of Lords have raised questions about ebook market practices
- Since launch, the #ebooksos team has gained increasing international recognition with invites to speak at key events⁴ in Canada, South Africa, USA, Denmark, Ireland, France, Germany and an online seminar that was attended by over 700 people from over 13 different countries. Most recently, #ebooksos participated in the World Library and Information Congress and led seminars with international library leaders and attended meetings with library association chiefs from across Europe to discuss how the challenges of the ebook market can be addressed through international collaboration.
- The EU Commission has announced a pilot project which will investigate the need for legal and digital solutions that facilitate access to copyright protected works. One area for investigation will be ebook lending.⁵
- The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions commissioned a research report on 'How well did copyright laws serve libraries during Covid-19?'⁶, with a conclusion recognising a need for clarified legal protections for libraries and the communities they serve. #ebooksos contributed data to this study.
- The League of European Research Universities invited #ebooksos to address them at their annual meeting with the view to take the matter on as their next policy campaign at the EU parliament
- Several US states have attempted to enact legislation intended to facilitate "reasonable" ebook charges to libraries. There are several lawsuits in motion brought by publishers, as well as a key one against the Internet Archive regarding the right for libraries to lend ebooks, as reported in the Washington Post.⁷
- Due to demand, and the global nature of the ebooksos crisis, the original letter written by #ebooksos to the Education Select Committee has been opened to international signatures and our animated video explaining the issue has been translated into German at the request of the German Library Association ⁸

⁴ [#Ebooksos on Tour – New dates for 2022 – Campaign to investigate the ebook market for libraries](#)

⁵ [New European Commission Pilot Project to Investigate Digital Solutions for Copyright Issues – Knowledge Rights 21](#)

⁶ [Research Report: How well did copyright laws serve libraries during COVID-19? – IFLA](#)

⁷ [Publishers are suing the Internet Archive over digital book lending - The Washington Post](#)

⁸ [Campaign to investigate the ebook market for libraries](#)

- Sector leaders in the UK and globally have issued statements that share our concerns and call for action by policy makers^{9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16}
- An International Statement of Solidarity has been published¹⁷, calling for copyright reform and the rights of libraries to be respected, signed by ebookSOS and international organisations such as IFLA, Creative Commons, Internet Archive, Authors Alliance and institutions and individuals from at least 15 countries around the world.

In summary, the ebook crisis is increasingly worsening and access to knowledge for educational purposes is being increasingly restricted. If UK political leaders, legislators and policy makers do not seek to address this problem now, another jurisdiction will. Our students and library users will be left behind and disadvantaged.

We believe that this is an opportunity for the UK to show leadership in tackling an internationally recognised problem. We are not asking publishers to stop making a profit, but we believe that they are profiteering at the expense of knowledge and student education. In their annual report published in April 2022, the Publishers Association reported a 14% increase in profits in the academic publishing market for the UK alone¹⁸. We hope that the Education Select Committee will be able to facilitate a solution that benefits all.

Yours Sincerely,

Yohanna Anderson, Caroline Ball and Rachel Bickley
ebooksoscampaign@gmail.com



Anderson, Y. and McCauley, C., 2022. How the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated an e-book crisis and the #ebooksos campaign for reform. *Insights*, 35: 13 <http://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.586>

⁹ [HE sector unites in call for affordable pricing models for e-books and e-textbooks | SCONUL](#)

¹⁰ [IFLA releases a statement on Controlled Digital Lending](#)

¹¹ [Irish librarians call for action on the electronic content crisis facing libraries and library users](#)

¹² [RLUK Content Statement in support of libraries reviewing new and renewed content purchasing](#)

¹³ [Commercial Textbooks Present Challenges in a Virtual Environment](#)

¹⁴ <https://library.hee.nhs.uk/resources/content-and-usage/ebooks/ebook-call-for-action>

¹⁵ [A Position Statement from Knowledge Rights 21 on eBooks and eLending](#)

¹⁶ [Lettre ouverte aux éditeurs francophones : pour une ouverture des contenus et une pluralité d'éditeurs francophones dans nos collections d'ebooks](#)

¹⁷ [International Statement of Solidarity](#)

¹⁸ [Publishers Association Annual Report 2021](#)