BOOKSELLERS ASSOCIATION

BOOKSELLING IRELAND
DÍOLACHÁN LEABHAR ÉIREANN

# Bringing Culture into the Heart of Communities – The Cultural Role and Value of Ireland's Bookshops








A Research Report from The Booksellers Association of The UK and Ireland

# The Booksellers Association of UK and Ireland (BA) and Bookselling Ireland

The mission of the Booksellers Association of the UK and Ireland (BA) is to support, advise, and advocate for booksellers – to public representatives, to the media, and to publishers and other book trade stakeholders. The Booksellers Association works continuously to provide services for members, and runs consumer-facing campaigns promoting books, bookshops, and reading. Bookselling Ireland is a committee of the BA and is made up of Irish members of the BA, including representatives from both chain and independent bookshops all over Ireland. Bookselling Ireland offers support and advice to Book Trade Conference and learning and networking events for members. In addition, BA members from Ireland play a key role in the governance and strategic direction of the organisation, for example through membership of its Advisory Council (which determines the organisation's approach to a range of key issues facing the sector and its members).

# Acknowledgements

The research was commissioned by The Booksellers Association of UK and Ireland (BA) and Bookselling Ireland.

I would like to thank the numerous bookshop members across Ireland 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. This research would not have been possible without all of these contributions. In addition, the Committee Members of Bookselling Ireland have provided helpful input on the draft version of this report.

# The Author

Howard Davies has a background in Public Affairs and Public Policy. Howard is a self-confessed bookshop enthusiast. He has previously worked for the Booksellers Association of UK and Ireland as (maternity cover) Head of Policy and Public Affairs, where he advised and supported Bookselling Ireland and members in Ireland on a range of policy issues.

# Foreword

We are very proud to bring you Bookselling Ireland and the Booksellers Association's impact report, **The Cultural Role and Value of Ireland's Bookshops**, the first report of its kind to be commissioned.

The report is a huge testament to the creativity, generosity, entrepreneurship and hard work of Ireland's bookshops. It lays out in inspiring detail the range of events run by bookshops, the energetic and innovative ways in which bookshops connect with their customers, their communities and their commercial and cultural partners across the country. The work they do with young people and schools, the promotion they give to the Irish language and the role they play in supporting inbound tourism. Much of the work done by Ireland's bookshops is unfunded, and originates in a generosity of spirit which marks much of Irish bookselling.

With literature at its heart in a characteristic and unique fashion, Ireland has always valued its bookshops, and seen them as part of the wider ecosystem of writing, reading and loving literature. Bookshops have also always been part of the fabric of the country's consumption of books in a different way, being the means by which parents and children stocked up on school books and back to school supplies every August.

The world is changing however. Amazon.ie will launch in 2025, bringing with it the potential to damage Ireland's main streets in ways soberingly prefigured in the UK and US. The Irish government's (welcome) support for parents of school age children in their provision of school books via schools rather than retailers will result in permanent disruption to (largely) SME ecosystem which, for generations, has supplied Ireland's families with their school supplies. That ecosystem is now in jeopardy, and taken with the arrival of Amazon, provided Bookselling Ireland and the BA with an urgent requirement – to advocate for bookshops in a more urgent and data-driven manner.

This advocacy is crucial. Amazon has been running a long time in the UK market, where the number of bookshops halved over the 20 years of their growing dominance, and where the message is finally getting across to legislators and regulators that Amazon's behemoth status needs challenging. It became essential that we laid out the contribution – both cultural and social – of bookshops to Ireland's main streets, and to the literary landscape, to Ireland's families and to the wealth of the nation.

With this landscape before us, we commissioned this report to examine the activities and contributions of Ireland's bookshops, and to interview a number of bookshops in detail. To thereby lay out the data on the contributions and ambitions of those bookshops, and also bring colour and celebration to the specifics of what they deliver.

It's been a great privilege to watch this report take shape, and we are immensely proud of Ireland's bookshops, and the booksellers who work in them. We will use this report to demonstrate and illustrate those facts, and to advocate for support for bookshops from the industry, from the government and from consumers themselves.

**Dawn Behan, Chair, Bookselling Ireland**

**Meryl Halls, MD, Booksellers Association of the UK & Ireland**

# Contents



## List of Abbreviations

**BA** – Booksellers Association of The UK and Ireland

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

**YA** – Young Adult (a category of book)

# Executive Summary

## Background

In May 2024 Bookselling Ireland, the Irish arm of the Booksellers Association of the UK and Ireland (BA) commissioned this research into the cultural role and value of Ireland's bookshops. It has long been the contention of the BA that Ireland's bookshops, alongside their contribution as vital economic lynchpins of Ireland's main streets, play a significant role in enriching the cultural life and social cohesion of communities in every part of the country. In broad terms therefore, this research seeks to determine the extent to which and in what ways bookshops across Ireland enrich the communities they operate in and the country more broadly, whilst identifying enablers and barriers so that this contribution can be secured and strengthened.

## Ireland's Bookshops are Powerhouses of Cultural Enrichment and Community Engagement

Ireland's bookshops represent and act as creative and cultural assets in their communities and taken together are an important, arguably essential component of the nation's cultural infrastructure. They perform this role with flair, generosity and a dedication which deserves to be better known and supported. The research findings demonstrate how this contribution can be found across every part of the country, in a mix of urban and more rural/small town settings. The scale and popularity of bookshop events and activities strongly suggests their value and ongoing benefit to the cultural wellbeing and social cohesion of communities.

In the context of the post covid recovery, and the intensifying risk of digital media driven social isolation across the generations, bookshop activity like writer events and reading groups represent important antidotes. Moreover, in an era vulnerable to the malign dynamic of disinformation and misinformation, bookshops assume an even larger dual role as places where citizens can access reliable and trusted sources of information, and as places where rational debate and competing ideas can be respectfully exchanged and developed.
This research underscores and evidences the extensive reach these activities achieve with an estimated 75,000 people attending bookshop organised writer events across the year (writers is used throughout this report as a shorthand which covers all authors, poets, playwrights and illustrators). In addition, many thousands gain benefit from bookshop organised book clubs and creative activity such as writing classes. Across all these activities community connections and bonds are strengthened.

## Championing Ireland's Writers

Bookshops are an integral part of Ireland's literary landscape and infrastructure, supporting a wide range of writers, from internationally acclaimed novelists, to budding authors and local historians. Central to this is the role of bookshops in enabling writers to connect with new audiences in a range of contexts and locations. This is true for those writing in Irish, and those who are working primarily through English. It is not an overstatement to say that without the work and support of Ireland's bookshops, the breadth and vitality of its cultural and artistic connections would significantly diminish. This applies in major centres like Dublin, Cork, and Galway, but equally in small town and rural settings in every part of the country. Indeed, this research reveals how Ireland's bookshops, regardless of location and socio-economic context, demonstrate a talent and skill for 'audience creation' which acts as a powerful catalyst for widening avenues for cultural inclusion and enrichment in a diverse set of communities. Bookshops perform this role with flair, generosity and a dedication which deserves to be better known and supported.

## Providing Important Support to The Irish Language

An important strand of this research was to better understand the extent to which and how Ireland's bookshops support the Irish language. The results are encouraging, as they highlight the role of bookshops in providing Irish language books in a variety of genres, and in offering opportunities for Irish speakers to connect with Irish language writers. A trio of figures illustrate this commitment; 94% of Ireland's bookshops sell Irish language books; 89% would like to sell more Irish language titles; and nearly one in three bookshops support Irish language events/ festivals. The research also identifies a range of suggested options for boosting the ability of booksellers to provide an even stronger range of Irish language titles and an enhanced flow of events with Irish language writers.

## Supporting Children's Literacy and Cultural Enrichment

This research makes clear the ongoing contribution of bookshops to turn children and young adults into enthusiastic and confident readers and to provide them with precious opportunities for cultural enrichment. This commitment is heartfelt and informed by a passionate desire for all children and young people, regardless of circumstances, to enjoy the riches of reading, and be inspired in their own creativity through meeting writers and illustrators. It is a commitment allied with expertise on the best of children's and Young Adult (YA) literature, in particular working energetically to ensure a full place for Irish writers.

## Innovation in Meeting Community Cultural and Social Needs

The breadth and depth of bookshop organised activities and events highlighted by this research have a powerful dynamic of their own. Bookshops – both independent bookshops and chains such as Eason, Dubray (now part of Eason), have always been important as platforms where communities can engage with writers. This report highlights the positive results of this work and identifies examples of innovation to improve representation and inclusion. These all speak powerfully of the community, as well as cultural benefits delivered on a daily basis by bookshops across every part of the country. Bookshops physical presence and profound local roots are key to this.

## The Positive Power of Partnerships

A key facet underscored and substantiated by this research, is the extent of the positive partnerships and mutual support networks involved in delivering bookshop led cultural and community activities. A stand out area is the excellent collaborations many bookshops enjoy with local libraries and librarians. These ongoing collaborations are 'vital yeasts' which enable meaningful partnerships and collaborations, to grow and succeed. At the same time, the report identifies areas for improvement, for example where the BA could enhance its own training and support capabilities.

## Grants and Funding

It is notable that 97% of bookshops provide (some or all) of their author events and activities (like book clubs), free of charge. This generosity is a testament to a cohort of retailers which genuinely values the enrichment and joy which cultural activity brings their community. However a consistent refrain from BA members in Ireland was that if grants were available to help pay the costs of writers to participate in bookshop events (in particular debut and less well established authors and poets), this would encourage and enable more bookshops to put on a wider range of events and activities. Consequently, a core recommendation from this research is for the BA to develop further its partnership with bodies like The Arts Council, to evaluate options for making funding available to meet the travel and other costs of less well established writers, so that they can participate in more bookshop based events.

## A Compelling Case for Investment and Support

At a time when bookselling in Ireland is grappling with significant challenges, it is hoped that the findings from this research will help enhance perceptions of Ireland's bookshops as a significant contributor to the health and vitality of the nations' culture and its communities. The ongoing economic contribution of Ireland's bookshops should not be overlooked. An important dimension of this contribution is the positive role played by bookshops in helping to attract domestic visitors and overseas tourists. The report therefore sets out a range of recommendations for enhanced support by government and the public sector, as well as key parts of the book industry including the Booksellers Association. Key advocacy priorities include introducing a culture voucher for Ireland's 16-18 year olds, action to ensure fairer access to procurement opportunities for school library and local library book contracts, and a strengthening of government policy framework for SMEs, and town centres.

## Research Methods

A multi-method approach has been used to generate a substantive and 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 bookshops in the Republic of Ireland which generated responses from 48 members, representing 108 bookshop outlets – c.50% of bookshops in Ireland. In addition a series of 'deep dive' interviews were held with 17 booksellers, representing a mix of locations, contexts, and scale. These interviews allowed a deeper exploration of themes around cultural and community contribution as well as insights regarding enablers and barriers.

Books Upstairs, Dublin

# Introduction

## It has long been the contention of the BA and Bookselling Ireland that its members, play an out-size role in enriching the cultural and social lives of the numerous and diverse communities they operate in across the country. In broad terms therefore, this research seeks to determine the extent to which and in what ways Ireland's 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, whether an independent or part of a chain, by virtue of what it sells, provides the community it serves with a key means of accessing culture. However, this report looks beyond that vital purpose to the fuller related range of activities and events run by or supported by bookshops. These activities alongside the selling of books, are intrinsic to 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 movingly 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... it is important that we continue to support our bookshops, ensuring they continue to play their important role in our towns, villages and suburbs – remaining visible on our high streets and relevant in our lives... I thank you for all you do to enrich and empower the creativity and imaginative thinking that is such an essential part of our being thinking."*

It is not an over-statement to say that a passionate desire to help nurture culture, and community well-being are central to the purpose of Ireland's bookshops. This report sets out to establish and assess how that purpose is achieved, what that means for the communities served and the cultural life of the nation as a whole, and how, with an improved framework of support, that contribution can be nurtured, enhanced, and secured.

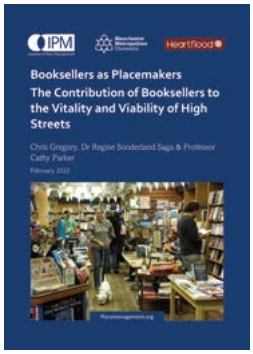
### Ireland's Bookshops – Key trends and figures

An important starting point for this research is to provide context on overall trends regarding bookshops in Ireland and their challenging commercial realities. Using BA membership figures, the number of bookshops in Ireland in May 2024 stood at 217 up from 208 bookshops in 2017. However, the number of independent bookshops stands at 129, down from 138 in January 2023. The decline in the number of independent bookshops is arguably indicative of the vulnerability of Irish bookshops to the increasing pressures of the costs of doing business, the rise in levels of on-line book buying, and the major changes impacting the schools book market. Bookselling Ireland have strongly supported the move to relieve parents of the costs of buying school books. Nonetheless, they have sought to ensure these changes are implemented in a way which allows bookshops to compete, for example for tendering processes to give proper weighting to social benefits, so that the new procurement framework does not permanently disadvantage individual bookshops, especially those in more small town and rural locations.

## An Overview of Existing Research on Ireland's Bookshops


Commissioned by the BA, the economist Jim Power undertook a study into the economic contribution of Ireland's bookshops in 2017. This research was subsequently updated and extended in 2021 (the results of which were published in February 2022). Both of these reports emphasized the scale and extent of bookshop's economic contribution. So, in 2021 Ireland's bookshops:

- Paid €9.6 million in taxes to the Revenue – this provides sufficient funding for 137 vacant houses to be turned back into homes (through the 'Vacant Property Refurbishment Grants' scheme – set at a maximum value of €70k per property)
- Generated €189 million to the economy (aggregate GVA)
- Each €1 spent in an Irish bookshop generated €2.40 in the wider economy
- Paid €43.7 million in wages, which were recirculated in the local economy (Ireland's bookshops have a presence in every county)
- For every €1 paid in wages by Ireland's bookshops an additional €2.20 was generated in the wider economy with every €1 paid in wages by Ireland's bookshops
- 3,145 jobs were supported by Irish bookselling, including 1,747 directly and a further 1,398 in the wider economy.



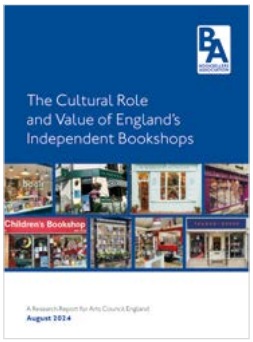

These reports also underscored the strength of the sector's links with the publishing sector and on through the value chain to writers, illustrators, and their agents. An important point made by these research reports was the increased economic activity that bookshops and bookselling fosters elsewhere in the economy. An example of that is the positive impact of Ireland's bookshops in helping to attract visitors from overseas and domestically. Inbound tourism alone is estimated to be worth €5.3bn annually to the Irish economy. It is interesting to note the important place given by official websites such as Ireland.com to the country's rich literary tradition, included the role of bookshops as key places for visitors to access this ever developing body of great literature. A potential topic for further research is to better identify the role and contribution of bookshops within the tourist sector in Ireland.

The insights from the Jim Powers' research were complemented by other research initiatives. A prominent example is the **Booksellers as Placemakers** report of February 2022 (commissioned by the Booksellers Association), 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.

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 touch points, including the commitment of independent booksellers to literacy and community. 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 that this would give educational benefits for local communities and would strengthen the symbiotic relationship between schools, libraries and bookshops.




Another contribution to advancing understanding of the cultural role and social value of bookshops was made by the research conducted by the Booksellers Association (commissioned by Arts Council England), into the **The Cultural Role and Value of England's Independent Bookshops (published in September 2024)**. This report laid new ground in evidencing the scale and popularity of the cultural activities delivered by independent bookshops in England, alongside their social and community impacts. The sector emerged as a cultural powerhouse, with a deep and meaningful reach into communities in urban and more rural settings. This role was echoed by the wider contribution of high street bookshops in general. The report also highlighted bookshops role as vital engines of children's literacy and cultural enrichment, alongside the role of bookshops in advancing representation and inclusion. The instrumental role of bookshops in supporting and developing literary and arts festivals was another key finding identified by the report. In overall terms, the report underscored the role of bookshops and independent bookshops in particular as cultural assets. At the same time the report highlighted that this contribution should not be taken for granted – the sector's position is potentially fragile. The report identifies a number of recommended areas for targeted improvements across the framework of activity within the book industry, and wider public and arts sector partners, as well as priority areas for government in the UK at national and local levels.

It is also worth noting and drawing attention to the **Bookselling Ireland: A Manifesto from the Booksellers Association 2023**. The manifesto highlighted the intrinsic role of bookshops as social, economic, and cultural assets for the country. It also identified a range of priority recommendations for policy makers designed to help secure this contribution. These included improvements to the commercial rates taxation system, ring-fenced discretionary budgets for libraries in respect of books of local interest, and for Arts Council funding dedicated to enabling bookshops to hold more events with Irish writers.


Charlie Byrne's Bookshop, Galway City

# 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 (the survey questions are available through the link here: https://booksellers.org.uk/BookSellers/IrelandCulturalReport.pdf

## Survey Design

The bedrock of the research is the results of the survey which went out to every bookshop in Ireland (and in BA membership – the two categories are overwhelmingly co-terminus), on 27 May 2024 and remained open until 11 June 2024. The survey generated 48 responses, representing 108 bookshop outlets in Ireland, with a presence in 21 counties. This means that the survey data represents 50% of all bookshops in Ireland, drawn from 81% of counties, so making it highly representative.

The survey questionnaire covered 37 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 in hosting/organizing author events, it then asked them to provide examples of collaborations which have worked especially well. The survey also asked about members' motivations, specifically asking what has encouraged/enabled them to run their events and activities? The range of organisations/groups in their community whom they support; how the costs of these events are met; feedback about the impact of their events on the cultural and social life in their community; and questions asking about barriers, including 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 Ireland's bookshops. In total, 2,120 answer responses were gathered across the 37 questions - 1,921 quantitative and 289 qualitative responses.

### Table 1. Location of deep dive Interviews (7 conducted at the bookshop and 10 conducted on line/phone)

***NB** – a number of the interviews were with members with branches across a number of counties, but the listing here relates to the actual physical location where the interview was conducted/the interviewee is based.

## 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 here as deep dive interviews - were conducted with 17 booksellers across 16 bookshops. The deep dive interviews were conducted between 4 June 2024 and 21 June 2024; seven took place at the individual bookshop, and 10 were conducted online. 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; nine are in city locations, and 8 in small town/rural locations. The deep dive interviews were designed to provide additional insights and context to further inform and strengthen the research insights shaping this report.


Kennys, Galway City


Halfway Up The Stairs, Greystones, Co. Wicklow

# Research Results – Part 1
## Ireland's Bookshops in their Communities

The survey data, and findings 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 Ireland's bookshops contribute to the cultural life of their communities. **Part 2** examines the enablers and barriers to this contribution.

### Ireland's Bookshops in their Communities – Headline Findings

#### Strong cultural leadership by Ireland's bookshops:

- 83% run activities such as author readings/ book clubs for their local communities
- 73% support local literary/arts festivals
- 54% host events in-store for local schools
- 78% work with Irish publishers to deliver events/activities.

#### Bookshops provide key support to Irish Language culture:

- 94% stock Irish language titles
- 40% run events/activities in order to specifically boost Irish language cultural activity
- 89% would like to stock more Irish language titles
- 30% support Irish language events and festivals
- 18% directly work to support Irish language groups in their locality.

#### Extensive reach and popularity of bookshop organised events and activities:

- An estimated 75k annual attendance at bookshop events
- 54% of bookshops organise 10 or more events a year
- Nearly 1 in 4 bookshops organise 30 or more events a year
- Ireland's bookshops are helping to advance inclusion and representation
- Generosity - the overwhelming majority of events and activities are provided free of charge.

#### Ireland's bookshops as engine rooms of children's literacy and cultural enrichment:

- Just over 50% of bookshops host events in-store for local schools
- 40% of bookshops support parent/children's groups
- 38% organise for authors to go into local schools
- 35% organise book clubs/reading groups for children
- Leading role in promoting Irish children's writers and illustrators.

## Ireland's Bookshops Contribution to their Communities

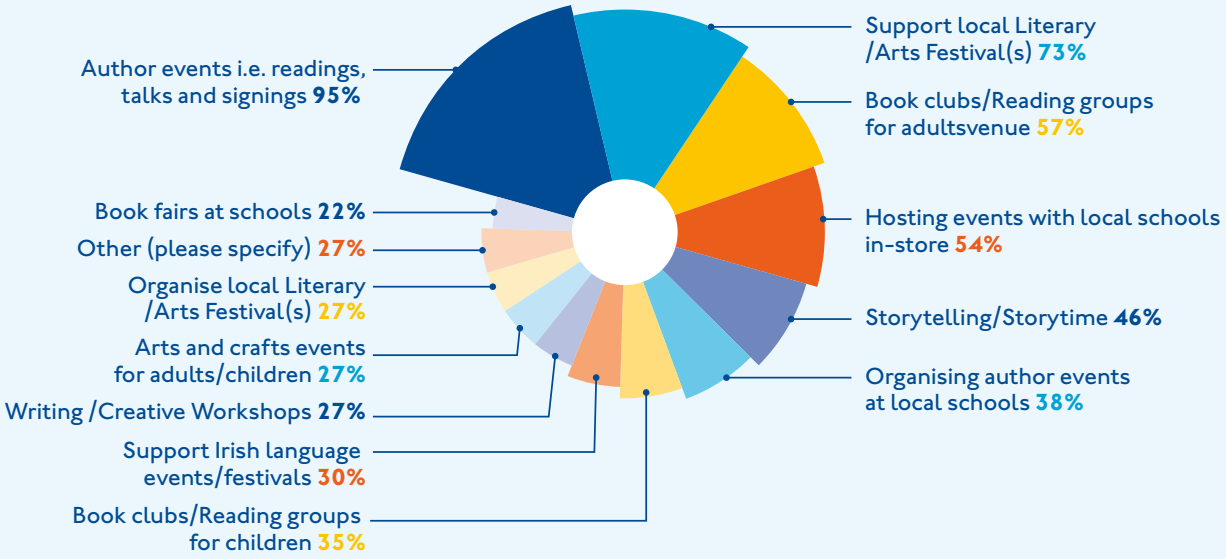
A key starting point for this research was to build up a detailed picture of the range of events and activities undertaken by bookshops across Ireland. It is not an exaggeration to say that the picture which emerges powerfully evidences the vital, arguably indispensable role played by bookshops as places where the rich talents of Ireland's past and present writers, illustrators, and publishers meet the minds and imaginations of Ireland's readers.

The connections made with contemporary, often emerging Irish writers (in Irish and English), are particularly important as they are a key mechanisms for boosting the careers and profiles of these writers. In addition, they generate fresh cultural and creative connections to multiple communities across the nation. That skill, in what is termed 'audience creation,' means that bookshops enable a vibrant ongoing set of connections and a rich dialogue between communities and writers. A notable feature of this activity, and one underscored by this research, is how bookshops provide a vital platform for the current generation of hugely talented Irish writers to connect with communities throughout the country. As the research results evidence, this happens through the role of bookshops and booksellers in working generously, imaginatively, and skillfully on events and collaboration initiatives. Booksellers are not ciphers, but use their agency, expert insights, and experience to inform and shape the ongoing conversation between Ireland's writers and its readers. They are critical to delivering a form of 'cultural alchemy.'

### Figure 1

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

*(Select all that apply)*



A number of striking features emerge from this data. First, with over eight in ten (83%) of bookshops running activities and events for their communities, is the extremely high level of cultural engagement by the bookshop sector. Second, is the range of activities and support involved (all figures relate to those bookshops running activities and events):

- **95% provide author events i.e., readings, talks, and signings**
- **73% support local literary /arts festivals**
- **57% organise book clubs/reading groups for adults**
- **30% support Irish language events/festivals**
- **27% organise writing/creative workshops**
- **27% organise local literary /arts festivals.**

An important strand of this data relates to bookshop support for schools and children's literacy, for example, 54% of Ireland's bookshops organise events at their shops for local schools. Bookshop role in supporting children's literacy and educators is discussed in more detail in a separate section on pages 25-27.

Drilling down within each of these areas of bookshop organised and supported activity, and drawing on findings from the deep dive interviews, reflects the role of Ireland's bookshops in providing a rich and vibrant array of cultural and community focused activities. Examples of this from a range of geographical settings are explored in more depth in the 'Bookshops in Focus' section on pages 19-21.

The survey also uncovered striking data relating to the frequency of these events (an event is defined here as any bookshop organised gathering or activity), which taken together with the estimated number of attendees, highlights both the extent of bookshop led activity and their popularity in every part of the country. The survey revealed the following about Ireland's bookshops' events activity:

- **54% deliver 10 plus events each year**
- **38% deliver 20 plus events each year**
- **24% organise 30 plus events each year**
- **Average attendance at events stands at 37**
- **Average best attendance stands at 138**
- **Estimated total of 75k attendees at bookshop activities across a year. ***

With attendance average of 37, and an average best attendance of 138, the range of attendance delivered by bookshop events reflects their popularity and a distinct skill at 'audience creation and engagement'. The reported range of attendance is also striking, for example a number of bookshops reported attendance between 400-500, with several attracting in the region of 200/250, and numerous over 100. Whilst these might be outliers, it is worth noting that eleven bookshops attracted average attendance of 50 plus. Arguably, these figures reflect the quality of the events organised, their accessibility, and the appetite amongst the reading public.

It was not possible within the structure of this survey data to provide a fully accurate assessment of the number of individuals attending bookshop events across Ireland. However, a broad approximation delivers an estimated number of attendees at bookshop events of 75k* for 2023.

*(This figure draws on an extrapolation from the survey data; with an estimated number of bookshop organised events in a year of 2,037, which was then, multiplied by the average attendance figure of 37.)

A theme which powerfully resounded from the survey data and the deep dive interviews, was the close and continuous connection between Ireland's writers and its bookshops. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this is a golden thread, as bookshops are vital to choosing, recommending (the power of bookseller 'handselling' can be considerable), and promoting the work of Irish writers. This applies to debut and unknown writers as well as to the growing cohort of nationally and internationally renowned Irish writers. It is striking that this activity is strongly represented not just in key centres like Dublin, Galway, and Cork but also in a range of rural and smaller town settings. Best practice examples of these are discussed in more detail in the 'Bookshops in Focus' section below.

## Bookshops in Focus
## Leadership in supporting Irish Literary Life

### Books Upstairs, Dublin; Tertulia Books, Westport, Co Mayo; The Maynooth Bookshop, County Kildare

© Books Upstairs


© Tertulia

The diverse range of literary activity supported and fostered by these events was strongly evident in the survey data and from the deep dive interviews. For example, **Books Upstairs**, Dublin's oldest independent bookshop, hosts free poetry readings every Sunday, consistently attended by forty people. In the words of Louisa Earls of **Books Upstairs** "*Poetry – we believe it has inherent value... and these gatherings would not happen otherwise,*" Louisa goes on to describe "*the mutual support community with poets – which the shop is at the nexus of.*" As well as using its convening power and generously offering its space, **Books Upstairs** activity, and the multiple other examples every week across Ireland's bookshops emphasise the importance of bricks and mortar events which in Louisa's words "*have a special feeling.*"

The research findings demonstrated how this cultural enrichment is not confined to Dublin but is evident in a range of settings across the country. For example, **Tertulia Books**, in Westport, Co. Mayo, is dedicated to being a cultural and community space, inviting locals and visitors, in the words of Brid Conroy its owner "*to experiencing the joys of books and involve yourself in it.*" From opening its doors in 2019, **Tertulia Books** has had events, creativity, and culture at its heart. Activities include groups on solving climate change, a range of book clubs, including history, and for children, as well as a short story group for writers aimed at helping them to explore and develop their abilities. **Tertulia Books** has also developed and amplified its cultural and community impact by contributing to the programmes of local activity such as The Westport Festival, which delivers a programme of art and music. **Tertulia Books** is able to provide the festival with an additional reach of activity which would not happen otherwise and has a positive meaning and impact across the west of Ireland. **Tertulia Books'**

wider year long range of activity is supported by funding sources such as the 'creative communities' provided by Mayo County Council. Brid Conroy reported positively on the straightforward application process to 'creative communities.'

Another important strand highlighted by this research is the pivotal role bookshops such as **Maynooth University Bookshop and its 'sister shop' at University College Dublin, The Campus Bookshop**, provide key spaces for the promotion and discussion of specialist books and the related scholarship of university staff. This means that a range of important public policy topics are discussed in a safe, supportive, and accessible environment. Topics to date in 2024 for events at the two University campus based shops, have included, the future of the welfare state, and the latest strands of eco/green environmental thinking.

© Maynooth Bookshop

## Partnerships & Collaborations

To gain a deeper understanding, the survey also asked bookshops to list the range of who they worked with in hosting/organising author events. Writers at 86%, and Irish publishers at 78% sit at the heart of this collaboration. However, a mix of other community partners feature prominently in hosting/ organising author events;

- **43% work with UK or other country publishers**
- **41% work with local community groups**
- **41% work with local arts/music/literary festival**
- **38% work with local school/educational body**
- **38% work with local arts organisation**
- **22% work with local library**
- **16% work with charities**
- **11% work with national arts organisations**
- **11% work with Irish language specific bodies e.g., Foras na Gaeilge.**

The data highlights the rich ecosystem and span of community partnerships intrinsic to the work of Ireland's bookshops. Ideas around how these can be strengthened are explored elsewhere in this report under part 2 of the analysis and also in the recommendations section.

It is important to recognise that beneath each of these figures is a range of significant contributions to the vitality of the nation's cultural life, which would be hard to replace or replicate if bookshops' viability and numbers were to diminish.

## Book Clubs and Reading Groups

Alongside author events, book clubs/reading groups represent a highly meaningful contribution by Ireland's bookshops to the cultural and social life of communities across Ireland. . It is not untypical for bookshops to organise and host multiple book/ reading clubs, reflecting the level of demand within their locality. The survey revealed that 54% of Irish bookshops provide book clubs and reading groups.

Across a month, based on bookshops own estimates, the number of attendees at book clubs/reading groups were:

- **19% report 31-50 attendees**
- **27% report 21-30 attendees**
- **27% report 11-20 attendees**
- **4% report 50 plus.**

## Bookshops in Focus
## Powering Book and Reading Clubs

### Charlie Byrne's Bookshop, Galway City & Woodbine Books, Kilcullen, Co. Kildare

© Woodbine Books

**Charlie Byrne's Bookshop** in Galway **City** runs eight book/reading clubs, with a combined membership of over 100. This means that over a year, the shop just from these reading clubs is responsible for providing an estimated 9,600 hours of free cultural engagement for citizens of Galway and its wider region. (The shop also organises numerous author and poetry events by the shop throughout the year.)

The community reach of these activities in more rural/small town settings can also be considerable. For example, **Woodbine Books**, in Kilcullen, Co. Kildare, runs four book clubs for adults, with an average membership of 12-15, and three for children, with an average membership of 6-8 members. In addition, **Woodbine Books** organises a creative writing group with twenty-five members, whose ages vary from twenty year olds to one in their eighties. This group was set up by the team at **Woodbine Books** in response to a gap locally and strong expressions of interest from the community. Each month two pieces of its members writing are published in the local community magazine.

Taken across the year, these activities (which are provided free of charge), represent a significant level of cultural engagement provided by **Woodbine Books**, in a community of c, 4,000 people. This represents a substantial and meaningful contribution to the cultural life of the local community, as well as helping to build stronger social bonds and cross generational connections. It is also important not to overlook the added importance of such activity as Irish communities recover from the impacts of Covid. It would be a worthwhile strand of additional research to investigate the social and especially the health benefits of these activities, as they are potentially a strong example of the benefits of what is termed 'social prescribing.'

## Bookshops contribution to supporting the Irish language

An important focus for this research was to build up a detailed depiction of the range of activities undertaken by Ireland's bookshops to support the Irish language. This support takes a range of forms, including helping children and young adults to develop their Irish language skills, as well as providing outlets for connecting Irish language authors and literature with communities across the country. The survey data and the deep dive interviews revealed the strength of that commitment. It also highlighted areas where this important contribution to Ireland's national life and culture, could be enhanced. This support manifests itself in a variety of positive ways:

- **94% of Ireland's bookshops sell Irish language titles**
- **89% of Ireland's bookshops would like to sell more Irish language titles**
- **40% of bookshops are motivated to hold events because they boost Irish language activity**
- **38% cite a desire to boost Irish language cultural activity as a motivating factor encouraging them to run events and activities**
- **30% support Irish language events /festivals**
- **18% work with local Irish language groups.**

The survey asked booksellers additional questions about (a) what factors might prevent them from stocking more Irish language titles, and (b) what would encourage them to stock Irish language titles / stock more Irish language titles? Prominent responses received to these questions were:

- **More information about what titles are available (in English as well as Irish). Challenges in finding out information about them – *"we need to know more about available titles"* – summed up a request voiced in many responses**
- **Improved supply chain and marketing; specific examples included a strongly voiced desire for improved ease of ordering and availability through wholesalers.**
- **Levels of demand/sales**
- **Low discount compared with English language books**
- **Interest in the possibility of listings of new titles in categories such as age range/fiction/non-fiction; and best seller lists**
- **A common thread arose from booksellers' perception about their own levels of proficiency in Irish and so they rely on customers to recommend titles etc. *"We have an extensive range of Irish language books. Better grasp of the language would help us. All staff are currently studying Gaelige"***
- **The role of schools in encouraging purchases – at both primary and secondary levels (e.g., for school library titles).**

The research data identified a number of areas and ideas for improving the ability of Ireland's bookshops to promote Irish language literature and culture. These included, ring-fenced Arts Council funding (as part of a strand of funding to help the sector sustain its cultural events activity), for Irish language events. In addition, a strongly voiced theme from Ireland's bookshops was for enhanced flows of information on Irish language titles; and consideration of enhanced distribution channels. More detailed recommendations around how this contribution could be strengthened are discussed later in this report in the sections on enablers and barriers, and in the recommendations section.

## Bookshops in Focus
## Champions of Irish Language Literature and Learning

### An Siopa Leabhar, Dublin; Halfway Up The Stairs, Greystones, Co Wicklow; Charlie Byrne's Bookshop, Galway City and Kennys Books and Art Galleries, Galway City

© Halfway Up The Stairs



© Charlie Byrne's Bookshop

The cause of promoting and strengthening Irish language culture and literature is a cornerstone of many bookshops purpose and identity. The survey data powerfully demonstrates, virtually the entire cohort of Irish bookshops contribute in a meaningful way to providing Irish language books for children, learners, and adults. Clearly as bookshops are present in every county this acts as a vital nationwide means of connecting the nation with the joys and riches of the Irish language and its literature.

Enhancing access to children's literature in Irish is a distinctive and important facet of the cultural contribution of the nation's bookshops. For example, specialist children's bookshop, **Halfway Up The Stairs**, in Greystones, Co Wicklow, attaches real importance to ensuring a good stock of books in Irish, and developing strong links with specialist Irish language children's publishers, including cover reveals and pre-order campaigns. As **Halfway Up The Stairs** has a national profile this means that it can help influence the promotion and development of Irish language children's books on a nationwide basis.

Ensuring a strong and varied stock of Irish language titles are cornerstones of the activity of **Charlie Byrne's Bookshop**, and **Kennys Books and Art Galleries**, both based in Galway City (as such they have a clear connection to the Gaeltacht, but in addition both offering a service across the country and further afield). For both shops this support extends in other meaningful ways. For example, amidst the array of book/reading clubs provided by **Charlie Byrne's Bookshop**, is a monthly Irish language book club. In addition, the team at **Charlie Byrne's Bookshop** ensure a steady stream of Irish language author events through the year. This activity is augmented with an inspiring and wide-ranging stock of new and secondhand titles in Irish.

In a similar vein, promoting and advancing Irish language literature and culture is central to the purpose and focus of **Kennys Books and Art Galleries**. In the words of Tomás Kenny – *"a key purpose (of the shop) is to support the Irish language and its milieu... this is incredibly important to us – ensure we always have a really good stock and availability, including first*

*class website.*" Shop staff at **Kennys Books and Art Galleries** have strong levels of Irish allied with a deep levels of Irish language literary knowledge. Supporting writing and writers in Irish is also an important focus as part of **Kennys Books and Arts Galleries'** wider ambition to help nurture artistic and writing talent in the West of Ireland.

Another key pillar of bookselling in Irish is **An Siopa Leabhar,** based in central Dublin. **An Siopa Leabhar** is in the words of its manager Gráinne Ní Mhuilneoir, *"The Irish language bookshop for the island of Ireland and internationally for the diaspora."* So, it acts in effect as a national asset and resource, providing literature of all descriptions in Irish, but also acts as a help centre, fielding numerous questions and queries relating to the language. The shop plays an important role in promoting the Irish language internationally, and to providing speakers and learners with reading, writing, speaking, and listening opportunities. **An Siopa Leabhar** acts as a vital hub for people to use their Irish and in Gráinne's words "to see themselves in the books." As Irish medium education grows, especially in urban areas like Dublin, Gráinne reports a growing level of diversity in its speakers and customers, including Irish speakers who are also people of colour. In turn, this has helped catalyse feedback to publishers around the need for more diverse representation in Irish language books. Similarly, the shop ensures that through LGBTQ+ flags, and in its social media presence it helps promote an inclusive approach which celebrates diversity. Supporting Irish language transmission is an important priority for the team at **An Siopa Leabhar**, especially supporting young families whose children attend Irish medium schools, for example advising parents on suitable Irish language titles to read to their children (which also bolsters parents confidence in their own Irish language skills). **An Siopa Leabhar** also organises a range of events through the year which are conducted in Irish, and so enables Irish speakers to meet and connect with writers, translators and others dedicated to the flourishing of Irish language literature and culture.

© Kennys Books and Art Galleries


© An Siopa Leabhar

## Supporting schools – bookshops as "engine rooms of children's literacy

The survey data reflects the breadth of support provided by Ireland's bookshops for children and schools:

- **54% host events in store with local schools**
- **46% organise storytime/storytelling at their shop**
- **35% organise book clubs/reading groups for children**
- **27% organise arts and crafts events for children (and adults)**
- **38% work with local schools/educational bodies**
- **39% support (donations/help in kind etc.) parent/children groups.**

The role of bookshops helping to support schools raising levels of literacy and to deliver cultural engagement is a key insight emerging from the research data. Bookshops of all sizes, from independents in rural locations to nationwide chains in more urban settings bring considerable expertise and energy to this task. This role is distinct from the role of bookshops in supplying school books.

The provision of a first class choice of children's books and connecting local children to writers is central to the purpose of a great many of Ireland's bookshops. Examples of this purpose was strongly reflected in a number of the deep dive interviews conducted for this research, and these are detailed in the Bookshops in Focus section below which aims to reflect the significant contribution of the bookselling cohort as a whole to children's literacy.


Dubray

## Bookshops in Focus
## Championing Children's Literature and Literacy

### Halfway up the Stairs, Greystones, Co. Wicklow; Dubray (various locations); The Book Centre (various locations)

© Dubray

**Halfway up the Stairs** a shop dedicated to children's books including young teen and young adult opened in October 2019, and core to its purpose is to be able in the words of its owner Trish Hennessy, *"find a book for every child regardless of need, circumstances, or ability... to cater for any requirement."*

A central element of **Halfway up the Stairs** service is its events programme which Trish Hennessy views as "*a pathway for kids to experience books in different ways and be inspired.*" A distinctive part of its events programme are its online events which have enabled it to achieve a national reach. One event offering interactive engagement with authors, working in collaboration with World Book Day and The O'Brien Press, is beamed into 90 classrooms, and so reaches thousands of pupils. Another online event example is aimed at teachers where expertly curated lists of recommended books are presented and authors are invited to speak.

As part of **Halfway up the Stairs** wider ambition to support Irish children' s authors, illustrators, and publishers, they are also highly supportive of the 'Discover Irish Children's Books Campaign.' The campaign is spearheaded by Sarah Webb, the shop's Events Manager. It aims to highlight and celebrate Irish children's books and give them and the talents of Irish children's authors and illustrators greater prominence and recognition, and has successfully garnered the involvement of many bookshops, many of whom contribute to the alternative Irish children's charts with their top ten selling Irish books.

A focus is also provided on ensuring that **Halfway Up The Stairs** is a safe space for teens, for example where a teenager who is 'coming out' can find books to support them. Children with dyslexia are supported by ensuring that dyslexic friendly books are readily identifiable via white dots. The shops cultural contribution is set to grow in October 2024, when with the support of Arts Council funding, **Halfway up the Stairs** is spearheading a new festival in Greystones.

© The Book Centre

There are many other examples of the dedication, expertise and effort bookshops put into helping children develop a love of stories and reading in general, for example **The Book Centre's** four branches (Waterford, Kilkenny, Wexford, and Kildare), each puts on a children's story time each Saturday. Likewise **Dubray** ensures children's books are given prominence and support, for example, its 13 stores are

supported by a team of dedicated children's specialists. In turn each store has 4/5 local schools with whom they have developed close links. These specialists have also built a range of relationships with children's writers and aim to bring a strong community based approach.

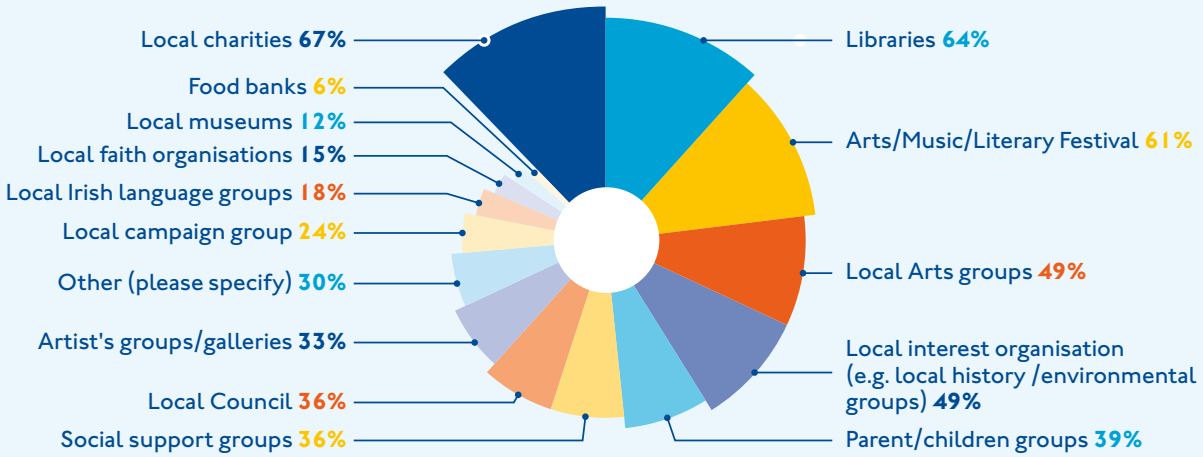
## Wider community and cultural support - Ireland's Bookshops as Active Citizens

The survey asked members to detail the organisations/groups in the community they support, alongside detailing the form and nature of this support. The picture which emerges from this speaks to the generosity and wide range of imaginative ways Ireland's bookshops support and contribute to their communities.

### Figure 2

### Which organisations/groups in your community do you support?

*(Select all that apply)*




Within the 'other' category are a number of noteworthy contributions, including supporting schools, animal welfare, the Simon community, asylum seekers, palliative care, and local homeless charities.

The survey went onto ask bookshops to detail what form this support/partnership takes. The data generated by that question in many ways speaks for itself as a powerful roll-call of the generous and extensive nature of this community support:

- **71% provide promotional support**
- **68% donate books**
- **65% provide bookshop staff advice/expertise**
- **61% donate staff time**
- **53% provide meeting space (at their shop)**
- **42% act as 'box office'**
- **32% work with local independent shops and businesses.**

## Positive Partnerships – Bookshops & Libraries

A thread running through the survey results and the deep- dive interviews was the strong and highly collaborative relationships so many of Ireland's bookshops enjoy with the nation's libraries. And it is important to note that this applied in city settings and in rural/small town locations A common perception was of a prevailing shared interest in encouraging reading and consequently of a recognition of each sector as being mutually beneficial parts of the reading/books ecosystem.

The form this takes is often around collaborations to deliver community based writer events/festivals. For example, the Kildare Readers Festival which takes place every autumn, organised by the Kildare County Library and Arts Service, acts as a vehicle for communities across Kildare to participate in events with national and local authors. **Woodbine Books** partner with this, providing a popup book service which enables festival goers to buy performing author's books.

Numerous booksellers contributing to this research highlighted their admiration for the 'One City, One Book' initiative which originated in Dublin, and is now also operating in Cork. Booksellers in both cities have greatly valued the opportunities to support this initiative, for example **Waterstones** in Cork have partnered with the Cork library service on the initiative for six years, including hosting the closing event.

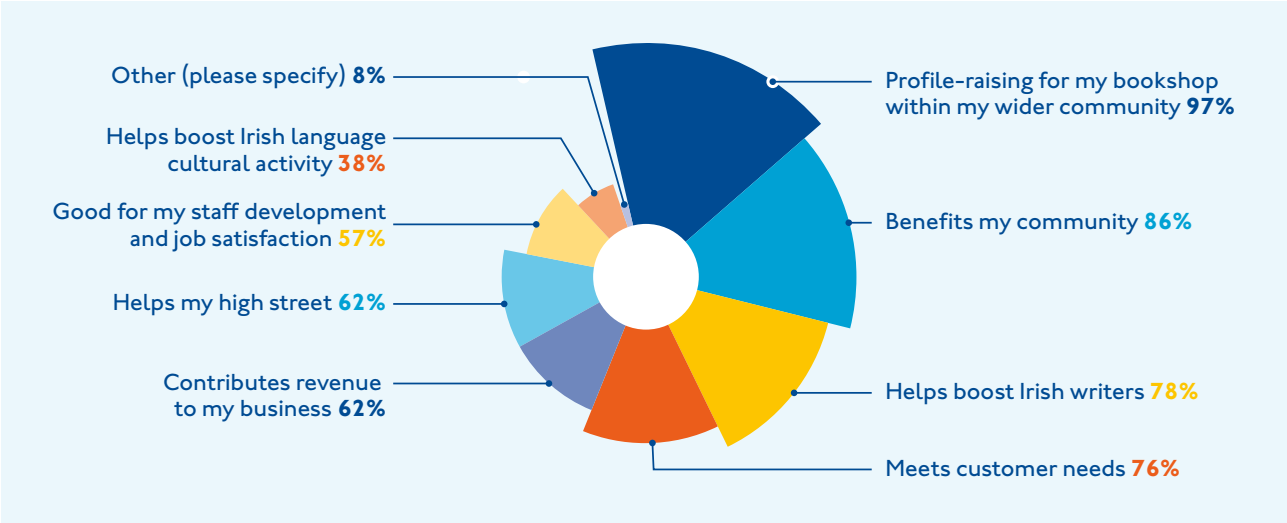
Other bookshops highlighted their admiration for how libraries across the country have taken the 'Discover Irish Children's Books' campaign to heart and provided it with strong support the closing event.

The openness of library services and staff to these ongoing collaborations means that locals are able to enjoy the activities and opportunities for cultural enrichment offered by these collaborations. It represents a model of cultural best practice which it is hoped will continue to thrive across the country and could be leveraged and emulated further afield, for example in the UK.

## Motivations – community focus and benefit in the DNA of Ireland's Bookshops

An important aim of this research was to better understand what drives and motivates Ireland's bookshops to run their events and activities. Consequently, the survey for this report asked, 'What has encouraged/enabled you to run these events and activities?

### Figure 3
### What has encouraged/enabled you to run these events?
*(select all that apply)*




As figure 3 reveals, a leading motivation at 86% was 'Benefits my community', and this can be taken together with 'Helps my high street', to echo the centrality of community as the driving force of bookshop activity.

Other important motivations included;

- **Helps boost Irish writers at 78%**
- **76% cited meeting customer needs**
- **57% said it was good for staff development and job satisfaction**
- **28% cited boosting Irish language cultural activity.**

## Assessing the impact - what does this mean for cultural life and communities in Ireland?

The online survey and the deep dive interviews sought to build up a deeper understanding on the impact of bookshop 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. This generated insightful and detailed feedback, examples of which are given below.

A representative selection of the feedback is outlined below:

*"What we do feeds into the wider arts scene, public sphere, and community, particularly in winter... book clubs promote community building and literature appreciation for kids."*

*"We have witnessed so many beautiful conversations and readings from Irish authors over the years and moments between readers and writers engaging with each other."*

*"Our events not only support Irish authors but also provide an environment for people to mix and meet new friends. We strive to make our bookshops welcoming and inclusive environments."*

*"Irish language events, and particularly literary events, offer a much-needed space for speakers to get together and chat in an informal setting. These are vital social events. We know this from the squeals of delight when a new person comes in the door – in fhaca me thu le faada – I haven't seen you in ages!"*

*"People love attending events and feedback has been very positive – feelings of empowerment, interest and intellectually stimulated."*

*"Our events are very much supported by the local community. They also allow authors to support each other – many of our events are attended by many of the Irish children's books community."*

## Boosting Communities Through Stronger Inclusion and Representation

The importance of individuals and communities seeing themselves in books and literature was a consistent theme articulated by bookshops in their survey responses and in the deep dive interviews. Consequently bookshops of many dimensions across Ireland work assiduously to improve levels of inclusion and representation. Examples of this work in practice are outlined in more detail in the '**Bookshops in Focus**' section below.

### Bookshops in Focus Improving Representation and Inclusion

#### Dubray & The Read Irish Women Challenge & The Maynooth Bookshop's work on Autism awareness


A notable example of the vital role bookshops and booksellers can and do play in spearheading a progressive approach to inclusion and representation is The Read Irish Women Challenge a campaign founded and spearheaded by Karina Clifford of **Dubray** bookshops.

This campaign which started in one branch of **Dubray** is now an annual fixture and is in its sixth year, (running across the month of April), operating across all of **Dubray's** stores. The challenge has a different prompt each day in April, in order to provoke discussions about which Irish woman writer would fit the prompt; eg. a book featuring bravery or a book that taught you something. In addition, other organisations have got behind the campaign such as libraries, including those in universities and schools have become involved. This means that students and pupils awareness of the range of work available by Irish women writers, past and present, has been significantly broadened. And overseas, Irish embassies have used the campaign to promote Irish women's writing for their embassy book clubs. In Karina's own words, the campaign *"has contributed to making the current vogue around Irish writers to be more inclusive."*

The work by bookshops to progress inclusion also includes initiatives to boost how individuals with autism are supported so that they can fully enjoy and become more confident bookshop visitors. For example, **The Maynooth Bookshop** works with a local autism charity to welcome in individuals the charity supports, at times when the shop is likely to be quit, and also deliver introductory preparatory talks ahead of the visit for individuals with autism on what they can expect. The shop manager has also undertaken training to bolster staff awareness of autism and how to make the shop's approach as inclusive and responsive as possible.

# 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 delivered by bookshops. As in the above section it draws on the results of the May/June 2024 survey and on each of the deep dive interviews. The purpose of identifying enablers and barriers is to elicit best practice and identify 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):

- The costs of running events and activities are overwhelmingly borne by bookshops or by members of their local communities
- In 32% of activities costs are partially met by event partners.

#### Government Support:

- 79% would be encouraged to run more events and activities if there was a business rates relief scheme for community engagement.

#### Grants & Funding:

- 79% of bookshops see grants/public funding as a source of enabling them to sustain and expand their wider role in the community
- 69% of would like to see straightforward access to funds to support the costs of running events and activities
- 48% of have concerns about the time involved in applying for grants/public funding
- 43% have successfully applied for grants/ public funding.

#### Enhanced support from publishers and arts bodies:

- 78 % of bookshops would like more support from publishers e.g., costs/staff to help host events
- 61% would like to see advanced information from publishers about author availability
- 53% would like more ready and flexible ways to collaborate with arts bodies/centres (local/regional and national).

#### BA Support:

- 30% of bookshops would like advice on running and promoting events including mentoring
- Look to strengthen partnerships with organisations such as **Children's Books Ireland** to find new routes for enabling bookshops to support mutually shared aims around strengthening literacy.

## Supporting cultural events and activities – the cost dimension

In terms of running costs - staff time and opportunity cost - are all key factors shaping Ireland's bookshops' ability to develop and sustain the wide array of cultural events and community activities identified in this research. Consequently, a cornerstone of this research was to identify and understand how bookshops go about meeting the costs of the events and activities they organise.

The resulting research data would strongly suggest the costs are largely borne by the individual bookshop(s) or by the members of the local community attending the events (respondents were asked to select all options that apply):

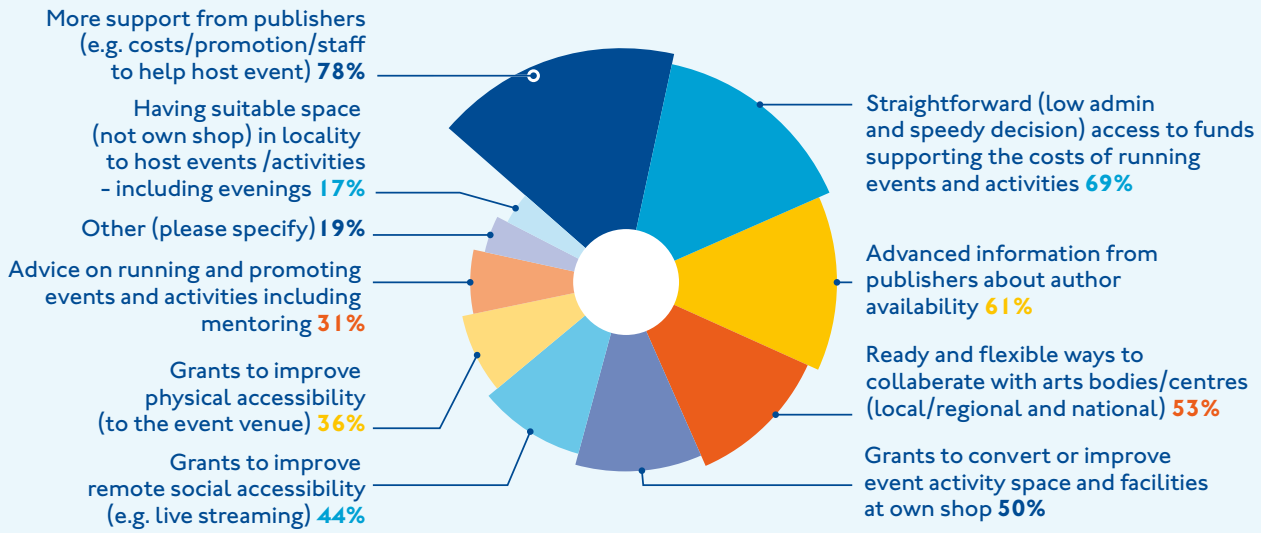
- **97% free of charge**
- **35% require a ticket to attend**
- **16% offer a ticket and book option**
- **32% partially met by event partners**
- **8% fully met by event partners**
- **3% no charge but donations sought.**

Within the research it was important to identify potential sources of support for bookshops to encourage them to run more events and activities.

### Figure 4

### 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 and relevance across the Irish book trade and its cultural partners;

- **78% would value more support from publishers e.g., costs/promotion/staff to help host events**
- **69% would like access to funds supporting the costs of running events and activities**
- **61% would value advanced information from publishers about author availability**
- **53% would like ready and flexible ways to collaborate with arts bodies/centres**
- **50% would like grants to convert or improve event activity space and facilities at their shop**
- **31% would value advice on running and promoting events and activities including mentoring.**

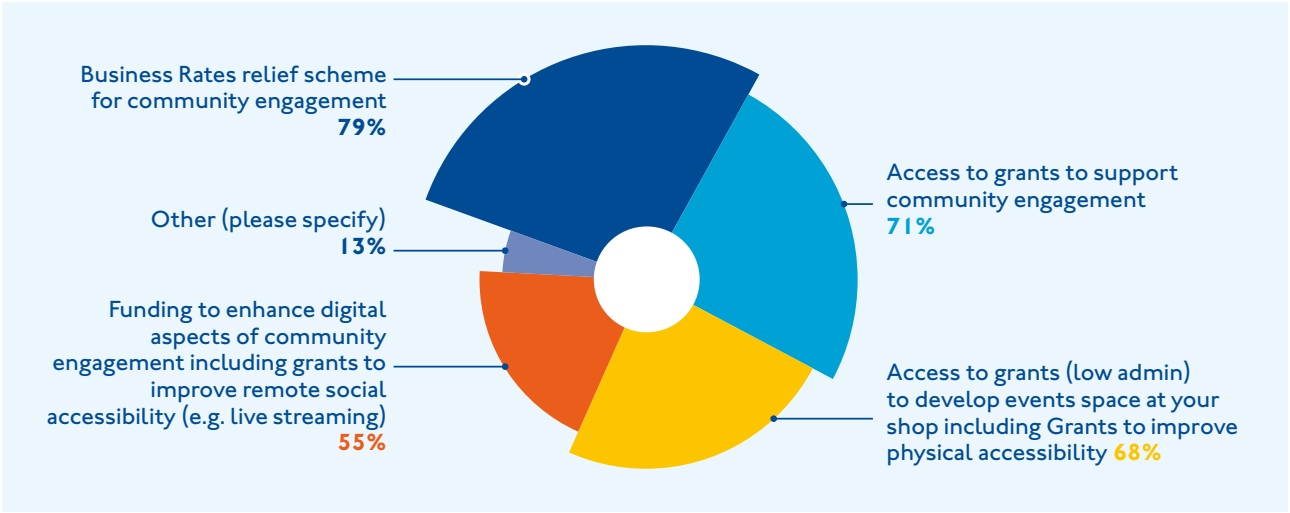
There was a strongly voiced request in the survey responses and throughout the deep dive interviews for stronger support for funding the costs of writers participating in bookshop events. Booksellers were clear that this request did not relate to well-established national and international figures, who in any event are well supported by their publishers. However, a recurring concern was that the risk of poorly attended events could be mitigated if there was funding available to cover the costs of authors (for example a figure of €300/350 payment direct to the writer ). It was felt that more bookshops would then feel able to take the risk of putting on events where there was more uncertainty over attendance levels. This would help deliver a substantial increase in the range of events bookshops could arrange and would have a weighting toward less well known and often emerging talent. In turn, this could provide a key boost for writers at the early stages of their careers, whilst also strengthening levels of cultural and creative connection with audiences across Ireland, and so further strengthen cultural life and community well-being. Consequently, a recommendation from this research is for the viability of such a scheme to be evaluated jointly by the BA and The Arts Council.

The survey also asked bookshops about what might encourage them to run (more) events and activities, either in their shop or externally. The answers provided are detailed below and cast meaningful additional light on those identified in figure 5.

## Figure 5

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

*(select all that apply)*



As under figure 4, the results highlight the strong support – at nearly eight in ten – for a dedicated business rates relief scheme for community engagement, and at seven in ten – an emphatic preference for access to grants to support community engagement. Similarly just shy of seven in ten expressed a preference for 'low admin' access to grants to develop events space at their shop (including grants to improve physical accessibility). Survey respondents were also asked to provide comments and suggestions on how their shop could be better enabled to run events and activities. Several key priorities emerged from these responses:

- **More support from government to encourage people to shop locally**
- **Grants – to pay for less well established writers to speak at bookshop events**
- **Grants to help fund events equipment, and for improved accessibility like wheelchair ramps**
- **Stronger recognition at a local and national level from the Arts sector (especially those parts operating within the public sector) of the contribution and abilities of the bookselling sector to the arts and creativity.**

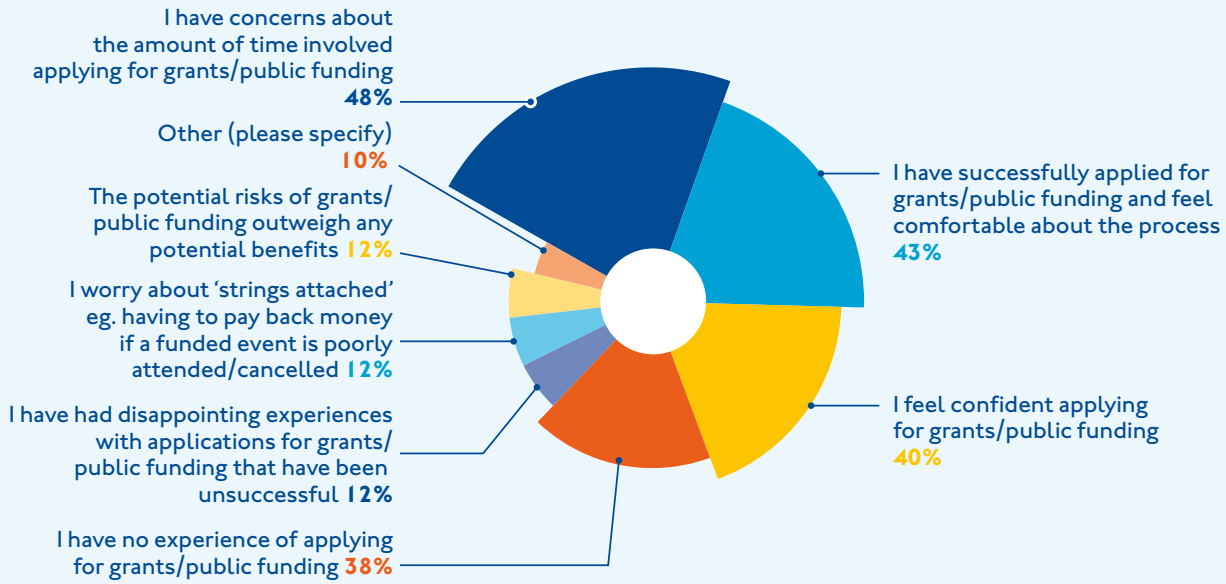
## Grants & Public Funding

An important component of this research was to gain a better understanding of Ireland's bookshops experience (in particular smaller non chain shops) of applying for grants and public funding (as part of supporting and enabling them to deliver their events and activities). Consequently, the survey asked respondents how they felt about applying for/using grants/public funding.

### Figure 6

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

*(select all that apply)*



The main responses were:

- **48% cited concerns about the amount of time involved in applying for grants/public funding**
- **43% have experience of successfully applying for grants/public funding**
- **38% have no experience of applying for grants/public**
- **Only 40% felt confident about applying for grants/public funding**
- **12% respectively had no disappointing experience of applying for funding/worried about 'string attached' and felt the potential risks 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 provide useful insights into the realities (especially for SMEs) of applying for grants/public funding.

> *"Our experience of arts council grants is that it takes a huge amount of time with no guarantee of success, so it is never worth the risk."*

Several cited more positive experiences of applying for Irish language grants;

> *"Comfortable applying for small Irish-language business grants, struggle to deal with wider funding opportunities" and another who said, "We have successfully applied for Irish-language specific funding; however we have struggled to find the time to dedicate to navigating funding more widely."*

Another reflected on their success, drawing on having a staff member who was experienced in applying for grants

> *" I had support from my events manager who has prior experience in filling out forms. We were successful in our applications."*

As already outlined above, an emphatic and persistent request from bookshops across the country, representing a variety of locations and contexts, was for public bodies, such as The Arts Council, to make available dedicated funding for bookshop events. The envisaged focus of this funding is for small grants to enable writers to speak at bookshop events which otherwise might not take place. The grants would be designed to provide a payment to writers for their time and also any travel costs.


Roe River Books, Dundalk

# Conclusion & Recommendations

The picture which emerges from this research gives powerful evidence of the scale, popularity and reach of the cultural activities and community engagement delivered by Ireland's bookshops. A number of areas stand out. It is not an overstatement to say that the sector is a cultural powerhouse, with a deep and meaningful reach and connection to numerous communities across all parts of the country. This means that accessibility to culture and in particular the talents of Ireland's home grown writers is greatly enhanced. It also plays an important and easily overlooked role in supporting Irish language writing, and Irish speakers in all generations, and does so across the country. Schools and children's literacy are also powerfully supported by the role played by booksellers in supporting teachers in connecting children and young adults to the joy of reading and creativity. This is instrumental in helping to deliver lifetime skills and cultural enrichment. In short, Ireland's bookshops play a significant role as creative and cultural assets nationwide.

Booksellers are skilled and talented at 'audience creation' combining to powerful effect an innate understanding of the communities they serve with their expert knowledge of the best of books and writers. A cornerstone of this activity is the strength of booksellers motivation to make a difference to their communities allied with a generous emphasis on making these activities inclusive and accessible.

However, this contribution should not be taken for granted. The passion and talents of Ireland's booksellers are not qualities that can be replicated by an algorithm or served by a giant automated out of town warehouse. Equally, it is important to ask, if Ireland's bookshops are not adequately valued and supported, what consequences would this have on the health and vitality of Irish literary culture, the viability of its main streets and to ensuring future generations of enthusiastic and critically engaged readers?

## Conclusion cont'd

Consequently, a series of recommendations are outlined below focused on measures aimed at sustaining, nurturing, and strengthening bookshops. Priority areas include enhanced access to grants for putting on events, making public sector procurement work better for bookshops, and a relentless focus by central and local government on ensuring policies to revive town centres are joined up and fully effective, most especially in supporting SMEs and family firms. In terms of arts bodies, most especially The Arts Council, it is clear that they are already playing a valuable role in supporting parts of the book sector to deliver cultural enrichment. The findings from this research pinpoint scope for strengthening this partnership. These measures will it is hoped contribute to strengthening the ability of bookshops to continue to enrich the lives of communities nationwide, in this and future generations.

# Recommendations for Government and Policy Makers including The Arts Council

## Culture Vouchers

Increasing number of European countries, including France, Germany, Spain and Italy, are recognising the impact of access to in-person cultural experiences on young people and the wider economy. These countries are encouraging access to cultural experiences by funding Cultural Voucher programmes with the aim of introducing teenagers and young adults to their country's unique and rich cultural landscape, while also supporting cultural and creative industries. In France for example, 18 year-olds receive a €300 "culture pass" to be spent on books, art materials, musical instruments, and exhibition visits.

Countries who have implemented Culture Voucher programmes have reported that these schemes have positive impacts in the form of increased book sales and footfall of young people in bookshops, on reinforcing young people's reading habits, as well as diversifying their cultural practices. The launch of a similar scheme in Ireland, targeted at 16-18 year-olds could have a significant cultural and economic impact;

- helping the creative and cultural sector, including bookshops, which are still recovering from the impact of lockdowns as well as a fall in turnover due to losing school book business
- provide access to the cultural expertise of booksellers, will boost the cultural lives of young people by providing them the opportunity to access a broad range of titles relating to Ireland's history and the wealth of contemporary and past Irish literary talent, complementing their education and exposing them to a broader range of ideas, opinions and cultural experiences.
- A culture voucher would bring large numbers of young people into town and city centres, instilling in them a lifetime habit of visiting Ireland's cultural institutions which will pay dividends for years to come.

## SME friendly Application of Procurement Rules

Support bookshops ability to continue their stellar contribution to children's literacy by improving procurement rules, specifically:

- Government to act to improve awareness amongst teachers and school finance staff of social value clauses in procurement legislation and to strengthen such clauses so they act as mechanisms to enable bookshops to continue to act as engine rooms supporting children's literacy.
- Library procurement could be improved to better serve libraries, booksellers, and readers. Government to ringfence discretionary funding for libraries to allow for the purchase of books of local interest from local bookshops.

## Stronger Government Focus on Flourishing Town Centres

The ability of bookshops to continue serving as creative and cultural assets for their communities is intimately dependent on having thriving town-centres. Consequently, an integrated action plan to secure the future of town-centres and main streets is needed;

- Government should commit to providing an annual update on how its policies are delivering stronger more sustainable and resilient high streets, in particular championing the role of SMEs and independent and family owned businesses.
- A key reporting requirement would be to demonstrate how policy across government departments and agencies is being integrated and coordinated to maximise positive outcomes for town-centres/ main streets.
- Government to continue with its welcome rates relief scheme until the end of 2025, and to provide total rates exemption for new physical bookshops in the first phase of their establishment (for example a period of 24 months).

## Dedicated Funding for Bookshop Events

- The Arts Council to establish a dedicated budget and scheme to enable more bookshops to hold events with Irish writers, and for a proportion of this funding to be ring-fenced for Irish language bookshop events.
- This would enable more bookshops in more locations to organise events for less well established authors. It would play a significant role in 'de-risking' such events for both the author and the bookshop. A flat amount (c€300/350 per event), would be made to the author to ensure they receive payment for their time and expenses, and the bookshop would be encouraged by knowing that even if turnout is low, the author is not out of pocket.
- A proportion of any such funding could ring fenced (a) for shops in small town and rural locations, and (b) for Irish language events at bookshops.
- Such a scheme could learn from and build on the successes of the 'Writers in Schools' scheme **http://www.poetryireland.ie/education/writers-in-schools.html** which over the last 22 years has given more than 500k children the chance to work closely with writers in the classroom.
- The Arts Council to make available small grants (up to €5k), for bookshops to invest in equipment and facilities such as PA systems, accessibility improvements such as ramps, in order to widen access and improve the quality of the cultural events put on by bookshops.
- The Arts Council, working with partners like the BA to proactively use its influence and convening power to promote bookshops as integral parts of the cultural life of Ireland, and to ensure their role as vital platforms of culture is appropriately reflected into strategic thinking and priorities.

## Irish Language Bodies

- Irish Language bodies, in conjunction with the BA, to establish a joint working group, to identify and prioritize an action plan for strengthening the flow of Irish language titles and related supporting information (information to be provided on a bi-lingual basis in order to assist booksellers with less confident/proficient command of Irish).

The overall aim is to enhance the provision of Irish language titles and so grow access to its cultural riches.

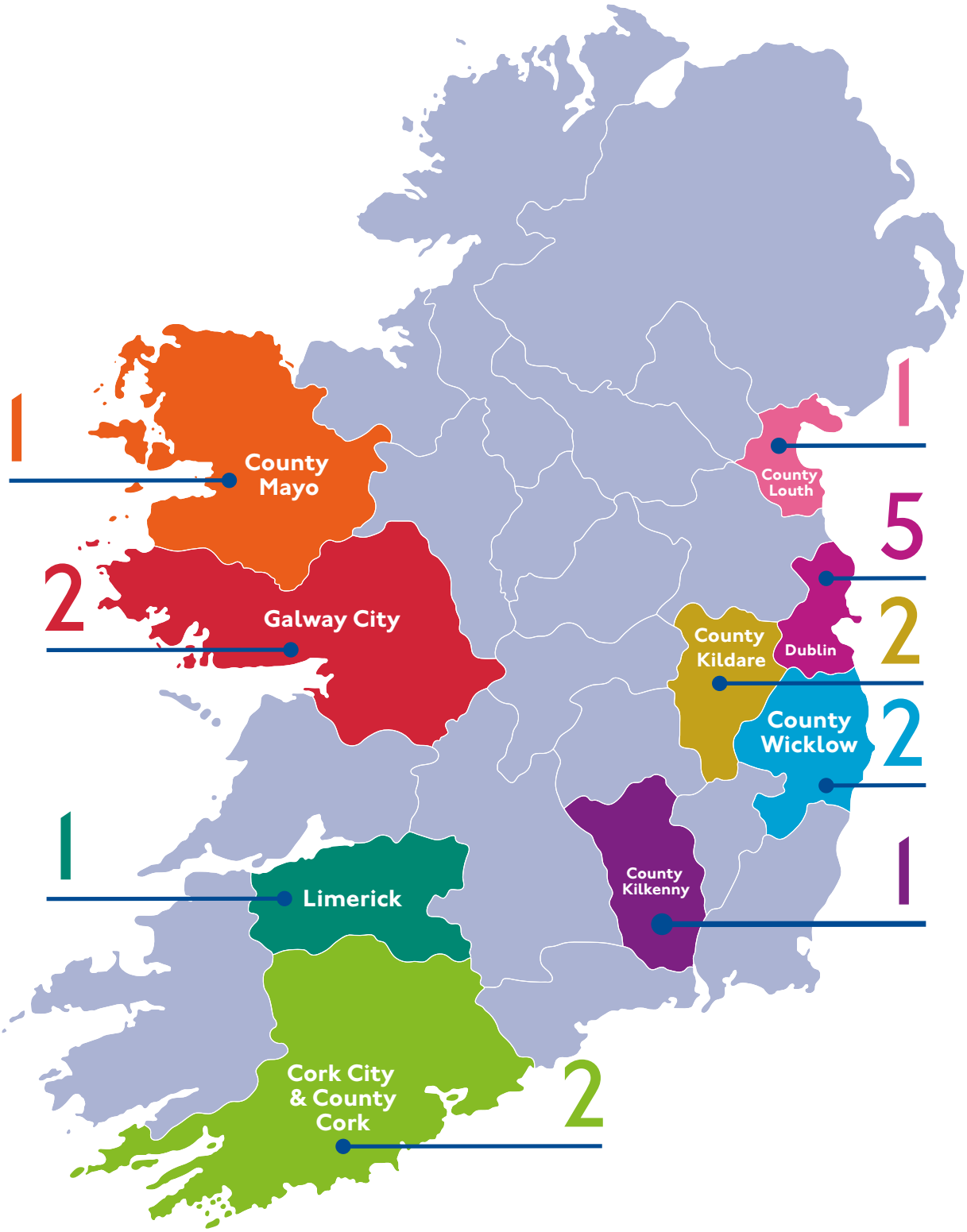
## For the Booksellers Association

- BA to examine the practicalities of a platform which details information on sources of funding for bookshops, including their cultural and community offerings, including advice on how to secure it. This should include all relevant funding streams from central and local government.
- Continue to develop existing partnerships with bodies such as **Children's Books Ireland** to further strengthen the role of bookshops as engine rooms of children's literacy.
- To evaluate the scope for leveraging the insights from this research as part of the ongoing 'Books Are My Bag', campaigns which exist to develop and strengthen connections between bookshops and the people who value them, and to champion the work booksellers do within their communities.
- Consider potential new research into the health benefits of book clubs and reading groups, potentially as part of an Ireland and UK wide study.
- Explore the scope and desirability of creating or enhancing an existing version of an online platform for consumers and bookshops, which provides information on a nationwide listings of book shop events, covering indies and national chains.

## For partners across the book trade in Ireland

- Publishers working in dialogue with the BA to identify and agree how additional areas of best practice support from publishers on events and promotion, could be identified and delivered
- Publishers and publicists to look to improve and enhance the availability of advanced information concerning author availability with annual feedback gathered by the BA to help track effectiveness and highlight best practice.

A sincere hope is that the findings of this report together with its recommendations, will help to widen and deepen understanding of Ireland's bookshops as precious vessels of the nation's culture, and to help ensure they continue to flourish in every part of the country. In the words of Sebastian Barry – "*Our bookshops are the lighthouses for every writerly boat on the ocean. Without them we cannot set sail. They are the little churches and heroic temples of our endeavours.*"


1
County Mayo
2
Galway City
1
Limerick
2
Cork City & County Cork
1
County Louth
5
Dublin
2
County Kildare
2
County Wicklow
1
County Kilkenny

# Appendix 1:
## Contributors to Deep-dive Research Interviews

| Bookshop | Location |
|---|---|
| Philip's Bookshop | Mallow, Co. Cork |
| Waterstones | Cork, Co. Cork |
| Books Upstairs | Dublin |
| Chapters | Dublin |
| Dubray | Dublin* |
| Eason | Dublin* |
| An Siopa Leabhar | Dublin |
| Charlie Byrne's Bookshop | Galway, Co. Galway |
| Kennys Bookshop & Art Galleries | Galway, Co. Galway |
| Woodbine Books | Kilcullen, Co. Kildare |
| The Maynooth Bookstore | Maynooth, Co. Kildare* |
| The Book Centre | Killkenny, Co. Kilkenny* |
| O'Mahony's | Limerick city, Co. Limerick* |
| Roe River Books | Dundalk, Co. Louth |
| Tertulia Books | Westport, Co. Mayo |
| Halfway Up The Stairs | Greystones, Co. Wicklow |
| Bridge Street Books | Wicklow, Co. Wicklow |

**location of interview; bookshop also has outlets in other locations.*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## Online:

booksellers.org.uk
nationalbooktokens.com
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facebook.com/thebooksellersassociation
facebook.com/groups/booksellersnetwork
twitter.com/BAbooksellers
booksaremybag.com
facebook.com/booksaremybag
twitter.com/booksaremybag
instagram.com/booksaremybag
youtube.com/booksaremybag