



BRADFORD  
LITERATURE  
FESTIVAL

# IMPACT REPORT 2025

explore words, discover worlds

[bradfordlitfest.co.uk](http://bradfordlitfest.co.uk)



“Bradford Literature Festival is a highlight of the UK festival season and always has an eclectic programme that provides so many access points for multiple audiences, across generations and backgrounds.”

Festival Visitor

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*BLF consistently stands out as a space for meaningful conversations. It always seems to ask the relevant, often difficult questions about our society, many of which are too often unaddressed elsewhere. Whether through panel discussions, talks or performances, the festival brings together diverse voices and perspectives that challenge, inspire and inform.*

Festival Visitor

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# DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

**2025 marks the 11th edition of Bradford Literature Festival (BLF) and the beginning of our second decade. As Bradford celebrates its designation as UK City of Culture, we are proud that BLF was cited as a key reason for this achievement, reflecting the impact and reputation the festival has built over the past decade. This year, at the very heart of the City of Culture celebrations, BLF delivered 752 events to an audience of 187,366 people.**

From our launch in 2014 with just 24 events for under 1,000 attendees, BLF has grown into one of the UK's most distinctive cultural festivals. This growth is not simply about scale, but about reach and relevance: engaging across generations, reflecting diverse communities, and fostering connections both locally and internationally.

We have always understood that our communities are international, rooted in global histories and identities and, yet, proudly Bradford. For us, there has never been a divide between a local focus and an international outlook. That is why BLF is both deeply local and confidently global.

Our success is living proof that when you are grounded in values and driven by vision, regional organisations can shape national conversations and build global relationships. BLF has become one of the UK's most high-profile cultural platforms, a space where ideas, identities, and partnerships converge.

None of this would be possible without the vision and investment of our funders and partners. We are grateful for the support of Arts Council England, Doha Debates (a production of Qatar Foundation), Bradford 2025, the University of Bradford, Bradford Council, and our network of institutional and philanthropic supporters.

With a proven track record, international reach, and strong foundations, BLF is entering its next chapter, deepening collaborations, strengthening sustainability, and building the long-term partnerships that will secure its future impact.

**Syima Aslam**  
CEO & Artistic Director  
Bradford Literature Festival

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS



**John Makinson**  
Chair of the Board,  
Bradford Literature  
Festival



**Syima Aslam**  
CEO & Artistic Director,  
Bradford Literature  
Festival



**Dr William Lawrence**  
Executive Director,  
Bradford Literature  
Festival



**Ismail Amla**  
Senior Vice President,  
Kyndryl Consult



**Shahzad Saleem**  
Managing Director, Alvarez  
& Marsal Corporate  
Transformation Services



**Julia Randell-Khan**  
Former lawyer, Norton  
Rose Fulbright and  
Freshfields.



**Costas Kalisperas**  
Founder & CEO, In Tune  
Executive Coaching  
Limited.

# VISION

**Creating a fairer society and changing lives through world-class arts and culture.**

# MISSION

**Bradford Literature Festival is the UK's largest and Europe's most eclectic and diverse literature festival, shaping national and drawing international audiences. Serving as a beacon of global cultural exchange, BLF engages with international partners and audiences, making it a thought-provoking destination for literary enthusiasts and cultural observers alike.**

At the heart of BLF is a commitment to artistic brilliance and contemporary discourse. We combine renowned literary figures with up-and-coming voices to curate dynamic and innovative programmes that spark dialogue and delight for both international audiences and local communities.

Our representative programmes give a platform to diverse and marginalised voices and stories, creating a supportive stage for rich, varied perspectives and discussions, even on the most challenging topics. As a thoughtful festival with a point of view and a sense of place, our events not only represent our city, but also reflect contemporary Britain and the global community.

We are leaders in social inclusion and representation, creating spaces that are welcoming and accessible for all. To make sure everyone can access our work, BLF pioneered the 'Ethical Ticketing' Policy; making our events are free for people who otherwise may not be able to afford to attend.

**We do this because we believe culture, literature and education have the power to change lives.**

# TRACK RECORD SINCE 2014



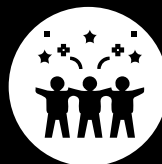
The UK's Largest  
Literature Festival



Over **895,000**  
Audiences from  
**34 Countries**



**49% Audience**  
and **46% Artist**  
Ethnic Diversity



Over **322,000**  
Children and  
Young People



Driving **Global**  
**Impact** through  
**Partnerships**  
**Across Continents**



# BLF 2025 IN NUMBERS

**752** Events

The UK's Largest  
Literature Festival



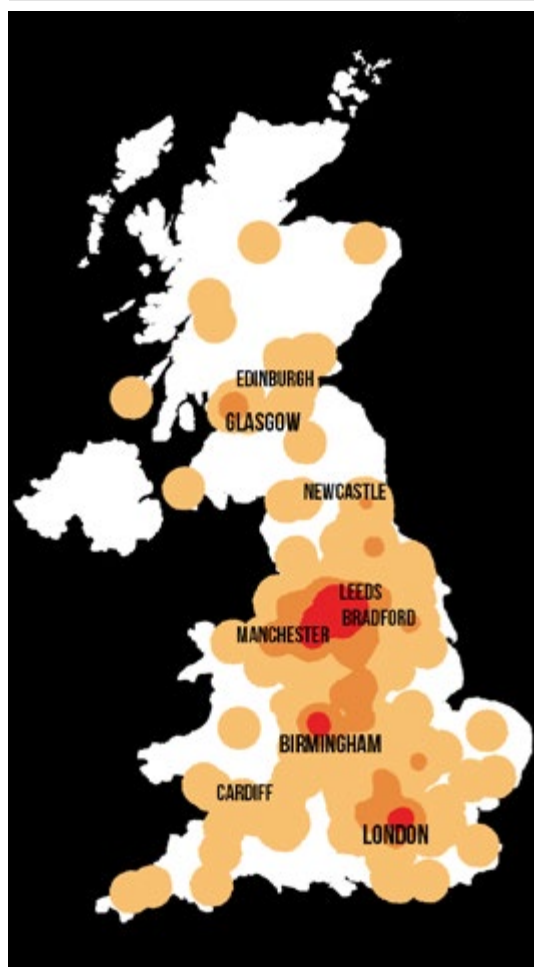
**187,366**  
Audiences

**54%**   
Ethnically Diverse

**524**  Artists

**57%** Ethnically Diverse

**39,829**  
Children and  
Young People



## Global Audiences

**2%**  
International

**29%**  
National

**20%**  
Regional

**49%**  
Local





**99%** 

**Recommend  
visiting BLF**

**90%** Said

**BLF improves  
wellbeing**

**97%**

Said

BLF Improves  
West Yorkshire's

**National  
Reputation**

**72%**

Said They  
Interacted with People from  
**Different Ethnicities  
& Social Backgrounds**

**Free Access**

**to Festival Activity**

Valued at

**£924,443**

**58%**

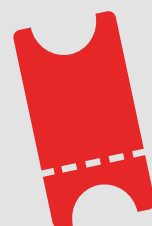


**Below UK Average**  
Household Income

**65%**

Accessed the

**Ethical  
Ticketing Policy**



# BLF 2025 IN PICTURES









# BLF 2025 IN PICTURES







# TOP 10 BEST-SELLING EVENTS

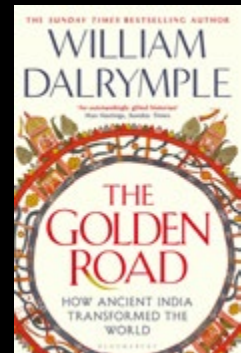
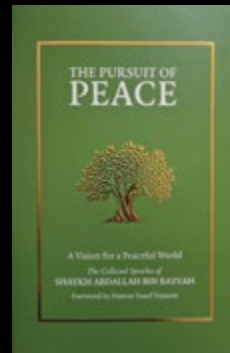
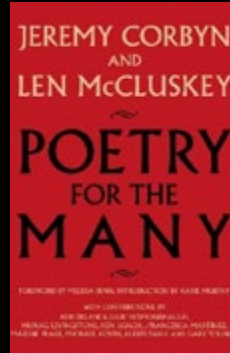
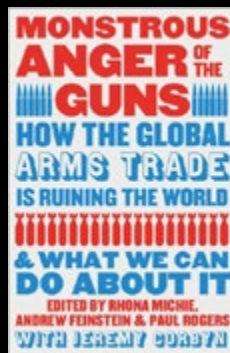
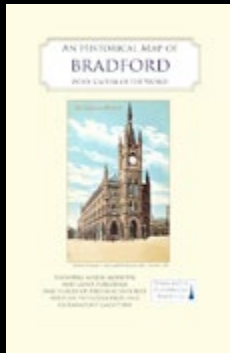


1. **More Sense & Less Sensibility** | Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Dr Aisha Subhani
2. **The Heavenly Shadhili Wisdom** | Shaykh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi
3. **Soaking the Soul in the Recital** | Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Dr Asad Tarsin, Dr Aisha Subhani
4. **Al-Qaswa** | Professor Abdullah Alkadi, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf
5. **Sufiyana Kalaam** | Najmuddin Saifuddin & Group
6. **An Evening of Comedy** | Tez Ilyas, Scott Bennett, Jessica Fostekew, Kyras Gray
7. **John Cooper Clarke in Conversation** with Nihal Arthanayake
8. **Whirling Dervishes** | Konya Metropolitan Municipality Turkish Sufi Music and Sema Ensemble
9. **The Monstrous Anger of the Guns** | Jeremy Corbyn, Professor Paul Rogers
10. **Bollywood Gold** | Navin Kundra Live in Concert with The 515 Crew

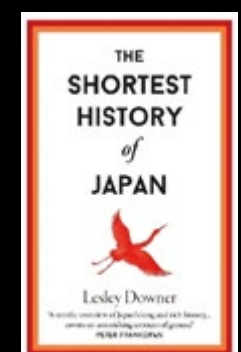
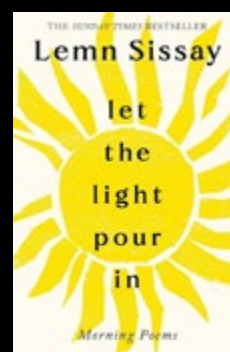
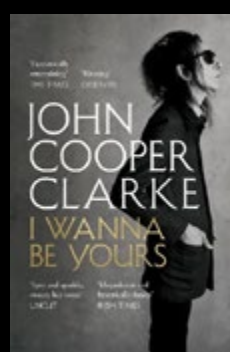
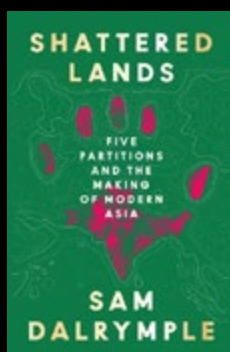




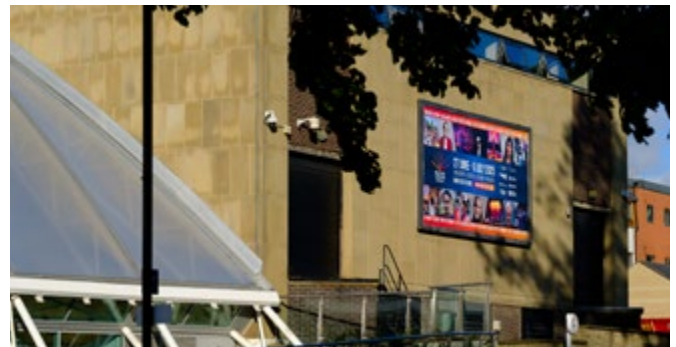
# TOP 10 BEST-SELLING AUTHORS



1. Ian Roberts | *An Historical Map of Bradford: Wool Capital of the World*
2. Jeremy Corbyn, Rhona Michie, Andrew Feinstein, and Paul Rogers | *Monstrous Anger of the Guns: How the Global Arms Trade is Ruining the World and What We Can Do About It*
3. Jeremy Corbyn and Len McCluskey | *Poetry For The Many*
4. The Collected Speeches of Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah. Foreword by Hamza Yusuf Hanson | *Pursuit of Peace, A Vision for a Peaceful World*
5. William Dalrymple | *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*
6. Sam Dalrymple | *Shattered Lands*
7. John Cooper Clarke | *I Wanna Be Yours*
8. Pierre Novellie | *Why Can't I Just Enjoy Things?: A Comedian's Guide to Autism*
9. Lemn Sissay | *Let The Light Pour In*
10. Lesley Downer | *The Shortest History of Japan*



# NATIONAL BLF BRAND PRESENCE





# MARKETING, MEDIA AND REACH



**1.27 Billion** Impressions Worldwide



**589,577**  
Website Visits



**11.59 Million**  
Out of Home Media Impressions



**5.78 Million**  
Social Media Impressions



**4.05 Million Reach**  
**Across Train Station**  
**Digital Displays:**



**1.26 Billion**  
Total Press and Media Reach



**36,000**  
Printed Programmes  
Distributed Nationally

- London King's Cross
- London Euston
- Leeds
- Birmingham
- Manchester Piccadilly
- Liverpool

Irish Independent

The Observer



Good Housekeeping

BookBrunch  
Your daily serving of news and views

THE YORKSHIRE POST

BBC  
RADIO



COUNTRY & TOWN  
HOUSE

YEP  
YORKSHIRE EVENING POST

THE WEEK

THE BOOKSELLER  
At the Heart of Publishing since 1858

Welcome  
to Yorkshire

beb.  
RADIO 106.6fm

rayo

COUNTERPUNCH

unityfm

Telegraph  
& Argus

HALIFAX  
Courier

AP  
Arts  
Professional



AsianImage

Eastern  
Eye

The Patriot

islam  
CHANNEL

Daily Times  
Your right to know. A new voice for a new Pakistan

THE NATION

The Peninsula

Hindustan Times

hyphen. ActuaLitté  
les univers du livre

Yorkshire Times  
A VOICE OF THE FREE PRESS

Pakistan  
OBSERVER

# BRADFORD LITERATURE FESTIVAL 2025

**BLF marked its 11th year in 2025 with 10 days of expansive, eclectic programming, welcoming 187,366 audiences to 752 events, making it the most ambitious and well-attended edition of the festival to date.**

Since 2014, BLF has grown into one of the UK's most significant cultural festivals. Over 11 years, it has curated 4,800 events, hosted 4,068 artists, and welcomed 895,369 audience members. The festival has engaged 322,328 children and young people, including 202,580 through the Education Programme alone, making it the largest cultural education initiative of any UK festival.

This track record was instrumental in Bradford being named UK City of Culture 2025. In the City of Culture year itself, BLF is both an anchor point and the central moment of the programme; demonstrating the scale, ambition, and international recognition that first secured the title. We are especially proud that this milestone coincides with the beginning of a new decade for the festival, underlining BLF's role in shaping Bradford's cultural identity and positioning the city as a national and international cultural destination.

In 2025, BLF's headline events featured household names, including: John Cooper Clarke, Grace Dent,

Celia Imrie, Steph McGovern, Reeta Chakrabarti, Griff Rhys Jones and Larry Lamb. BLF also welcomed the return of Jeremy Corbyn, Lemn Sissay, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf and Joelle Taylor.

Alongside these names, the programme continued its reputation for tackling complex issues, with major debates on the Middle East, the role of media in political conflict, and the state of democracy in the age of populism. Programming was framed by urgent and wide-reaching themes such as freedom of expression, Islamophobia, global faith, poetry, art and architecture, neurodiversity, nature, and citizenship. At its core were the interwoven themes of resistance, memory, and identity, explored through shared history, representation, and dialogue as ways to build social cohesion and strengthen individual wellbeing.

BLF's 2025 programme deepened its longstanding focus on representation, inclusion, and cultural engagement. It drew 524 artists from across the globe, with 14% international, 49% national, and 37% regional. Artists had roots in 70 countries across five continents, and 55% identified as ethnically diverse.

International programming continued to strengthen Bradford's global profile. A major partnership with Doha Debates, a production of Qatar Foundation, brought a town hall on the future of the nation state

***BLF presents different perspectives on diverse topics and issues. It provides a platform for genuine debate and connections with people whose paths would not usually cross. BLF is a model for events of cities of the future, sparking positive debate and connection between diverse communities.***

Festival Artist





to Bradford, filmed to broadcast standard and shared worldwide.

Family engagement remained central to the programme. Four free Family Fun Days transformed City Park into a hub of activity, with events including themed storytelling, crowd-forming musical and dance performances, fantastical walkabout theatre, and readings by authors. The Imagination Station and Broadway shopping centre hosted interactive crafts sessions across the weekend, and themed screenings brought classic family films to new audiences.

BLF's Education Programme engaged 31,695 children and young people across 65 sessions. It reached 69 primary and secondary schools as well as 86 home-educated learners. All sessions were designed to align with the national curriculum, while also showcasing topics and perspectives not typically covered in classroom teaching. These sessions included interactive talks and performances all offered without charge for non-fee paying schools.

Community partnerships remain fundamental to BLF's model. This year, the festival worked with 57 community groups across 65 events that included poetry, theatre, dance and music. BLF also featured 11 exhibitions; from visually interactive displays

to thought-provoking installations and historical retrospectives.

Bradford is one of the UK's most diverse cities, with over 150 languages spoken and 48% of residents identifying as ethnically diverse. BLF reflects this, with 54% of its audiences from ethnically diverse backgrounds. In 2025, 61% of attendees used the Ethical Ticketing Policy and 89% of the programme was free to access, a vital commitment where 58% of BLF's audiences have household incomes below the national average.

BLF 2025 reinforced the festival's role as a civic asset and cultural institution, operating at the intersection of creativity, civic responsibility, and global dialogue. Working across schools, communities, and international partnerships, it remains rooted in Bradford while opening cultural access to global audiences.

BLF has made Bradford's cultural moment in the spotlight truly international; connecting the city to audiences, artists, and partners across the world. As we look to the future, BLF will be central to carrying the city's legacy forward long after 2025, ensuring Bradford's cultural life continues to grow in scale, quality, and ambition, as the city strengthens its reputation as a cultural destination.

***The range of talks and subjects covered by authors, chairs, and expert panellists at BLF is impressive, and being part of an audience of like-minded people makes the experience especially enjoyable in these difficult times.***

Festival Visitor



# DOHA DEBATES TOWN HALL BLF 2025

**Doha Debates returned to BLF in 2025 with its internationally recognised town hall format, following the 2024 edition that reached over one million viewers worldwide. The partnership, developed with Qatar Foundation, reflects BLF's commitment to placing Bradford at the centre of global cultural dialogue.**

The 2025 sell-out debate, moderated by Malika Bilal, brought together scholar of Islamic law, Dr Wael Hallaq, Indian parliamentarian and author, Dr Shashi Tharoor, and historian, Dr David Engels, alongside students from Qatar, the UK, and other countries to interrogate the future of the nation state and its role in shaping identity. Doha Debates' town halls put young voices at the heart of the conversation, giving the next generation a platform to engage directly with thought-leaders. At BLF, students shaped the discussion with questions and commentary, driving the debate alongside the panellists.

The event was filmed at broadcast quality on a bespoke set inside Bradford's St George's Hall, reimagining the historic venue as a studio environment of international standard. The programme will be released later in 2025 across Doha Debates' global platforms, extending

Bradford's reach to millions of viewers worldwide.

The debate captured the essence of the town hall model. Dr Tharoor defended civic nationalism as a framework for pluralism, Dr Engels argued for a layered understanding of identity, while Dr Hallaq questioned the very premise of the nation state, raising concerns about its effect on ethics and human flourishing. Students challenged each speaker with their own perspectives, underscoring Dr Hallaq's point that continuing these debates is a responsibility for younger generations.

This partnership illustrates BLF's ability to bring world-class institutions into dialogue with local audiences, positioning Bradford as a stage for debates of international consequence. It demonstrates the festival's role as a convener of critical conversations and as a cultural institution preparing young people to navigate and influence the issues that will define the future.

This collaboration illustrates how a festival rooted in Bradford and the UK can connect its communities to global platforms, amplify youth voices, and embed a city in international conversations about justice, identity, and the future of society.

*“Bringing Doha Debates back to BLF has once again affirmed the power of open, intergenerational dialogue. This Town Hall was more than a debate. It was a reflection of how young people are not just questioning the future of national identity but actively shaping it through truth-seeking conversations that invite reflection and challenge assumptions.”*

Amjad Atallah, Managing Director of Doha Debates





# BBC TASTY READ LAUNCHES AT BLF 2025

**In 2025, BLF was chosen as the launch partner for the BBC and The Reading Agency's Big Tasty Read, a nationwide campaign designed to reawaken the joy of reading by connecting it with one of the most universal cultural touchstones: food. Prompted by research from The Reading Agency showing that half of UK adults do not read regularly, the initiative used the pleasures of food writing, memoir and fiction to inspire more people to pick up a book.**

The campaign opened at St George's Hall with a sold-out event featuring *Celebrity MasterChef* judge and restaurant critic Grace Dent in conversation with restaurateur, and broadcaster, Nisha Katona. They explored how food carries memory, history and belonging, and how stories about food open up conversations about identity, migration and community. The launch reflected one of BLF's core principles: literature has the greatest impact when it connects directly with lived experience and when it becomes a bridge between people.

A curated list of 22 titles supported the campaign, combining fiction, memoir and essays. The list ranged from Julia Child's *My Life in France* to Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*, Charmaine Wilkerson's

*Black Cake*, and Grace Dent's memoir *Hungry*. Each book was selected not only for its literary quality, but also for its ability to spark dialogue across generations, cultures and communities, using food as an entry point into deeper stories.

The campaign also highlighted the wider role of reading in public life. Previous "Big Read" initiatives from The Reading Agency boosted library loans by 54%, proving the impact of themed pathways in encouraging people back to books. The Big Tasty Read reinforced the link between literature, wellbeing and social cohesion, bringing people together through stories that resonate in everyday life.

Hosting the launch in Bradford demonstrated BLF's ability to convene high-profile national partners and deliver projects of both local relevance and national impact. Delivered in collaboration with BBC Arts, The Reading Agency, and Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture, the project reached new audiences while showcasing Bradford's role as a cultural leader. BLF provided the platform that rooted the campaign in one of the UK's most diverse cities and once again proved its role as a catalyst for cultural participation, innovation, and long-term sector development.

***This campaign reflects what our festival stands for: the belief that literature, culture and the arts can broaden horizons and change lives. Food is a powerful expression of culture and identity, and like stories, it brings communities together – a value at the heart of the festival.***

Syima Aslam, CEO & Artistic Director of Bradford Literature Festival



# CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Building confidence, enrichment and empowerment

**BLF recognises the transformative impact that literature and culture can have on young minds, which is why children and young people remain central to our programme. Whether through school visits, the Education Programme, or the free Family Fun Days, the festival provides opportunities for young audiences to experience high-quality cultural events that inspire creativity, build confidence, and encourage a lifelong love of reading and learning.**

## Family Fun Days

In 2025, four Family Fun Days transformed Bradford's City Park into a vibrant, open-access creative space. Designed to break down barriers to cultural participation, these events are entirely free and bring families together across generations. They combine interactive workshops, performances, film screenings, storytelling, crafts, and walkabout theatre to create an inclusive atmosphere where all children can engage with the arts, regardless of background or household income.

Themed days provide an entry point into literature and culture for children of all ages. In 2025, themes included superheroes, Alice in Wonderland, outer space, and magic - each chosen for its ability to spark curiosity, connect with children's existing interests, and introduce them to new stories and ideas. From shadow puppetry rooted in Turkish folk traditions to space-themed crafts, bhangra dance performances, and author-led storytelling, the programme blended cultural heritage with contemporary creativity.

These days are more than entertainment, they provide opportunities for children to explore identity, cooperation, and problem-solving through shared cultural experiences. The free, drop-in format ensures accessibility for all, while the combination of structured activities and open creative spaces encourages children to express themselves at their own pace. Performances, live readings, and interactive elements such as face painting, puppet shows, and music bring the park to life, making cultural engagement both exciting and memorable.

## Education Programme

The Education Programme is central to BLF's mission, built on the belief that educators have the power to change lives and that literacy underpins all areas of learning. The festival offers curriculum-aligned events that also showcase subjects and perspectives not typically found in classroom teaching, giving students a broader and more inclusive understanding of literature, history, science, and the arts.

In 2025, the programme featured 65 live shows, workshops, and interactive sessions for Key Stages 2–4. Pupils explored Shakespeare and Gothic literature alongside sessions on Malcolm X and the American Civil Rights Movement, and the Holocaust. Science and creative thinking were brought to life, exploring astronomy, robotics, and invention, while themed strands on Superheroes and Rebellious Royals invited students to consider power, identity, and representation in unexpected ways. Performance poetry, rap, and spoken word encouraged expression and confidence, while explorations of Ancient Egypt, climate change, and global citizenship connected students to history and contemporary challenges through fresh perspectives.

All sessions were free for non-fee-paying schools, education groups, and home educators, ensuring equitable access. In 2025, the programme engaged 31,695 children and young people through contributions from 35 acclaimed authors, poets, scientists, and historians. BLF worked with 69 schools across the Bradford district, as well as schools in Kirklees and Calderdale, and welcomed groups from national institutions whose students travelled to Bradford specifically to take part. Priority was given to schools in areas facing the highest levels of deprivation and cultural exclusion.

BLF's commitment to cultural education now extends beyond the festival through the Digital Education Programme, supported by The Rayne Foundation. Launched in 2025, it provides teachers with free online lesson plans, videos, and resources to continue the learning experience year-round.

*“Promoting a love of learning and reading is hugely important for our children as it is not something they get from home. In order for our children to learn and gain this love, they need to be engaged and have hands-on experiences.”*

Teacher



*“ BLF is essential for our school. We need to develop leadership, cultural capital, and inspire learners who would otherwise miss out on a wealth of amazing experiences. ”*

Teacher



*“ Most of our students are from disadvantaged backgrounds, so this was an amazing opportunity to do something they wouldn't usually get to do. ”*

Teacher

*“ Bradford Literature Festival gives me the opportunity for my children to meet an author and spend time reading together. ”*

Festival Visitor



*“ The storytelling is brilliant, fun, and inclusive. We love the crafting, and my daughter enjoys the face painting. We will be back next weekend! ”*

Festival Visitor

# BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Enriching lives and nurturing talent

**Community engagement is central to BLF, spanning grassroots hubs, faith centres, charities and national advocacy organisations. Our approach goes beyond access: we create the conditions for communities to lead, participate and be seen, demonstrating that culture is a shared language connecting people across backgrounds and interests.**

The Community Code scheme remains one of the most powerful ways BLF connects with and sustains community participation. By offering free ticket access to groups across Bradford and beyond, the scheme opens the festival to literacy projects, wellbeing networks tackling everything from ageing well to isolation and mental health, neighbourhood hubs supporting those lacking confidence to attend alone, and organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers.

In 2025, 131 organisations used codes to book tickets across 182 events, with more than 60% returning from previous years — clear evidence of habit-forming participation and growing confidence year on year. The majority of groups (78%) were Bradford-based and a further 11% came from Kirklees, highlighting both the festival's deep local roots and the strength and depth of sustained outreach across the region. Notably, 38% of organisations had previously engaged with BLF through consultation or collaboration, showing how the scheme strengthens long-term relationships. More than a gateway to events, Community Codes are a trusted mechanism for inclusion, loyalty, and shared ownership of the festival.

BLF's work in Kirklees demonstrates this impact. As part of a three-year project, the festival has delivered sustained consultation, meaningful activity in schools and community settings, and built regular audiences who now travel into Bradford for the festival. In 2025, we continued engagement in multiple settings,

delivering workshops that introduced new cultural experiences while strengthening local capacity. Community Codes once again enabled groups to attend BLF together, turning one-off visits into an annual habit. One women's reading group, made up of members from diverse backgrounds, received free books by a festival author, attended her event, and later turned out in numbers for A. A. Dhand's launch of *The Chemist*, for many their first-ever book launch. Encounters like these deepen cultural participation, broaden horizons, and embed BLF into the annual calendar of Kirklees, helping to establish a cultural corridor between Kirklees and Bradford where underserved communities now see BLF as their festival.

In 2025, BLF's partnership with Connecting Roma reached a new level with An Evening of Romani Music, a major co-curated event that closed Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month. Connecting Roma, Bradford's leading GRT advocacy and cultural organisation, has been a long-term partner, with our collaboration growing year on year. What began in 2022 as a community-focused event evolved into a Zabava within the festival in 2023, and had become a platform for emerging Roma talent by 2024. This year marked a step-change. An Evening of Romani Music brought internationally renowned ensembles together with local performers, drawing diverse audiences and securing Roma heritage as part of the festival's cultural mainstream. The scale and visibility of the event reflected the confidence Connecting Roma has built, and BLF's commitment to celebrating Roma culture on Bradford's biggest stages.

Together, these strands of work show that BLF empowers communities to shape cultural life on their own terms, turning participation into leadership and building the foundations for long-term systemic change.

*As someone who has presented at multiple writers' festivals overseas, I can confidently vouch for BLF being a standout, not only for its broadly inclusive programme, but for its audience attendance being the most diverse of any I've seen. Ever. To witness a literature festival of this scale engage its local community so enthusiastically, as well as attendees from across the country, is testament to a high-calibre event. Codesign with locals in elements of production were markers of success.*



*“BLF stands out from other festivals with its mixed programming that really reflects the community of Bradford and those communities beyond the city.”*

Festival Artist



*“I love to see our very ethnically mixed community all having a wonderful time in the City Park.”*

Festival Visitor

*“BLF brings many different people together from across the globe - linking Bradford’s history in the present, as it’s been a place of migration for people across the globe for centuries.”*

Festival Artist



*“BLF feels local in that it has its own personality and reflects its community, but also international in its scope and ambition. We were honoured to add to its representation of Roma, Travelling and Show people.”*

Festival Artist

# IMPACT: INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL PLACEMAKING

**BLF has built an international profile that contributed to positioning of Bradford as UK City of Culture 2025. The festival made this possible by giving the city global visibility, credibility, and a reputation for cultural excellence. In 2025, international audiences doubled from 1% to 2%, with a further 27% travelling from across the UK. The programme featured 72 international speakers and artists, embedding perspectives from across literature, politics, heritage, and the arts.**

BLF's influence is seen not only in the international make-up of its audiences and artists, but in the strategic international partnerships it forges with leading cultural institutions.

In the Middle East, Doha Debates, a production of Qatar Foundation, returned in 2025 with a landmark town hall that drew international attention and reinforced Bradford's role in shaping global conversations. Building on this relationship, the festival has forged new partnerships in Doha with HBKU Press, Qatar National Library, and Al Ghorrah for Literature and Arts, creating opportunities for publishing, research, and knowledge-sharing that link into global cultural networks.

Across the rest of the region, in Saudi Arabia BLF has continued the partnership with the Islamic Arts Biennale and in Dubai through the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature and the Forum for Peace, whose mission to promote cohesion and interfaith dialogue reflects BLF's own ethos. In South Asia, its partnership with the British Council Pakistan continues to expand. In Europe, collaborations with Yunus Emre Enstitüsü have deepened BLF's reach, while in North America, work with the El-Hibri Foundation has extended the festival's profile. Together, these connections demonstrate BLF's globally relevant role in cultural exchange.

A new partnership with Yunus Emre Enstitüsü London brought Turkish heritage to the programme, including a performance of the whirling dervishes by the Konya Metropolitan Municipality Turkish Sufi Music and Sema Ensemble. For many in the audience, this was a first encounter with this UNESCO-recognised tradition, offering rare access to centuries of Turkish cultural practice and illustrating BLF's role in opening pathways to global heritage.

BLF also expanded its long-standing partnership with the British Council through a major collaboration with the Faiz Foundation in Pakistan. Together, they curated a festival-wide tribute to Faiz Ahmad Faiz, one of South Asia's most influential poets and humanists. Through discussion, performance, and music, the programme connected Bradford audiences to a shared South Asian legacy, while highlighting the contemporary resonance of Faiz's vision of justice, humanity, and creativity.

The festival deepened its engagement with the Diriyah Biennale Foundation following BLF's participation in the landmark Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah earlier in 2025. At BLF, the Foundation presented Beyond the Biennale: Islamic Art and Its Contemporary Resonance, with Dr Abdulrahman Azzam exploring the living legacy of Islamic art and architecture, its global influence, and its power to connect past and present.

International collaboration also shaped BLF's role in sector-wide thought exchange. The Creative Economic Conference hosted a session on the future of cultural funding and philanthropy in partnership with the US-based El-Hibri Foundation. Senior figures from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Arts Council England, and global philanthropic networks, including El Hibri Foundation, explored how cultural investment can adapt to tightening public budgets and international challenges. The discussion addressed the shift toward equity, impact-led models, and new approaches to cultural philanthropy, positioning Bradford at the centre of global debate on the sustainability and growth of the creative industries.

BLF's international impact demonstrates how a UK-based festival can reshape global cultural dialogue. Through international speakers, partnerships with leading institutions, and programming that connects Bradford audiences to global narratives, BLF has built Bradford and the UK's international reputation. It has established a platform where intercultural exchange, nuanced debate, and strategic thought-leadership thrive, creating a model of cultural engagement rooted in Bradford and recognised across continents.

*I love how the ambition of this festival is its life blood, how it seeks out new voices to champion and how it is truly international.*



*“ I enjoy the variety of speakers that come from around the world to share their knowledge and wisdom at BLF. I love that the festival allows people to see Bradford in a positive light. ”*

Festival Visitor



*“ BLF offers a wide array of topics discussed with leading speakers, which are often very hard to access outside of London. ”*

Festival Visitor

*“ BLF is such a wonderful event that puts Bradford on the cultural map of Britain. The variety of events spanned everything Bradford has to offer and there really was something for everyone. It should be nurtured and cherished. ”*

Thomas Hodgson



*“ BLF offers a great selection of local, national, and international speakers across a wide variety of topics. It provides the opportunity to hear debates on important global issues with contributions from people of diverse backgrounds. The festival truly showcases Bradford at its best. ”*

Festival Visitor

# IMPACT: SOCIAL COHESION AND WELLBEING

**Social cohesion is central to BLF's purpose. The programme is deliberately structured to create shared spaces where people from different backgrounds, ages, socio-economic backgrounds and beliefs meet, exchange ideas, and participate in cultural life together. BLF treats social connection as a measurable outcome, designing events that actively reduce isolation, strengthen community resilience and cohesion, and increase access to meaningful cultural participation.**

The festival's programming is a key driver of this impact. BLF consistently transforms narratives by placing underrepresented voices at the centre of the conversation and inviting audiences to engage with perspectives that challenge assumptions. The programme creates a safe space for nuanced debate on complex and sometimes contentious issues, from global affairs and faith to identity, resilience, and belonging. By combining high-profile speakers with local and community voices, BLF ensures that discussions reflect both global contexts and the lived realities of Bradford's residents.

International speakers and collaborations bring global outlooks directly into the programme, allowing audiences to consider their own experiences alongside those of people from around the world and deepening understanding across cultures.

In 2025, this approach was reflected in audience feedback, with 72% reporting that they met people from different social, ethnic, and age groups at the festival, and 30% attending events alone. Many cited feeling comfortable doing so because of the welcoming atmosphere, the diversity of attendees, and the opportunity for informal interaction before and after sessions.

This atmosphere helps address the UK's loneliness epidemic, which has intensified since the COVID-19

pandemic, providing a low-cost, low-barrier alternative to more formal social or wellbeing interventions.

BLF's programme is shaped by an understanding of its role in supporting public health. Alongside debates and cultural discussions, the festival offers activities that directly promote wellbeing, including yoga and tai chi sessions, guided walking tours, bus tours, and workshops such as Emotional Freedom Technique. These create free and accessible opportunities for people to look after both their physical and mental health, helping to counter the inactivity, isolation, and poor wellbeing that contribute to growing pressure on NHS services.

The programme is also designed with inclusion at its core. Events are tailored to engage neurodiverse audiences, ensuring that different ways of experiencing and processing the world are recognised and valued. Heritage talks provide opportunities for older people to connect and participate, children's events invite families to read and learn together, and intergenerational programming bridges divides, helping people reconnect in the wake of prolonged social isolation during the pandemic.

In 2025, 89% of audiences reported a positive impact on their wellbeing as a result of attending BLF. Many highlighted the value of events that reflect their own heritage and identity, increasing mutual understanding while reinforcing a sense of belonging.

The mix of perspectives on stage and in the audience is one of the most frequently praised aspects of the festival. For Bradford, one of the UK's most diverse cities, this intentional design strengthens civic pride and the social fabric, while building a model of cultural engagement with relevance nationally and internationally.

*The special glue of this wide-ranging programme is the fascinating social mix of all the other participants you meet. For this reason, I often love attending events on my own, and I feel very comfortable doing so. I treat the week of BLF as my annual holiday, clearing my calendar to attend. It is the jewel in Bradford's crown, especially during our City of Culture year.*



“ *I live in a mainly white British city, so the chance to mingle with a more diverse public at BLF is really worthwhile.*

Festival Visitor



“ *I feel valued as a British Muslim, with events that reflect religious and cultural heritage, a positive sharing of our way of life, thus increasing understanding and learning of each other's way of life.*

Festival Visitor

“ *The panel event went beyond reflection to provide real insight into social progress and efforts to build a harmonious society.*

Festival Visitor



“ *BLF breaks down barriers, which is especially important in Bradford. As someone born and bred here, BLF is something that's very diverse, inclusive and allows everyone to join in, and feel proud to be a Bradfordian.*

Festival Visitor

# IMPACT: SOCIO-ECONOMIC REGENERATION

**BLF is more than a cultural event; it is a catalyst for socio-economic regeneration that strengthens both the city and its communities. The festival works at the intersection of place-making and people-focused development and was a driving force in securing Bradford's designation as UK City of Culture 2025. BLF continues to support the city's cultural sector to grow in ambition, reach and resilience.**

Accessibility remains central to this impact. BLF's Ethical Ticketing Policy, in place since the festival's inception, removes financial barriers for those who need it most, including people in receipt of benefits, students, educators, senior citizens, disabled people and carers, refugees and asylum seekers. In 2025, 61% of ticket holders used the scheme and 89% of all audiences accessed free programming.

The value of this was £924,443, representing a direct reinvestment in public access to culture. In a year where 58% of BLF's audiences had household incomes below the national average and 16% lived on less than £20,000, free tickets made literature, ideas and cultural events possible for thousands who might otherwise have been excluded. Families engaged with books together for the first time, while adults saw their own identities and experiences reflected on stage.

The festival's impact also extends to future economic regeneration. Through its Children and Young People programme and the UK's largest festival-based Education Programme, BLF equips the next generation with the skills, confidence and cultural awareness needed for long-term growth. This investment supports future economic participation by preparing young people for workforce readiness and meaningful engagement in society. By raising aspirations, strengthening literacy and developing critical thinking, the festival invests in young people who will become the city's future workforce, leaders and creative entrepreneurs.

BLF also delivers measurable economic benefits in the present. Each year, the festival attracts thousands of visitors from across the UK and overseas, generating direct spending in hotels, restaurants, shops, and transport. Local suppliers, venues and freelance practitioners benefit from the surge in demand, supporting jobs, sustaining independent businesses and stimulating further investment in the city's cultural and hospitality infrastructure.

Since its founding in 2014, BLF has also strengthened the city's cultural ecology. An early audit revealed limited infrastructure and little connection between Bradford's cultural activity and national or international networks. Over 11 years, BLF has helped change that landscape, working with venues, grassroots organisations and artists to raise ambition and visibility. Existing organisations have expanded through collaboration with the festival, and new initiatives have taken root in a city where culture is now seen as a driver of opportunity.

The festival's wider impact is also felt in Bradford's reputation and profile. National and international media coverage positions the city as a dynamic cultural destination, while visiting artists, speakers and audiences experience its diversity and hospitality first-hand. This exchange of people, ideas and stories leads to repeat visits, collaborations and future investment. Audiences recognise this transformation: in 2025, 93% said that BLF contributes to the social, cultural and economic regeneration of Bradford and Yorkshire, and 94% said the festival improves the region's national reputation.

These results show that the festival creates both immediate economic and cultural benefits and lays the foundations for a stronger, more confident Bradford in the years ahead.

*“There is a real sense of the festival taking place within and as part of Bradford - from events being held in venues local to Bradford to local artists and businesses being involved. The whole festival is a true testament to the place. A celebration.”*

Festival Visitor



“ *BLF's Ethical Ticketing Policy means that my wife and I can attend without paying for the events. This made the difference between us attending or not attending.* ”

Festival Visitor



“ *I went to events I wouldn't normally attend and learned new things. I was inspired to buy books and explore information and history. It gave me the confidence to do things on my own, which I don't usually do.* ”

Festival Visitor

“ *BLF brings speakers to Bradford that would not ordinarily come to Bradford. BLF allows visitors to see another side to Bradford, allowing us Bradfordians to show off our hospitality and our willingness to be open and engage in topics that are sometimes controversial.* ”

Festival Artist



“ *Being able to access a free ticket due to disability and benefits gave me the opportunity to purchase the reading material, which I can now study and reflect on.* ”

Festival Visitor







# BLF VOLUNTEERS

Developing skills, opportunity and social capital

**Volunteers remain a driving force behind BLF. In 2025, 153 individuals gave 1,661 hours to help deliver the festival across 10 days, taking on key roles that shaped the public experience and supported the wider cultural infrastructure of the city.**

This year's volunteer cohort reflected the scale and depth of BLF's reach from across Bradford and beyond. Individuals from different generations, ethnicities, and social backgrounds worked together to form a team that was as varied as the city itself.

One of the most consistent messages in volunteer feedback was the value of working alongside people they wouldn't normally meet. That sense of connection continues to set the volunteering programme apart.

Volunteers supported the festival as Venue and Stage Assistants, Workshop Assistants, Green Room Assistants, and Festival Runners. These roles gave individuals the chance to gain hands-on experience in event delivery while developing skills that support long-term growth, both personally and professionally.

BLF's volunteering model is built on access and inclusion, actively removing barriers that limit participation in the arts. This year, 108 volunteers were new to the festival, reinforcing the sense of progression and investment across the team.

Motivations ranged from a passion for literature and culture to gaining practical experience or contributing to the city. Regardless of reason, outcomes were consistent. Volunteers built skills, grew in confidence, expanded their networks, and formed lasting pathways into arts and culture. Most people (88%) said their involvement with BLF made them more likely to engage in arts and culture going forward.

Volunteering at BLF is an active contribution to the city's cultural life. It builds capacity, strengthens social cohesion, and ensures the festival continues to reflect and serve the people of Bradford.

The 2025 programme took place during Bradford's UK City of Culture year, contributing directly to the city's momentum. Volunteers were active participants in that civic energy, reinforcing the festival's role in the city's cultural infrastructure and providing visible support at a time of national focus.

*Volunteering at BLF gives me the opportunity to give back to my community and promote Bradford.*

Festival Volunteer

*I enjoyed the variety of roles I was placed in. No day was the same or repetitive.*

Festival Volunteer

*I enjoyed being a helping hand at the festival and meeting new people from all walks of life. I finally managed to experience the behind-the-scenes of how everything works at BLF.*

Festival Volunteer

*Working as an Artist Liaison meant I got to meet some amazing speakers and artists as well as the lovely Venue Managers.*

Festival Volunteer





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**www.bradfordlitfest.co.uk**

