

Bookshop

Business Opportunity Profile

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Introduction

Bookshops sell a wide range of fiction and non-fiction books, along with maps and a small range of stationery. In 2025, there were over 1,000 independent bookshops trading in the UK. Independent bookshops differ from national chains, such as Waterstones and Blackwells, as they tend to reflect the personality of the bookseller who is usually the owner of the business. They also tend to meet the interests of their local area and communities.

This profile provides information about starting up and running a bookshop. It describes the skills required, the training available, the current market trends and the key trading and legal issues.

Training and resources

The following courses and resources will be useful for anyone starting up a bookshop:

- Introduction to Bookselling, which is a one-day online course provided by the Booksellers Association. It covers key facts about the book market, a guide to all aspects of the book trade, bookshop finances, stock control and gaining customer loyalty. The course is run once or twice a year and costs £150. A separate annual course is available for those based in Ireland. Go to www.booksellers.org.uk/jointheba/aspiringandnewbooksellers/Introduction-to-Bookselling-Course for details.
- How to Start and Run a Bookshop, which is an e-book published by the Booksellers Association that costs £25 (excluding VAT). Go to www.booksellers.org.uk/Products for more information.
- Start-up resources provided by the Booksellers Association, which include guidance on buying a bookshop, industry placements and mentoring. Go to www.booksellers.org.uk/jointheba/aspiringandnewbooksellers/thinkingofopeningabookshop for more information.
- Online resources provided by bira (the British Independent Retailers Association), which cover topics such as digital and social media, store management, retail technology, payments and finance (<https://bira.co.uk/resources/>). bira also provides bespoke training courses covering topics such as customer service and visual merchandising skills (<https://bira.co.uk/benefits/retail-training/>).

Industry resources

There are various online resources and events to help booksellers develop their knowledge and skills, including:

- 'The Bookseller' (www.thebookseller.com), which is a trade journal and online resource for the book industry. It provides independent business intelligence and analysis for the book trade, including the Official UK Top 50 chart for book sales.
- 'Bookselling Essentials' (www.booksellers.org.uk/booksellingessentials), which is a digital trade journal published four times a year by the Booksellers Association.
- BookBrunch (www.bookbrunch.co.uk), which is an online source of daily news for the book trade.
- Bookreporter (www.bookreporter.com), which is an online resource providing information, synopses and previews of new book releases.
- The London Book Fair (www.londonbookfair.co.uk), which is a three-day event held each spring at Olympia, London that includes a seminar programme and a range of half-day conferences.
- Events and conferences organised by the Booksellers Association (<https://booksellerevents.org.uk>).
- The Independent Booksellers Forum (www.booksellers.org.uk/Member-Services/Business-Support/Independent-Booksellers-Forum), which holds regular events and enables booksellers to share best practice.
- Hay Festival (www.hayfestival.com/hay-on-wye/home), which is a literary festival that takes place over 11 days each May at Hay-on-Wye in Wales and includes a programme of lectures and author appearances.

Key market issues and trends

Current market issues affecting established and start-up bookshops include the following:

- According to the Booksellers Association, some of the main challenges faced by independent bookshops in 2025 were the impact of cost of living on consumer confidence, rising staff costs and increases to RRP and wholesale prices (www.booksellers.org.uk/industryinfo/industryinfo/latestnews/2024-Independent-Bookshop-Numbers-Tell-Story-of-Co).
- A 2024 survey by the Booksellers Association found that 71% of consumers think that booksellers at a physical bookshop are the most knowledgeable source for book recommendations. They scored higher than any other source of book recommendations, such as family and friends, book clubs, social media influencers and AI recommendations (www.booksellers.org.uk/industryinfo/industryinfo/latestnews/Booksellers-are-most-knowledgeable-source-for-book).
- In 2024, volume sales of print books in the UK fell by 1.7% year-on-year. Adult Fiction was the strongest performing sector, but sales of Adult Non-Fiction and Children's, Young Adult &

Educational books both fell (<https://nielsenbook.co.uk/bestsellers-trends-in-the-uk-ireland-in-2024/>).

- Romance & Sagas, Historical & Mythological Fiction and Science Fiction & Fantasy were the most popular adult fiction categories in the UK in 2024. Popular non-fiction categories included True Crime, Puzzles and Handicrafts, Arts & Crafts, and Poetry (<https://nielsenbook.co.uk/bestsellers-trends-in-the-uk-ireland-in-2024/>).
- In 2024, an increase in younger consumers buying books was attributed to BookTok, which is a community on TikTok that focuses on books and literature. Romance is the biggest genre on BookTok, followed by Mystery, Thrillers and Classics (www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2024/05/books-tiktok-booktok/).

Trading, commercial and legal issues

Start-up and established bookshops face the following trading, commercial and legal issues.

Trade bodies

Membership of a trade body can provide a wide range of individual and business benefits. Relevant bodies include:

- The Booksellers Association (www.booksellers.org.uk), which represents over 95% of bookshops trading in the UK and Ireland. Members receive a listing in the 'Bookshop Search' directory and can sell and accept National Book Tokens. They also benefit from free use of Batch Payment and Batch Returns, promotional resources, business support and discounts from industry suppliers. Annual membership fees are tiered and start from £127.50 for bookshops with a turnover of up to £300,000.
- The British Independent Retailers Association (bira, <https://bira.co.uk>), which provides advice and guidance to a wide range of specialist independent retailers. Membership benefits include a tax and legal advice helpline and discounts on training, insurance and office stationery. The annual membership fee for retailers is £205.

Sourcing books

Most bookshops source books from specialist wholesalers, such as Gardners (www.gardners.com). The Booksellers Association publishes a directory of wholesalers, which can be found at www.booksellers.org.uk/Member-Services/Business-Support/retaildirectory.

Books are also sourced from distributors, including:

- Penguin Random House Distribution (www.thebookservice.co.uk/for-customers).
- Macmillan Distribution (MDL, www.macmillandistribution.co.uk/customers).
- BookSource (www.booksource.net/booksellers).

- Central Books (www.centralbooks.com).

Bookshops buy books from wholesalers and distributors at around 45% to 55% of each book's recommended retail price.

Most distributors operate a returns policy setting out the conditions where unsold books can be returned. Typically, returns are processed under the Industry Returns Initiative using the Batch Returns system, which is free for booksellers who are members of the Booksellers Association. Go to www.batch.co.uk/web/services/returns for more information.

Ordering and managing stock

Many publishers and distributors require booksellers to use specialist online ordering software and platforms, including:

- Pubeasy, which allows booksellers to access title, price and availability information, check catalogues and place and manage orders. For a list of distributors and wholesalers that use Pubeasy, go to <https://info.pubeasy.com/services/booksellers-how-you-save-time-money-with-pubeasy>.
- Batch Payments and Batch Returns, which are payment and return systems that allow booksellers to place orders, pay invoices and manage returns with multiple distributors and wholesalers. Go to <https://batch.co.uk/web/getting-started> for more information.
- BatchLine POS, which is point-of-sale and stock management software that works with barcode scanning machines and other point-of-sale equipment. It includes functionality to manage loyalty card schemes and send SMS reminders to customers who have ordered books. Go to <https://batch.co.uk/web/batchline/batchline-pos> for more information.

Specialist electronic point of sale (EPOS) software is available to help bookshops manage stock levels, place book orders, take payments and produce sales reports. Examples include:

- XEPOS (<https://xepos.co.uk/retail/business-types/bookstores/>).
- Guardlink (www.gardners.com/Services/Gardlink).
- OneEpos (<https://oneepos.uk/book-shop-epos-system/>).

Most bookshops share their sales reports with Nielsen BookScan (<https://nielsenbook.co.uk/measure>), which provides continuous retail sales data on best-selling titles and enables bookshops to identify popular titles they may not stock. Bookshops receive the data free of charge in return for submitting their day-end sales to BookScan via their EPOS system.

Maps and stationery

Some bookshops sell Ordnance Survey maps and a small range of stationery such as notebooks, pens, bookmarks and diaries.

Bookshops can source maps from wholesalers that have been authorised by Ordnance Survey. A list of authorised wholesalers is available at <https://shop.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/retailers/>.

Stationery is available from specialist wholesalers such as The Wholesale Stationery Company (<https://thewholesalestationerycompany.co.uk>), Wholesale Stationers (www.wholesalestationers.co.uk) and Harrisons Direct (www.harrisonsdirect.co.uk).

Specialist online networks

Hive (www.hive.co.uk) and Bookshop.org (<https://uk.bookshop.org>) are online networks that support independent bookshops. When someone buys a book from either Hive or Bookshop.org, they can nominate a bookshop to receive a percentage of the value of the books they have bought.

To join Hive, the bookshop must have a credit account and place regular orders with Gardners Books (www.gardners.com). Commission rates and more information about how to join is available at www.hive.co.uk/Help/JoinHive.

To join Bookshop.org, retailers must sign up for an affiliate account. Go to <https://uk.bookshop.org/affiliates/profile/introduction> for more information.

TikTok shop

To sell books and engage with the BookTok community, some bookshops set up a TikTok shop. To set up a TikTok shop, the bookshop must first register for a TikTok business account (<https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/about-business-registration?lang=en>). Once registered, bookshops will then be able to set up a shop within the TikTok Seller Center.

Go to <https://ads.tiktok.com/help/article/set-up-tiktok-shop-using-tiktok-seller-center?lang=en> for more information about setting up a shop.

Guidance on promoting a TikTok shop is available at <https://business.tiktokshop.com/uk/blog/detail/10020512>.

Premises and equipment

Some booksellers start up their business by taking over an existing bookshop. Details of bookshops for sale on a leasehold or freehold basis are available at <https://uk.businessesforsale.com/uk/search/book-shops-for-sale> and www.daltonsbusiness.com/book-shops-businesses-for-sale/.

To fit out a new bookshop from scratch, bookshops will require a range of fixtures and fittings, such as:

- A sales counter (from £250 to £300).
- Bookshelves (from around £100 for a 2.5m-high unit).
- Wall units (from £100 to £400 for a standard wall bay unit).
- Display shelving (from £70 to £120 for a five-shelf 2m x 1m unit).

Booksellers can design and order customised book shelves to fit their store from online suppliers such as Shelfstore (<https://shelvingsystem.co.uk>) and Pickawood (www.pickawood.com/en/configurator/conf2).

The Booksellers Association publishes a directory of suppliers of bookshop equipment and supplies, which can be found at www.booksellers.org.uk/Member-Services/Business-Support/retaildirectory.

VAT

Printed books, children's picture books and maps are zero-rated for VAT, but stationery is standard-rated. Bookshops must register for VAT once their turnover reaches the mandatory threshold.

Go to www.gov.uk/guidance/rates-of-vat-on-different-goods-and-services for more information about VAT rates.

Workplace health and safety

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the most common types of health and safety risks in a retail environment are slips and trips and manual handling injuries. The HSE has published health and safety guidance for the retail sector at www.hse.gov.uk/retail/index.htm.

Other key health and safety issues applicable to bookshops include:

- Identifying and assessing work-related risks (www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/index.htm).
- The safe use and maintenance of work equipment (www.hse.gov.uk/work-equipment-machinery/power.htm).
- Assessing fire safety risks (www.hse.gov.uk/fireandexplosion/fire-safety.htm).

Promoting the business

Opportunities for promoting a bookshop include:

- Participating in various campaigns and initiatives run by the Booksellers Association. Examples include Independent Bookshop Week, which takes place annually in June (www.booksaremybag.com/IndependentBookshopWeek/About), and Books Are My Bag (www.booksaremybag.com).
- Participating in the National Book Tokens scheme managed by the Booksellers Association. There is more information about selling and accepting book tokens at www.nationalbooktokens.com/new-booksellers.
- Participating in World Book Day (www.worldbookday.com/work-with-us/booksellers), which takes place annually in March and is intended to encourage children to read.
- Participating in Bookshop Day, which takes place annually in October (www.booksaremybag.com/BookshopDay/About).

- Using Google's Business Profile (<https://business.google.com/uk/business-profile>) to edit and update the information about their business that appears in Google search results and Google Maps.
- Using Apple Business Connect, which enables bookshop owners to manage information about their business that is used within Apple Maps, Apple Wallet and Siri. Go to <https://businessconnect.apple.com> for more information.

Insurance

A bookseller requires several types of insurance cover, including:

- Public and product liability insurance, which covers the bookshop against claims for compensation from anyone injured or adversely affected as a result of their activities.
- Employers' liability insurance, which is mandatory as soon as the bookshop employs anyone.
- Legal expenses insurance, which provides cover for defending disputes with wholesalers, distributors, online networks, other suppliers, customers and landlords, or to defend employment tribunal cases.
- Business contents insurance, which provides cover for damage to books and equipment caused by fire or flood and theft of books or equipment.

Specialist insurance for bookshops is available from insurers and brokers such as AXA (www.axa.co.uk/business-insurance/bookshop-insurance/) and Hiscox (www.hiscox.co.uk/business-insurance/bookshop).

Legislation

This section provides an at-a-glance list of the legislation that bookshops must comply with.

- The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 place a general duty of care on employers to protect the health and safety of their employees and anyone else that may be affected by their business activities.
- The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers, and those who are self-employed, to identify and assess any workplace risks and to provide adequate health and safety training for employees. In Northern Ireland, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 apply.
- The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 and equivalent legislation in Northern Ireland require employers to assess the risk of injury to themselves and their employees, to ensure that any unnecessary lifting is avoided, and to take measures to reduce the risk of injury when lifting is unavoidable.

- Under the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 (PUWER) and the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, booksellers must ensure that equipment used at work is suitable for its purpose and properly maintained.
- The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and equivalent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland require booksellers to carry out a fire risk assessment and install appropriate fire detection and prevention equipment on their premises.

Related factsheets

SEC007 Independent Retail - Sector Update

SEC125 Books and Magazines - Sector Update

MBP112 Comic Shop

MBP334 Second-hand Bookseller

MBP492 Stationery Maker

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