Stories Start Here: The Impact of Literature on the City of Edinburgh

Key Findings, Recommendations and Perspectives from BOP Consulting's 2026 Impact Study

Edinburgh City of Literature

BOP Consulting

Connecting people to Edinburgh's literary story and creating opportunities for writers, readers, literary professionals & visitors alike.

Introduction



In 2004, Edinburgh made history. We were designated the first UNESCO City of Literature and became the founding member of a remarkable international network which now spans over 400 cities across 7 artforms. This designation, awarded in recognition of both our literary heritage and our contemporary creativity, is not just a significant honour: it is an active provocation. To be a City of Literature is to live and breathe books.

In 2024, we celebrated the 20th anniversary of this designation, prompting us to reflect on all that has been achieved since 2004 – and all that we are still yet to do, both as an organisation and, crucially, as a city.

We commissioned BOP Consulting, an independent third party, to produce an impact study to examine the social, cultural and economic benefits of literature. We wanted to give the cultural and civic communities of Edinburgh real insights into what literature achieves for us all. We also wanted to help to map out a future where Edinburgh's literature continues to thrive, diversify and expand.

This study is our birthday gift to the City of Edinburgh.

Edinburgh Makar, Michael Pedersen, penned a special poem to mark both our anniversary and the Edinburgh 900 celebrations. In his sweeping and playful work, he implored our city: "Be more, Edinburgh". This study celebrates all that we are and everything that we do – while showing us that we still have the potential to "be more".

I invite all of Edinburgh to join us on this journey.

Dr Harriet MacMillan
Director, Edinburgh City of Literature

> “Literature is worth a fortune to Scotland.”

Mairi Kidd
author and former Director of the Saltire Society

Key Findings

Edinburgh’s literature sector is a major asset

- Socially, culturally and economically, Edinburgh’s literary activity brings distinct and significant value to the city
- Literature is central to Edinburgh’s identify, global reputation and sense of place
- The city has an unusually dense, interconnected literary ecosystem
- This ecosystem creates combined impact across culture, the economy and society

Literature has a strong impact on our economy

Literature is not just a cultural force – it is a serious economic engine

- The sector generates £50.9m GVA (gross value added) per annum
- It supports specialised jobs and a nationally significant publishing hub
- Literature also acts as a tourism driver, bringing high-spend visitors and supporting hospitality, retail and events

Literature provides Edinburgh with major cultural impact and a leading role internationally

- Literature gives Edinburgh major cultural impact and a leading role internationally
- Literature shapes how the city, and the nation, are imagined and experienced worldwide
- Our literary heritage and cultural assets give us a leading role on the global stage
- We are recognised, at home and abroad, for our literature

Literature in Edinburgh has demonstrable social value and public benefit

- Our literary culture provides vital social infrastructure
- Literary activity supports wellbeing, education and literacy, community cohesion and lifelong learning
- Our libraries, bookshops, festivals and event programmes create shared spaces and social connection



Impact in Numbers

£50.9m
gross value added (GVA) by literature in 2024

For every £1 of public funding, libraries generate £5-7.
For every £1 of public funding, Edinburgh International Book Festival generates £8.

More than 140 million copies of books sold by selected Edinburgh authors (and a staggering 650 million if we include Harry Potter)

50
university courses in literature and creative writing. 199 courses with literary studies as a core component.

£19.3m
GVA from publishing alone

61%
of visitors to Edinburgh cite history and culture as a top reason for coming to the city

62%
of UK adults associate Scotland with its books and writers

More than 50 book launch and Meet the Author events per month

1,656,389
annual visits to Edinburgh's public libraries

59%
of respondents in Edinburgh agree that arts and culture make a positive difference in their lives (47% Scottish average)

8 literary festivals welcoming over a quarter of a million visitors annually

For sources, please see full case study



Opportunities & Recommendations

> “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,
Scottish Book Trust

Capitalise on best practice
Let’s make the most of our sector strength and expertise by extending the reach and depth of our engagement.

Represent the whole city
More engagement with underserved and underrepresented communities across Edinburgh.

A centralised source for information
A “one-stop shop” to bring all this wealth of activity into a single place for the sector and its audiences.

Go hard on soft power
At city and national level, make more of the soft power benefits of our literature, in terms of tourism, international engagement and civic pride.

Sustainable investment
The sector is under-resourced, with rising costs and only 5% of public funding for culture going to literature. There is a need for increased financial support – both through public subsidy and philanthropy – to both safeguard what we have and reach our full potential.

Dedicated, affordable space for the sector
We need affordable, accessible spaces for writers, publishers, literary organisations and communities. We need dedicated space for working, convening, sharing and connecting.

How is Edinburgh City of Literature responding to this study?

Be more, Edinburgh

> “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.”

Bop Consulting Impact Study, p5

Celebrating our impact and telling the story

We are working hard to make sure everyone in Edinburgh knows just how valuable literature is to our city. In the city, nationally and internationally, we are telling Edinburgh’s story loudly and proudly. We are also commissioning, developing and supporting writers as they tell their stories.

“One-Stop Shop” for the literary community

We have created a single, accessible website to promote good news and opportunities, while our community event submissions feature will populate a city-wide calendar of activities. Our new digital map also offers an in-depth guide to the literary city.

A City of Literature for Everyone

Working with libraries and partners with reach across every postcode, we are developing new projects to make sure that everyone in Edinburgh feels connected to our story.

Stronger Together

In the past, we’ve worked with over 250 partners locally, nationally and internationally. Our current projects are all delivered in partnership – it is fundamental to our ethos and our model. We want to work smarter and foster increased collaboration across the sector.

A Strategy for Literature

Edinburgh City of Literature will be co-chairing a new strategic steering group with the Lord Provost. Through the Edinburgh Literature Forum, we hope to facilitate meaningful conversations and develop a long-term strategic plan for this City of Literature that belongs to us all.

A Room of Our Own

A Literature House for Edinburgh – a home with work, convening, exhibition and performance space – remains a strategic goal for Edinburgh City of Literature. We want to see a literary hub for writers, creatives and communities to use all year round. We are actively seeking partners to join a consortium to create this hub for the city.

Join us on this journey – help Edinburgh's stories continue to inspire, connect and flourish.

If you'd like to support us, as a volunteer, partner, donor or advocate please get in touch:
director@cityofliterature.com

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