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Submission to the development of Australia's National Cultural Policy by the Book Cow Bookshop.

The Book Cow is an independent, family-owned bookshop located in Kingston, Canberra. Since opening in December 2020, we have sought to create a welcoming, community-focused cultural space that encourages reading, storytelling, creativity and lifelong engagement with literature for people of all ages.

We strongly support the continuation of the five pillars established under Revive and welcome the opportunity to contribute to Australia's next National Cultural Policy.

As an independent bookshop operating in Canberra, we believe local bookshops should be recognised as essential cultural infrastructure. Bookshops are not simply retail businesses. They are places where Australian stories are discovered, where communities gather, where children encounter books and storytelling, and where audiences connect directly with authors, illustrators and ideas.

Independent Bookshops as Cultural Infrastructure

Independent bookshops are one of the most accessible and community-based parts of Australia's cultural ecosystem.

At The Book Cow, our work extends well beyond bookselling. We regularly host:

- author launches and literary conversations
- children's storytimes and school holiday programs
- school and educator engagement activities
- festival partnerships and pop-up bookshops
- community reading groups and themed discussions
- events supporting Australian writers and publishers.

These activities occur in everyday community settings and often engage audiences who may not attend traditional arts venues.

In the past year alone, The Book Cow has hosted or partnered on dozens of literary and cultural events across Canberra, including:

- major author launches attracting 80–100 attendees
- weekly toddler storytimes regularly attended by 30+ families
- school and family literacy events
- literary discussions and panel conversations
- Canberra Writers Festival pop-up bookshops and festival partnerships.

These events generate significant cultural participation in Canberra while also supporting local economic activity and neighbouring businesses.

The Australian Booksellers Association has correctly identified local bookshops as “essential cultural infrastructure” comparable to libraries, galleries and performing arts venues. We strongly support this framing.

Research internationally has increasingly recognised the broader social and cultural contribution of independent bookshops beyond their direct retail function. A 2022 study commissioned by the UK Booksellers Association found that bookshops make a significant impact on local communities and ‘high streets’ through cultural programming, social connection, local partnerships and community participation.

The study described a strong “halo effect” generated by bookshops, with benefits extending well beyond bookselling itself. These findings strongly reflect our experience in Canberra, where literary events, children’s programs and partnerships delivered through local bookshops contribute to community wellbeing, cultural participation and local economic activity.

Future cultural policy should explicitly recognise independent bookshops as part of Australia’s cultural infrastructure and ensure they are eligible for appropriate cultural support and investment.

Reading and Literary Participation

Reading is one of Australia’s most widespread and democratic forms of cultural participation.

Books and reading:

- develop empathy and imagination
- support literacy and educational outcomes

- strengthen civic engagement
- improve wellbeing and social connection
- create pathways into broader cultural participation.

Australia Reads has highlighted the urgent need for national investment in reading engagement, particularly for children and young people.

Independent bookshops play a vital role in this ecosystem by:

- connecting readers with Australian stories
- curating local and diverse voices
- supporting Australian authors and illustrators
- encouraging reading for pleasure
- creating accessible literary experiences for families and communities.

At The Book Cow, children’s literacy and reading engagement are central to our mission. We run regular storytimes, school holiday programs, book fairs and school partnerships that encourage children to see reading as joyful, social and creative.

Importantly, these are not simply educational activities — they are cultural experiences that help children participate in Australia’s literary culture from an early age.

We support proposals for:

- national reading promotion campaigns
- book voucher programs for children and young people
- increased support for school and community literacy partnerships
- greater investment in author touring and literary events
- support for Australian children’s publishing and illustration.

Supporting Australian Authors and Festivals

Independent bookshops are critical to connecting Australian authors with readers and communities.

The Book Cow has worked extensively with Australian writers, publishers and literary organisations to deliver events and audience engagement opportunities in Canberra.

We have proudly partnered with the Canberra Writers Festival as the festival bookseller, operating pop-up bookshops at venues including the National Film and Sound Archive, the National Museum of Australia and Patrick White Lawns.

These partnerships help:

- increase access to Australian writers and ideas
- expand festival participation
- support book sales and author visibility
- bring literary culture into accessible public spaces.

We have also supported children’s programming associated with the festival, including school engagement and family-focused literary activities.

Local bookshops are uniquely placed to help build audiences for Australian literature because they maintain ongoing relationships with readers and communities year-round — not only during festivals or major events.

However, literary programming is increasingly difficult to sustain financially. Independent bookshops are operating under growing pressure as small businesses, with rising occupancy costs, wages, interest rates, freight, business and workers compensation insurance costs, banking and EFTPOS fees, and broader supplier costs all affecting sustainability. These pressures make it increasingly difficult to continue delivering free or low-cost cultural activities and literary events for communities.

Despite this, independent bookshops continue to invest significantly in local cultural participation because of the long-term social and cultural value these activities create. Many events, storytimes and community programs are delivered with limited ability to recover costs directly, yet they remain an important and accessible part of Australia’s cultural life.

Importantly, many of the broader community and cultural benefits generated by independent bookshops are difficult to measure through traditional retail metrics alone. Much of this work — including free events, children’s storytimes, school engagement and community partnerships — is delivered with limited direct financial return despite requiring significant staff time, planning and operational investment.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore consider:

- micro-grants for literary programming and community events
- support for regional and suburban author touring

- grants supporting children’s literacy and family reading initiatives
- recognition of bookshops within cultural infrastructure funding programs
- investment in literary participation and audience development.

Place-Based and Community Culture

One of the great strengths of Australia’s cultural life is that it occurs not only in major institutions, but also in local communities, shopping precincts, schools, libraries and neighbourhood gathering spaces.

Independent bookshops help create cultural identity and social connection at a local level.

At The Book Cow, many events are intentionally designed to activate local public spaces and strengthen community participation. Our children’s storytimes in Green Square in Kingston, for example, create free and accessible cultural experiences for young families in a public setting.

This type of place-based cultural activity builds social cohesion and creates everyday opportunities for cultural participation.

Future cultural policy should continue to support local and community-led cultural activity, particularly where it:

- strengthens local identity
- supports Australian creators
- encourages intergenerational participation
- activates public and community spaces
- supports small creative businesses.

Key Recommendations

The Book Cow recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

1. Explicitly recognise independent bookshops as essential cultural infrastructure.
2. Establish grant programs supporting literary events, author programming and community reading initiatives delivered through local bookshops.

3. Invest in national reading engagement campaigns for children, young people and adults.
4. Support partnerships between schools, libraries, festivals and independent bookshops to strengthen literary participation.
5. Develop targeted support for children's literacy, Australian children's publishing and family-focused cultural programming.
6. Support regional and suburban author touring and audience development initiatives.
7. Explore policy measures that strengthen the sustainability of independent bookselling and Australian literary culture.

Conclusion

Independent bookshops are small businesses, but they are also community cultural institutions.

They help Australian stories reach readers. They create spaces for discussion, imagination and creativity. They provide accessible pathways into cultural participation for children, families and communities.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to recognise the essential role independent bookshops play in Australia's cultural life and to ensure literary culture, reading engagement and local community participation remain central to Australia's cultural future.

Submitted by



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