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Assessing the cultural, social and economic impact of literature: a study of Edinburgh



BOP
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“

We want to share the literary culture of our capital city with the world. Edinburgh is not proposed as **the** world city of literature but **a** world city of literature – one of many, we hope [...]

Our idea in offering this title, World City of Literature, is for its continuing and proliferating use across the globe. It is not intended to be an exclusive mark for Edinburgh but rather a mantle to don for those whose past merits it, and whose ambition is up to it [...] The idea of Cities of Literature will find enthusiasts worldwide. We now announce that Edinburgh, capital of Scotland, is ready to welcome partners in developing a worldwide chain of cities of literature.

Executive Summary

Edinburgh’s status as the world’s first UNESCO City of Literature is not purely symbolic - it reflects a globally significant literary ecosystem that underpins the city’s economy, identity, and its international reputation.

Economically, literature is both productive and catalytic. This report finds that the sector contributes £50.9 million in Gross Value Added (GVA) to the city’s economy, with publishing alone accounting for £19.3 million. In parallel, literature attracts high-value tourism, contributing spend across accommodation, hospitality and retail.

A high-performing cultural and economic asset, Edinburgh’s literature sector’s impact extends well beyond direct economic output. The sector contributes to a distinct sense of place and possibility, sustaining Edinburgh’s international reputation and providing world-class festival programming.

Alongside this, the sector also functions as critical social infrastructure. Through the work of its libraries, literary organisations, festival outreach initiatives and bookshops, literature supports education outcomes, wellbeing and community cohesion across the city.

The stakeholder consultations and economic and wider sector data drawn on in this study point to a dense and interconnected ecosystem that enables literary production, distribution and participation across the city.

Yet this success story finds itself exposed to rising costs, stagnant and uncertain funding, and increasing financial instability among writers.

Organisations are being forced to do more with less, constricting organisational capacity rather than expanding it.

As a result, while the sector continues to deliver significant social, cultural and economic value, its capacity for growth is threatened at a time when it is needed all the more. As highlighted in this research, there is an increasing gap between the needs identified by sector organisations, and their capacity to meet those needs. This is exacerbated by a clear demand to expand access and participation more evenly across the city.

Sustained and strategic investment is essential to ensure the conditions for growth remain in place. Alongside talent retention and workforce development, literacy initiatives and literary programming more broadly are of equal importance. This includes supporting organisations to do the work they are already doing - ensuring that Edinburgh remains a place that draws in writers and creatives not only as a place of inspiration, but as a place to work and live.

Ultimately, as the findings of this study demonstrate, Edinburgh’s strength lies in the collective impact of all its component literary parts. It is vital that the ecosystem continues to be supported, ensuring that the vibrant contemporary literary scene that contributed to the establishment of the City of Literature designation can continue to build the city’s cultural capital, social fabric, and economic activity.

Context & Methodology

Context & background for this impact study

Edinburgh's cultural identity is inseparable from literature.

The significance of literature for Edinburgh was enshrined in, and celebrated by, its designation as the world's first UNESCO City of Literature 2004. Two decades later, this network has grown to include more than 60 cities - a global family of local literary scenes and sectors.

Entering a new chapter, the Edinburgh City of Literature Trust has commissioned this study to explore the literature sector in Edinburgh today, aiming to articulate the impact of literature on the city and identify potential gaps in and for the sector. Crucially, this study looks beyond

the designation to understand how Edinburgh continues to be shaped by literature. To do this we have assessed three distinct but intersecting areas of impact – cultural, social and economic.

Recent years have seen a challenging operating environment for the literature sector. Public investment in literature has declined, while broader social and economic shifts following the pandemic, and the increasing digitalisation of both leisure time and work, have altered the conditions in which the sector operates.

Many of these external factors have not supported the health or growth of literature and related industries. Against this backdrop, the resilience of Edinburgh's contemporary literary scene highlights the importance of clearly articulating the sector's impact and value. Strengthening the evidence base can help demonstrate value for

money, improve the accessibility and coordination of support, and reinforce the importance of reading, literacy, storytelling and writing for current and future generations. This study is therefore timely. However, its scope is focused: it does not constitute a sector review. Rather, it provides a contribution to how the impact of the sector can be articulated, alongside a snapshot of its current health.

In addition to assessing impact, this study also seeks to capture the distinctive dynamics that characterise Edinburgh as a literary city - the interplay of its literary heritage and the contemporary vitality of its literary scene. This relationship creates a productive tension between heritage and innovation, and there are opportunities for this tension to be better understood, leveraged, and communicated.

“

What should the story be? It's about connecting the heritage and the future [...] we do the heritage storytelling really well, but there's also all this new interesting, progressive stuff. And innovation at all these different points, plus inclusivity that is really specific and powerful - that should be part of the story as well.

”

Jenny Niven
Director, Edinburgh International Book Festival

Methodology at a glance

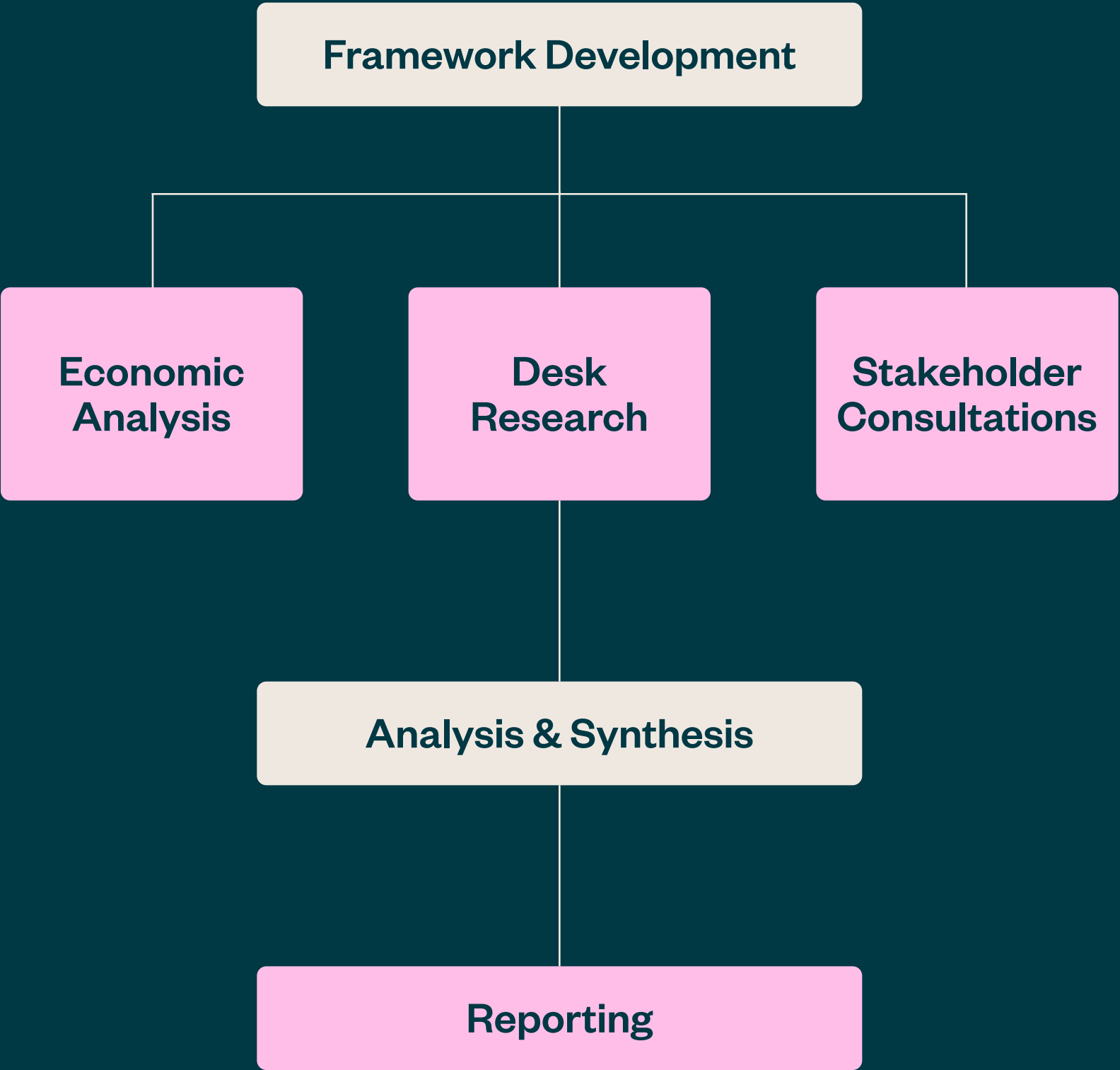
The methodology for this study has been built around three distinct yet interconnected strands of research, grounded in an analysis framework created in collaboration with the City of Literature Trust:

1 Economic analysis, using ONS data on businesses and employment in the literature sector in Edinburgh, alongside data from a range of additional sources.

2 Desk research to identify existing best practice examples (in Edinburgh, Scotland, and the UK more widely), quantify elements of the cultural and social impact of literature in Edinburgh, and highlight existing research with bearing on this study.

3 Stakeholder consultations with representatives from across Edinburgh’s literature sector, including publishers, support agencies, bookshops, festivals, and writers themselves. A full list of consultees is provided at the appendix.

The full findings from this research are presented in this report.



Key Findings

Edinburgh’s distinctive literary ecosystem defines the city, delivering significant economic, social and cultural value – but an increasingly pressurised funding landscape threatens the sustainability of these impacts at a time when they are needed most

“
Every time I speak publicly about the network, Edinburgh’s role as the founding city and continued gold standard of how to be a City of Literature is part of my remarks.
”

John Kenyon
Director of Iowa City of Literature

Cultural Impact

Edinburgh’s strong storytelling reputation, both across the UK and internationally, underpins its enduring status as a leading centre for literature and the exchange of ideas. This is supported by a dense literary ecosystem which enables a vibrant culture of events and literary production, and which sustains audiences while creating opportunities for emerging talent alongside established voices. Threaded through the cultural fabric of the city, literature shapes how the city is imagined and experienced, reinforcing its sustained character as a place rooted in intellectual and artistic exchange.

Social Impact

Edinburgh’s literary activity plays a vital social function. It strengthens social connection by creating shared spaces where people can come together through books and stories. This is reinforced by strong library infrastructure, literacy programming and events which give people access to reading and books in exciting ways; delivering wide ranging benefits across wellbeing, empathy, civic participation and lifelong learning. While innovative access models and inclusive programming are putting literature at the centre of initiatives to broaden cultural participation, there remains need for expansion of literary activity and embedded outreach in communities in the outskirts of the city.

Economic Impact

Edinburgh’s literature sector generates multi-layered economic value. In several respects, the economic profile of literature in Edinburgh resists wider national trends. Particularly strong contributions from the publishing sector and literary businesses generate significant economic output, employment and levels of specialisation far beyond the UK average. In addition to the direct contribution of sector activity, literature also drives substantial spending through tourism, including major events and literary tourism. This attracts high-spend visitors and stimulates broader activity across the visitor economy. A strong sector and visitor economy are underpinned by a resilient creative supply chain and resilient audiences. However, external pressures threaten this economic ecosystem – with increasingly unaffordable rents and living costs, writers and creatives are being priced out of the city and organisations struggle with a tightened funding environment.

Cultural Impact

Key Findings

1 Edinburgh’s storytelling reputation, both across the UK and internationally, enables its continued position as a place for literature and the circulation of ideas

2 A dense literary ecosystem drives a culture of events and exchange that sustains audiences and opportunities for emerging talent alongside established voices

3 Literature shapes how Edinburgh is imagined and experienced, reinforcing a cultural identity that cultivates creative expression

Cultural status and international standing

Edinburgh’s international profile is derived from its longstanding reputation as a place of storytelling. As the writer Mary Paulson-Ellis noted during a Civic Reception to mark 20 years of UNESCO Cities of Literature in October 2024, Edinburgh is “a city birthed through our imagination; that exists in the imagination worldwide because of what we do.” This statement captures an observable dynamic: that Edinburgh’s cultural capital is amplified through the literary works, voices and narratives that are rooted in the city.

The city’s international standing is sustained by both its heritage associations and the vibrant contemporary literary sector that provides a platform for the city to a global

audience. This status is enabled through infrastructure that connects a wide audience (readers, residents, tourists) and a wide variety of roles working across the literature sector and its related industries (writers, publishers, etc.).

Edinburgh’s status within the UNESCO Cities of Literature network positions the city as part of a global framework for literary exchange. This facilitates the international circulation of stories originating in and inspired by Edinburgh. Alongside this, writers’ residencies attract authors from across the world to the city. Additionally, the global profile of Edinburgh’s festivals - most notably the Edinburgh International Book Festival (EIBF) (the world’s largest book festival) - reinforces the city’s reputation as a major hub of intellectual and creative dialogue. At the same time, the strength and visibility of Edinburgh’s publishing sector ensures that literary

production is not only celebrated but professionally sustained and internationally distributed. Together, these elements generate significant cultural impact, demonstrating that literature is central to the city’s identity, soft power, and cultural economy.

“
Edinburgh has been such a popular
filming destination, and Scotland more
broadly, and a lot of what gets filmed is
from the literature sector originally.
”

Dr Vicky Adams
Transformation Manager at Literature Alliance
Scotland & Story Fellow at University of Edinburgh

More than **50 million** copies sold by
contemporary Edinburgh authors (selected authors)

Over **600 million** copies of
JK Rowling’s Harry Potter series sold worldwide

~90 million copies sold by
historical Edinburgh authors (selected authors)

Source: BOP Consulting Desk Research (2025)

Literary tourism & cultural exchange

Literary tourism* is also an important part of literature’s cultural impact, its economic activity providing the most tangible effect. Alongside the footfall generated through literary tourism, the city’s literary activity contributes to symbolic, cultural capital.

For some visitors, this is realised as explicit intentions related to literary production – engaging with literary tours, the favourite spots of fictional characters, or the streets of Leith depicted in Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*. Relatedly, Choose Books, which opened in the northern part of Edinburgh in March 2026, pays tribute to *Trainspotting* through its name and signage.

Additionally, there is the tourism impact created by literary adaptations, as demonstrated by the ‘Outlander Effect’. A 2023 visitor survey by VisitScotland showed that around 8% of visitors (~700,000 people) specified *Outlander* as their main travel motivation. While a significant portion of this tourism is connected to interest in the screen adaptations, it is literature that is the foundation of these works.

The same survey reports that 19% of visitors to Scotland said film, TV or literature was a source of inspiration. This increases to 37% for long haul visitors (a market primarily dominated by the US). For many UK visitors, Scotland and literature are natural associations: 62% of UK adults believe Scotland is a nation known for its well-known poets, authors and writers.

Data from the Scotland Visitor Survey (2023) further underscores the prominence of heritage and culture in Edinburgh’s appeal to visitors – with 61% of visitors sampled in Edinburgh citing history and culture as one of their top reasons for choosing Scotland as a destination (compared to 48% of visitors from the Scotland-wide sample).

*Literary tourism is understood as travel motivated wholly or partly by an interest in books and literature connected to place, authors and literary figures associated with particular places, adaptations of literary works, literature events such as book festivals and fairs, and literary heritage and culture.

“Given the increasing popularity of Edinburgh as a cultural destination, and the importance of culture and tourism to the city’s economy and global reputation, it is high time a strategic long-term plan for our City of Literature was put in place that brings sustainable, tangible benefits to citizens, tourists, writers and many others.”

Marc Lambert
CEO Scottish Book Trust

62% of UK adults believe Scotland is a nation **well-known** for its poets, authors and writers. Source: Scotland Visitor Survey, Visit Scotland, (2023)

Enduring cultural production amid growing precarity

This global cultural presence is reinforced by the circulation of works by Edinburgh based writers and those who write about the city - embedding Edinburgh within the global literary consciousness. A conservative estimate puts the number of copies sold worldwide by select Edinburgh-based contemporary writers at around 140 million.

The international profile of Edinburgh’s literary output also continues to nurture (and be nurtured by) its universities. There are 50 courses offered across literature and creative writing, and this grows to 199 courses when the definition is expanded to include courses of which literature studies are a component.

While Edinburgh’s international bestsellers, festivals and intellectual, cultural exchange have global reach, consultees noted that a driving force in the sector has been how it operates locally: intimately and relationally.

Reflecting on developments over the past two decades, Vicky Adams observes that “there were a lot of individuals willing to put in the time and the effort and the startup funding to make things flower.” Individual actors were able to shape ideas and translate them into tangible initiatives, building a network of people and activity through which a flourishing ecosystem could grow.

Recent years have seen more challenging circumstances: a shrinking funding landscape; the pandemic; and a climate of poly-crises due to the cost of living and operating costs have strained the conditions needed for sustained growth.

Public investment in arts and culture in Scotland has declined significantly over the past decade, reflecting a wider contraction across the UK. Between 2009-10 and 2022-23, Creative Scotland’s core government funding fell by 22% in real terms, while Scottish local authorities’ revenue spending on culture and related services decreased by 29% per person.

This pressure is not only felt by the organisations who deliver cultural activity and enable literary production, but also by writers. A 2022 ALCS survey highlights that both the number of full-time authors and their earnings are in decline.

Despite this economic climate, there remains a rich local ecosystem which sustains Edinburgh’s cultural impact through the networks, spaces and organisations that enable literary

activity. This highlights both the particular resilience and strength of Edinburgh’s network of individuals and organisations who make up the sector, and the precarity of the circumstances in which they are currently operating.

“Post Covid, culture is starting to put itself back together again. [The sector] has gone through a bit of a trauma, as we all did, but I think it is starting to pick up a little bit - though more support [is] needed.”

Hannah Lavery
Poet & Playwright

More than **8** residency programmes (number would be higher if theatre & playwright residencies were included).
~ **22** writers supported in 2025 (through writers residencies).

The city’s active literary ecosystem, and the networks and infrastructure which support it

A defining feature of Edinburgh’s literary culture is the **frequency and plurality** of events. Independent bookshops play a significant role within this – with multiple consultees describing the city’s bookshops as cultural anchors and noting their success in providing convening spaces for readers, platforming writers, and sustaining literature as a participatory cultural form. This scene has been resilient in the changed social and cultural landscape post covid, with one consultee noting the return of confidence to host events. The scale and reach of book festivals in Edinburgh has grown over the past

two decades, despite some variation in the number of festivals within the city. For example, EIBF saw an 11% increase in ticket sales on 2024, and a 19% rise in first time ticket buyers.

There is also an **ongoing culture of innovation**, with new festivals emerging in recent years (e.g., Push the Boat Out). This highlights both the strength of ambition of cultural producers and of audience appetite for contemporary literature – despite the challenges which the wider economic ecosystem has brought. Reflecting this, there have been three additions to Edinburgh’s bookshop scene in 2026: Choose Books, The Cookbook Shop and Wild Fungarium.

The density of activity lends Edinburgh a rich and varied offer for writers. There are multiple opportunities and inlets for new and established writers to engage with peers, direct support, new ideas,

and new audiences, enabled through the bookshops, festivals, sectoral support networks and other key players such as higher education providers. A spotlight was shone through consultation on the role played by bookshops in offering writers opportunities to present their work and speak in public through a programme of open mic nights, meet-the-author events and workshops. Additionally, bookshops like Typewronger host mentoring and training events that provide meaningful entry points for new writers and help build confidence in approaching shops and publishers.

The **complementary** character of Edinburgh’s independent bookshops was noted by several consultees. The ability of commercial businesses to exist in complement - not just in competition - underscores the distinctive vitality of Edinburgh’s literary scene. Analysis of events programming across seven of

Edinburgh’s independent bookshops shows that across one calendar month there are upwards of 75 literature-related events taking place.

“The independent bookshops have got such a good, nuanced understanding of their customer base - they speak to each other and they understand each others’ remit and strengths.”

Jenny Brown
Founding Director, Jenny Brown Associates

256,300 Visitors (annually) to literary festivals.

8 Literary festivals.

Aspiration and ideation – cultural impact experienced through the individual

[Edinburgh is] “a wonderful place to be a writer because every night and every day... somewhere, an author is speaking.” – **Mary Paulson-Ellis**

Importantly, the literary ecosystem in Edinburgh supports both established and emerging voices, cultivating a pipeline of opportunities which support writers through different stages of their career. The reach of high-profile writers helps create opportunities for lesser-known authors. As Mairi Oliver of Lighthouse suggests, “a little of the shine of the bigger name” can extend visibility to new writers. This dual capacity – to host and celebrate internationally recognised writers alongside incubating

and platforming emerging talent – is a defining strength of Edinburgh’s literary culture. Reflecting this dynamic, Tee Hodges of Typewronger notes how the presence of well-known authors at literature festivals drives increased footfall at the independent bookshops while the festivals are going on.

Edinburgh’s distinct cultural profile is shaped by an ongoing interplay of storytelling and materiality. This layering of narrative onto the city gives it a sense of place that, more than simply being described by literature, is constructed by it. This phenomenon is largely the result of representations of Edinburgh in contemporary writing, rather than the city’s significant literary heritage (although this does play a part).

Jenny Brown, founder of Scotland’s leading literary agency (Jenny Brown Associates) and a prominent voice

in Edinburgh’s literary scene for over four decades, noted that 40 years ago there was very little representation of Edinburgh in writing. “Now there are so many brilliant books telling stories set in Edinburgh and Scotland more widely, and the connection between reading and writing and Edinburgh is so strong.” She highlighted the impact of “seeing oneself represented in a book; seeing your city as a place in which people become writers and storytellers”.

This illustrates the layers of literature’s influence, and the depth of the cultural impact literature can have. At one level there is the international reach and associated tourism, soft power and industry status. At another, there is a flourishing cultural ecosystem in which people can find opportunities, pursue creative careers and create a culture of intellectual exchange and entertainment. Then, at the personal

and interpersonal level, literature shapes aspiration, longing and a sense of place.

“
The thing about Edinburgh and about Dublin, is they are on another level – they are cities whose identities are almost entirely constructed on literature.
”

Mairi Kidd
Author & former Director of the Saltire Society

more than **50** book launch and meet the author events per month (across seven selected bookshops)
25 book club and reading group events per month (across seven selected bookshops)

Cultural identity & sense of place

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of ensuring that Edinburgh's literary identity is felt by those who live in the city. Relatedly, several consultees pointed to the role played by the quotations at Waverley Station in making Edinburgh's literary character visible and woven into civic space.

However, "tangible markers" such as these installations were recognised as being just one mechanism through which literary identity can be unlocked. Equally, there was recognition that the story of literature in Edinburgh can be told back to the city, and to the sector, a little more clearly. One stakeholder highlighted the role of literature as a "gateway" to ideas, and noted the potential that could be realised if "more physical space and air

time" were given to literature in other cultural spaces. In this view, a greater cross-pollination within the city's cultural scene – and integrating literature into other art forms and spaces – could act as "a seed for so many other things."

While more can be done to embed literature within civic identity in Edinburgh, there is an established and tangible connection between reading, writing and the city, and this has implications for creative expression and imaginative possibility.

Cultural impact: concluding reflections

Edinburgh's literary activity generates cultural impact across multiple scales. Internationally, the city's storytelling reputation strengthens its cultural influence and global visibility. Locally, a dense and relationally-rich ecosystem sustains a vibrant culture of events and exchange – supporting opportunities for creative development through literature and, specifically, opportunities for writers (established and emerging). At the same time, literature shapes how the city is imagined, experienced and understood – embedding storytelling within Edinburgh's identity and reinforcing its role as a distinctive centre for cultural and intellectual life.

Acknowledging the strength of these impacts, there is support needed to secure greater returns for the literature sector to recognise and support its role in sustaining Edinburgh's appeal

to international tourists. Crucially, more support is needed to maintain and extend access to opportunities for emerging writers. With a UK-wide decline in both the number of full-time professional authors and in authors' earnings, there is pressing need for strategic writer development initiatives to maintain the vibrancy of the contemporary literary scene in the face of challenging financial circumstances.

“

Books are our way of changing the world - we think the world can be a better place - more just, kinder, more creative, all the good things, and the way that we dig for that better world is books.

”

Mairi Oliver
Owner, Lighthouse Books

Social Impact

Key Findings

1

Edinburgh’s literary activity strengthens social connection by creating shared spaces for people to come together through books and stories

2

Strong library infrastructure and literacy programming support wide ranging social benefits across wellbeing, civic participation and lifelong learning

3

Innovative access models and inclusive programming are expanding participation, though more embedded outreach is needed to extend social benefits of existing activity

Community level connections and a sense of belonging

Reading and writing are mostly experienced as solitary activities. However, in Edinburgh, literature can often be experienced as a shared, collective practice that fosters meaningful social connection. The city’s literary ecology creates spaces in which individuals gather around books and storytelling. Edinburgh’s independent bookshop scene plays an important role – hosting a high volume of reading groups and book clubs, cultivating regular, informal and discursive spaces of people to connect through literature.

The variety of the different independent bookshops means that distinct audiences and interests can be nurtured. Lighthouse – a bookshop which builds on Edinburgh’s longstanding history

of radical thought – provides a strong example of how a bookshop can function not simply as a retail space but also as a space for representation and belonging. Lived experiences and political identity are reflected in the books on the shelves and in the programming, creating a physical space which enables individuals to feel part of a wider community of shared interests and values.

It is, however, important to acknowledge that the community-building capacity of the bookshop scene does not mean that all communities are successfully engaged; there is anecdotal evidence that participation in bookshop events sits primarily with student and middle-class audiences, showing that there is room for exploring access and engagement with other audiences.

Survey data indicates that Edinburgh residents generally feel the positive

impact of cultural connection. The 2023 Scottish Household Survey indicates that 59% of respondents in Edinburgh agree that culture and the arts make a positive difference to their lives, compared to 47% across Scotland as a whole. Similarly, 63% of Edinburgh respondents agree that culture and the arts make a positive difference to their local community (versus 51% Scotland average).

“

What does storytelling do but help us understand someone else, help us understand our own history, or help put us in context? It’s never felt more important than it does now.

”

Hannah Lavery
Poet & Playwright

Broader civic connection, and dismantling barriers to access

Beyond localised community-building, literature contributes to broader forms of civic connection. Several stakeholders highlighted the role of storytelling in fostering empathy, understanding and social cohesion – noting the increasing importance of this in today’s social and political climate. Through reading and sharing stories, individuals encounter perspectives beyond their own, deepening awareness of different contexts and experiences, and strengthening their social connectivity. In addition to Edinburgh’s culture of reading, its festivals, book groups, libraries and informal networks support the connecting potential of literature.

At the same time, there are structural pressures which threaten the vitality of Edinburgh’s living literary ecosystem. Rising housing costs and the increasing unaffordability of the city centre have led to the pricing out of writers and creatives (among others). This raises critical questions: what does it mean to be a writer from Edinburgh today? And how can the city meaningfully support writers whose connection to the city is strained by economic pressures?

While Edinburgh’s literary offer is rich, barriers to participation persist along geographic, financial and social lines. However, ongoing efforts to dismantle these barriers demonstrate a shared commitment within the literature sector to accessibility and inclusion.

Innovative ticketing models across Edinburgh’s literary festivals (EIBF and PTBO) and the programme of events run

through the independent bookshops are examples of how organisations across the city are working to reduce financial barriers. Tiered pricing and pay-what-you-can tickets, alongside free options, reduce cost barriers to participation.

Despite the availability of events and books in Edinburgh, the literature sector is still vulnerable to social divides articulated through markers such as schooling or postcode.

A theme noted by several consultees was the perceived distance – both physical and imagined – between Edinburgh’s central cultural institutions and its peripheral neighbourhoods. In Niddrie or Broomhouse, for example, it might not feel that literary provision is “on your doorstep.” There are efforts to counteract this geographic barrier. The National Library of Scotland has developed outreach initiatives (with a Scotland-

wide remit) such as their Outwith programme which tours collections from Edinburgh out into communities where those collections have local resonance.

“There’s one social level which is incredibly well served. There’s a huge amount there for those [who] can access it, and then it’s about putting that connection in place so that the people who aren’t currently using that are able to access it.”

Dr Vicky Adams
Transformation Manager at Literature Alliance
Scotland & Story Fellow at University of Edinburgh

Public library infrastructure and engagement

Organisations like StreetReads have provided reading support and books directly within communities experiencing disadvantage. The loss of StreetReads’ premises in 2025 provides an example of how there is meaningful access work being done but that greater financial support support is needed to nurture its positive impacts. EIBF models ambitious outreach with its Paper Trails initiative, which co-creates cultural programming with five of Edinburgh’s public libraries and the communities they serve.

Edinburgh benefits from strong library provision. Insights from BOP’s Global Cultural Cities Database indicate that the City of Edinburgh has the highest number of libraries per capita in the UK. This infrastructure provides a vital free point

of access to books, digital resources and community space. The business case for investment in public library infrastructure is made clear by research via the Scottish Book Trust – in the UK, estimates suggest that every £1 invested in libraries returns between £5 and £7.

Findings from the recent Libraries Futures report (which focuses specifically on the public libraries system) provides further insight into usage patterns and how library provision in Edinburgh is perceived by its residents. More than being a space for the borrowing of books, libraries provide a space through which myriad social benefits can take shape.

The Edinburgh public library system offered 2,396 free activities to adults, and 7,317 free activities for children and young people in 2023-24. 28% of library users surveyed reported that they use the library as a place to socialise,

and 20.6% report using the provision of children’s services – highlighting how public libraries fulfil an important broader civic and social function.

The majority of service users (95.7%) surveyed agreed that libraries are situated in the correct location for their community. Where issues were raised, they related to factors such as proximity to busy roads, limited parking and public transport access – highlighting the interconnectedness of library and wider cultural asset engagement with transport provision.

Among the respondents who reported that they do not regularly access the public library service (N=125), reasons given included: purchasing their own books (19%), using other libraries (14%) and “fallen out of the habit” (14%). Importantly, 12% indicated an intention to return. Relatedly

public library staff identified opening hours as an area for review - while 53% of staff felt that current hours adequately met community needs, 47% of staff respondents suggested exploring improvements to opening hours, to better align with patterns of demand and optimise staff capacity.

“Libraries are somewhere where you can be warm, be nurtured, have access to books, and a route into a world of imagination.”

Librarian and writer speaking at a Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) reception



Literacy and its positive social impacts

Literacy underpins a wide network of social impacts. Functionally, it supports educational attainment, employability and civic participation. At a personal level, it contributes to confidence, empathy and agency. These benefits were widely reported across the consultations and are supported by research from the National Literacy Trust, highlighting literature’s central role in creating space for people to feel connected, understood, to communicate, participate socially and engage in lifelong learning. One standout statistic from research conducted by Touchstone shows that whether or not a child enjoys reading is more important to their educational success than their family background.

Evidence was cited by more than one consultee linking access to books at an early age to reduced re-offending in the justice system. Additionally, evidence was cited that around 6,000 prisoners in Scotland have a reading age of 11 or less, pointing to the need for further exploration of literacy through a social justice and welfare lens.

There is already important work being delivered, with the Scottish Book Trust’s BookBug and Reading Schools initiatives receiving note and praise from several consultees. Craigmillar Library was also cited several times for its exemplar community-focused delivery. Evaluation of the BookBug programme identified benefits including strengthened social networks among parents and carers, improvements in children’s speech, language and listening, and enhanced parent-child bonding. One consultee also highlighted the social value of the

programme for librarians. Through BookBug librarians have an opportunity to fold early years engagement and reading aloud into their role, creating a relational dimension and a new means of engaging with literature.

The Edinburgh ecosystem recognises the lifelong social value of literature and creativity – including the importance of ensuring recognition and participation are not limited by age. This is exemplified by Jenny Brown Associates who, in 2023, launched the Silver Linings Debut Prize, set up to discover new writers over the age of 50, an initiative recognised by EIBF’s Jenny Niven as demonstrating an “inclusivity that is specific and powerful”. While the remit of this Award is not limited to Edinburgh, Edinburgh acts as an epicentre in which innovation in the literary ecosystem can take shape and effect change.

“Getting people to read is the bigger picture [...] getting readers and getting enthusiasm, excitement and wonder and rebellion - all those things that reading is actually about.”

Vikki Reilly
Marketing & Trade Development
Manager, Publishing Scotland

94% said Bookbug Sessions have a positive effect on their own wellbeing (parents/carers)

95% said Bookbug Sessions have a positive effect on parent/carer-child bonds

n=437

Source: The impact of Bookbug Sessions on promoting positive parenting practices, SBT

Finding pathways to lifelong wellbeing through literature

At a Scotland-wide level, the role of literature in social and individual wellbeing is evidenced through the work of the charity Open Book, and programmes such as SBT's Reading is Caring, which supports people living with dementia and those who care for them through reading together in shared workshops.

While it is not the remit of the literature sector alone to resolve social issues, consultees noted the significant role played by literary organisations and the library network in addressing social challenges – ranging from educational outcomes for young people, social care for older adults, and community wellbeing through cultural participation. To build on this impact, there is an

opportunity to strengthen visibility of the positive social impacts of literacy, and for other sectors to support literature in increasing the frequency and accessibility of programming, particularly for communities in the outskirts of Edinburgh. Through consultation there was recognition that more investment in literacy would deliver easily-attainable, tangible gains and meet important welfare concerns.

“
My background is children who struggle with reading, and if we focussed on welfare we could sort it.
”

Mairi Kidd
Author & former Director of the Saltire Society

Social impact: concluding reflections

Literature contributes to Edinburgh's social fabric by creating lifelong opportunities for connection, participation and learning. Across its bookshops, festivals, libraries and literacy programming, the city's literary ecosystem supports social interaction, empathy and civic engagement while delivering tangible benefits for education and wellbeing.

At the same time, persistent barriers linked to geography and wider social inequality highlight the importance of continued investment in literacy development and community outreach to ensure that the social benefits of literature – and of Edinburgh's particularly active literary offer – is felt across all parts of the city.

While organisations are increasingly being tasked with doing more with

less – and with recognition of the social value that libraries, literacy and reading bring to people's lives, there is need for reflection on what the most pressing social challenges are for Edinburgh today; on the role literacy and the literature sector play within that; and a joined-up approach to relieve financial and resource pressures on organisations so they can continue to deliver and expand social impact.

“
The wellbeing impact of reading a book, of being able to be creative – it's massive – but it's one of those things isn't it, a bit like being a teacher; you probably don't know the real impact of being a teacher until about 20 years on.
”

Hannah Lavery
Poet & Playwright

Economic Impact

Key Findings

1

A nationally significant hub for publishing and literary businesses, Edinburgh generates economic value, employment and sector specialisation well above the UK average

2

Events and literary tourism draw high-spend visitors to the city, generating wider economic activity across the visitor economy

3

The rich and plural literary economy sustains jobs in the creative supply chain and resilient consumer demand

A thriving economic sector that resists national trends

The concentration of literary businesses in Edinburgh illustrate the economic value of the sector - with Edinburgh serving as an engine of publishing in the UK, and a magnet for creative professionals looking for opportunities and work in literature and related activity.

Relatedly, several stakeholders noted the size of the freelance economy drawn to Edinburgh. These figures fall outside of the employment data captured by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), suggesting that the economic value of Edinburgh’s literary businesses is higher than the estimated generated through analysis of ONS data.

Edinburgh’s literary sector features large-scale employers – including

Scottish Book Trust (which has a turnover of £7 million and 75 staff) and EIBF (which employs 30 year-round staff, growing to 130 during its delivery phase) alongside an expansive network of smaller organisations. Additionally, the majority of Scotland’s publishers are based in or have offices in Edinburgh, representing the full breadth of the publishing ecosystem, including independent publishers, establishment publishers and major academic and educational presses like Bright Red and Edinburgh University Press.

While the economic significance and plurality of Edinburgh’s publishing sector was widely reported by stakeholders, one consultee highlighted how established independent publishers have in recent years come under financial pressures resulting in several acquisitions by larger conglomerates.

With regard to consumer behaviour, the vitality of Edinburgh’s literature sector influences a retail environment that resists wider downwards trends in physical bookshops. Stakeholders highlight Edinburgh’s healthy trading volumes in physical books. Additionally, the well-attended events programming hosted by independent bookshops creates additional income – for the bookshops themselves, for featured writers, and for individuals paid to host and chair the events.

“
Edinburgh’s business was intellect and has been for centuries, and it remains intellect, very significantly.
”

Mairi Kidd
Author & former Director of the Saltire Society

Economic opportunities across the creative supply chain support Edinburgh’s role as a national hub for literature

Business number and employment

The literary sector in Edinburgh (defined by the SIC codes presented in Figure 2) maintained a broadly stable business base between 2022 and 2025, with business numbers peaking at 130 in 2023 before falling to 125 in 2024 and around 120 in 2025, largely driven by a reduction in publishing businesses. A combination of factors within a challenging investment environment - among them rising operating costs, shifts in market trends, consumer behaviour, and business models – are likely to have influenced the recent decline. Employment rose from 1,625 in 2022 to 1,950 in 2023 and then declined to 1,350 in 2024.

Location quotient

A location quotient (LQ) measures how concentrated an industry is in a place compared with the national average. An LQ above 1 means the activity is more specialised locally than nationally, while an LQ below 1 means it is under-represented. In 2025, Edinburgh showed strong specialisations in key parts of the literary sector. Library and archive activities, as well as bookstores, are the most concentrated (LQ 2.7), followed by translation and interpretation (2.2) and book publishing (1.9), indicating that these activities are significantly more concentrated in Edinburgh than the UK average. These figures confirm Edinburgh’s role as a nationally significant hub for literature - and publishing-related activities.

Figure 1 Number of businesses and employment in the literary sector of Edinburgh (2022-2025) ¹

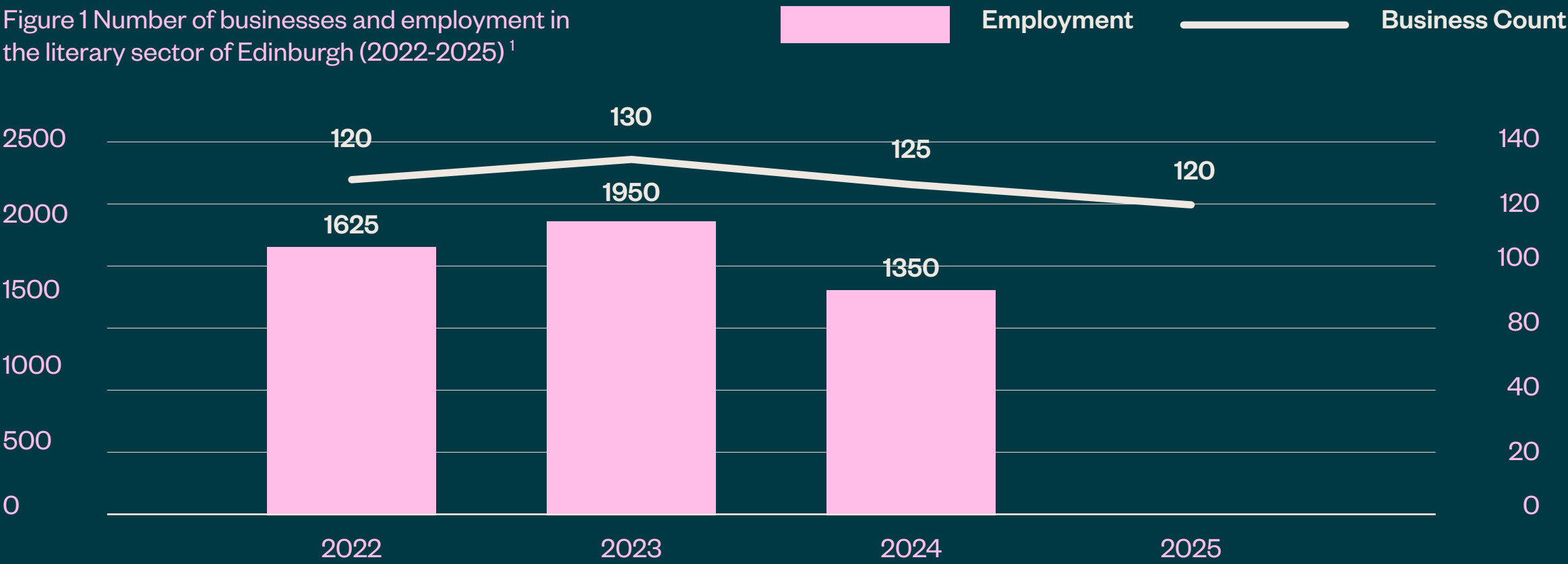


Figure 2 Location quotient of Edinburgh’s literary sector by Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) ²

“There’s a really strong economic aspect - and a high percentage of the freelance literature professionals are based in or near Edinburgh, because that’s where the work is.”

Dr Vicky Adams
Transformation Manager at Literature Alliance Scotland & Story Fellow at University of Edinburgh

Location Quotient (2025)	
4761: Retail sale of books in specialised stores	2.7
5811: Book publishing	1.9
5814: Publishing of journals and periodicals	1.1
5819: Other publishing activities	1.0
7430: Translation and interpretation activities	2.2
9101: Library and archive activities	2.7

^{1,2} Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS). 2025 data for employment was not available at the time of reporting.

The economic might of the Edinburgh literary sector, literary events tourism and the crucial role of literature in attracting visitors and spend

GVA contribution

ONS data shows that in 2024, the literary sector in Edinburgh contributed a total of £50.9m in Gross Value Added (GVA). The GVA estimates show that book publishing is the economic core of Edinburgh’s literary sector, contributing around £19.3 million. Journals and periodicals (£9.8 million) and other publishing activities (£8.9 million) also make substantial contributions, highlighting the strength of the wider publishing base. Beyond publishing, bookstores add a further £6.4 million, reflecting the importance of the retail

side of the literary economy. Translation and interpretation adds a further £5.2 million, while libraries and archives contribute around £1.3 million.

Figure 3 GVA contribution of Edinburgh’s literary sector by Standard Industrial Classification (SIC), 2024 ³

	GVA Contribution (£m)
5811: Book Publishing	19.3
5814: Publishing of journals and periodicals	9.8
5819: Other publishing activities	8.9
4761: Retail sale of books in specialised stores	6.4
7430: Translation and interpretation activities	5.2
9101: Library and archive activities	1.3

Literary Tourism

Literary tourism generates economic impact by bringing new visitors into a destination and encouraging them to spend beyond the cultural event itself. Audiences drawn by festivals or literary programming spend money on accommodation, food and drink, shopping, transport, and leisure, which boosts local businesses and increases citywide footfall.

The organisational side of literary events also strengthens the local creative economy. Spending on staff wages, artists, venues, and suppliers supports jobs, sustains creative services, and circulates money through the wider supply chain. These impacts demonstrate that literary tourism contributes not only culturally but also as a driver of urban economic growth. The next page illustrates this impact through the example of Edinburgh

International Book Festival. The impact estimates draw on a methodology combining primary research undertaken by BOP at the 2022 Festival with the Festival’s more recent attendance and organisational expenditure data from 2024. All figures are adjusted to 2024 prices to account for inflation.

“Literature is worth a fortune to Scotland.”

Mairi Kidd
Author & former Director of the Saltire Society

³ Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS). 2025 data for employment was not available at the time of reporting.

Literary events tourism and the crucial role of literature in attracting visitors and spend - as illustrated by Edinburgh International Book Festival

In economic terms, the 2024 edition of the Edinburgh International Book Festival translates into... ⁴

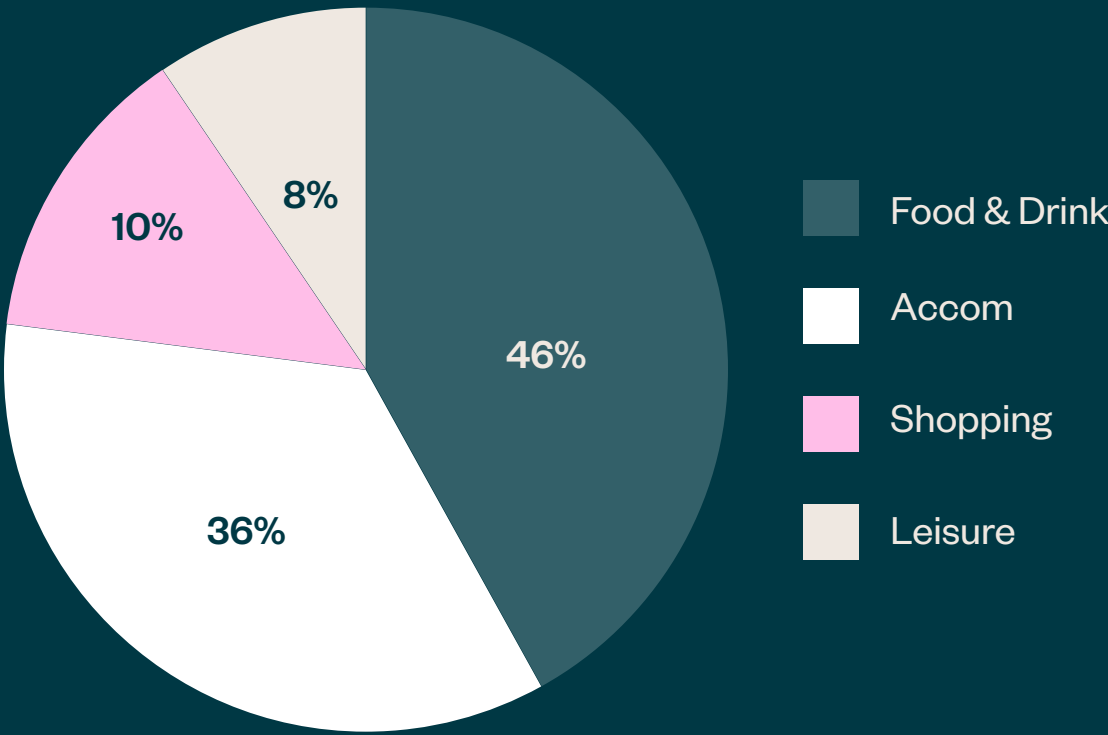
£10.4m Gross Combined Expenditure

£6.8m Net Economic Impact (after multipliers)

£3.4m Additional Gross Value Added (GVA)

112 Full-time Equivalent Jobs Supported

Figure 4 Visitor spend by category (%)



Food & drink (£403k, 46%) and accommodation (£317k, 36%) dominate visitor spend, demonstrating the Festival's direct stimulus to Edinburgh's hospitality, retail, and leisure sectors.

“For every £1 of public funding, we generate £8.”

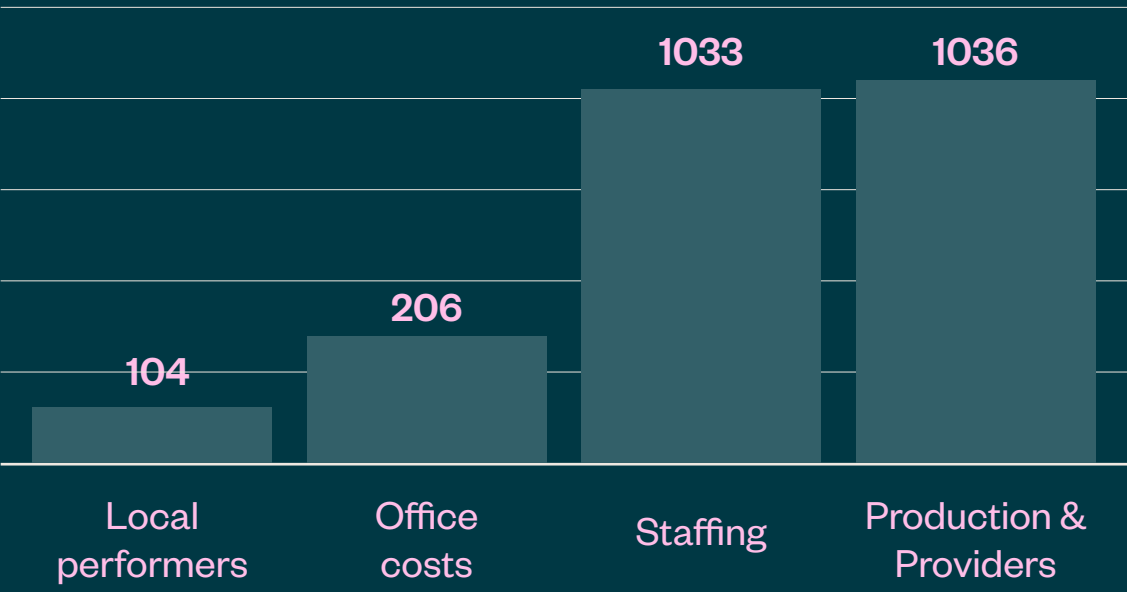
Jenny Niven
Director, Edinburgh International Book Festival

Figure 5 Average net spend by visitor origin (£)



Average visitor net spend rises sharply with distance: local attendees contribute ~£1, while visitors from outside Scotland average £168 — generating genuinely new income rather than redistributing existing local spending.

Figure 6 Organisational spend by category (£k)



The Festival invests over £2.43m directly into the local economy through channels such as staffing (£1m+) and its production and provider network (£1m+), supporting 112 FTE jobs across the city.

⁴Source: BOP Consulting (2025).

The creation of jobs, of economic opportunities across the creative supply chain, and Edinburgh as a national hub for literature

The major, international status of the Edinburgh Book Festival highlights a dynamic that operates more broadly across consumer-facing literary activity in the city. Literature acts as a magnet that draws high-spending visitors to the city and provides the foundational content for other high-growth industries.

In acknowledgement of this, stakeholders have articulated a need for stronger recognition of literature's role in generating economic value for Edinburgh. This applies across different strands of sector activity. For example, one

stakeholder cautioned that the literature sector can be instrumentalised for its social wellbeing impacts without being given the financial support to enable full adoption of this responsibility, which would typically fall under the remit of the Education sector. Another stakeholder highlighted the relative disparity in public funding across the cultural sector industries – noting that literature's share is significantly less than visual arts (5% and 18% for FY 2025/26, respectively). Recently, the Tourism Visitor Levy has been identified by several stakeholders as a mechanism through which the city council can recognise the central role of literature in Edinburgh's tourism appeal and economy, advocating for a portion of the visitor levy to be reinvested back into the literary ecosystem. Negotiations are ongoing at the time of writing.

Economic impact: concluding reflections

Publishers, booksellers, festival programmers and writers share an interest in sustaining readership, promoting new work and enabling dignified employment across the chain of production and distribution. The success of one element strengthens the whole.

Stakeholders and economic analysis of sector data support the narrative of literature's commercial significance for Edinburgh. However, consultation also underscored the need for stronger recognition from the government of the sector's economic force influence.

Smaller organisations struggle with standstill public funding which puts a limit on their capacity for planning and growth, while rising rents for housing and workspaces force writers and creatives into the outskirts or further

afield. In addition, a 2022 ALCS survey highlights that both the number of full-time authors and their earnings are in decline. Taken together, there is potential for wider economic risks to threaten the ecosystem, particularly for emerging talent. This highlights the need for further investment in and development of literature's economic potential to ensure Edinburgh does not lose elements of its critical literary infrastructure and appeal.

“

Fundamentally, our mission is the social and community piece, but increasingly we recognise that we'll have to charge for events and suchlike in order to make that happen [...] Literature can be hugely beneficial; it can even prevent some of the broader societal issues we're seeing.

”

Jackie Cromarty
Former Director of Engagement,
National Library of Scotland

Gaps

The strength of the impact literature creates is tempered by the gaps that exist within the sector across its social and economic activity

Across the different areas of impact, it is clear that literature makes a sizeable contribution to Edinburgh, underpinned by a rich and established ecosystem.

However, through consultations it was clear that whilst the individual component parts required for a flourishing sector are present and active in the city, there are several gaps within the sector. Consultees were swift to identify that resolving these gaps does not lie with any single entity, however they are pertinent challenges to the city should there be a desire for the sector to remain resilient and relevant in the current climate.

1

Capitalising on existing activity and best practice: growing the audience for the literature sector does not necessarily mean creating novel events or approaches. Consultees identified several cases where success could be generated by improving existing activity such as by extending reach or enhancing depth of engagement.

2

Centralised source of information: there are myriad events, opportunities, and initiatives running across the city, and an often cited barrier for engagement is awareness. A “one-stop-shop” that can bring disparate information sources into a single space is seen as a need for the sector – both for those working in the sector and for its audiences.

3

Representing the whole city: whilst there are pockets of provision for diverse audiences, there is a sense of the sector predominantly serving “the usual suspects” and a need to better engage with communities that exist in the fringes of Edinburgh, literally and socially.

4

Leveraging the soft power of literature (literature’s ability to shape cultural perceptions and influence opinion): at both a city level and a national level, more could be made of the soft-power benefits generated by the literary sector in Edinburgh, both in terms of literary tourism and in terms of international promotion of Edinburgh (and Scotland) as a thriving contemporary cultural destination.

5

Consistent, sustainable funding and investment: it is recognised that in the current climate culture is under resourced, and literature faces a particular challenge due to the nature of its creation and engagement. Much of the sector is supported by “trust and goodwill” and there is a need for increased funding – both through public subsidy and through philanthropy – to ensure the sector remains resilient and sustainable.

6

Dedicated, affordable space for the sector: several stakeholders identified a need for a shared physical hub that could bring together writers, freelancers, smaller organisations and others from across the literature ecology, supporting collaboration, networking and relational ways of working. These ways of working already underpin Edinburgh’s literary scene, but are recognised as needing additional support to ensure ongoing success in today’s economic climate.

As both a workspace and convening space, a new hub space could help sustain the contemporary sector while also addressing the shortage of affordable space for writers and smaller or grassroots organisations in an increasingly unaffordable city.

“

There are fewer literary magazines; fewer opportunities to publish things. Writers need space, time, colleagues, mentoring, opportunities to share, opportunities to get published.

”

Hannah Lavery
Poet & Playwright

Concluding Remarks

Edinburgh's literary ecosystem is a defining strength of the city, delivering significant economic, social and cultural value – but its sustained impact can no longer be taken for granted

The influence of literature on Edinburgh is both extensive and layered. It underpins the city's international reach, driving tourism, cultural reputation and industry standing. It supports creative careers and sustains a culture of intellectual exchange; vital drivers of Edinburgh's economic activity. This literary ecosystem plays a vital role in the city's social fabric: networks of libraries, literacy programming, bookshops and festivals act as a connective

tissue which enables lifelong learning, social connection and wellbeing. A unique strength of Edinburgh's literary ecosystem is the complementarity of its component parts – the success of one element strengthens the whole.

Beyond these impacts, literature also shapes dimensions of aspiration, identity and a sense of place, informing how Edinburgh is imagined, experienced and understood. In this way, storytelling is not simply an output of the city, but a defining element of its economic, social and cultural character.

To sustain this distinctive microcosm, the existing relational strengths of the sector require recognition and support. Stakeholders consistently describe a funding landscape that has become increasingly constrained, with many organisations operating in survival mode. This context places pressure on

their capacity to sustain and grow their programming, placing a limit on their ability to maintain and grow the clear impacts evidenced through this research process. Areas where literature's influence is keenly felt – education and wellbeing – are examples of how a flourishing literary ecosystem benefits society far beyond the sector itself. With persistent socio-economic inequalities, there is recognised need to expand the city's literary offer and extend its impact. However, limited and often static financial support bears implications for access, cultural participation, and for the vitality of the sector more broadly. Concurrently, increasing costs for housing and workspace are reshaping where creatives live and work. This risks a gradual erosion of key facets of what makes Edinburgh an attractive place for literary production and its associated economic activity.

Overall, the findings point to a sector that remains highly distinctive in its composition, engagement and impact, but which is operating within an environment of increasing constraint. The continued strength of Edinburgh's literary ecosystem will require sustained investment which expands the capacity of the sector to plan, innovate and grow – enabling organisations to continue important work and navigate the vulnerabilities of a challenging wider economic landscape.

“

Scottish government are really good at understanding the soft power of literature but not as good at investing in it.

”

Mairi Kidd
Author & former Director of the Saltire Society

Appendix

Stakeholders consulted through this research

Name	Role and related organisation(s)
David Ryding	Director, Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature
Hannah Lavery	Poet and Playwright
Jackie Cromarty	Former Director of Engagement, National Library of Scotland
Jenny Brown	Founder of Scotland’s leading literary agency
Jenny Niven	CEO & Director of Edinburgh International Book Festival
Mairi Kidd	Author & former Director of the Saltire Society
Mairi Oliver	Owner, Lighthouse Bookshop
Marc Lambert	CEO, Scottish Book Trust
Mary Paulson-Ellis	Writer and Novelist

Name	Role and related organisation(s)
Sheila Pinder	CEO, Publishing Scotland
Tee Hodges	Founder, Typewronger Books
Vicky Adams	Transformation Manager at Literature Alliance Scotland & Story Fellow at University of Edinburgh
Vikki Reilly	Publishing Scotland’s representative on Literature Alliance Scotland’s Board

Sources consulted through this research

<i>The value and impact of Scotland’s public libraries</i> , Scottish Book Trust, (2025)	<i>Office for National Statistics</i> , (2025)
<i>Scotland’s Literary Heartland</i> , BTS, (2021)	<i>Scottish Household Survey</i> , Scottish Government, (2023)
<i>Edinburgh by Numbers</i> , The City of Edinburgh Council, (2024)	<i>Scotland Visitor Survey</i> , Visit Scotland, (2023)
<i>Future Libraries Strategy for Edinburgh 2025-2030</i> , The City of Edinburgh Council, (2025)	<i>How Edinburgh became the World’s First UENSCO City of Literature</i> , Alison Bowden, (2025)
<i>Mobile Libraries in Scotland</i> , Scottish Library and Information Council, (2024)	<i>Evidence review: How sharing stories, songs and rhymes can support early language development, bonding and attachment, and parental wellbeing</i> , Scottish Book Trust, (2025)
<i>Push the Boat Out: Edinburgh’s International Poetry Festival</i> , Final Report, (2024)	<i>UK Authors’ Earnings and Contracts: A survey of 6,000 writers</i> , CREATE, funded by Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society, (2022)
<i>Edinburgh International Book Festival TVL Briefing for City of Edinburgh Council</i> , (2025)	
<i>A Writer in a City of Literature</i> , Mary Paulson-Ellis, (2024)	<i>The State of the Arts</i> , Campaign for the Arts and the University of Warwick, (2024)

Additional notes on sources consulted

Book sales / copies sold by selected authors:

As there is no centralised source or repository for total sales numbers, these figures give an estimate. Publishers may not share sales numbers for individual books, or their reported numbers may be inaccurate, skewed by marketing hype, multiplication through versions or publishers being several, or indeed by the book being available in the public domain. For the purposes of this study, reported figures are based on data availability, and reputability of available data. Authors included in the contemporary Edinburgh-based authors figure are: Maggie O’Farrell, Irvine Welsh, Ian Rankin, Iain Banks and Kate Atkinson.

Being Edinburgh-based is inclusive of authors who lived in Edinburgh for a significant period which must include at the time of writing (their works).

Recorded events across selected bookshops:

Bookshops included are as follows:

- The Portobello Bookshop
- Typewronger
- Golden Hare Books
- Lighthouse Bookshopp
- Argonauts Books
- The Edinburgh Bookshop
- Topping & Company Booksellers

June 2026

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