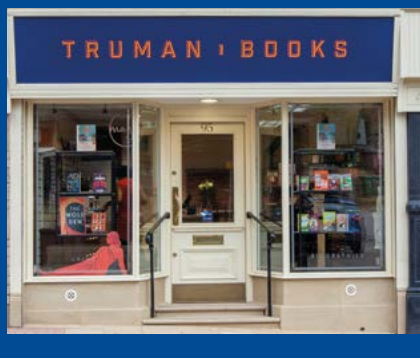
BOOKSELLERS ASSOCIATION

The Cultural Role and Value of England's Independent Bookshops

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ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank the 160 plus independent bookshop members across England who invested their time in responding in such insightful detail to the survey which forms the bedrock of this report. Especial thanks are also due to the individual bookshops and their teams who met the report author as part of the deep dive research interviews and were generous in their time, thoughts, and contributions as well as a plentiful supply of hot drinks and lifts. In addition, it is important to thank the members of other parts of the book and reading community, not least local librarians who also gave generously of their time and expertise. This research would not have been possible without all of these contributions.

The report was reviewed within the Booksellers Association by Meryl Halls, Alan Staton and Laura McCormack and on behalf of Arts Council England by James Urquhart.

The Author

Howard Davies has a background in Public Affairs and Policy. Howard is a self-confessed bookshop enthusiast and has previously worked for the Booksellers Association of UK and Ireland as (maternity cover) Head of Policy and Public Affairs, between 2022 and 2023.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

BA – Booksellers Association of UK and Ireland

BAME – Black and Minority Ethnic

BID – Business Improvement District

CBS – Community Benefit Society

CIC – Community Interest Company

CSI – Creative Spillover Impact

Indie/Indies – Independent Bookshop(s)

LA – Local Authority/Council

LGBTQ+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

YA – Young Adult (a category of book)

Executive Summary

Background

In December 2023 Arts Council England funded the Booksellers Association of the UK and Ireland (BA) to commission research on the cultural value of England's independent bookshops ('Indies') to help better understand the role they play in enriching the cultural lives of their communities and the extent to which their work helps with the delivery of Arts Council England's strategy 'Let's Create'. The findings of this research would then be used by the Booksellers Association, Arts Council England, and Indies to identify the opportunities for working more closely together in future, to the benefit of booksellers.

Whilst this commission is explicitly focussed on the role of independent bookshops, we recognise and understand that the bookselling chains also make an important and ongoing cultural contribution to the communities in which they operate.

Arts Council England and *Let's Create*

The Arts Council's strategy *Let's Create*, in place until 2030, foregrounds aspiration and opportunity for creative and cultural engagement for people across England. It values the creative potential in each of us and aims to provide communities in every corner of the country with more opportunities to experience, enjoy and celebrate culture. The content of this report documents a number of ways in which Indies support this vision with tangible activity across the country, sometimes in communities where there may be very little other cultural infrastructure accessible to the public.

Let's Create has three clear outcomes, which resonate with the emerging picture of cultural activity in this report. The first outcome, Creative People, focuses on amateur and voluntary creative activity, including by children and young people. The third outcome, A Creative and Cultural Country, looks at the professional cultural sector, including those seeking to develop a career in the creative industries. This report evidences how Indies contribute to both these outcomes, through outreach to schools and community events, promoting and celebrating diverse authors or by giving visibility and tangible support (including selling their books) to local or under-represented voices, boosting early careers as well as more established writers.

The second outcome, Cultural Communities, brings the first and third outcomes together by considering how villages, towns and cities can thrive through a collaborative approach to culture. The research and data in this report amply demonstrates the extent to which Indies are fully embedded in and responsive to the needs and nature of their local communities.

Let's Create recognises that investment in cultural activities and in arts organisations, museums and libraries helps improve lives, regenerate neighbourhoods, support local economies, attract visitors and bring people together. This report, alongside the BA's 2022 *Booksellers as Placemakers* report mentioned below, strongly evidences the role that many Indies play in providing and amplifying opportunities for cultural engagement in their local communities – from reading groups to local festivals, hands on activities with children and young people to partnership offers with local business or libraries. Indies also respond positively to the investment principles outlined in *Let's Create*, with a clear commitment to ambition and quality in what they do; strong evidence of their inclusivity of, and relevance to, their local communities, and modelling dynamism through the entrepreneurial resilience of their business approaches.

England's Independent Bookshops are powerhouses of cultural enrichment and community engagement

The research survey findings demonstrate that Independent bookshops across every part of England, in a mix of urban and more rural communities, provide an array of activities and events which reach across the generations. The increasing scale and popularity of bookshop events and activities suggests they make a valued and beneficial contribution to the cultural and social lives of people in their communities.

Independent bookshops are a vital and dynamic part of England's literary landscape and infrastructure, supporting internationally acclaimed authors, but as importantly budding authors and local authors. This role extends to the important and growing support Indies provide to writers from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and other minority groups like the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer communities (LGBTQ+). The research data also suggests that independent bookshops are delivering this cultural engagement in a wide range of settings including those grappling with urban decline, squeezed high streets and rising levels of deprivation.

Supporting children's literacy and cultural enrichment

A mission to boost literacy and contribute to cultural enrichment is a core driving force for England's independent bookshops. This research makes clear the ongoing contribution of Indies to supporting England's often hard-pressed schools to turn children into enthusiastic and confident readers and to provide precious opportunities for cultural enrichment. This commitment is heartfelt and informed by a passionate desire for all children, regardless of circumstances, to enjoy the riches of reading and be inspired in their own creativity through meeting authors and illustrators. It is a commitment allied with expertise on the best of children's and Young Adult (YA) literature.

Innovation in meeting community cultural and social needs

The breadth and depth of activities and events highlighted by this research have a powerful dynamic of their own. Whilst Waterstones (our pre-eminent national chain, which now also owns Foyles and Blackwells) and other chains have always been important for promoting author and reader events, the increased scale and geographical reach of Indie bookshop based author activity in recent years is striking. It has been driven by the talents and determination of Indie booksellers who have delivered a quality product, service and environment, with acute awareness of their customers interests and needs, in the face of challenges from online retail giants, the covid pandemic, and struggling high streets, helping to promote a positive sense of place in both urban and rural settings.

Supporting writers and the wider artistic community

Indie bookshops also provide a valuable means of enabling writers and other members of the artistic community, such as illustrators and musicians, to connect with new audiences in a range of contexts and locations. Without the work of independent bookshops, cultural and artistic connections would be sparser, especially in the locations and contexts where Indies provide much needed cultural infrastructure that enables writers' tours and festival delivery or partnerships. This provision can boost writers' and artist continuing professional development. Indies, regardless of location and context, also demonstrate a talent and skill for 'audience creation,' which in turn is important to widening avenues for cultural inclusion and enrichment both for audiences, and communities of writers and artists.

The positive power of partnerships

Positive partnerships and mutual support networks involved in delivering the range of Indie – led cultural events and activities – are key enablers highlighted in this report – the 'vital yeasts' – which enable such collaborations to grow and succeed. At the same time, the report identifies areas ripe for improvement, for example, where the BA could enhance its own training and support capabilities. The research also highlights powerful examples of ongoing collaboration with cultural and literary partners like arts centres and libraries – and recommends that more could be done to make this the norm.

We hope that the findings of this research will increase the recognition of Indies as vital cultural and community partners; and will help equip those booksellers who are less familiar with creative provision for their communities – equipping them with the confidence and knowledge resources to embark on their own partnerships and activities.

Grants and Funding

The research reveals the mixed experiences of independent bookshops in applying for grants and funding. For many Indies, grants, and other forms of support, (including those from Arts Council England) have been an indispensable element enabling them to transform their community and cultural reach. The survey feedback also suggested potential areas for enhancing the responsiveness of grant application processes, such as making terminology more accessible. These areas of feedback will form an integral part of the ongoing dialogue between the BA and funding bodies like Arts Council England, so that access to grants can be fully optimised by Indies. Grants can play a critical role in nurturing and sustaining the

independent bookshop ecosystem, which already makes a remarkable and all too- easily-overlooked contribution to everyday cultural life in communities across every part of England. The BA will look into ways of improving the awareness of, and access to, local and national grant giving bodies amongst the independent bookselling community and will aim to work with providers of funding to connect them with bookshop owners. The BA will also look at the feasibility of providing assistance and pro-active signposting of such sources.

The Case for Investment and Support from Government, Industry and the BA

The research also identifies a number of suggested priority areas for additional support and investment by government, and key parts of the book industry, including the BA. For government at a national level, key priorities emerging from this report include actively enabling school libraries in England to build links with Indies through a dedicated element of grant funding which can only be spent at a 'bricks and mortar' bookshop or online via platforms like bookshop.org which are dedicated to supporting Indies. Any reform of business rates should factor in a system of 'cultural amenity' reliefs and reductions for the bookshop sector, to reflect its social and cultural contribution. At a local government level, especially for the book trade's partners in libraries and arts centres, it is hoped that this research will provide meaningful case studies of best practice partnerships, which could be adopted and built on in more parts of the country, to the benefit of many communities.

In terms of publisher support, the report identifies examples of best practice partnerships which should be championed and built on. At a practical level these included stronger levels of support from publishers to help meet the costs of putting on author events, and for better flows of advance information on author availability. A strongly voiced need emerging from this research is for an improved appreciation of the importance of a fully supported mixed ecosystem for events and for authors - with events at Indies and by other high street bookshops recognised as an integral part of that ecosystem. Recent developments around the funding of major arts festivals have arguably underscored the potential fragility and vulnerability of the ecosystem surrounding author events. This research highlights how bookshop events are often self-supported, which simplifies and de-risks them as compared with more substantial funded programmes; however, that in turn highlights the important opportunity for the book industry and funders to look at investing in the network of bookshops as a robust delivery mechanism which reaches readers and communities in every part of the country.

Research Method

A multi-method approach has been used to generate a rich quantitative and qualitative data set from which key themes, insights, and recommendations have been identified. The key elements of the research was an on-line survey which was distributed to all independent bookshops in England, and which received over one hundred and sixty responses. In addition, a series of in-depth interviews (termed in this report as 'deep dives') were conducted with twenty six bookshops to explore in more detail themes from the survey, looking at their role in the cultural life of their communities, and at related enablers and barriers. Members of a book club were also interviewed. A small number of related discussions were also conducted with library officials to gain a closer insight around particular cultural and community collaboration with local bookshops.

Kett's Books, Wymondham, Norfolk

Introduction

It has long been the contention of the BA that its members (chains and Indies), especially the growing number of independents, play an out-size role in enriching the cultural and social lives of their communities. In broad terms therefore this research seeks to determine the extent to which and in what ways independent bookshops enrich the cultural and social lives of their communities, whilst identifying enablers and barriers so that this contribution can be sustained and strengthened.

A bookshop, by virtue of what it sells provides the community it serves with a key means of accessing culture (this applies to both Indies and chain bookshops). However, this report looks beyond that vital purpose to the fuller related range of activities and events run by or supported by independent bookshops. These activities alongside the selling of books, are intrinsic to independent booksellers' sense of purpose and motivations. This purpose was beautifully expressed by The President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, in his message to the 2022 Irish book trade conference, when he wrote of how bookshops through their presence and diversity *"are a critical element of our society, bringing spaces of culture into the heart of our communities. A good bookshop is never reduced to a place of commerce but generously works, through events and initiatives, to connect readers and writers, introduce young people to the joys of reading, and to create opportunities for emerging writers to launch and promote their work."* Indeed, it is not far-fetched to say that a passionate desire to help nurture community well-being is central to the purpose of independent bookshops. This report sets out to establish and assess how that purpose is achieved, what that means for the communities served and how, with an improved framework of support, that contribution can be nurtured, replicated, enhanced, and secured.

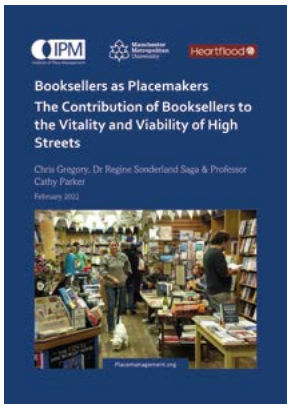
England's Independent Bookshops – key trends and figures

An important starting point for this research is to provide context on overall trends regarding independent bookshops in England and the challenging commercial realities they operate under. Using BA membership figures from a low point in December 2016 when the number of independent bookshops in England had fallen to 604, the last few years has, in overall terms, seen a substantive reversal of this decline, with the number of independent bookshops in England at the start of 2024 standing at 755.

In fact, 2023 saw 51 new independent bookshops across the UK and Ireland (the majority in England), but overall, the year saw a net fall of nine independents, driven by a range of factors including end of leases, retirements, rent, or rate increases which reflect how in a low margin sector like bookselling, small increases in costs can have a highly damaging impact. The tough economic realities of bookselling are underscored by data from the BA's 'BASELINE' performance measurement which aggregates figures from participating BA members across a range of operating and sales datapoints. The most recent BASELINE data relates to year end 2022 and this underscores the fine margins prevailing across the independent bookselling sector; 77% reported a profit, with average turnover of £314k, and an average net margin (after payments to bookshop owners), of 7%. Events contributed 4.8% of the total sales among shops participating in reporting figures to BASELINE, 1-2% points below pre pandemic figures.

Existing Research

The 2017 report for the BA by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) is an important foundation stone for this research as it focused not just on the economic impact of bookshops (Indies and chains) but also acknowledged the creative spillover impact (CSI). The CEBR report identified a range of social benefits of bookshops, noting that *"the importance of creative spillovers to the UK economy are perhaps even more significant than the current monetary economic impacts."* The report identifies a range of benefits from bookshops (Indies and chains), including, engagement with literary initiatives such as World Book Day, supporting UK authors, bookshop events, and their role as cultural hubs hosting and organising events, author signings, readings, poetry events etc.



The insights from the CEBR research were in turn built on by other research initiatives. First, the BA commissioned **the Booksellers as Placemakers report which was published in February 2022,** and in June 2023 conducted its BA Social Value survey, the results of which were instrumental in building the case for Arts Council England commissioning this project. The **Booksellers as Placemakers** report was authored by the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University, researching the contribution of bookshops to the vitality of high streets in the UK and Ireland. The report showed that over 90% of booksellers work actively to support local priorities including the provision of recreational and cultural spaces, place marketing, and maintaining economically attractive town and city centres. It established that bookshops contributed in a variety of powerful ways to make their high streets vital and viable. Key findings from the **Booksellers as Placemakers** report showed that 92% of bookshops contributed to local events and festivals, 99% to the economic attractiveness of their town centres, 98% to 'place-marketing' of their locality, and 96% to the liveability of their local community, while 77% were proactively involved in networks and partnerships with local councils. The study found a number of examples of bookshops contributing to their communities beyond their retail function with bookshops donating laptops to local schools, taking part in local beautification projects, promoting other local businesses through social media, and engaging with vulnerable groups in the community.

98%

of bookshops contribute to the 'place marketing' of their towns

Booksellers are involved in collective marketing efforts that encourage people to visit their town centres with a rewarding experience

*Key findings from the Booksellers as Placemakers report produced by the Institute of Place Management, part of Manchester Metropolitan University, and commissioned by the Booksellers Association.

99%

of bookshops contribute to innovation and experimentation on the high street

Retail is constantly evolving to meet changing customer needs, with booksellers regularly leaders in innovation

*Key findings from the Booksellers as Placemakers report produced by the Institute of Place Management, part of Manchester Metropolitan University, and commissioned by the Booksellers Association.

In a similar vein, the BA's own **Social Value of Bookshops Survey** conducted in June 2023 showed the range and depth of the contribution by bookshops (indie bookshops in England made up the lion's share of respondents to the survey). In particular it highlighted the strength of work with schools, with 85% engaged with local primary schools, and 76% engaged in supporting local secondary schools. This engagement encompassed arranging for authors to visit schools, supporting teachers and school librarians on literacy enrichment alongside providing pupils with work experience and donating books. Collaboration with local authority libraries was another major area of activity, with just under half (47%) of bookshops involved in active collaborations including arranging author events and literary festivals. It also identified an emerging trend for one in five bookshops to run 'pay it forward' schemes whereby customers donate money which is then used to buy books for a range of groups including local food banks. The survey also captured a range of activities by bookshops to promote reading in their communities, help for often – marginalized groups, such as homeless readers, and support prison libraries, and hospital libraries. The role of bookshops in supporting and in many cases delivering local cultural festivals also emerged as an important element of bookshop activity. This underscored the importance of developing a fuller and better understanding of the full extent of this, in particular its cultural, social and community dimensions.

Another useful contribution is made by the October 2020 research paper, **Indies in Scotland: Exploring the Unique Role of Independent Bookshops in Scotland's Towns and Villages**, by Audrey Laing, of the School of Creative and Cultural Business, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. Although the geographic focus of that research is clearly different from this research there are a number of related touchpoints, including the commitment of independent booksellers to literacy and community. The research highlighted the strength of the contribution made to communities, their welfare and social well-being. As the report puts it,

"much of the work undertaken by independent bookshops is at a small scale but collectively it is extremely powerful," finding that "many independent bookshops to be hubs of activity, proactivity and philanthropy; safe spaces for communities; protectors and promoters of literacy and most of all lovers of books."

The report also made a number of wider public policy recommendations for strengthening the cultural and community contribution of Scotland's independent bookshops, including an overhaul of the business rates system in order to recognise the cultural contribution of independent bookshops, and for a substantial increase in Live Literature funding accessible to bookshops to incentivise more author events (Live Literature is a Scotland-wide programme that helps fund and support author events across the country). Also libraries and schools should be mandated to produce a certain number of author events through the year with authors and stock sourced through local bookshops. The report advocated this would give educational benefits for the local communities and it would also strengthen the symbiotic relationship between schools, libraries and bookshops.

Mostly Books, Abingdon

Research Methods

A multi-method approach has been used to generate a rich quantitative and qualitative data set from which key themes, insights and recommendations have been identified. The key elements of the research methods are presented below.

Survey Design

The bedrock of the research is the results of the survey which went out to every indie bookshop in England and in BA membership (overwhelmingly co-terminus), on 9 February 2024 and remained open until 23 February 2024. The survey generated 163 responses.
The survey questionnaire covered 34 questions of a quantitative and qualitative nature.

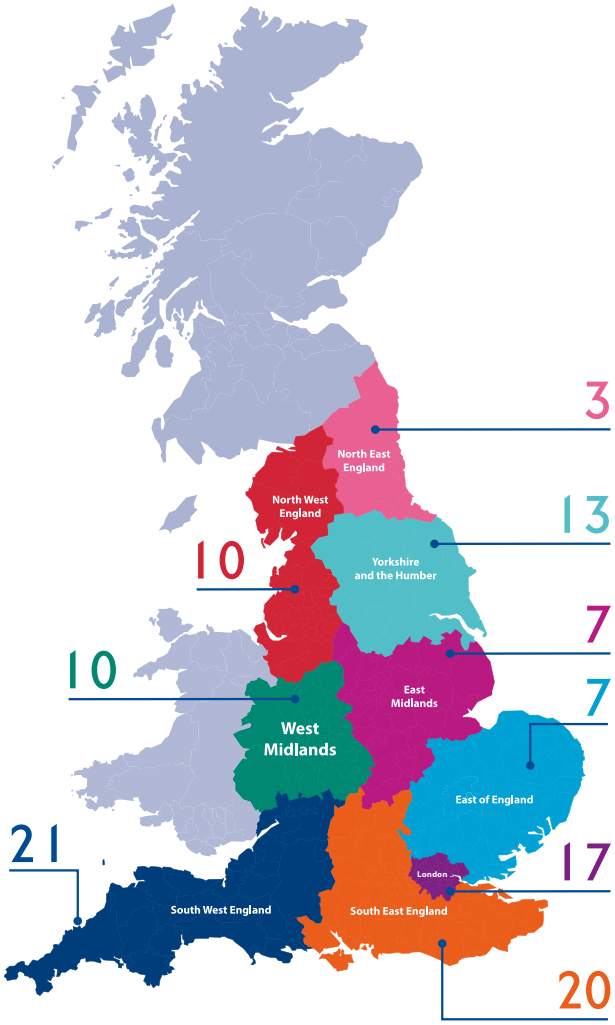
The quantitative questions were linked to qualitative follow up questions, designed to allow the submission of detailed additional insights and opinions to gain a more nuanced and fuller insight into the responses to the quantitative questions. For example, where the survey asked members to identify the full range of organisations and groups they work with it then asked them to include details about how they work with these organisations and groups. The survey also asked about members' motivations, what enables them to sustain the activities, the location of events, the range of partners worked with in delivering these activities, how the costs of these events are met, feedback from events on the cultural and social life in members' communities, and questions asking about barriers, including asking about their experience of and attitude towards applying for grants/public funding.

This was successful in gathering a wide range of responses and insights into the full array of activities undertaken by Indies. In total, 2,520 answer responses were gathered across the 33 questions; the answer responses were broadly split between quantitative and qualitative responses (this figure excludes question 34 which asked for details about the bookshop itself, although this has been used for the location data detailed in table 1 below).

Table 1. Regional Location of Indie Bookshop Survey Respondents

Regions: Based on UK government English regions

Numbers: Based on respondents to survey who supplied postcode data



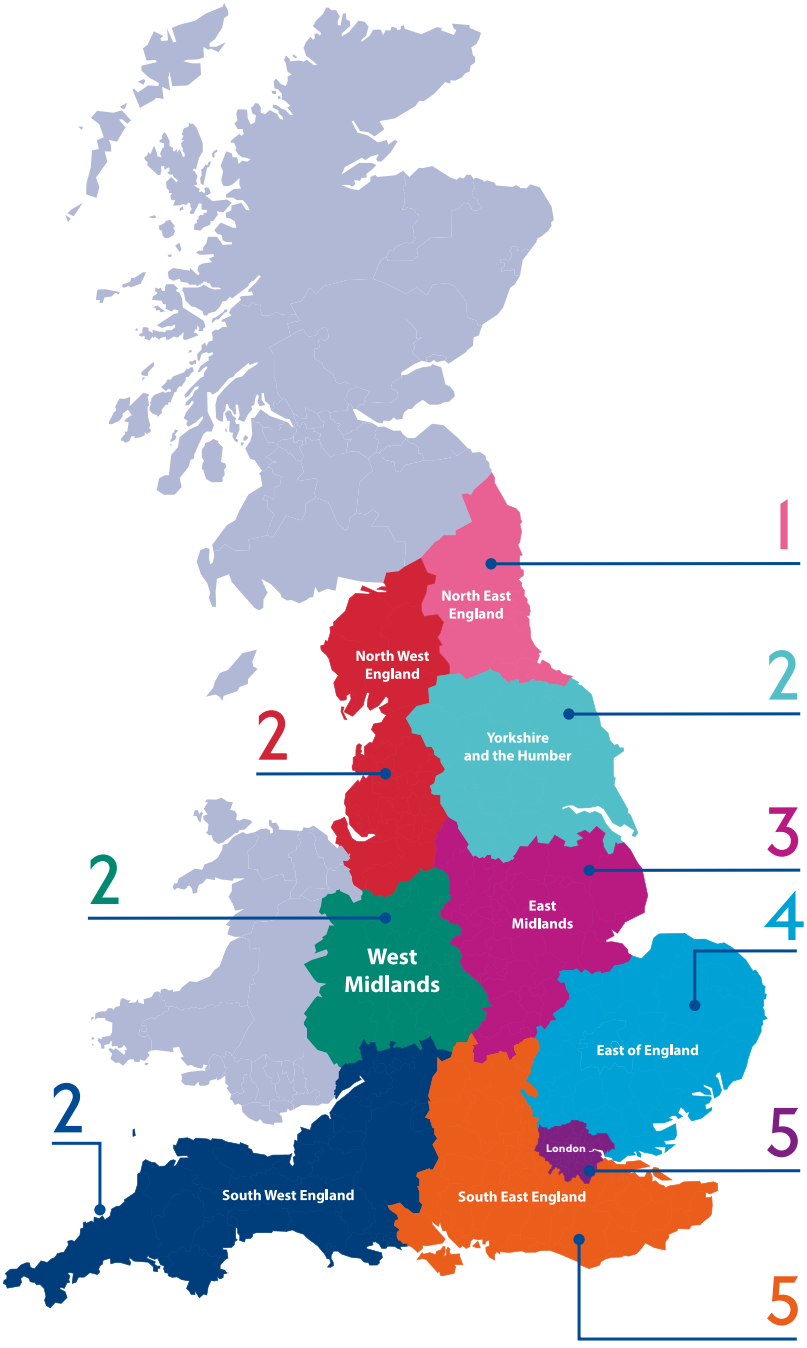
Deep-dive Interviews

To provide additional insights and to allow for wider ranging explorations of key research themes, a number of face to face meetings termed as deep dive interviews were conducted with 26 independent bookshops (all BA members). The deep dive interviews were conducted between 15 February 2024 and 9 April 2024; 19 took place at the individual bookshop, and seven were conducted online or over the phone. These deep dive interviews were based on a careful selection of members and geographical locations and contexts, drawing on members who are exemplars of best practice in the cultural and social life of the communities they serve. The deep dive shops also reflected a mix of 'business models' including, 'ltd', sole trader, and newer forms such as Community Interest Companies, and Community Benefit Societies. These interviews were designed to provide vital case studies to further inform and strengthen the research insights shaping this report.

Additional discussions took place with two librarians, one based in the north east of England and one in east London, and also a primary school teacher from a school in Newham, London, and a North Yorkshire based children's writer. The library dialogues were aimed at gaining greater understanding on local collaborations between libraries and local indie bookshops, with children's literacy and cultural enrichment as a key focus of both discussions. Members of a book club run by the **White Rose Book Café** in Thirsk, North Yorkshire, were also interviewed, as part of a deep dive visit. Additional insights were also provided by a BA – organised panel session at the London Book Fair (13 March, 2024) which explored the ways in which Indies successfully engage with their communities.

Table 2. Regional Location of deep dive Interviews (19 conducted at the bookshop and 7 conducted on line/phone)

Regions: Based on UK government English regions



Sevenoaks Books, Kent

Research Results – Part 1
Indies in their Communities

The survey data and outputs from the deep dive interviews are examined under two main sections. **Part 1** examines what the survey data and deep dive interviews tell us about the extent and ways Indies contribute to the cultural and social life of their communities. **Part 2** examines the enablers and barriers to this contribution.

Indies in their Communities - Headline Findings

92% of Indies run activities and events for their local communities:

- 92% (of those running events) hold author events
- 60% run book/reading clubs
- Nearly 1 in 2 Indies organise 20 plus events per year
- One in three organise 30 or more events
- 56% run events in partnership with local arts and community organisations.

Supporting children's literacy and cultural enrichment "engine rooms of children's literacy"

- 48% organise book fairs at schools
- 45% organise for authors to go into local schools
- Indies propel and develop partnerships with teachers to enhance literacy and promote the joy of reading
- Indie bookshops are in the vanguard of supporting the reading needs of neurodiverse children.

Strong cultural leadership by indie bookshops:

- 63% support local literary/arts festivals
- Nearly 4 in 10 bookshops organise creative writing /writing workshops
- 27% organise local literary festivals.

A range of other social contributions by Indies are highlighted by the survey data:

- Indies are skilled in audience creation, enriching the cultural lives of varied communities
- Creativity and innovations for example in combatting social isolation and loneliness
- Indies provide vital support for authors and illustrators
- Indies support the needs of diverse and sometimes historically marginalised groups
- Pivotal role in combating high street and town centre decline.

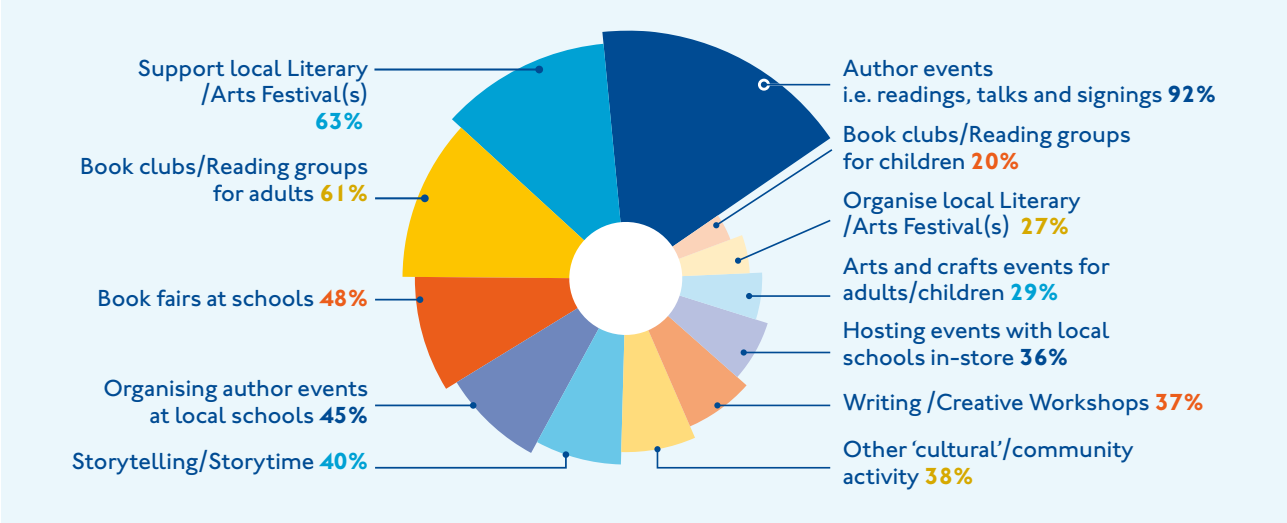
Indies' contribution to the cultural and social life of their communities

A key starting point for this research was to build up a detailed understanding of the range of events and activities undertaken by Indies across England.

Figure 1

'What kind of events/activities do you run at your shop?

(Select all that apply)



A number of striking features stand out from this data. First, with over nine in ten (92%) running activities and events for their communities, is the extremely high level of community engagement by Indies. Second, is the range of activities and support involved:

- **92% hold author events such as readings and talks**
- **63% support local literary/arts festivals**
- **60% run book /reading clubs**
- **37% organise writing and creative workshops**
- **27% organise local literary/arts festivals.**

Drilling down within each of these areas of activity and also considering related findings from the deep dive interviews, highlights the role of Indies in providing a rich array of cultural and community focused activities. For example, in addition to much-valued core activities such as book launches and author talks, Indies organise events encompassing, poetry readings, cookery book demos, music, special sessions for neurodiverse children, and a neurodiversity podcast, local book awards, end of life support (a death club), book launches, LGBTQ+ community hub, collaborations with other indie businesses (often food based), film nights, wellbeing meetups, survivor support, and more.

The survey also uncovered a striking set of numbers relating to the frequency of these events (an event is defined here as any bookshop organised gathering), which taken together with the estimated number of attendees highlights the extent of indie activities and their popularity across communities. The range of community partnerships involved in delivering these events is another stand out feature. The survey revealed the following:

- **51% organise 20 plus events across a typical year**
- **One in three organise 30 plus events across a typical year**
- **Average attendance at events stands at 43 people.**

Beneath the attendance average of 43, the range of attendance achieved by Indie events suggests they enjoy a strong level of popularity and reflect a distinct bookseller skill at 'audience creation'. The reported range of attendance is striking, for example, one Indie reported attendance reaching 10,000 for a festival based event, others reported attendance at 1,800, and several have attracted 800 attendees. Whilst these might be outliers, six Indies reported average attendances in the region of 150-200; 16 reported average attendance of between 50-100, and 36 reported average attendances between 25 and 49.

These figures taken together, might reasonably suggest a level of attendance across the year (for bookshop events), which stand comparison with the numbers attending major literary festivals. They certainly underscore the ongoing contribution of Indie bookshops to delivering engagement between writers and audiences in a wide range of communities and settings across England.

As most Indie shops have a relatively limited seating capacity many work with local venues to host events, especially in organising popular events. An important dimension unearthed by the survey was the range of bodies Indies work with in organising author events, as well as the variety of local and community facilities that are used to host these events. Whilst their own shop space is used by 85% of Indies (all/some of the time), a wide range of other venues are also used – see figure 2, for example 43% of Indies also use local community spaces such as church halls, and one in five use local libraries, theatres, and arts centres. This spreads the benefits and vital sources of income across communities which in turn helps to sustain and strengthen key community cultural infrastructure and contributes to the vibrancy, vitality, and durability of local cultural life.

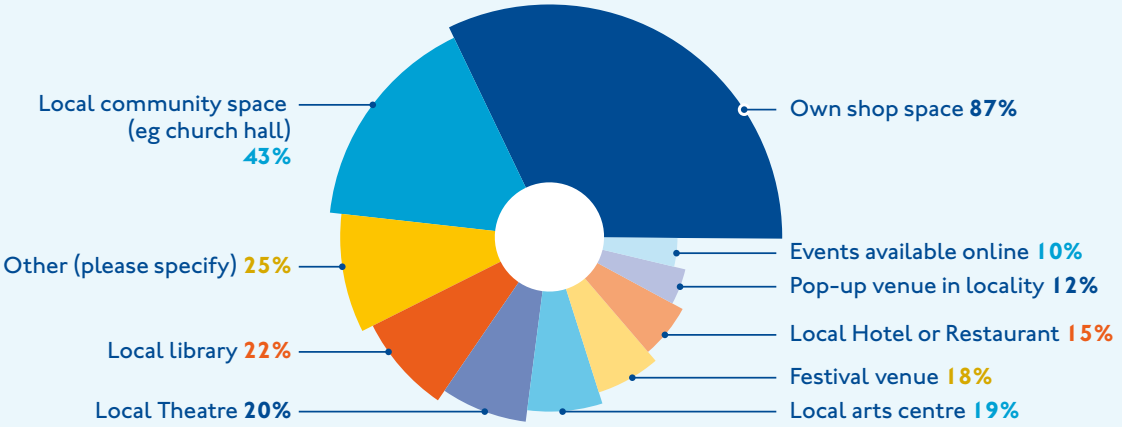
White Rose Book Café, Thirsk

Activities supporting schools and children's literacy is another major facet of activity revealed by this data, with for example 45% of Indies organising author visits to local schools. (A fuller exploration of the involvement and contribution of Indies with schools is provided on pages 23-25.)

Figure 2

Where do you hold author events?

(Select all that apply)



To gain a deeper understanding, the survey also asked Indies to list the range of who they worked with in hosting/organizing author events. Perhaps not surprisingly, authors at 93% and publishers at 87% sit at the heart of this collaboration. However, a mix of other community partners feature strongly in hosting/organizing author events;

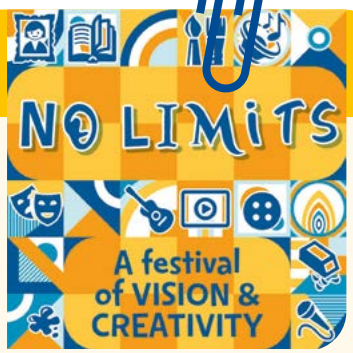
- 44% of Indies work with local schools
- 37% with local art/music/literary festival
- 29% local community groups
- 27% with a local arts organisation
- 27% with a local library
- 13% with a charity.

What this data highlights is the extensive span of community partnerships intrinsic to the work of Indies in delivering their activities and events. Ideas around how these can be strengthened and sustained are explored elsewhere in this report under part 2 of the analysis section.

Case Study
Indies & Cultural Festivals

Outlined here are two examples of Indies galvanizing cultural activity through organising festivals in their local communities.

The Rabbit Hole Bookshop, Brigg, North Lincolnshire & 'The No Limits Festival'



The Rabbit Hole Bookshop in Brigg, run by Mel Webb and Nick Webb is having an 'outsize' impact on the cultural life of communities in Brigg and the wider area which also takes in the towns of Grimsby and Scunthorpe. A key vehicle for this is 'The No Limits Festival,' an inclusive and free festival which provides a diverse range of events with authors, illustrators, live theatre, music workshops in a huge celebration of creativity. It was set up and organised by Mel and Nick in 2022 and is now planning its third edition for later in 2024. Central to Mel and Nick's vision for 'The No Limits Festival,' was to meet a need for families in their local community to be able to enjoy the joys of a festival on their doorstep and for free. Also giving local children in particular, as well as adults, the opportunity to participate in a range of creative activities are core aims of the festival. In 2023 in its second year the festival, which is held at Normanby Hall, attracted nine thousand people. Mel and Nick report that the local community positively view the festival as their own.

The festival has spawned a regular poetry group in addition to a spoken word group. In turn a key aim is for the festival to help in the post Covid period to build a more cohesive community. As such the choice of its 'No Limits' title deliberately avoided using the term literary in order to maximise its appeal. With upwards of fifty writers and artists staying at a local hotel during the festival, additional benefits are produced for the local economy and also from the opportunity for mutual learning and encouragement between the different performers. Central to sustaining the festival will be securing more stable funding which extends over a number of years, which will enable the festival to continue to attract a wealth of artistic talent and to ensure it is free and accessible. As well as a more secure funding base, a key ambition is to get more schools involved.

Case Study
Indies & Cultural Festivals

The Heath Bookshop, Birmingham – 'The Heath Bookshop Literature and Music Festival'

April 2024 saw a new festival organised by **The Heath Bookshop** in Birmingham suburb Kings Heath, featuring a wide range of literary and music events for all ages and interests. The festival aimed at encouraging children and adults in this diverse community to experience the written word and music in different ways. Collaboration and partnership with the Hare and Hounds pub, a famous music venue was key to the music elements of the festival. Likewise working with nearby indie - **How Brave is The Wren**, children's bookshop, is important to supporting the children's activities.

© @reupenpho

The festival lineup included an eclectic mix of nationally known but locally based names such as Robin Ince, Daniel Rachel, Mike Gayle, and Catherine O'Flynn, and a wide range of musicians including Pauline Black and Richard Norris. Organised across three days, it featured creative writing workshops, live music, panel discussions and a children's parade. Keen to encourage new voices, **The Heath Bookshop** has provided a bursary for one young writer to attend a workshop with bestselling writer Michel Faber. Speaking ahead of the festival (to Birmingham What's On, issue 447, April 2024) Catherine Gales, co-owner of **The Heath Bookshop**, said "So many of the events will be something people haven't seen before, and I hope people will be inspired by them… there is something special about having that close contact with musicians and authors… You feel inspired by them." Co-owner Claire Dawes speaking about the community support since The Heath Bookshop opened in September 2022, said "We've been so well supported here at The Heath Bookshop from the day we opened, and this festival is part of us giving something to the King's Heath community." The festival has received National Lottery funding through Arts Council England – and in order to make events as accessible as possible, many are free to attend or low cost. Across the three days the festival attracted nearly 2,100 participants including 1,125 children from five local schools.

Book clubs and reading groups

The survey identified that **61% of Indies** provide book clubs and reading groups, making them alongside author events, core elements of Indies cultural and community contribution. They are dynamic, have evolved through the pandemic, and the research would suggest popular in a range of communities and contexts. Across a month based on Indies' best estimates, the number of attendees to book clubs/ reading groups were:

- **41% report that between 11-20 people attend**
- **17% report numbers between 21-30 attendees**
- **20% report 31 plus attendees each month**
- **9% report 50 plus attendees each month.**

It is not untypical for an indie to organise and host several book clubs /reading groups, reflecting the level of demand within their locality. The community reach of these activities including in non-urban/city settings can be considerable. For example, **Kett's Books**, a community run bookshop in the market town of Wymondham, Norfolk, runs six different book clubs per month which in total have 90 members. Across the year this equates to providing an estimated **1,800 hours of cultural engagement** for members of their community. When attendance at **Kett's Books** author events are factored in the level of cultural engagement rises even more. This represents a significant contribution to the cultural life of their community but also to helping to build wider community bonds and connections. It was evident from discussions with members of a book club organised and hosted by the **White Rose Book Café** in Thirsk, North Yorkshire, that participation was greatly valued by its members who cited a range of cultural and social benefits. These included stimulating wider reading, opening up new avenues of literature, and making a link with writers, others commented on how the book club had provided a key to getting to know people in the community when they moved in, and also how it had provided a sense of belonging. A number of the members commented on how the book club had been a key lifeline during and after the pandemic. The ability of these groups to help combat social isolation were echoed in the survey responses; as one indie put it (in the comments section in the on-line survey for this report);

> *"As well as the in-person reading group we have also organised an online reading group which helps to improve inclusivity and accessibility, giving the opportunity for those who cannot attend in person to join us for discussion."*

This latter category includes individuals who have caring responsibilities for example for a spouse with dementia, so as one bookshop manager relayed in one of the deep dive interviews, for this book club member being able to access the book club had been a vital lifeline for them. A possible topic for further research is to look into the health benefits of book clubs and reading groups as they are potentially a strong example of the benefits of what is termed 'social prescribing.'

The research also identified examples of book /reading club innovation by Indies to meet rising social and community needs. This ability to innovate can be illustrated by two examples which emerged during the deep dive interviews. The first related to **The House of Books and Friends**, a CIC based bookshop in central Manchester, which has shaped its events programme around helping to combat loneliness and social isolation. For example, organising events to celebrate friendship such as a 'palatines' day event held the day after Valentine's day and targeted at single people who want to celebrate non-romantic

friendship. The other example is **Red Lion Books** in Colchester, who are building on their already successful book clubs (which have over ninety members), by experimenting with a 'death club' aimed at bringing people together to discuss a book which deals with end of life and death themes.

Supporting schools – Indies as 'engine rooms' of literacy

A recurring theme in the survey data and amplified in the deep dive interviews was the strength of commitment and engagement of Indies with schools in particular around supporting teachers to help raise levels of literacy and deliver cultural enrichment. Indies across every region bring considerable expertise to this task and are instrumental in developing partnerships with teachers which are evidence of the positive contribution they offer to this vital social goal. This often takes the form of advising teachers on the best new children's books, working with school libraries to ensure a varied stock, and working to bring children's authors in to schools. The inspiration provided by author visits was a constant touchpoint articulated by many Indies and is indicative of an enduring commitment to enable children to have their lives enriched by the opportunity to hear an author in the flesh and access the best of literature for their age group. As Vanessa Lewis of **The Book Nook**, Hove, put it – *"to see the joy on children's faces on meeting an author ...."* This is especially pressing post Covid where reading loss continues to be a key challenge across primary and secondary sectors.

The survey data reflects the breadth of support provided by many Indies for schools;

- **48% organise book fairs at schools**
- **45% organise authors to go into local schools**
- **40% delivering storytime/storytelling activities**
- **20% organise book clubs/reading groups for children.**

The results of the **BA's Social Value of Bookshops survey of June 2023** also testified to the depth of the commitment of Indies to schools in their communities. (Noting that figures from this survey reflect responses from indie bookshops across the UK, however 74% of respondents were from England so the figures are congruent with the data in the February 2024 survey relating to this research.) At a primary school level:

- **56% of Indies donate books to school libraries**
- **63% of Indies work with teachers/school librarians to compile reading lists**
- **48% of Indies hosts school visits at their shop (outside of World Book Day)**
- **64% of Indies donate books to be handed out to pupils around World Book Day.**

At a secondary school level:

- **40% of Indies donate books to school libraries**
- **55% of Indies work with teachers/school librarians to compile reading lists**
- **35% of Indies donate books to be handed out to pupils around World Book Day**
- **26% of Indies hosts school visits at their shop (outside of World Book Day)**
- **50% of Indies provide work experience for pupils.**

This quote sums up the approach and experience of many Indies working with schools:

> *"We've also arranged many free author visits for our local secondaries and used to work with our main village secondary school on their own book awards; helping choose the shortlists, arrange the visiting authors, publicity... all very time consuming with not much profit, but so rewarding and meaningful for all concerned."*

On the inclusion front, this quote illustrates the progressive approach taken by Indies:

> *"We also work with specialist schools for children with different access needs who struggle to find work placements due to bias and prejudice."*

Indie bookshops are also responding to help meet rising societal needs with a number of shops in the vanguard of helping families and public bodies to gain a better understanding of supporting the reading needs of neurodiverse children. For example, **Bookbugs and Dragon Tales**, a children's specialist bookshop in Norwich, runs reading workshops for children with dyslexia, run by a bookseller who is dyslexic. Other Indies use their special needs expertise to handpick books to support and celebrate neurodiversity, and to deploy this with individuals, families, schools, and community groups.

A number of deep dive interviewees, for example, **Yellow Lighted Books**, Gloucestershire, and **DRAKE The Bookshop**, Stockton-On-Tees, mentioned the contribution their bookshop had made in helping local schools with whom they had worked, to win praise from Ofsted inspection reports which had cited the quality of reading support, with well-stocked and inviting libraries. From the deep dive interviews as well as the survey it was strongly evident how many Indies are ardent about the power of school-bookshop collaborations to help improve the literacy skills and cultural lives of children.

Bookbugs and Dragon Tales, Norwich

Case Study
Indies enriching children's cultural lives

The Great North Author Tour

An initiative which is illustrative of the passion and commitment of Indies to children's literacy and cultural lives is the work by a number of indie booksellers in the North East and North Yorkshire to develop the **Great North Author Tour**. This initiative has been running since 2019 and in 2023 took eleven local authors by minibus to indie bookshops and schools across the North East and North Yorkshire over two days. It was initiated by **DRAKE The Bookshop**, Stockton on Tees, and has proven immensely popular with authors, children, parents, and schools and the other six bookshops that have been involved.

The collaboration between seven Indies in the region has been critical to developing the tour, getting through Covid, and ensuring it is now entering its fifth year entirely funded for the last two editions by **DRAKE The Bookshop**, though they are looking to find some support to run it in a sustainable form. In addition to highlighting the talents of regional and new writers and helping to ensure they are better connected with audiences in their region, it helps to boost regional cultural life, bringing access to an array of writing talent direct to children in their own communities. It also helps send a positive message about culture and literary talent having its roots in their region and localities. As Richard Drake puts it *"giving children a chance to see themselves in a book is huge and knowing that person is from where they are from is equally, if not more, important!"*

The tour has many other spin-off benefits, for example, by providing authors with the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas gives them valuable professional support and development. Richard Drake of **DRAKE The Bookshop**, estimates that to date, the Great North Author Tour has had a total of **22 authors take part with over 3,500 children** reached through either author talks or workshops.

"giving children a chance to see themselves in a book is huge and knowing that person is from where they are from is equally, if not more, important!"

Wider community and cultural support

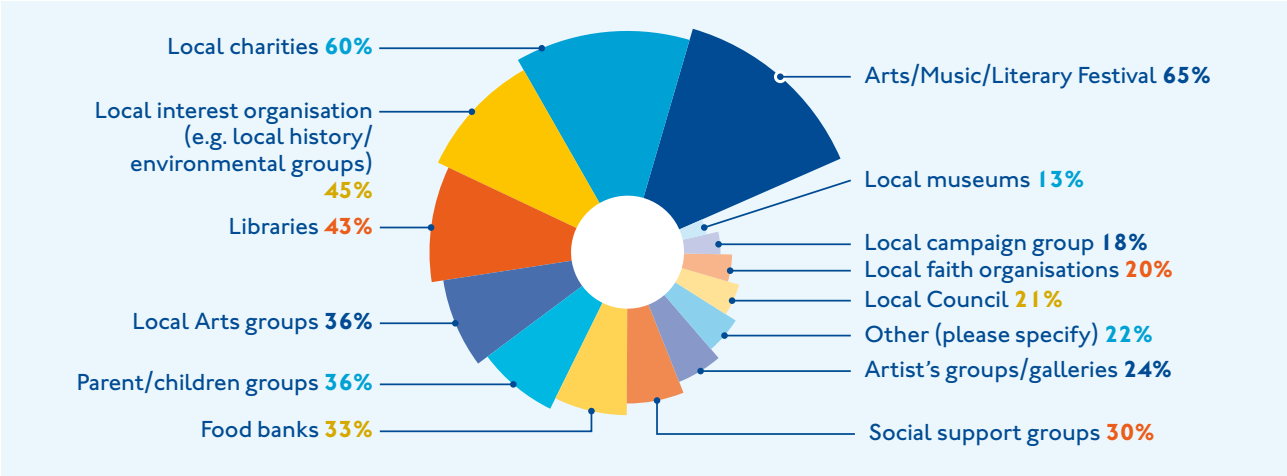
Leadership on the cultural front is another striking feature, with Indies delivering a wide range of cultural activities, either directly or in partnership with other organisations. The survey data reveals the significant contribution Indies make to supporting a wide range of cultural activities, and to many parts of their local communities:

- **65% support arts/music/literary festivals**
- **60% support local charities**
- **43% support libraries**
- **36% support parent/children groups**
- **33% support food banks**
- **24% support artist' groups/galleries.**

Figure 3

Which organisations/groups in your community do you support?

(Select all that apply)



The survey went on to ask Indies to detail what form this support/partnership takes. The data from that question in many ways speaks for itself as it demonstrates a powerful roll-call of practical help and support:

- **69% donate books**
- **67% provide promotional support**
- **66% provide advice/expertise**
- **56% donate staff time**
- **45% act as 'box office'**
- **50% provide meeting space**
- **41% work with other local 'indie' shops and businesses.**

Behind each of these figures are a multitude of acts of kindness and generosity. This in turn is shaped and sustained by a set of prevalent values held by Indies which are based on an enduring commitment to community and building positive human connections.

Case Study
Indies & Local Libraries in trusted partnerships

Partnership

Newham Bookshop a community run independent in east London has over many years developed a highly beneficial collaboration with the London Borough of Newham's library service. This collaboration has meant that local children and families, in an area characterized by high levels of economic deprivation, are able to experience the cultural enrichment offered by author events. One such example took place in autumn 2023 when the actor and author Sir Lenny Henry spoke to 370 children from 13 local schools at an event jointly organised by **Newham Bookshop** and Newham Libraries. Sir Lenny was introducing his new children's book, reading the children extracts and encouraging them to have a go at writing their own stories.

The event is part of an ongoing collaborative partnership between **Newham Bookshop** and Newham Libraries. **Newham Bookshop**, not least through its long standing manager, Vivian Archer, brings its expertise on children's authors, especially those with a BAME background, and its strong links with publishers and writers. In turn the Library services' Deborah Peck, uses her expert links and relationships with local schools to ensure hugely well attended events which use local council facilities and are provided free of charge to all attendees. The net result is an ongoing range of inclusive events which brings cultural enrichment to children in this richly diverse part of east London. Deborah and Vivian also work together to co-create author events for adults in Newham, recent examples include an event with a black neuro-diverse female author which was strongly supported in the community attracting fifty participants.

A shared commitment to highlighting the work of BAME community writers is at the heart of a developing partnership between Brixton library (part of the library services of the London Borough of Lambeth), and **Round Table Books**, Brixton. Brixton Library has over several decades organised events to highlight the works of writers from minority communities. **Round Table Books** are now working to help amplify the work of Brixton Library.

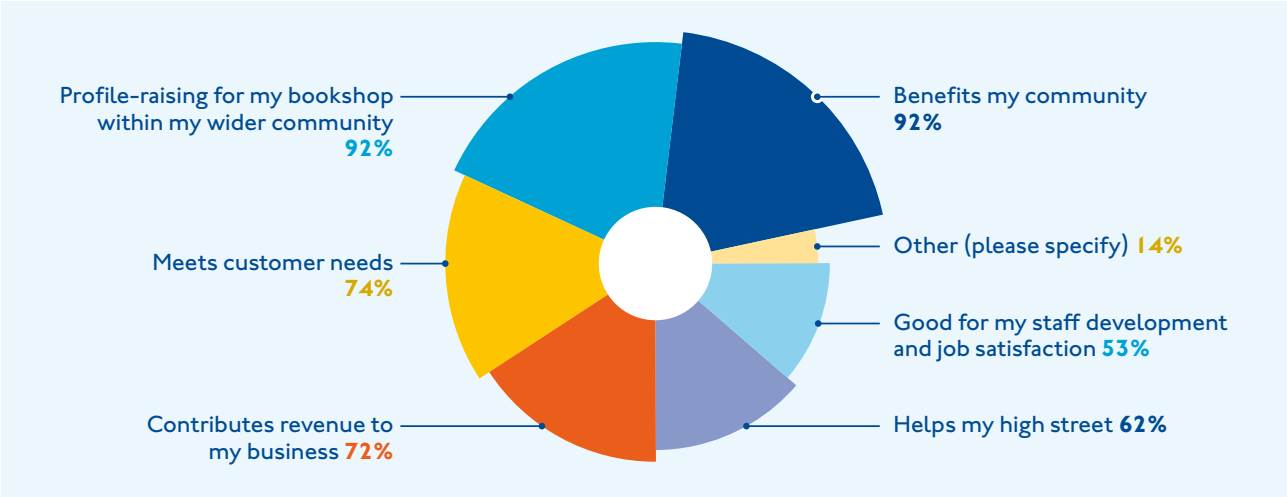
Motivations – community benefit in the 'Indie DNA'

An important aim of this research was to better understand what drives and motivates independent bookshops to run their events and activities. This also builds on the BA's Social Value of Bookshops survey (June 2023) which gathered data on the wider range of contributions Indies make to social need as well as cultural life in their communities. Consequently, the survey for this report asked, 'What has encouraged/enabled you to run these events and activities?

Figure 4

What has encouraged/enabled you to run these events and activities?

(Select all that apply)



As figure 4 reveals the joint largest single response category at 92% was 'Benefits my community', (alongside 'Profile raising for my bookshop within my wider community'), and this can helpfully be taken together with many of the responses detailed under the 'other' category which echo the centrality of community as the driving force of Indies activities. A selection of the answers provided here give eloquent voice to Indie's motivations;

> *"Sharing learning with our community."*

> *"Promotes, supports, and encourages local creativity. Raises aspirations. Creates entertainment and enjoyment."*

> *"It's my life work, as a working class person who grew up in poverty, bookshops and libraries were havens and lifelines ... I want to keep alive and carry on that legacy of storytelling and safe cultural spaces where everyone should feel welcome to gather."*

Other important drivers included;

- **Meet customers' needs at 74%**
- **Contributing revenue to the book shop scored 72%**
- **62% cited 'helps my high street'**
- **Staff development and job satisfaction was cited by 53% of respondents.**

Case Study
Bookshops Revived

Two successful projects which have put community benefit and cultural enrichment at the heart of their existence are outlined here. In addition, both are based in towns (one industrial and one a market town in a predominantly rural setting), which in recent times had lost their independent bookshops.

The Book Stop, St Helens, Lancashire

St Helens was left with no bookshop in July 2019 with the closure of Wardleworths. A desire and hunger to ensure St Helens again had a bookshop drove Brian Leyland and a group of local volunteers to ensure St Helens had a bookshop and to make it a thriving community hub. Sadly, Brian passed away in early 2022 but he lived to see bookselling revived in his home town when **The Book Stop** opened in November 2021. Critical to this was £45k of crowdfunding, a figure which was matched by the Community Share Booster Programme. The shop operates as a social enterprise in the form of a Community Benefit Society (CBS). Any surplus profits are paid out as book tokens. Vital to realizing the vision was funding from The Steve Morgan Foundation who provided the salary of the bookshop manager for three years.

The shop is already a positive presence in the local community whose town centre is experiencing tough challenges with the closure of household retail names and the costs of living crisis. As well as providing over 5,000 titles for readers from pre-school children to retirees, **The Book Stop** delivers a range of events and activities, with arts, crafts, literature, and music as the four key pillars. Examples of the popularity and diverse range of these events and activities, with attendee numbers include:

- Harry Potter 25th Anniversary Day estimated footfall: 300+
- Superhero Saturday estimated footfall: 150+
- Street Hunt: engagement: 168
- Shared reading every other Tuesday: 12+
- Queens Park Book Club every month: 6+
- QBC (Queer Book Club) every month: 15+
- Alternative Book Club (funded for disadvantaged families): 20+
- Murder Mystery Event: 36.

There are ambitious plans to develop aspects like live music with the shop hosting local groups, debutants and up and coming musicians. Funding has been secured to convert an upstairs space as a 60 seat capacity space for hosting author events, book clubs etc, complete with a lift which will help ensure disabled access. This space will also enable lettings to other community groups and initiatives and so help strengthen the local community.

Strong collaborations have been established with local libraries and an increasing number of local schools, for example **The Book Stop** are hosting book fairs with local primary schools. This is a key part of fulfilling the shop's central mission of helping to raise literacy in St Helen's

Case Study
Bookshops Revived

Kett's Books, Wymondham, Norfolk

Kett's Books is an independent bookshop in Wymondham, Norfolk, set up as a Community Interest Company in 2014. The prospect of Wymondham having no bookshop loomed in autumn 2013 when a long standing independent bookshop announced its closure. This galvanised a determined group of locals to band together and set up a community led not for profit business (trading as a Community Interest Company -CIC). By February 2014 this led to the opening of Kett's Books. Since then, Kett's Books has become a cornerstone of the local community with an increasing impact across its locality. Integral to the objectives of the shop are to grow a love of reading in the area, to help improve mental health, combat loneliness, to build work skills, create employment opportunities, and advocate for local high streets by investing in the town. A range of book and reading clubs means the shop is instrumental to enriching the cultural lives of locals from school readers to retirees. Alongside this the shop puts on an exciting range of events with national and local authors, including Elly Griffiths, Susan Hill, and Chris Riddell.

A significant development came in 2023 when **Kett's Books** moved into a newly refurbished shop at the heart of Wymondham's historic market place. These new premises have been instrumental in enabling Kett's Books to expand its volunteer base, extend its range of activities like author events, and to increase its work with schools and a range of community groups. The refurbishment of the new premises involved new volunteers, including teenagers learning to work alongside experienced tradesmen. Recognition of the significant impact Kett's Books is having in achieving these community goals came in March 2024, when the shop was awarded the best bookshop in eastern England award in the 2024 British Book Awards (Nibbies). Kett's Books is clearly valued by its local community, here are some quotes gathered as part of a community feedback survey (q4'2023);

"Wonderful to see a community project in the centre of town" and "It's more important than ever to retain life in small town centres and Kett's Books contributes hugely to this by being such a welcoming and vibrant space."

Alongside its inspired leadership and talented multi-skilled group of volunteers, Kett's success has been aided by its track-record in attracting funding and grants from a range of local bodies, including local councils, and also the Community Ownership Fund. Intrinsic to Kett's success in applying for substantial amounts of funding (as part of a strategic project to purchase its new premises) has been the availability of targeted resources enabling it to afford to buy in specialized expert support to make bids for substantial funding. This access has played a significant role in enabling **Kett's Books** to win funding in spring 2024 from the UK government's Community Ownership Fund of £300k to purchase its new premises. Community gifts and no-interest loans have also been important in getting **Kett's Books** to its current position.

Assessing the impact – what does this mean for communities?

As part of the research the online survey and the deep dive interviews sought to build up a deeper understanding on the impact of Indies events and activities on the cultural and social Life of their communities. The survey asked participants to provide specific examples of feedback about the impact of their events and activities on the cultural and social life of their communities and this generated insightful and detailed feedback, examples of which are given here. Similarly, a critical area of focus for the deep dive interviews was to learn about the bookshop and its role and contribution to the community. Indies were asked to provide additional feedback about the impact of events and activities programmes on the cultural and social life of your community. A selection of the feedback is outlined here:

"Our events are a highlight for people living here – they become a talking point for weeks afterwards, with people popping into the shop to say how much they enjoyed them. Getting authors into schools can be life changing for children who meet them."

"We have amazing feedback from attendees and the wider community about the value we add to our local High Street and the services we provide to young families as a result."

"Very small town, community feels special and part of something bigger when a well-known author comes to speak."

Parental feedback was cited by one bookseller, picking up on a recurring theme about the crucial help bookshops provide on encouraging literacy,

"Without your shop my kids would have continued to struggle to read. They loved coming in and choosing – it was something they looked forward to every week."

"Our local community love our events, we're quite rural so often people are not able to get to evening events from outside the area ... many rely on our events programme and firmly believe it brings culture to our town."

"Our events are much loved and valued by the queer community – people have found friends they would not have found before. Our LGBT book club group has formed friendships that would not have existed previously."

The positive anticipation by others in the local small business community over the opening of an independent bookshop is another aspect worth noting. At the time of writing, a project is underway which it is hoped will see the relocation (and reopening) of the **Green Heart Bookshop** in Edgbaston, Birmingham. A nearby independent retailer commented,

"This bookshop would be key to helping enhance the community feel amongst the current tenants and create that bit of community magic we are so keen to promote."

These sentiments are powerfully amplified by others in the book trade. Speaking at a BA event (13 March 2024) about community at the 2024 London Book Fair, the writer, publisher and literary agent, **Jamilah Ahmed**, spoke about Indies as "beacons" and the power of the connections created by Indies -

"It is sustaining to know there is a connection between bookshops, schools, readers, and publishers."

Clearly, the perspectives of people in the communities served by England's Indies find some voice here and the value they get from Indies' activities is powerfully endorsed by the attendance figures across bookshop events and reading/book clubs. However, by the nature of this research it has not been

possible to provide authoritative data on this. Consequently, a possible topic for further research is to explore the demographic composition of audiences and participants (across book shop events and activities). However, anecdotally, in several of the deep dive conversations, Indie booksellers remarked upon their experience that book clubs and reading groups tended to be markedly more popular with women. Some Indies are seeking to address this for example by organising non-fiction reading groups which have been successful in attracting men.

Case Studies
Indies boosting inclusion and representation

Powerful testimony emerged from the research which underscores the significant impact of Indies on inclusion and representation. In some instances, this has been an ongoing contribution across many decades. Others are more newly established Indies but already making an impact, with inclusion as central to their mission and purpose. A selection of these are outlined here.

Established in 1979, **Gay's The Word** is the UK's oldest LGBT bookshop, based in Marchmont Street in central London. In that time, it has acquired a national and international reputation and standing for its positive role in the lives of its customers and the communities it serves. This has not always been easy, and the shop had to endure in past decades the sharp edges of societal hostility including those of central government authorities. Although notably it had the support of its local authority – the London Borough of Camden who is also its landlord. Integral to it over its history is the provision of a safe space for meetings where communities can find each other. The longest running group is the Lesbian Discussion Group who have been meeting since 1981 on a weekly basis to discuss current affairs, sexuality, politics, lifestyle, and lesbian specific topics. Inspired by that group and UK Black Pride, the shop also hosts the Black Lesbian Discussion Group which seeks to provide a safe space for all Black Lesbians to speak on various topics and socialize in a non-party atmosphere. In addition, **Gay's The Word** is often used by teachers, librarians, and academics to source LGBT+books for their research or borrowing collections, using the shop's extensive knowledge to source the best books for the purpose. The shop's impact has been extensive as it has enabled and nurtured an ecosystem of books and activities to serve its, engendering in the words of, **Gay's The Word** deputy manager, Uli Lenart *"an ecosystem, ... kindness, understanding and freedom out of this space... an engine of change."*

Afrori Books, Brighton, has been running since 2021 and was in the words of its founder Carolynn Bain *"created as a safe space for Black people and their allies"*. Carolynn was inspired to open the shop because in her own words *"I was tired of going to bookstores and having to search for ages to find the tiny BAME section that had been allocated to Black authors. Surely, they deserved more than that? It is hard to become an author, it is even harder to be a Black author. But we are so much more than a bookshop ... we also deliver anti-racism training to adults, run anti-racist clubs in schools across Sussex ... and so much more."* Alongside serving the needs of the Black community in Brighton and Hove, **Afrori Books** also draws about 40% of its customers from further afield in Sussex but also extending to London. When **Afrori Books** was faced with having to move out from its original premises, Arts Council England funding was a key enabler in helping to secure new premises.

Round Table Books in Brixton, London is seeking innovative ways of meeting the reading needs of its diverse local community. A key ambition is to change perceptions about literature in translation, so that it is not seen as elitist but is instead recognised for its importance to the cultural lives of a wide range of local people whose origins spread across the world.

Sevenoaks Bookshop in Kent has developed a varied programme of events which in addition to bringing in well-known authors, also boosts cultural enrichment by showcasing diverse talents for example, cookery authors from countries such as Sierra Leone. These authors use a live cookery demonstration of recipes from their books to not only introduce the delights of their national cuisines but also act as a pathway to the history, literature, and culture of their country.

Next Page Books, Hitchin

Research Results – Part 2
Enablers and Barriers

This section of the research results examines what the research insights tell us about the enablers and barriers to the range of activities and events organised by Indies. As in the above section it draws on the results of the February 2024 survey of all England based Indies, and also on each of the deep dive interviews. The purpose of identifying enablers and barriers is to elicit best practice exercised by the most experienced booksellers and allow less confident booksellers to draw on these practices and approaches, principally in the removal of barriers.

Part 2 – Enablers and Barriers – Headline Findings

Costs (of running cultural activities):

- Costs of running events and activities are overwhelmingly borne by Indies or by members of their local communities
- In 20% of activities costs are partially met by event partners.

Grants & Funding:

- 78% of Indies see grants/public funding as a source of enabling them to sustain their wider role in the community
- 71% of Indies would like straightforward access to funds to support the costs of running events and activities
- 55% of Indies have concerns about the time involved in applying for grants/public funding
- Indies expressed strong preference to make language and terminology on grant application systems more accessible
- Deep-dive interviews pointed to a desire for more support on digital marketing.

Enhanced support from publishers:

- 71% of Indies want more support from publishers e.g., costs/staff to help host events
- 65% would like to see advanced information from publishers about author availability
- Publishers and publicists to respond more dynamically to the potential for collaborating with clusters of new Indies, for example in major areas like the West Midlands.

Business Improvement Districts

- Identified in deep dive research interviews as positive partners.

Arts centres:

- Potential benefit from stronger partnerships between Indies and Arts Centres
- To help deliver this Indies should be unafraid in their conversations to articulate shared values and purpose.

Recognising the cultural contribution of Indies:

- Indies want to see a greater awareness and recognition by the wider arts community of their cultural role and contribution.

Supporting cultural events and activities – the cost dimension

In terms of running costs – staff time and opportunity cost – are all key factors shaping Indies' ability to develop and sustain the wide array of cultural events and activities identified in this research. Consequently, a cornerstone of this research was to identify and understand how Indies go about meeting the costs of the events and activities they organise. The resulting research data would strongly suggest the costs are largely either borne by the individual bookshop or by the members of the local community attending the events (respondents were asked to select all options that apply):

- **74% free of charge**
- **69% require a ticket to attend**
- **52% offer a ticket and book option**
- **In 20% of activities, the costs are partially met by event partners**
- **Only 11% of event costs are fully met by event partners**
- **11% use a suggested level of contribution.**

The survey responses also surfaced a number of barriers preventing some Indies from expanding their activities in this sphere and maximizing community inclusion, factors identified included, staff, venue, publicity costs, and the lack of disabled accessible toilet facilities. This data can helpfully be viewed in conjunction with the data on page 28 which explored Indie's motivations.

As part of understanding Indies' cultural and community contributions it was also important to better understand what impact the Covid pandemic might be having on their ability to run events and activities. The survey therefore asked **'Are you running or considering running fewer events and activities than before 2020 – if so why? Select all that apply'** (although it is important to note that this question was only answered by 41% of respondents). The key results to this question were:

- **37% said it takes too much time from running their shop**
- **28% said costs have become too high**
- **28% cited declining support/attendance**
- **19% cited lack of support from publishers.**

Specific feedback included difficulties contacting publishers and especially freelance publicists, who it was felt over rely on email. Others cited the costs of doing business and the loss of staff expertise as factors leading to a reduction in events and also scaling back the level of individual events. Bookshop owner/staff time constraints also emerged as a key barrier from deep dive interviews. This extended to frustration that lack of time was holding back the ability of some Indies to develop projects for their communities such as book and literary festivals, with locations such as Norwich identified as missing out (this was strongly felt in this specific location, given Norwich's strong literary associations through the National Centre for Writing, and the well-respected School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia). A possible enabler identified in discussions was providing access to small pots of funding to help Indies to find the time, for example funding a short project based secondment, to enable the development of both project plans and active links with potential partners across the cultural sector. A variation on this was a suggestion from one deep dive interviewee that funding be targeted at 'indie hotspots' i.e., where there are clusters of Indies, so they could form 'consortia' to develop and deliver literary festivals.

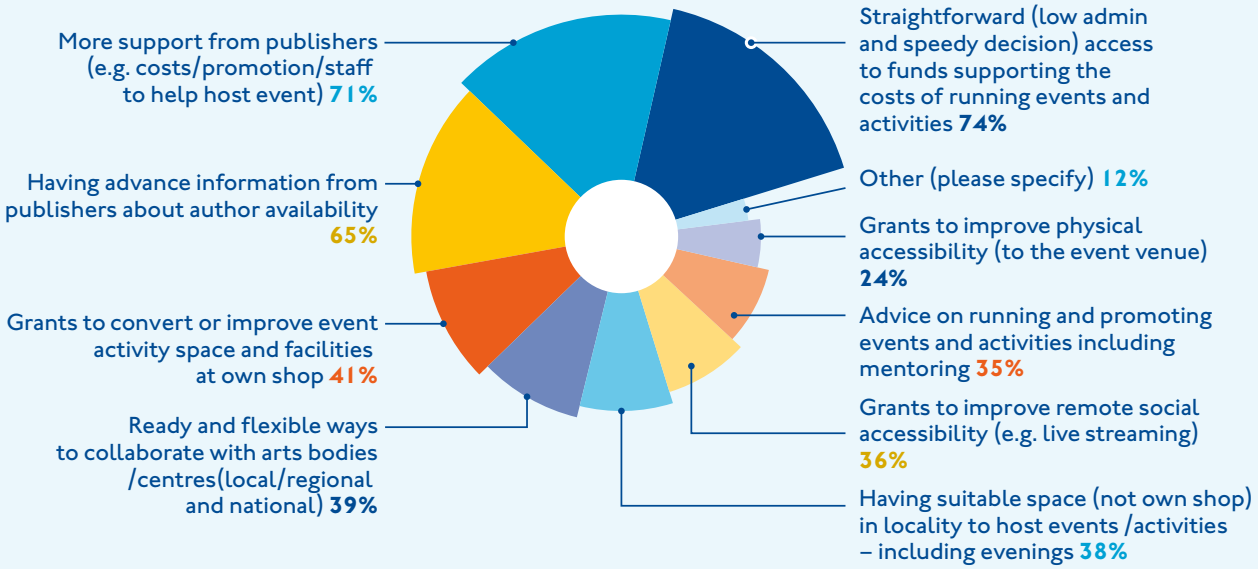
Support and potential sources of support

It was important for the research to seek to identify potential sources of support for Indies to encourage them to run more events and activities.

Figure 5

What would help your shop run more events and activities?

(Select all that apply)



A number of emphatic preferences emerge from this data which have a resonance across the book trade and its cultural partners;

- **73% would value straightforward access to funds to run events and activities**
- **71% would like more support from publishers**
- **65% would value advanced information from publishers about author availability.**
- **40% cited grants to convert or improve event facilities at their shop**
- **35% would like advice on running and promoting events and activities.**

There was a strongly voiced request to ensure that major cities like such as Birmingham emerged and are not overlooked when publishers and publicists develop author tours. The capabilities of the newly established cluster of Indies in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands area is reflected (amongst others) in the track-record of **The Heath Bookshop**, which since its establishment in September 2022, has organised over eighty author events.

A theme which emerged in the survey and in several 'Deep-dive' discussions related to relationships with local arts centres. Concern and frustration was voiced that collaborating on delivering indie organised author events at local arts centres was put at risk by high hire charges, and in one instance a refusal by arts centre staff to open the venue early which meant that the queue of several hundred attendees had to be directed elsewhere by the indie manager for pre-event coffee/drinks (despite this new arts centre having ample bar facilities; the net result is that this Indie which runs an extensive

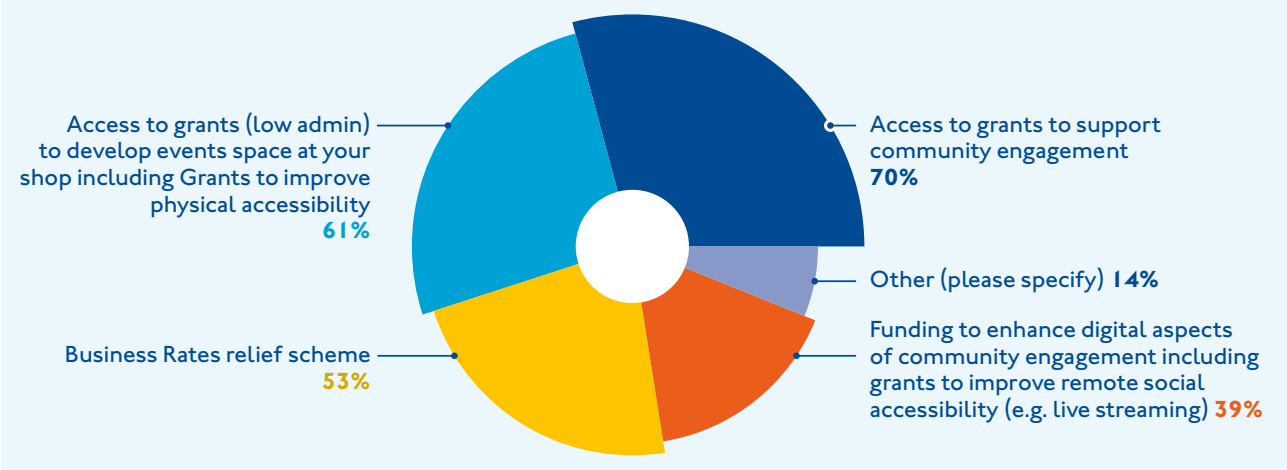
events programme is now deeply reluctant to hold events at this neighbourhood and newly opened arts venue). One barrier identified is whether arts centres might think of Indies as purely commercial operations and so be reluctant to view them as potential arts/cultural partners. A suggested best practice identified through these discussions was around the value of Indies establishing an open dialogue around shared values, not least on the love of literature and cultural enrichment with their local arts centre/community theatre. At a national level there might be scope for additional dialogue between the BA and leaders of the arts centre sector, to help forge a closer relationships which in turn drives stronger partnerships.

The survey also asked Indies about what might encourage Indies to run more events and activities either in their shop or externally. The answers provided here are detailed below and they cast meaningful additional light to those identified in figure 5.

Figure 6

What might encourage you to run (more) events and activities, either in your shop or externally?

(Select all that apply)



As under figure 5, the results here highlight strong support – at seven in ten – for access to grants to support community engagement, and at six in ten, a clear preference for low admin access to grants to develop events facilities and enhance physical accessibility. Survey respondents were also asked to provide comments and suggestions in relation to this question. Several key priorities emerged from these responses:

- Funding demand to access larger spaces so that more people could participate in events
- A perception that funded bodies like universities and town halls and local arts centres could do more to offer their space at reasonable cost
- A desire for mentoring to advise on social media promotion and marketing.

In addition, time as the key resource was a recurring theme and this was strongly mirrored in the deep-dive interviews also, to quote one bookshop *"Time constraints and myself being the only staff member is the biggest reason we don't have capacity to do more with community groups"*.

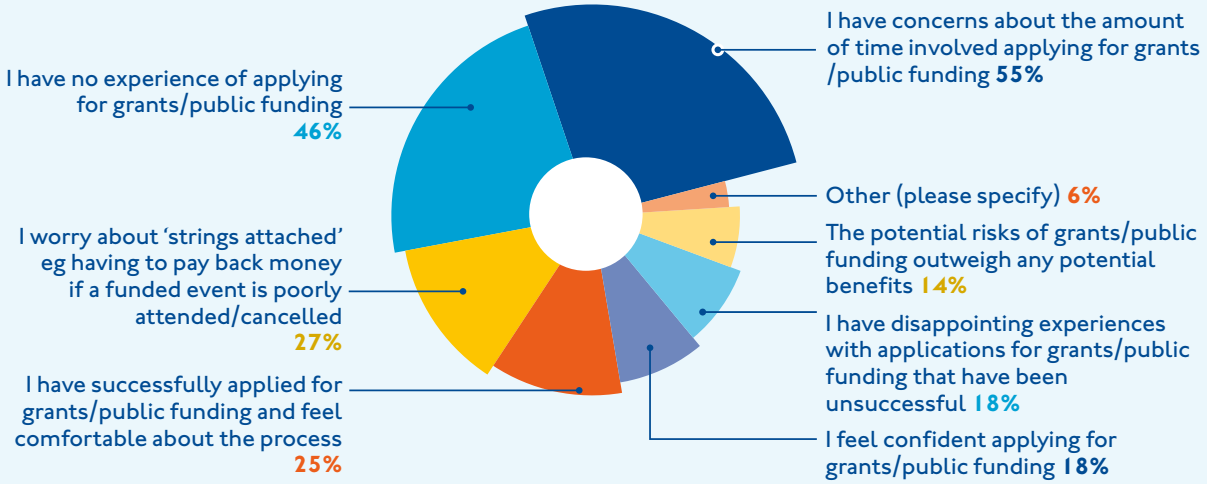
Grants & Public Funding

Gaining a better understanding of Indies experience of applying for grants and public funding (as part of supporting and enabling them to deliver their events and activities), is an important component of this research. Consequently, the survey asked respondents how they felt about applying for/using grants/public funding.

Figure 7

How do you feel about applying for/using grants/public funding?

(Select all that apply)



The main responses were:

- 55% cited concerns about the amount of time involved applying for grants/public funding
- 46% have no experience of applying for grants/public funding
- 27% expressed worries about 'strings attached' e.g., having to pay money back if an event is poorly attended/cancelled
- 25% said they had successfully applied for grants/public funding and feel comfortable about the process
- 18% said they felt confident applying for grants/public funding
- 18% have had disappointing experiences with applications for grants/public funding that have been unsuccessful
- 15% expressed view that the potential risk of grants/public funding outweigh any potential benefits.

Respondents were asked to make additional comments in relation to this question, a selection of these are detailed below and they speak powerfully about the realities many Indies encounter in engaging in the grant making process.

> *"Key is more grant funding that does not take too long to apply for and where administrative burden is low because it takes you away from bookselling on shop floor."*

One suggestion was,

> *"Some sort of website which has a database of community groups to work with,"*

and in a similar vein another indie commented that,

> *"It would be good to know who to connect with. It feels like everything is so scattered..."*

There were positive examples cited where Arts Council England funding had played an important and in one instance a vital role in enabling their shop to navigate and survive important challenges such as needing to find new premises when it was still at a fledgling stage. Others cited the helpfulness of Arts Council England staff. Alongside this there was a strand of feedback relating to the language and terminology of grant application systems which many Indies felt could be complex and potentially risked being exclusionary. It is understood that this is a recognised issue in the sector, for example work is underway within Arts Council England to help enhance the accessibility of the language used on its grant system.

There is an emerging need for clear signposting, skills enhancement and peer-to-peer mentoring to improve confidence, awareness and skills amongst booksellers for grant applications activity, and the BA could develop resources to help its members deal with this challenge.

The role of digital marketing in building cultural activities

A recurring theme throughout the deep dive interviews was the power and effectiveness of digital marketing as a key means of building successful events and activities (the term digital marketing is used here as a shorthand which encompasses marketing through social media channels such as Instagram as well as through e-mail based communication e.g., shop newsletters). Significant investment of time is made for example to building up followings on key channels such as Instagram and through e-mail based marketing, which help to build crucial levels of emotional engagement in communities about the Indie bookshop and its activities. In addition, 'digital marketing' is a key means of building audiences and ensuring strong demand for the programmes of cultural activity arranged by the shop.

A barrier which prevents some Indies reaching their true potential is often a lack of knowledge about the best practice techniques and core technical skills involved in running a successful presence on social media. Finding the time to build these skills alongside all the other demands is a key challenge. One potential enabler, particularly for those Indies looking to establish and expand their cultural activities is

to provide a form of digital marketing support, for example via mentoring/training support, specialized training seminars. This is an area which industry bodies such as the BA might wish to evaluate further how targeted funding, perhaps via a grant system might help improve Indies skills and capacities in this important area.

Business and Organisational Structures

A theme which has featured in a number of responses to the survey related to the advantages and disadvantages of different business models in particular as they determine access to certain types of grants and funding, and how this can shape the ability to deliver cultural activity in their communities. This also featured in a number of the deep dive interviews (seven of the 26 members interviewed have either CIC or CBS status).

There is no evidence from this research which points to a 'one size fits all' preference i.e., context and a range of other factors (not least the often distinctive circumstances shaping the creation of the indie), determine which form of business structure and legal status best suits the circumstances of an individual bookshop. It is evident from this research that regardless of business structure, indie bookshops, deliver a remarkable contribution to the cultural lives of their communities and also play a wider role in promoting wider social benefits especially around wellbeing in their communities.

However, one interesting possibility which emerged from several discussions is whether a hybrid model might work for some Indies. For instance, a discrete part of a shop such as its children's section and the related engagement to support literacy and cultural enrichment, could operate as a CIC or CBS, alongside non children's books, activities and events which continue to run as a traditional limited company/sole trader basis. This could be a topic for further research and exploration.

Booka Bookshop, Shropshire


Kenilworth Books
Kenilworth Books
we have a big, fun area of
Children's Books!
pop in for a browse, for great recommendations or to order.
We also support and supply books to our local schools!
come in to find out more.

Conclusion

The picture which emerges from this research gives powerful evidence of the scale, and popularity of cultural activities delivered by England's independent bookshops. It is not an overstatement to say that the sector is a cultural powerhouse, with a deep and meaningful reach into numerous communities across the length and breadth of the country. This role is often echoed by the wider contribution of high street bookshops in general, including Waterstones, Foyles, and Blackwell's, who play an important role in the cultural enrichment of the communities they operate in. This means in practice that accessibility to culture is greatly enhanced and strengthened through the commitment, dedication, and expertise of England's high street bookshops in general. This activity is highly dynamic and despite the challenges of covid and declining high streets, continues to innovate and grow. In short, independent bookshops and bookshops in general, represent and act as creative and cultural assets across the country.

This research report has also highlighted the multi-faceted contribution of independent bookshops to the social fabric and cohesion of their communities and the country as a whole. By extension this contribution also aligns with and supports key facets of Arts Council England's strategy '*Let's Create*.' A number of areas stand out, not least the role played by many Indies in supporting schools in connecting children to the joy of reading and creativity. This helps to deliver lifetime skills and cultural enrichment. Indie bookshops have a genuine claim to be engine rooms of the nation's reading and cultural enjoyment. The instrumental role played by Indies in supporting and increasingly establishing arts and literary festivals deserves to be better known and supported. Indies are skilled and talented at 'audience creation,' combining to powerful effect their knowledge of the communities they serve with their expert knowledge of the best of books and writers. A key bedrock of this activity is the strength of Indies' desire to make a difference to their communities, with cultural enrichment at the heart of this commitment, allied with an emphasis on making these activities inclusive, accessible, and progressive in terms of representation.

Conclusion cont'd

However, this powerful contribution should not be taken for granted. As this research highlights, there is considerable potential for Indies (and high street bookshops as a whole), to extend further their delivery of high quality creative and cultural engagement. Consequently, targeted improvements across the framework of activity within the book industry and wider public sector partners would help to sustain Indies contribution. Ensuring a stronger base of skills in digital marketing is an important priority, especially as it is a prerequisite for enabling new Indies to successfully establish their own programmes of cultural events. In addition in light of the strong evidence from this research of the mutual dependence of bookshops and authors, an important priority is to ensure an enduring commitment across the book and publishing sectors to a mixed ecosystem for author events.

National and Local Government also has an important role in supporting Indies. At a national level two priority areas emerge. First, any reform of business rates should factor in a system of 'cultural amenity' reliefs for the bookshop sector, to reflect its social and cultural contribution. Second, actively enabling school libraries in England to build links with independent bookshops through a dedicated element of grant funding which can only be spent at a 'bricks and mortar' bookshop or online via platforms like bookshop.org which are dedicated to supporting Indies. At a local government level, especially for the book trade's partners in libraries and arts centres, it is hoped that this research will provide inspiring examples of best practice partnerships.

On funding bodies, including Arts Council England, it is clear that they already play a meaningful role in enabling many parts of the indie book sector to deliver cultural enrichment. Naturally, there are ideas and proposals for developing and enhancing this support. These will be an important component of an ongoing dialogue between key stakeholders including (but not limited to) the Booksellers Association and Arts Council England, enhanced by development of an action plan based on the data included in this report. The Booksellers Association will examine the scope for improving the signposting of and access to information on grants and other sources of support, including Arts Council England's Digital Culture Network. An important strand of this dialogue will be with the partners in the publishing sector, for example around encouraging best practice in expanding the reach of author events at Indies across all regions and contexts.

This report has also identified areas which could benefit from additional research. This includes investigation to better understand the social benefits for individuals who participate in any of the range of activities provided by independent bookshops. This would seek to evaluate and quantify the range of mental and physical health benefits for individuals and in turn understand the wider benefits this provides to

communities and society, for example by reducing ill-health, and strengthening community cohesion. A sincere hope is that this report and in particular the range of best practices identified will contribute to strengthening the approaches of a wider cohort of Indies in England and also across the BA's wider membership in Scotland, Wales and across the island of Ireland.

A link to the survey questions sent to BA members is available here
www.booksellers.org.uk/BookSellers/Questionnaire.pdf

Appendix 1:
Contributors to Deep-dive Research Interviews

Afrori Books	Brighton City Centre
Kemptown Books	Kemptown, Brighton
Much Ado Books	Alfriston, East Sussex
Sevenoaks Bookshop	Sevenoaks, Kent
The Book Nook	Hove, East Sussex
Bookbugs and Dragon Tales	Norwich City Centre
Chorleywood Bookshop	Chorleywood, Hertfordshire
Kett's Books	Wymondham, Norfolk
Red Lion Books	Colchester, Essex
Bookshop on The Green	Edgbaston, Birmingham (planned re-opening now on hold)
The Heath Bookshop	Kings Heath, Birmingham
The Book Stop	St Helens, Lancashire
The House of Books and Friends	King Street, Manchester
Dormouse Books	Belper, Derbyshire
Five Leaves Bookshop	Nottingham City Centre
Kibworth Books	Kibworth, Leicestershire
DRAKE The Bookshop	Stockton-On Tees
Gay's The Word	Marchmont Street, Central London
Newham Bookshop	Barking Road, Newham, London
Round Table Books	Brixton, London
The Children's Bookshop	Muswell Hill, London
Village Books, Dulwich	Dulwich, London
The Rabbit Hole	Brigg, North Lincolnshire
White Rose Book Café	Thirsk, North Yorkshire
The Bookery	Crediton, Devon
Yellow-Lighted Bookshop	Tetbury & Nailsworth, Gloucestershire

Address:

Booksellers Association, 6 Bell Yard, London WC2A 2JR
T: +44 207 421 4640 E: mail@booksellers.org.uk

Online:

booksellers.org.uk
nationalbooktokens.com
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facebook.com/thebooksellersassociation
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youtube.com/booksaremybag

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