

BA Submission to Mary Portas High Street Review

In October 2009, The Booksellers Association's CEO Tim Godfray spoke at the Conservative Party Conference under the theme of *21st Century High Streets – Revival or Decline?* He mentioned that the Association of Town Centre Management said that 'Leisure, entertainment and cultural facilities are essential characteristics for a town centre.'

Since the ending of the Net Book Agreement (which allowed publishers the opportunity to impose minimum prices in the market place), bookselling in the UK has gone through a period of unprecedented change.

In a UK market without any price controls, supermarkets began to sell books in large numbers. We then saw the arrival of internet bookselling. Supermarkets and the internet booksellers have put pressure on the traditional high street booksellers. In 1995 we had 1,894 independent booksellers in BA membership; in 2011 we now have 1,159.

In just the past two years we have seen the demise of several bookshop groups, including Borders and British Bookshops, not to mention the closures announced by Waterstone's. The BA has always had 'churn' in membership, but this year we are seeing not only the usual amount of closures, but also a new trend as very few new high street booksellers are entering the market.

Bookshops are havens for everyone, building community character and contributing to the distinct flavour of a neighbourhood as literary and cultural hubs. Booksellers give substantial support to local and national causes and events, including reading groups, schools, libraries, arts organisations, festivals and charities. Bookshop events are well known to attract consumers to the High Street, especially families and they increase 'dwell time'.

In the face of deep cuts, we've heard a lot about the value of libraries, but there is also an argument for the cultural influence of booksellers. They too provide the public with unbiased, reliable and informed personal advice; promoting literacy and reading – the fundamental basis of a knowledge society.

It is incredible that three in ten children live in households that do not contain a single book. Visible access to new and exciting reading is vital.

We recognise that bookshops commercial concerns and they need to turn a profit, just like any other retailer.

To this end, the BA has introduced IndieBound – www.indiebound.org.uk, a community-oriented movement begun by the independent bookseller members of the American Booksellers Association and adopted into the UK in 2010.

It brings together booksellers, readers, independent retailers, local business alliances, and anyone else with a passionate belief that healthy local economies help communities thrive. Supporting local, independent businesses means that pounds, jobs, diversity and choices stay local, creating strong, unique communities.

Consumers in the UK today are aware in a new way of the importance of independent businesses and the health of the High Street. The growth of farmers' markets, the Transition Town movement and many other campaigns show how important it is to shoppers to shop local, and we believe IndieBound to be a key part of booksellers connecting with these community-aware customers.

The book industry will do all it can to foster change and seek new ways to operate, but it may not be enough to preserve the bookshop. If we wish to retain a vibrant High Street, that are not mere 'clone towns' but act as the true heart of a community, then we need outlets that promote art, literacy and entertainment.

We hope the Government will seriously take on board cultural and social aspects in the High Street Review, which bring benefits over and above merely providing consumers with goods and services. But help is required and we need it now.

The BA suggests the following areas should be addressed:

- Rate or rent reductions to balance out differences between High Street and Internet retailers with some rate relief for small businesses (perhaps also an end to upward only rents and rents linked to turnover).
- Action on parking charges (some free parking for an hour or two would help, as would a cap on charges).
- Subsidised public transport and more park & ride schemes.
- Partnerships with local authorities to plan a mixed use of cultural and leisure activities as well as just pure retail.
- Use empty shops to promote arts activities and artisan crafts – booksellers would be more than willing to offer support.
- Financial help for start ups – new entrepreneurs with new ideas need to be encouraged.
- Local people to have a say in what kind of retailers they would like to have on their High Street.
- Simply - less red tape.

We ask The Review to take these points into consideration when considering what can be done by national and local governments to improve the fortunes of booksellers operating in our High Streets.

Finally, a quote from author Neil Gaiman (from *American Gods*, 2001):

What I say is, a town isn't a town without a bookstore. It may call itself a town, but unless it's got a bookstore it knows it's not fooling a soul.

13 October 2011

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