



Reviving the



high street



**BOOKSELLERS
CALL TO ACTION**



RISE Bookselling Report

About RISE Bookselling

Resilience, Innovation and Sustainability for the Enhancement of Bookselling' (RISE Bookselling), is a three-year EU co-funded programme run by the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) for its network members, aimed at upscaling, reinforcing and maximising the capacity and resilience of the European bookselling sector.

About EIBF

The European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) is a non-commercial European and international umbrella organisation representing national booksellers associations and booksellers across Europe and worldwide. Our mission is to represent our members and their interests on a global platform, as well as to provide a forum for cooperation and foster the exchange of best practices.

About Creative Europe

Creative Europe is an EU programme that supports a wide range of cultural and creative sectors, encouraging cooperation and exchanges among cultural organisations and artists within Europe and beyond.

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Introduction

Booksellers and retailers working across European town centres and high streets¹ are facing increasing challenges, from the growth of online retail and the closure of retail spaces to soaring overhead costs and insufficient investment in local infrastructure. Moreover, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic further impacted retailers in the high street, with many shops having to temporarily shut their doors, while online commerce enjoyed an inevitable and unprecedented boost.

At the same time, during this period, many city centre retailers across Europe also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic reminded consumers of the value in shopping local and supporting their local commerce. Even now, as the current inflation and cost of living crisis drive many customers back to shopping centres, where goods are generally cheaper, this sentiment and appreciation for the added value of town centres remain. This proves that people stay deeply attached to their town centres and view them as indispensable and worth supporting, not only as places to shop, but also for the social and cultural value they bring to their communities.

Bookshops are prime examples of this: high street retailers and also unique cultural spaces that play an indispensable role in keeping their cities and towns' high streets financially viable and attractive. They simultaneously create local jobs, generate taxes, spend money with local suppliers, and provide cultural and recreational spaces for their communities.

As cultural spaces, bookshops in city centres also play a key role in providing access to culture, knowledge and information, and are an integral part in the life and soul of the high street. It is, therefore, essential to highlight the role bookshops will play in ensuring a resilient and thriving high-street in the years to come.

Background and context

Within the framework of the RISE Bookselling project, the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) is launching a communications and awareness raising campaign on the topic of “**Buying local and reviving the high street**” to highlight, support and amplify the work done at national level by national booksellers associations, local councils, town management associations, local booksellers and other relevant parties.

This campaign draws on the information gathered across three workshops which took place in the UK, France, and Germany, in the first half of 2023. Each location was carefully selected taking into consideration the extensive work that had already been carried out on the chosen topic, be it by the booksellers association or other local actors or authorities. Moreover, these countries were chosen to represent EIBF membership and draw on the expertise of local booksellers associations, their members and other relevant stakeholders contributing to the resilience of the city centre.





Case studies

United Kingdom

About the workshop

The first workshop was held in Norwich, UK, on 13 February in the historic Dragon Hall, the premises of National Centre for Writing. Known as the City of Stories, Norwich, with a population of roughly 144,000, has been a literary city for over 900 years. It has also been named as England's first UNESCO City of Literature, has a bustling city centre and is home to a dynamic bookselling community, which makes it an ideal city and case study for the topic at hand.

The event was organised with the assistance of the Business Improvement District² of Norwich (BID Norwich) and was attended by a dozen booksellers from the region, as well as local business representatives, UK and Ireland Booksellers Association staff members, town management and think-tank spokespeople – including Jonathan Warren (LOCALIS Think Tank), Chris Sands (Totally Locally) and Ojay MacDonald

(Association of Town & City Management – ACTM) – and former Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Catherine Rowett.

Context of the UK high street

It is no secret that the UK high street has been transformed in the past decade, as large retail spaces have shut down, consumer footfall has steadily declined and online retail has become the increasingly preferred outlet for shopping. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a big strain on small and medium-sized businesses, and the ongoing cost of living crisis has further exacerbated this precarious situation, with retailers facing higher than ever rental and operational costs, as well as unaffordable energy bills.

For many years, the UK & Ireland Booksellers Association (BA) has been at the forefront in

raising awareness on the role of bookshops as “third spaces” and “safe spaces” and in highlighting the contribution of bookshops to boosting the vitality and viability of high streets. They have done so, for instance, by publishing several in-depth reports on the role and value of bookshops in the high street, liaising with think-tanks, town management experts and other stakeholders in the field and, most importantly, providing guidance and support to bookshops on this matter.

The BA’s “Booksellers as placemakers” report showcases how booksellers are actively involved in their local communities, contributing to the range, quality, purpose and overall diversity of the high-street, for instance, by working with local traders, schools, libraries and the wider community.³

2022 proved to be the year with the highest ever-recorded number of books being sold and also the one that brought the number of independent bookshops in the UK to an all-time high, which indicates a strong interest in buying books and confirms that there absolutely is a space for bookshops in the high street.^{4 5}

However, many challenges remain – the closure of large department stores, the continuous rise of online retail, the declining purchasing power and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis – and it takes political will and concrete measures to ensure that the high street remains attractive and viable in the future to come. We sat down and listened to what booksellers had to say about their needs and necessary changes they believe are vital to guarantee the future viability of their high streets.

Findings from Norwich

During the workshop in Norwich, booksellers were given a forum and space to discuss, in small groups, their main concerns with the high street and the key changes they believe would help make them more resilient and future-proof.

The discussion was centred around three key questions:

1. What, in recent years, has made the biggest difference (positive or negative) in your town centre?
2. What potential change would have the biggest positive impact on your town centre?
3. What, within your own control, have you done or would like to do to positively impact your town centre?

Based on the responses gathered, the main findings are the following:

COVID-19: a surprisingly positive impact on business activities

The COVID-19 pandemic had a big impact on UK bookshops’ business operations, and, perhaps surprisingly, booksellers would argue that mostly for the better. It forced many of them to carry out a number of changes in order to adapt to the new reality of lockdowns and store closures. The key changes contributed to an increased and improved online presence, better engagement strategies with consumers, further motivation to become more resourceful and, overall, better visibility of their shop.

Soaring overhead costs and rental insecurity

The energy crisis and increased cost of living, which has affected consumers and businesses alike in the aftermath of the Russian war on Ukraine, has led to soaring overhead costs and rental insecurity for many booksellers. Those who rent their commercial premises are increasingly faced with the likelihood of their lease becoming unaffordable or simply with no guarantee that their rental lease will not be terminated abruptly. Consequently, they are less inclined (and financially capable) to buy their own shop, resulting in fewer incentives to invest in business growth.

Closure of local retail spaces and conversion into housing

The closure of large retail spaces in the high street, primarily department stores and chains, tied to a widespread housing shortage across large cities has resulted in many of these empty retail spaces being converted into housing. While the need for housing is imperative, this practice has had a knock-on effect on local retail, reducing the opportunities for retailers to rent commercial premises and contributing to an even lower consumer footfall in the high street, as they migrate to other accessible commercial venues, either online or outside city centres, namely shopping centres and retail parks.

Tackling retail space closure can be achieved through regular and consistent funding for the maintenance and improvement of town and city infrastructure. Furthermore, investment in public transport should be prioritised to help counter declining customer footfall.



External stakeholders, including ACTM's Ojay MacDonald, also weighed in on this topic, adding that more work must be done at local town management level to include different sectors and ensure that there is a balance in the property ecosystem.⁶

Local businesses need long-term investment and support

Bookshops, and generally local businesses, need more support from town councils to ensure their long-term longevity in their communities. Political and financial support is often granted to set-up businesses, but it is also needed to help maintain it.

Prioritising local procurement is a concrete measure that can help support local businesses on a long-term basis. When purchasing books and other related goods for public libraries and schools, local municipalities tend to go for the lowest price, which local bookshops cannot always compete with. They should provide as much importance to social value, local relevance, knowledge and expertise that local businesses can actually bring.

Additionally, initiatives such as the Business Improvement District (BID) are positive, as they involve businesses in the process, who contribute

financially to help maintain it and, in turn, they see this contribution being reinvested into their own future development through projects and other helpful initiatives.⁷ However, BIDs currently only operate in large areas and cities, while smaller areas could benefit from having them too. A suggestion brought forward is to create similar structures at a smaller scale, namely 'mini-BIDs'.

Jonathan Werran, CEO of think tank LOCALIS and an expert in localist policies adds that businesses also need to continue working with local government and local councils, as well as to use community powers for influence and engagement.⁸ Essentially, a working collaboration between public and private sectors will always be crucial.

High street retailers have to connect with local communities

The importance of connecting with local residents and understanding their needs is essential in the process of building and shaping the identity and personality profile of a business. This also applies to a bookshop working on the high street. To achieve this, it is important that retailers have an intrinsic sense of knowing the town or city they work in.

In doing so, working deliberately to create a welcoming environment for all is vital. For instance, the importance of remaining open and approachable, as well as consciously breaking down social barriers, cannot be understated. This includes working to eliminate perceptions such as bookshops being 'elitist'.

Specific steps that can help build and strengthen local connections are loyalty cards or offers such as a 10% discount ("Friends of the shop") where possible. Providing these offers to regular customers, schools or parents is a helpful practice to build loyalty.

Added value of buying locally compared to online

The experience of buying from a local shop on the high street is never just transactional; it brings a unique added value to customers and retailers alike.

For instance, buying a book in a local bookshop is more than just a purchase; it is also a service, a recommendation, a connection and an opportunity. For every book bought in a bookshop, a customer is also benefitting from the interaction with a knowledgeable expert, making a potentially long-lasting connection with a member of their local community, gaining a recommendation for another book, getting the opportunity to join a book club or an event etc.

This opportunity to build real connections and long-lasting relationships between local retailers and residents in their local communities is a unique strength and a real added value for businesses on the high street, which cannot be replicated by online retail.

Closure of banks and impact on the high-street

Many booksellers raised their concern with the increasing closure of banks and the devastating impact it is having on the high street, including a noticeable decline in customer footfall.

People visiting banks for in-person services often end up spending time in other shops or establishments on the high street. With the ongoing closure of branches, not only will this impact older and more vulnerable people who feel unsure about managing their finances online, but it will have an inevitable knock-on effect on the businesses in the vicinity.

Cross-collaboration among local retail businesses

Cooperation among small businesses in local communities is invaluable for all involved: it is mutually beneficial for businesses, it is well received by consumers and helps keep the community alive and attractive.

FOLDE Dorset bookshop is a prime example of this sort of cooperation, as they work with local artists, craftspeople and suppliers in their community to make sure all their supplies are produced and reused locally in order to work together and minimise waste⁹. For instance, their book stools are made from local wood, their local refill shop provides them with cleaning materials, and even their hand sanitiser comes from a local gin distillery.

Another example comes from a local Norwich-based business owner present at the workshop, citing a local soap business that makes soap bars from leftover upcycled coffee grounds donated by local independent cafés.¹⁰

These cases of cross-sector cooperation and innovative businesses endeavours not only work well, but also gain the attention from the local press and are recognised by consumers, who value businesses working together.

In the words of Chris Sands, creator of the Totally Locally campaign, *"if you market yourself on your own, you stand alone. But if you promote your business neighbour too, everybody wins. That's how we're going to win. It's the economics of being nice."*

Summary of key issues and solutions

Based on the discussions held during the workshop, in order for bookshops and other businesses in the high street to remain operational, resilient, attractive and key pillars of their communities, the following key points are crucial:

- Bookshops and businesses in the high street **need long-term support** for continuity and longevity, not just in the process of setting-up and launching their business. Local councils need to have clearer strategies in place to bring in innovative ideas and investment to ensure small businesses in the high street can thrive.
- There is a **big problem with the current town planning model**, due to a retail crisis and a lack of housing, resulting in empty retail premises being turned into housing and negatively impacting small local retail in the high street. A planning reform and support from local town councils is fundamental to address this issue and ensure a balance in the property ecosystem.
- COVID-19 was a big wake-up call and turning point for many bookshops: it helped them **increase their engagement and become more resourceful**. Still, more support is needed to assist them in developing a stronger online presence in order to remain competitive and attractive.
- **Local procurement needs to be prioritised through legislation, policies and/or recommendations**. Systematic advice (provided by local authorities or BA) could be given to schools regarding which bookshops in their vicinity they could work with, reminding them that buying from large online platforms is harmful to local businesses in their cities, towns and villages.
- Initiatives such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), as well as smaller-scale versions of them, are necessary. They **provide support and a voice for local businesses**, allowing them to reinvest in their own future development and providing them with tools to help address and respond to local challenges.
- Adequate infrastructure and **public transport to support customer footfall** should be prioritised by local councils.
- Support and **collaboration across retail in local communities is beneficial** and can help create a healthy, cooperative and interdependent high street.



Germany

About the workshop

On 15 February 2023, EIBF travelled to Frankfurt am Main in Germany for the second RISE workshop. The German Booksellers and Publishers Association, *Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels e.V. (BOEV)*, hosted the workshop on their premises. BOEV had already identified the topic of reviving the high street as a priority for the association and were keen to start working on it to find a coordinated stance to tackle the diverse challenges.

The RISE workshop in Frankfurt welcomed nine independent booksellers from all over the country, from Berlin to Leipzig, Braunschweig, Regensburg, Achim, Hanau and Oberursel. Thus, the booksellers present represented cities of different sizes, political affiliation, degrees of accessibility and various levels of attractiveness to tourists. All of them accepted to take part in the workshop that discussed challenges and possible solutions for boosting the attractiveness and vitality of their respective city centres.

This workshop gathers a broad range of perspectives and testimonies of booksellers, not just from one region, but from the whole country. This made it possible for us to spot national trends and explore the different local initiatives already in place. Among the booksellers present at the workshop, there appeared to be no want for ambition, experience and ideas to move forward on the topic of reviving the high street.

Context of the German high street

A study carried out in 2022 by CIMA Consulting and Management, the German Trade Association and the German Association of Chambers of Industry and Commerce on the viability of city centres notes that if city centres do not innovate and adapt to changing consumer needs, towns, especially small ones with up to 10,000 inhabitants, risk a permanent loss of visitors of up to 20% in the years to come. Through a nation-wide survey of people aged from 15 to 100, the study draws conclusions on the changing needs and desires of consumers today, while also making predictions for the future.

As an example, the study points out that, with the rise of online shopping and changed consumer habits, it is no longer possible for city centres to focus solely on retail activities, as physical shops are not indispensable for shopping anymore. Moreover, the need for large retail spaces have diminished and these venues do not attract customers to the same extent. This is especially visible in the younger generations, who seek flexibility and the possibility to shop when they please, be it late at night or on Sundays, when many brick-and-mortar shops are usually closed.

Additionally, and interestingly, the study also highlights that visitors of city centres nowadays seem to seek a larger mix of offers in addition to retail, including leisure activities and experiences, co-working spaces, health services and educational institutions. While most visitors would like city centres to keep offering shopping opportunities, there is a need for a reorientation as the demands have changed fundamentally and new instruments, actors and alliances are needed. This reorientation, the study concludes, cannot be done without the support of the public sector.

Findings from Frankfurt

During the discussion in Frankfurt, it became evident that German city centres have recently and are still undergoing fundamental transformations. These transformations are often direct responses to, on the one hand, changing consumer needs brought on by digitalisation and, on the other hand, the green transition and fight against climate change. While these changes set the stage for the Frankfurt discussion, other factors and possible solutions were also broached and explored, as we shall see below, in a summarised list of findings.

Competition between city centres and shopping centres

Like many other European countries, over the last decades, Germany has seen the construction of a great many shopping centres located in the periphery of towns. Usually, these shopping centres are designed and placed in locations where they can only be accessed by car. According to workshop participants, these large complexes seem to be struggling in recent years as they are not adapted to modern day consumer behaviour, what with the rise of internet shopping for instance. Nevertheless, Maria Meibohm, bookseller at Graff bookshop in Braunschweig, reports that competition between

shopping centres and city centres remain high. Meibohm reports that, in some cases, certain retailers have even received advantageous offers to relocate their shop to said shopping centres. For instance, the offer may include use of the retail space for very little rent, or even completely free, for a certain amount of time.

The parking conundrum

As cities all over Europe take steps to become environmentally friendly and fight climate change, cars are often pushed out of the city centres by the introduction of pedestrian zones, bike paths and the removal of parking spaces. In general, these are good and necessary initiatives as societies and cities move towards greener practices. However, the removal of car parks from city centres has caused some concern for retailers whose customers depend on those parking spaces to travel to, and access, shops in the city centre.

As several of the Frankfurt workshop participants pointed out, viable options for those customers who are used to travel by car need to be introduced as compensation for this change. Workshop participants feared that, unless something substantial is done, this demographic might turn predominantly to shopping centres in the periphery of towns, as those continue to offer parking spaces.

An example of such alternative options was brought up during the workshop: the €9 train ticket, which was a government-funded measure, introduced in the summer months of 2022, to relieve the economic burden on people from the sharp rise in the cost of living. People could buy a ticket for €9 which was valid all summer for trains in all of Germany. This scheme, which allowed German residents to leave their car at home and travel affordably, proved to be extremely popular. Therefore, it was soon followed up by the Deutschland-Ticket, which, since 2023, allows people to travel across Germany throughout the year at the slightly higher rate of €49 per month.¹¹

Empty retail spaces

Several workshop participants from various parts of Germany reported the same problem: shops that have been vacated, stay empty for years on end. This affects customer footfall twice over: firstly, the customers who would frequent the shop that closed might abstain from making the trip to the city centre in the first place and thus do their errands somewhere else, and, secondly,



empty shops have a general negative spillover effect on the overall attractiveness of the high street, for old and new customers alike.

Some of the workshop participants explained that they had helped their municipality by suggesting, and also organising, short-term solutions that made use of those empty retail spaces until a new vendor decided to set up shop there. For instance, they hosted bookshop events in the empty venues. However, they also described that on some occasions, they had difficulties organising these events as it was not very transparent who they should contact with such propositions.

The need for municipal support and involvement in the revival of city centres

Workshop participant and owner of Buchladen am Freiheitsplatz in Hanau, Dieter Dausien, brought with him examples of municipal involvement and support that has successfully contributed to a lively and attractive city centre. First, Dausien mentioned Hanau aufLADEN, an initiative for sustainable urban development, where the municipality provides spaces for pop-up shops, for instance by making use of empty

retail spaces, hands-on business advice, fosters resilient networks and provides temporary funding instruments for entrepreneurs, among other things.¹² The city set out to reinvent itself in 2008, and since then, projects like Hanau aufLADEN have been introduced with the aim of raising the attractiveness of the city centre.

In addition, Dausien mentioned another scheme launched by the municipality: Hanau's Grimm-Scheck voucher. This local initiative started as a measure to support local commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic. Essentially, customers can keep their shopping receipts from local retailers who participate in the scheme and hand them in at the municipality to receive "Grimm-Schecks", i.e. vouchers, whose value depends on the amount that was spent locally. For instance, €100 spent earned them a €10 voucher. Dausien confirmed that this scheme worked so well that it has been made into a permanent measure. He elaborated that it is an excellent example of a positive loop: taxpayers' money being spent on supporting local shops, who in turn pay taxes, in town and in business.

Sharing of knowledge and best practices

Workshop participants noted that there were already many good local initiatives in place across Germany that they had not heard of before. Therefore, they highlighted the need for better ways to share such information, for instance through an information hub where all initiatives and best practices that foster urban development and growth could be collected and shared. This would be beneficial both for local administration and commerce and conducive for collaboration, allowing successful schemes to be replicated in other parts of the country to have further impact.

Lack of long-term, coordinated policies and political interest in maintaining city centres

If the workshop showcased that there are successful initiatives at local level already in place, it also showed that they are often limited to just that: local initiatives that have local effects. The booksellers gathered in Frankfurt underlined what they perceive as a key flaw: there is a lack of long-term, coordinated policies focusing on the revival of city centres.

As outlined above, changed consumer behaviours, compounded with the transformation of city centres have tangible negative effects on the local retail scene. While booksellers are keen to pull their weight in the move towards greener and more sustainable practices, they also see that changing city planning impacts their business negatively. They worry that there isn't enough understanding and interest from the political side to support the commercial

landscape of inner cities in this transition. In the words of Anton Neugirg, bookseller and manager of Pustet bookshops in Regensburg, *"[the] main problem [seems to be that there is] no overarching concept, just isolated initiatives with no links between them."* These words also highlight what was concluded in the study mentioned above: the reorientation of city centres need the support of the public sector.

Maintaining a varied offer of housing, retail spaces and services within the city centre

As shown in the 2022 CIMA study mentioned above, the consumers of today and of tomorrow want to see a variety of offers in the city centres, including job opportunities that are not only tied to retail. In order to keep city centres alive, such offers and opportunities, including municipal services, need to stay in the city centre.

The workshop participants in Frankfurt briefly touched upon the ongoing housing crisis, mentioning the fact that people cannot afford to rent in the central areas. This, in turn, has a negative impact on footfall in local retail. Here, Anton Neugirg added that *"[...] many municipalities have removed their services from centres to buildings in the periphery, with parking."*

Summary of key issues and solutions

- Local administration **needs to take stock of the overall impact of newly designed mobility schemes** and assess their effects on local retail. Mitigating measures should be introduced, like providing more well-connected parking spaces, improving and subsidising public transport connections, or developing alternative solutions.
- Empty retail spaces should be **repurposed with municipal support**, by either creating pop-up shops or developing funding schemes for local initiatives and entrepreneurs.
- Efforts should be introduced to keep services, such as public administration, co-working spaces, health care and educational services in city centres as these are **vital when meeting the needs of consumers** in the future.
- It would be beneficial for town centre retailers and local administrations to create a hub for the sharing of knowledge and best practices between municipalities. Such hubs would **allow for more transparency between regions and cooperation between public administration** and local commerce.
- There needs to be more **long-term, coordinated policies and political interest** in the maintenance and development of city centres. Local initiatives can be effective but they risk being isolated, having only short-term effects.



France

About the workshop

In the third and final workshop, we explored Neuville-sur-Saône, a medium-sized city of about 7,500 inhabitants situated in the metropolitan area of Lyon, in the region of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, France. Neuville was chosen in this case as it is a city with an active town management organisation and engaged booksellers who are devoted not only to the maintenance, but also the revival of the city-centre. Moreover, in these medium-sized cities, it is particularly easy to analyse the forces at play and witness the impact that online shopping, as well as large commercial shopping complexes outside of city centres, have on local retail. For these reasons, Neuville provided an apt and fitting introduction to the realities of bookselling and the general challenges of running a retail business in the city-centres of France today.

In this workshop, we worked closely with the above-mentioned town management organisation, CentreNeuville, who offered

its facilities to the workshop. Participants of the workshop included representatives from CentreNeuville, as well as the national Independent Booksellers Association Syndicat de la librairie française (SLF), regional Booksellers Association delegates, and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Livre et Lecture, a regional organisation supporting authors, publishers, booksellers and other professionals in the book sector. Last, but certainly not least, Florence Veyrié, bookseller and owner of one of the two bookshops located in the city centre of Neuville joined the event.

Like the first two workshops, this was scheduled to take place on-site, in the centre of Neuville. However, due to the multiple national strikes that took place in France throughout the spring of 2023, which made any travel to and through France by rail virtually impossible, the workshop was changed to an online event which took place on 28 March 2023.

Context of the French high street

For many years, city planning policies in France have allowed the construction of large shopping centres and supermarkets outside of city centres, which have transformed the commercial landscape and changed many people's shopping habits and expectations. This landscape, together with the last decade's rise of online shopping, have created many difficulties for small-scale retailers located in city centres, who grapple with the dynamics of declining customer footfall.

However, 2022, witnessed the birth of 142 new bookshops across the country, thus showing the resilience of French booksellers.¹³ What was particularly interesting to see was that most of these bookshops opened not in the densely populated big cities, but in the smaller municipalities all around the country. Such a development inevitably begs the question: what where the incentives behind these bookshop births and are there any measures or initiatives in place that help them stay open? Below, we will dive into the findings from the RISE workshop in Neuville-sur-Saône to try and find answers to these questions.

Findings from Neuville-sur-Saône

The Neuville workshop yielded ample discussion and reflection on what makes small town centre retailers thrive and what are the main threats to a vibrant local commerce and community. From this discussion, the main findings were as follows:

Acknowledging the interdependency of local commerce

The workshop participants in Neuville were adamantly clear on one point: one cannot talk about flourishing city centres without touching upon the fact that local commerce is interdependent. As Florence Veyrié, bookseller and owner of the bookshop *La maison jaune*, puts it,

“You can be as good a bookseller as you like, but if the shops next to yours are empty, less people are going to pass by your street, and you will have less customers walking into your shop”.

That is the harsh reality booksellers, and city-centre retailers in general, are faced with. That is why they need strong, holistic policies that cater for the diverse needs of all types of town-centre retailers.

The need for holistic policies and state-funded programmes that foster the attractiveness of city centres

In 2017, *Action coeur de ville*, a state-funded programme with the aim of raising the attractiveness of middle-sized towns was launched. The scheme is to run between 2018 and 2023, containing 5 billion euros.¹⁴ Currently, 234 municipalities take part in the programme, which include funding directed towards, among other things, improving public transportation, greening public spaces and renovating residential and commercial buildings.

In February 2023, SLF conducted a survey gathering the impressions of around 100 booksellers on the impacts of the *Action coeur de ville* scheme. When asked if their town-centres had introduced any specific measures through the *Action coeur de ville* scheme that were directly beneficial to booksellers, respondents most often mentioned renovations of shop windows and façades, direct aid to set up shops, and the creation of pedestrian zones.

Moreover, 30% of the respondents reported they had witnessed an increase in customer footfall since the launch of the scheme. 31% said footfall was stable and that there had been no noticeable change since the start of the programme, while 39% had reported a decrease in customer footfall.

Interestingly, respondents highlighted a renewed political interest and will to improve city centres – a direct result of the programme – as a key contributing factor behind steady or increased customer footfall. Meanwhile, those who reported a decrease in customer footfall most often tied this to lack of sufficient parking spaces in city centres, large shopping centres on the outskirts of towns and a decrease in purchasing power. All cited factors emphasise the need for political interest to remain high so that more initiatives that aim to revive and reinvent the high-street can be launched.

Finally, workshop participants mentioned a recent piece of legislation, called the Darcos Law, which benefits small, local bookshops and encourages them to develop their online presence. Briefly summarised, the Darcos Law, voted in 2021, sets a minimum delivery fee of €3 for all online book purchases under €35. For purchases above €35, books can be shipped from €0.01. The aim of the law is to level the playing field in the French book sector by countering tech giants' aggressive commercial practices of shipping individual books for as little as €0.01.



The workshop participants emphasised the need to raise awareness and promote the benefits of this law, especially as it will boost business and aid smaller bookshops to compete with tech giants in the online market space. By strengthening their online presence, small bookshops can become more resilient as they can continue to conduct business. Currently, the Darcos law is not well-known among local administration or the general public.

The need for political interest in reviving the city centre

In the SLF survey, booksellers emphasise political interest and will to improve city centres as a key factor behind steady or increased customer footfall. For example, *Action coeur de ville*, is a nationally funded scheme with tangible effects locally. However, as it is an initiative of the incumbent government, whose mandate ends in 2027, there is no real guarantee of its continuation beyond that point in time. This is, of course, a concern for booksellers and other retailers operating on the high street who, as elaborated above, depend on their city centres

to remain healthy and attractive to visitors and customers in the long-term. Therefore, there is also a need to maintain political interest in reviving city centres and providing sufficient means for local commerce to thrive.

Solid administrative structures fostering exchange between local retailers, administration and politicians

Participants of the Neuville workshop pointed at the importance of having efficient supporting structures in place, like organisations for town-centre management, that put retailers, local administration and politicians in touch and allow them to exchange views. Such structures are conducive, even fundamental, for the creation of policies that are beneficial to local commerce.

Harmful public narratives

The construction of large commercial centres over the past decades combined with a steady decrease of purchasing power have contributed, over time, to build a public narrative that considers shopping centres as

cheaper than city centres. During the workshop, participants reported that they currently observe a reinforcement of this narrative, which they connect to the ongoing energy crisis and subsequent decrease of purchasing power.

When it comes to books, however, this perception is completely false. France has a fixed book price law, the so-called Lang law, in force since 1982. Books are thus sold at the same price throughout the country whether it be in local independent bookshops, large chains, supermarkets or on Amazon.

Little awareness of the fixed book price

In general, few customers in France seem to know that prices on books are fixed. To raise awareness, SLF has run several campaigns at national level to inform people that the price of a book is the same no matter where you buy it. However, SLF experienced that these campaigns are often too small, and they do not have the means to develop them enough to reach a wider audience. The narrative of perceived price difference which was reported during the workshop seem to confirm these limitations. Thus, the need for more, further-reaching campaigns is highlighted and remain key in breaking unhelpful narratives and assumptions.

The importance of consuming locally – where you buy matters

The workshop participants touched upon the overarching need to raise awareness on the importance of consuming locally, and the power individuals hold over the viability and vitality of their own town centres through their spending habits. As the fixed book price law ensures that the price for books is the same everywhere, choosing to buy locally means taking a stand for the local community.

By being conscious of where they spend their money, i.e., perhaps choosing to buy from the local grocer rather than a large supermarket out of town, or the local bookshop rather than Amazon, people have the possibility to directly influence the make-up of their local commercial landscape. If they wish to keep their city centres alive and thriving, it needs to be reflected in their shopping habits. Money spent locally is reinvested locally: retailers hire their staff from the local community; thus they pay wages locally. They also pay local taxes which contribute to the welfare of the community.

The added value of trade associations

On a final note, Florence Veyrié stressed that, as a small bookshop, there is a real added value of being supported by a trade association, like SLF and other booksellers association, who provide a platform for exchange of best practices, sharing of industry data and amplify the voices of local booksellers in a uniform way. By coming together in such associations, booksellers gain more weight and negotiating power in matters of socio-economic or political nature that affect them.

Summary of key issues and solutions

- City-centre retail is interdependent. You can be as good a bookseller as there is, if all other shops on the high street are empty, less people will choose to visit the city centre, which means less people will pass by your shop. There **needs to be a strong and varied retail scene** present for shops to thrive in the city centre.
- Long-lasting **political interest is necessary to create future-oriented policies** that span across political mandates and foster the attractiveness of city centres for both visitors and retailers in the long term. This includes legislation that benefit local commerce, like the Darcos and the Lang law.
- Funding programmes aimed at raising the attractiveness of city centres are **hugely beneficial for local commerce**. This includes funding for the renovation of buildings, green spaces, bike paths and pedestrian zones, as well as sufficient parking spaces and/or public transport.
- Solid structures of cooperation and **exchange between local commerce, administration and politicians** are key to foster understanding and policies that benefit local retail.
- There is a need to punch holes in existing harmful public narratives and **raise public awareness on topics like the importance of shopping locally**, the fixed book price, the Darcos Law and fixed minimum delivery fees for books.



Conclusion

Having assessed the challenges and concerns faced by booksellers working in the high street across several European towns and cities, this paper puts forward the following asks and calls to action, which will require **long-term coordinated policies and political support at local and regional levels**, to reinvest, support and protect local businesses in towns and cities' high streets.

BOOKSELLERS CALL TO ACTION

RAISE AWARENESS

1 Raise awareness on the importance of buying locally and reinvesting in the local economy through regular campaigns and other activities aimed at local residents.



SUPPORT BUSINESSES

2 Support businesses beyond the initial start-up or launch phases, to ensure their long-term security, viability and motivation to expand. Isolated short-term projects with limited long-term benefits and impact should be avoided.



PROVIDE STRUCTURAL FUNDING

3 Provide and fund solid and viable structures, such as neighbourhood investment plans and district management organisations that unite local businesses and facilitate interaction with public administration and political bodies, allowing them to meet and exchange regularly and easily.



PREVENT EMPTY RETAIL SPACES

4 Prevent the proliferation of empty retail spaces in town centres by considering local small retailers and their need for affordable commercial facilities.



PRIORITISE LOCAL PROCUREMENT

5 Prioritise and encourage local procurement processes as much as possible. This is a clear practice that benefits local businesses and emphasises their unique added value, be it socially, financially and/or environmentally.



CREATE HUB FOR KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

6 Create a hub among local municipalities and similar bodies that allows exchange of knowledge, expertise and best practices, where innovative projects can inspire other towns to replicate or adapt them in their own areas.



IMPROVE TOWN INFRASTRUCTURE

7 Improve town infrastructure and facilities without compromising the high streets' local businesses and consumer footfall. This can be achieved by allowing for sufficient parking space and investing in better public transport.



ENCOURAGE LOCAL COOPERATION

8 Enable, encourage and reward cooperation and interdependency of local retail for mutual benefit of businesses and consumers.



CONDUCT REGULAR RESEARCH

9 Conduct regular research and collect data to determine consumer needs and consumer behaviour regarding the future of the high street.



Endnotes

- ¹ High streets, also known as main streets, refer to the primary business street or area of a city, town, or village
- ² A business improvement district (BID) is a business-led organisation in a defined geographical area where local businesses invest as a group, through a mandatory contribution or fee, to improve their environment by developing projects which will benefit businesses in the local area
- ³ UK and Ireland Booksellers Association. 'Booksellers as Placemakers' report. <https://www.booksellers.org.uk/industryinfo/industryinfo/booksellersasplacemakers>
- ⁴ The Guardian. April 2023. 'UK publishing industry reports record-breaking year in 2022'. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/17/uk-publishing-industry-reports-record-breaking-year-in-2022>
- ⁵ The Guardian. January 2023. 'Indie bookshop numbers hit 10-year high in 2022 defying brutal UK retail year'. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jan/06/indie-bookshop-numbers-hit-10-year-high-in-2022-defying-brutal-uk-retail-year>
- ⁶ Association of Town & City Management (ACTM). <https://www.atcm.org>
- ⁷ see note 2
- ⁸ LOCALIS. <https://www.localis.org.uk>
- ⁹ FOLDE Bookshop. 'Sustainability'. <https://www.foldedorset.com/sustainability>
- ¹⁰ <https://waterandearth.co.uk>
- ¹¹ <https://www.bahn.com/en/offers/regional/deutschlandticket>
- ¹² <https://hanauaufladen.jetzt/ueber/stadtumbau>
- ¹³ <https://www.lesechos.fr/tech-medias/medias/en-france-les-creations-de-librairies-ont-atteint-un-niveau-record-en-2022-1912556>
- ¹⁴ <https://agence-cohesion-territoires.gouv.fr/action-coeur-de-ville-42>

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