

BRADFORD LITERATURE FESTIVAL

IMPACT REPORT 2026

explore words, discover worlds

bradfordlitfest.co.uk



The commitment to platforming bold conversations, brilliant panellists and a breadth of topics is a salute to this festival being a leading force in the Arts across northern England and the UK.

Artist

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Of the multitude of writers and literature festivals I have been involved in internationally, BLF is a standout for its repertoire of artists and audiences.

Artist

DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

Welcome to Bradford Literature Festival's 2026 Impact Report. Our twelfth festival recorded more than 200,000 attendances across 762 events, taking our total since 2014 beyond one million. For me, that growth matters because it has been built around the belief that excellence and access belong together.

Rooted in Bradford and connected to the world, BLF gives different literary and intellectual traditions equal standing within a shared cultural programme. Our purpose is to broaden whose stories are heard and whose ideas shape public life, while inviting audiences to encounter perspectives beyond their own. Our education work puts literacy at the heart of that purpose, giving children and young people opportunities to discover books and explore ideas.

Returning schools, sustained community relationships and international partnerships show how this work develops over time. Through Culture Squared, we have built a national cultural platform where people can explore complex questions together. In a world of assertions, we are a festival of questions.

I am deeply grateful to **Arts Council England, Bradford Council, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Humaniti, Pears Foundation, IMI, Human Concern, University of Bradford, Rayne Foundation, El Hibri Foundation, Adam Foundation, Islamic Relief** and **Nabeela Rashid Foundation**. Their support is a statement of faith in this city and our communities, and in culture that is serious and joyful, deeply local and confidently global, intellectually ambitious and genuinely accessible.

My thanks also go to our **Board of Directors** for their stewardship and commitment to the long-term vision of Culture Squared and BLF, and to our artists, partners, volunteers and dedicated team. These achievements owe a great deal to their judgement, creativity and care, and to the trust that audiences place in the festival.

Syima Aslam
Founder, CEO & Artistic Director

BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Syima Aslam
CEO & Artistic Director, Bradford Literature Festival



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Executive Director, Bradford Literature Festival



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VISION

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

MISSION

Bradford Literature Festival is the UK's largest literature festival. Awarded the title of Europe's most eclectic and diverse literature festival, BLF shapes national conversations and attracts international audiences.

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 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 **1.09 Million** Audiences from **37 Countries**

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





Over **398,000** Children and Young People

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



BLF 2026 IN NUMBERS

200,915
Audiences
46% Ethnically Diverse

762 Events
The UK's Largest Literature Festival

490
Artists
45% Ethnically Diverse

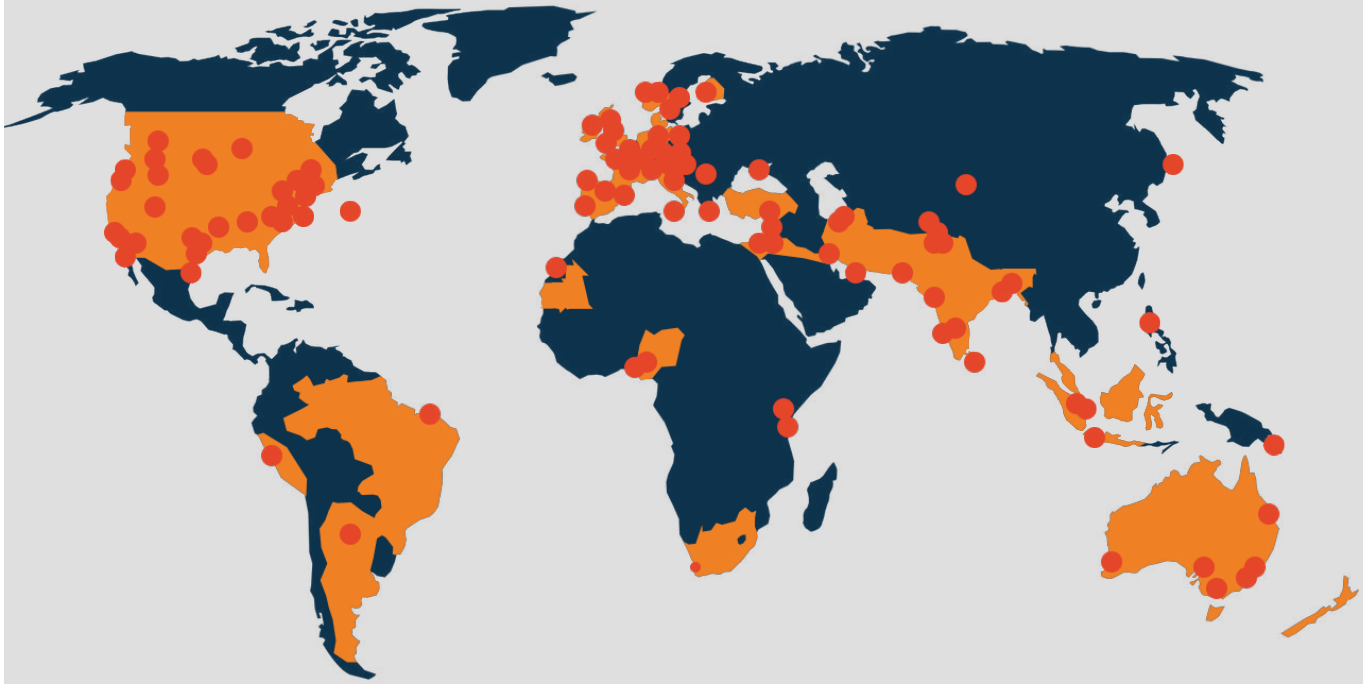
75,678
Children and Young People

89%
said **BLF** improves **Wellbeing**

Free Access
to Festival Activity
valued at
£1,024,230

59%
attendees accessed the **Ethical Ticketing Policy**

Global Audience Reach



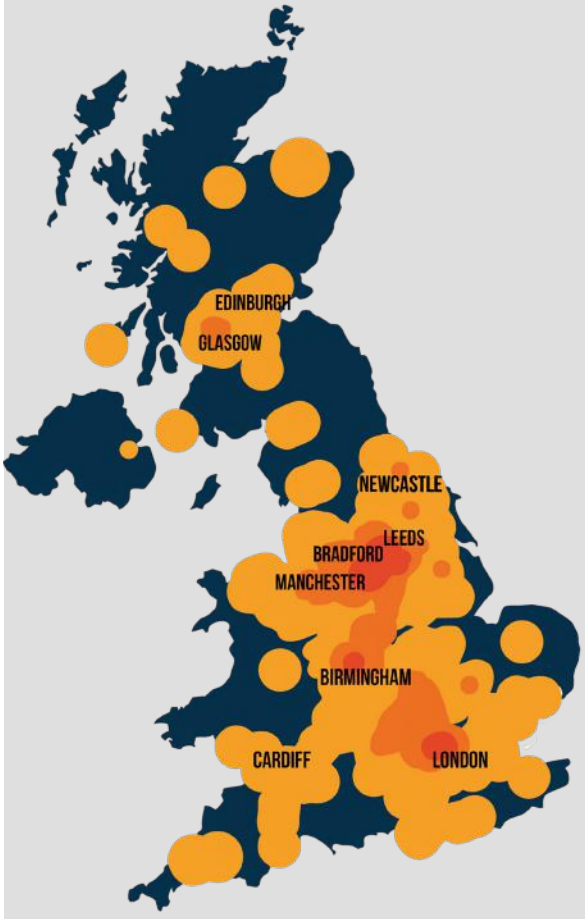
78% said they interacted with people from

Different Ethnicities & Social Backgrounds

98%

Recommend visiting **BLF**

UK Audience Reach



BLF 2026 IN PICTURES
















BRADFORD
LITERATURE
FESTIVAL





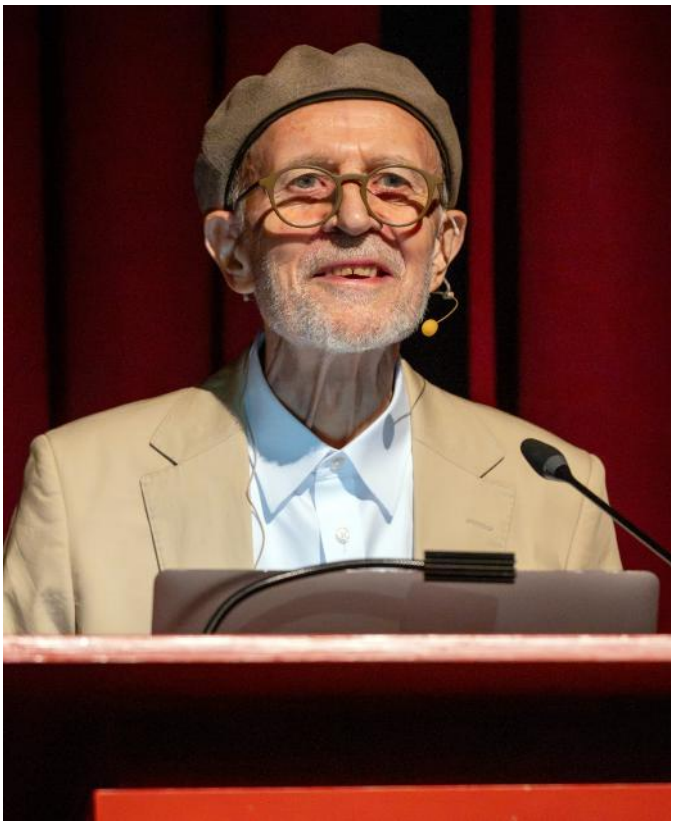


BLF 2026 IN PICTURES












SERIOUSLY,
enjoy more
THINK
less of everything
around.









TOP 10 BEST-SELLING EVENTS

1. **Life and Afterlife: Between the Material and the Spiritual** | Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, Adam Kelwick

2. **Sufiyana Kalaam** | Rushil Ranjan

3. **An Evening of Comedy** | Ola Labib, Jack Carroll, Eshaan Akbar, Desiree Burch

4. **Jeremy Corbyn: The Gaza Tribunal** | Jeremy Corbyn, Paul Rogers

5. **Turkish Classical and Sufi Music Concert** | Serda Türkel Öter, Eray Cinpir, Murat Ferhat Yegül, Tolga Öter, Koray Arısan

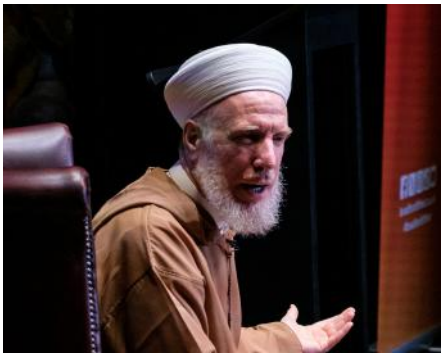
6. **Purifying the Heart** | Mohammed Isaaq

7. **In Conversation with Hannah Spencer MP** with Peg Alexander

8. **The Alchemy of Happiness** | Mohammed Isaaq

9. **Timeless Ghazals** | Priti Kaur

10. **F1 Insider: Notes from the Pit Lane** | Ted Kravitz, Matt Majendie, Robert Nisbet













TOP 10 BEST-SELLING AUTHORS

1. **The Gaza Tribunal: Britain's Complicity in Genocide** | Jeremy Corbyn, Neve Gordon, Shahd Hammouri, Sally Rooney

2. **The Hour of the Wolf** | Fatima Bhutto

3. **Monstrous Anger of the Guns** | Jeremy Corbyn, Rhona Michie, Andrew Feinstein, Paul Rogers

4. **How To Kill a Witch: A Guide For The Patriarchy** | Claire Mitchell, Zoe Venditozzi

5. **Honoured: Survival, Strength and My Path to Politics** | Naz Shah

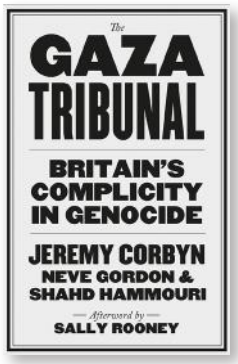
6. **The Kingpin** | A.A. Dhand

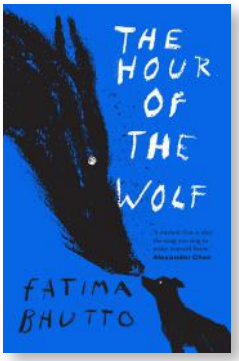
7. **F1 Insider** | Ted Kravitz

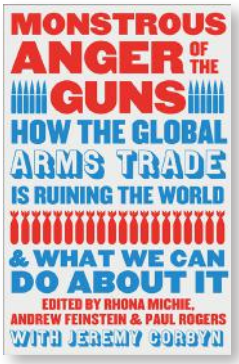
8. **Autistically Me** | Bradley Riches

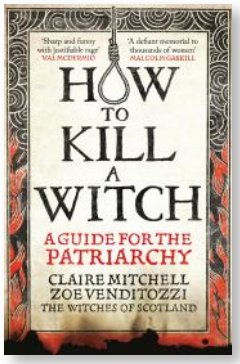
9. **Frequently Happy** | David Larbi

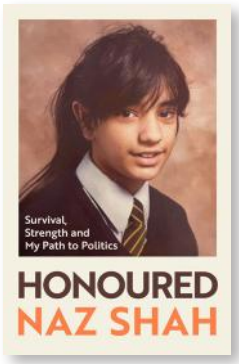
10. **Complicit: Britain's Role in the Destruction of Gaza** | Peter Oborne

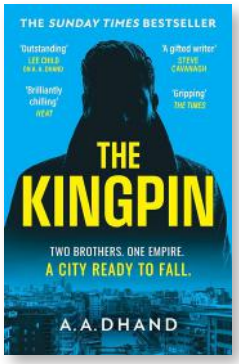


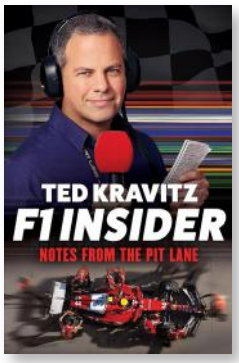


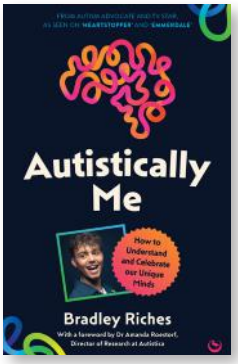


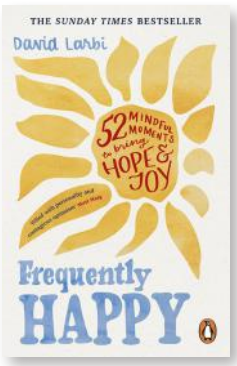














BRAND PRESENCE



LONDON KING'S CROSS



MANCHESTER AIRPORT



BRADFORD CITY CENTRE

MARKETING, MEDIA AND REACH

1.4 Billion Impressions Worldwide

544,099
Website Visits

8.47 Million
Social Media Impressions

1.37 Billion
Total Press and Media Reach

33,000
Printed Programmes Distributed Nationally

13.95 Million
Out of Home Media Impressions

15.43 Million Reach
Across Train Station Digital Displays in **Partnership with Network Rail**

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

BRADFORD LITERATURE FESTIVAL 2026

BLF marked its 12th year in 2026 with 10 days of world-class programming spanning literature, ideas, performance and culture, welcoming 200,915 attendances across 762 events and delivering the largest edition of the festival to date.

Since launching with 24 events in 2014, BLF has grown into a major national cultural platform. Across 12 editions, it has generated 1,096,153 attendances, delivered 5,586 events and worked with 4,558 artists. It has also engaged 398,006 children and young people, including 248,792 Education Programme attendances.

Headline contributors in 2026 included Prue Leith, Lemn Sissay, Fatima Bhutto, Misan Harriman, Jeremy Corbyn, Humza Yousaf, Ebrahim Rasool, Husam Zomlot, Shaykh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, Vince Cable, Hannah Spencer MP, Bradley Riches and A.A. Dhand. International contributors included Alanoud Hamad Al Thani, Dr Nafja Al-Kuwari and Meshael Al-Mannai, alongside writers, artists, academics, diplomats and public thinkers from Bradford, the UK and across the world.

The programme placed contemporary questions in conversation with literature, history and lived experience.

Events explored democracy, empire and colonial legacies, the changing global order, state collapse, technological power and political and social change across Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, the Gulf and the wider Middle East. Wider strands examined faith, philosophy, family, identity, ageing, neurodivergence, disability, mental health and social isolation.

Literature remained firmly at the heart of the festival, with writers including Janice Hallett, Hazell Ward, Tom Hindle, Abir Mukherjee, Jessie Elland, Lucy Rose and Charlotte Paradise appearing across fiction, crime and contemporary writing. Literary landmarks were explored through events examining William Blake and the enduring legacy of Agatha Christie, alongside conversations on the craft and business of writing and publishing.

This literary lens extended across the wider programme, connecting words, stories and ideas with music, theatre, comedy, film and visual art, from Sufiyana Kalaam and Timeless Ghazals to A Lit Night Out with Hacienda DJ Mike Pickering, the world premiere of Testament's new stage show Saints On A Bridge, and a film programme marking 100 Years of Marilyn Monroe. Participatory wellbeing activity included yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, guided journalling and reflective workshops, while discussions explored the relationship between creativity, physical and emotional wellbeing and social connection.

At the heart of the festival were the connected themes of family, hope, memory and belonging. Lemn Sissay's Tell Me Something About Family invited members of the public to contribute stories reflecting the complexity of family life. These formed a physical and online exhibition and informed Sissay's closing event, which considered both the dark and the light found within families.

"I have been coming to the festival for several years and witnessed BLF evolve from its early embryonic structure into an international festival."

Visitor





The project gathered 121 stories from contributors across Australia, Italy, France, the UK, Ethiopia, the United States, Zimbabwe and South Africa, bringing together family experiences from different cultures and communities. Participation extended beyond the festival, giving the project an international reach and connecting stories across countries and generations.

BLF worked with 490 artists, 45% of whom were ethnically diverse. Artists reported heritage links to 37 countries across six continents, reflecting a programme shaped by local experience, national talent and international perspectives.

BLF's cultural partnerships reflect the trust it has built with major national and international institutions, and its ability to translate collections, heritage and specialist knowledge into distinctive public programming. In 2026, national partners included the British Library, British Museum, WritersMosaic and Manchester Indian Film Festival, alongside international collaborations with Yunus Emre Enstitüsü London, Doha Debates and Qatar National Library.

Together, these relationships brought literary heritage, contemporary writing, visual culture, film, performance and global dialogue into the festival in ways shaped for broad public audiences.

Several have developed over successive festivals, allowing programmes to deepen, expand across different formats and build lasting cultural exchange rather than remaining one-off collaborations.

Family engagement remained central. Four free Family Fun Days transformed City Park and surrounding venues through storytelling, theatre, music, crafts, screenings and imaginative play, generating 29,366 attendances across 253 activities.

The Education Programme generated 46,312 engagements through 78 live sessions and 10 school-based exhibitions. It worked with 60 schools and a growing network of home-educating families, combining curriculum-connected activity with subjects, histories and perspectives not always available through mainstream classroom teaching.

BLF's audiences reflected the breadth of its programme, with 46% identifying as ethnically diverse. 59% of tickets were accessed via the Ethical Ticketing Policy, including Community Access Codes, with the value of free cultural access exceeding £1.02 million. This was particularly significant for an audience in which 59% reported household incomes below £40,000, including 24% below £20,000.

Over 12 years, BLF has developed a distinctive position within the UK cultural landscape, moving confidently between literature, public debate, performance, heritage and global affairs while retaining a clear point of view.

Its scale, reach and sustained relationships with artists and institutions enable it to convene conversations that resonate far beyond the festival itself, combining access with excellence and reflecting the complexity of contemporary Britain within an international cultural context.

"BLF is the most culturally distinct programme in the UK."

Artist





CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Building literacy, confidence and future opportunity

Children and young people are central to BLF because literacy underpins learning and opens the door to future education, opportunity and participation. Its importance extends far beyond attainment. National Literacy Trust research has found that children who enjoy reading are three times more likely to have good mental wellbeing, while communities facing the most serious literacy challenges are also among those with the lowest life expectancies in England. Yet its latest research shows that only 36% of 8 to 18-year-olds enjoy reading in their free time.

Creating opportunities for children to discover books, stories and ideas in ways that feel exciting and relevant is therefore fundamental to BLF's work. Early experiences of literature and culture can shape confidence, curiosity and aspiration for life, influencing how young people engage with ideas, understand the world and imagine their own futures. In 2026, BLF generated 75,678 engagements with children and young people through the Education Programme and Family Fun Days.

Family Fun Days

Four free Family Fun Days generated 29,366 attendances across 253 activities in City Park and surrounding venues. Themes including **Superheroes**, t**he Hundred Acre Wood**, **Under the Sea** and **Magic** connected with children's existing interests while opening routes into new stories, traditions and forms of creativity.The programme ranged from storytelling, author events and hands-on crafts to theatre, dance, music, film and imaginative play. Storytellers brought books and stories to life while sharing practical techniques with parents and carers for making storytelling engaging at home, helping families build the confidence to continue reading and sharing stories together beyond the festival.

National Literacy Trust research also shows that 1 in 10 children and young people aged 5 to 18 do not have a book of their own at home. BLF worked with the National Literacy Trust's Bradford Stories Bus, which gave 376 free books to children during the festival weekend.

Fat Cat Brass, Punjabi Roots and the Peace Artistes brought live music into City Park, while Karagöz and Hacivat shadow puppetry introduced families to a Turkish performance tradition.

Tree stilt walkers, Dreyo the Dragon, a giant bumblebee, superhero characters and other fantastical walkabouts transformed the city centre into a place of surprise and discovery.

Children could move between performances, make their own artwork, meet storytellers and take part at their own pace.

The free, drop-in format makes high-quality cultural activity easy to join and creates an environment where families can spend time together.

Shared experiences across generations help children build communication, cooperation and confidence, while making books, performance and creativity feel like a natural part of family and public life.

"Every year there are new opportunities to learn and engage. Meeting the authors is one I look forward to as it encourages my children to read."

Visitor





Education Programme

The Education Programme generated 46,312 engagements. This included 38,136 attendances across 12 themed days and 78 live sessions, alongside 8,176 engagements through exhibitions in 10 secondary schools. The live programme worked with 60 primary and secondary schools, as well as home-educating families. All sessions were free for non-fee-paying schools, education groups and home educators.

Curriculum-connected days explored Myths and Magical Creatures, Ancient Egypt, Time and Space, the Natural World, Shakespeare, Classic Fiction, Dystopia, Gothic Literature and Performance Poetry. Authors, artists, historians and experts brought subjects to life through talks, performances and interactive sessions. Young people were encouraged to ask questions, discuss ideas, create their own work and respond to what they encountered.

The programme complements classroom teaching while giving space to histories, cultures and perspectives that are not always explored in depth at school. Some pupils see their own heritage and experiences reflected with seriousness and depth. Others encounter ideas and viewpoints that may be entirely new to them. Both experiences help build confidence, cultural understanding and the ability to engage thoughtfully with difference. Schools are increasingly building BLF into their annual learning programme. 58% attended more than one themed day in 2026, while 42% have participated in at least three separate years since 2023. Pupils are now returning as they move through different year groups, making BLF part of their educational journey rather than a single cultural visit.

The programme also has a growing regional role. 44% of participating secondary schools travelled from outside Bradford to access interactive curriculum content they could not access elsewhere. Home educators generated almost 3,000 session attendances, with more than four in five families travelling from outside the district. Many families valued the range of perspectives offered and trusted BLF's approach to history and culture. Educators reported significant wider benefits. 91% agreed that the programme opened young minds and raised aspirations, while 89% said it provided high-quality cultural experiences that pupils facing economic disadvantage may not otherwise access. 80% agreed that it developed skills supporting future education and employability, and 87% said it demonstrated the value of creative careers.

The free Digital Education Programme extends this work throughout the year through curriculum-connected lesson plans, artist-led videos, presentations and classroom resources. It enables schools and home educators across the UK to use BLF content beyond the live festival and continue learning within their own settings. Together, this work develops literacy, communication, independent thought and creative confidence. It broadens young people's understanding of the world, expands their sense of what may be possible for them and strengthens the skills that underpin future learning and employment. It also helps nurture a generation better prepared to question assumptions, understand different perspectives and contribute to the cultural, civic and economic life of their communities.

"Our school has a highly disadvantaged cohort. Opportunities like today allow us to educate our students about literature and further studies."

Teacher







BLF brings different cultures, traditions and perspectives into the same space.

Artist

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Building relationships and widening participation

BLF's approach to community participation is rooted in long-term relationships, year-round consultation and ensuring that communities can shape both the programme and the ways in which they engage with it.

In 2026, this approach informed targeted work with Bradford's Bangladeshi communities, the continued development of Urdu-language programming and the growth of Community Access as a route into sustained festival participation.

Building Relationships with Bradford's Bangladeshi Communities

BLF's year-round community programme combines consultation, programme development and audience building, with relationships developed outside the festival feeding directly into the programme each summer. In 2026, a particular focus was Bradford's Bangladeshi communities.

Consultation with local organisations including BEAP and RadhaRaman, alongside local residents, shaped three events exploring Bangladeshi migration history, Bengali folk and Baul music, and the experiences of Bengali Muslim migrants in the United States. The programme generated close to 300 attendances, and follow-up work is continuing to build relationships with Bangladeshi artists, organisations and audiences.

Developing the Urdu Programme

BLF has presented an annual Urdu Mushaira since its inaugural festival in 2014, with the strand expanding in response to conversations with Yorkshire-based Urdu poets.

In 2026, BLF introduced Muzakara: The Art of Urdu Poetry, an extended Urdu-language conversation with an international poet exploring the creative process, literary influences and practice behind the work. The event responded to a gap identified by poets themselves for deeper critical discussion of Urdu writing and is now planned as an annual part of the festival.

The strand also expanded through an event on Urdu humour and satire and Timeless Ghazals, exploring the relationship between poetry and music through live performance. Together, the Urdu programme generated nearly 600 attendances.

Sustaining Relationships and Growing Participation

Community Access provides a direct route from BLF's year-round relationships into festival participation. Since 2023, around 400 organisations have registered, spanning cultural and faith organisations, neighbourhood groups, community support services, and book and writing groups. The network is also used to identify organisations for deeper consultation around programme development, with new relationships then carried forward into future years.

In 2026, 118 organisations booked 2,046 tickets through Community Access. Three quarters had participated previously, while 25% were new to the scheme, and almost a third have participated in every festival since 2023.

"As a library volunteer, I was fortunate to access tickets via a Community Access Code. Without that, I probably would not have been able to attend as I am on a low income."

Visitor





IMPACT: INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL PLACEMAKING

For ten days each year, Bradford Literature Festival creates an international cultural destination. Across civic spaces, cultural venues, libraries, the University and the Festival Hub, literature, performance, heritage, ideas and artistic traditions from around the world become part of one shared festival landscape.

International cultural placemaking is about more than bringing international artists or organisations to Bradford. It is about the experience created when global culture is concentrated within a place, interpreted through a distinctive curatorial lens and encountered alongside the people, histories and communities already there. Through repeated experiences, audiences attach new memories and associations to both the festival and the place in which it happens.

The breadth of BLF creates an unusual environment for discovery. Within a single visit, audiences can move between contemporary literature and global politics, music and philosophy, visual culture and historic traditions, performance and public debate.

Familiar subjects sit alongside unfamiliar ones, encouraging audiences to cross cultural and intellectual boundaries rather than remaining within established interests. In 2026, 71% of audiences attended an event they would not typically experience, demonstrating the role the festival plays in opening routes into new ideas and cultural forms.

That international outlook is embedded across the festival. In 2026, BLF worked with 490 artists whose heritage links extended across 37 countries and six continents. 90% of audiences agreed that BLF brings high-quality national and international artists to Bradford whom they would not otherwise have the opportunity to see.

BLF's wider cultural relationships have included major national and international institutions such as the British Library, British Museum, WritersMosaic, Yunus Emre Enstitüsü London, Doha Debates, Qatar National Library and the Islam and Muslims Initiative.

This also changes where internationally significant cultural experiences take place. Major international culture in the UK remains heavily concentrated in London and within specialist institutions.

BLF creates a large-scale public platform outside that traditional geography, giving audiences from Bradford, the North and across the country access to global artists, ideas and traditions within a mainstream cultural festival.

In doing so, BLF helps create a different relationship between the local, national and international. Bradford is not simply the backdrop for a global programme. Its audiences, cultural diversity, histories and perspectives are part of the encounter itself. International culture enters into conversation with contemporary Britain through a place that reflects many of the global connections, migrations and identities shaping the country today.

Over 12 years, these experiences have accumulated into reputation. BLF is increasingly associated with cultural breadth, international outlook and the opportunity to encounter ideas and traditions that sit beyond the conventional boundaries of a literature festival.

In 2026, 95% of audiences agreed that BLF improves the national reputation of Bradford and Yorkshire, while 95% said it contributes to the area's social, cultural and economic regeneration.

The impact therefore extends beyond the temporary transformation created during the festival itself. Cultural relationships continue, audiences return, knowledge and networks develop, and memories of the experience become part of how BLF and its destination are understood. This strengthens the cultural ecosystem around the festival while giving people further reasons to visit, participate and return.

Ultimately, BLF broadens where major cultural experiences can happen in the UK. It creates a distinctive destination for discovery, exchange and connection, bringing global ideas and traditions into the mainstream of national cultural life and strengthening BLF's position as an outward-looking festival of national and international significance.

"I was able to take part in a unique experience, it was such a beautiful mix of artists and experiences. The variety of stimulating topics and the quality of the contributors were excellent. The world came to us."

Visitor

YUNUS EMRE ENSTITÜSÜ – LONDON

Bradford Literature Festival's partnership with Yunus Emre Enstitüsü – London deepened significantly in 2026, building on a new relationship established the previous year. Across two festivals, the collaboration has developed into a broad exploration of Turkish literature, spirituality, music, traditional arts and performance, creating multiple ways for UK audiences to encounter Türkiye's cultural heritage.

The first programme in 2025 introduced audiences to Turkish culture through traditional bookbinding and paper marbling workshops, a lecture on Rumi, Karagöz and Hacivat shadow puppetry and a major performance by the Whirling Dervishes. The partnership returned in 2026 with an expanded programme that moved between scholarship, participation, craftsmanship and live performance.

Professor Nurullah Koltaş explored the poetry and spiritual legacy of Yunus Emre, the 13th-century poet and Sufi after whom the Institute is named, opening up themes of love, humility, unity and the search for the divine. Traditional Ottoman and Islamic calligraphy was brought to life through talks, demonstrations and hands-on masterclasses, while conservator and parchment maker Demet Tokbay introduced audiences to the techniques and materials of Ottoman manuscript-making through both a public talk and practical bookbinding workshop.

Families encountered another living tradition through Shadow Puppet Magic: Karagöz & Hacivat, introducing children to the humour, characters and artistry of centuries-old Turkish shadow theatre. The programme also created space for wider intellectual exchange through Islam Between East and West: Alija Izetbegović at 100, considering faith, modernity, identity and the continuing relevance of one of the twentieth century's influential Muslim thinkers.

The collaboration culminated at St George's Hall with a **Turkish Classical and Sufi Music Concert**, bringing accomplished vocalists and musicians together around the ney, oud and qanun. Rooted in centuries of musical and spiritual practice, the performance allowed audiences to experience the tradition through the artists who continue to practise and develop it today.

Across two festivals, the partnership has established a sustained presence for Turkish literature, spirituality, music, traditional arts and performance within BLF. Artists, scholars and practitioners have brought these traditions into direct contact with UK audiences through performance, discussion, demonstration and participation, presenting Turkish cultural heritage as living practice rather than something fixed in the past. The continuity of the relationship allows this work to develop in depth over time and creates a strong foundation for future cultural exchange between Türkiye and the UK.

"I enjoyed the variety of events, there's something for everyone. My husband enjoyed the history events, my adult children the poetry events, and I usually take my grandchildren to the children's events."

Visitor





DOHA DEBATES

Bradford Literature Festival's relationship with Doha Debates continued for a third consecutive year in 2026, following large-scale town hall collaborations in 2024 and 2025. This year, the partnership took a more intimate and participatory form through the Doha Debates Portal, bringing its distinctive approach to global dialogue into the Festival Hub.

The immersive six-person Portal used live facilitation to connect BLF audiences directly with young people in different parts of the world.

Rather than watching a debate from a distance, participants entered the conversation themselves, listening, questioning and exploring complex ideas together in real time.

The format created space for reflection and exchange around questions with profound implications for society and our shared future. Across the opening weekend, five live Portal sessions explored three major questions.

'Are We Facing the End of Civilization or Its Rebirth?' connected BLF audiences with young people from South Africa and Mexico to consider cyclical patterns of history and whether the modern world is facing collapse, renewal or a wider moment of transition.

'Are We the Most Intelligent Beings in the Universe?' connected participants with young people from Nigeria and Brazil, asking how the discovery of intelligent life beyond Earth might reshape our understanding of humanity, our place in the cosmos and the moral and spiritual frameworks that have guided civilizations for centuries.

'Will AI Bring Us Together or Drive Us Apart?' brought BLF audiences into conversation with young people from Iraq and Rwanda to explore whether artificial intelligence will decrease or widen social divides, and whether AI can truly reflect cultural and ideological diversity.

The Portal made international dialogue immediate and personal, giving BLF audiences the opportunity to encounter how people elsewhere in the world approach questions that increasingly shape all our lives.

These conversations showed how meaningful exchange can happen across borders, creating space for curiosity, reflection and deeper understanding.

"Doha Debates connected us with inspiring people in Mosul, Iraq, to discuss AI. It was one of the most inspiring, delightful and thought-provoking experiences I have had at BLF or anywhere else."

Visitor



QATAR NATIONAL LIBRARY

Bradford Literature Festival's partnership with Qatar National Library brought classical Arabic literature, manuscript culture and contemporary Arab art into the 2026 festival through a carefully curated programme of exhibitions and public events.

The programme centred on Kalīla wa-Dimna and Maqāmāt al-Harīrī, two landmark works that reveal the ethical, artistic and intellectual depth of Arabic literary heritage. Their inclusion reflected a shared commitment to widening cultural understanding and giving UK audiences greater access to traditions that have shaped global literature, philosophy and visual culture.

At the Festival Hub, Kalīla wa-Dimna – The Art of the Moral Fable presented newly commissioned miniature-style paintings by Qatari artist Wadha Al Athba. The exhibition traced the movement of one of the world's most enduring story collections from Sanskrit into Arabic and beyond, while exploring its continuing insights into power, politics and human nature. The Maqāmāt al-Harīrī programme brought together contemporary work by Qatari artists Wadha Al Athba and Zainab Al Shibani, digital responses from eight artists across the Arab world, a facsimile manuscript and interactive displays exploring language, wordplay and geography.

Together, these elements presented Arabic literature as a living source of artistic invention, humour and intellectual exchange. The exhibitions extended across The Broadway Bradford shopping centre, Manningham Library, Shipley Library and Keighley Library, bringing the work into civic, retail and neighbourhood spaces. Curated exhibition panels will also be displayed in 10 secondary schools across Bradford and surrounding communities, extending the life of the programme and introducing a new generation to Arabic literature and visual culture.

Public events deepened the programme through conversations on the global journeys of Arabic stories, calligraphy and spirituality, the intellectual legacy of Andalusia, solitude across faith traditions, and the relationship between astronomy, mythology and human curiosity. By placing Arabic literary heritage across the Festival Hub, libraries, retail spaces and schools, the partnership extended access far beyond a specialist cultural setting. It gave classical texts and manuscript traditions a visible place within contemporary public life, while showing how those traditions continue to generate new artistic interpretation. In doing so, the programme strengthened the presence of Arabic literature and visual culture within a major UK festival and created new routes for audiences of different ages to engage with their intellectual and artistic legacy.

"I really enjoyed the exhibitions in the Festival Hub. They were unexpected and taught me about subjects that were completely unfamiliar."

Visitor



IMPACT: SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion is central to BLF's purpose. The festival creates shared cultural spaces where people of different ages, backgrounds, beliefs and experiences can meet, participate and engage with perspectives beyond their own. In 2026, 95% of audiences felt welcomed and comfortable at BLF, while 78% interacted with people from different ethnic or social backgrounds or age groups.

BLF sees culture as part of the civic infrastructure that helps people understand themselves, encounter others and participate in shared public life. Literature, history, politics, faith, music, performance, comedy and visual culture create different routes into the festival, bringing together audiences who may arrive with very different interests, experiences and points of view.

Creating opportunities for people to engage meaningfully across difference is increasingly important in a society shaped by diverse backgrounds, beliefs and experiences.

BLF creates opportunities to hear directly from writers, artists, academics, public figures and people with lived experience, giving audiences the time and context to explore complex questions with curiosity and intellectual openness. The aim is not to create uniformity of opinion, but to strengthen understanding, encourage informed public conversation and make space for thoughtful engagement across difference.

Representation is an important part of creating that shared cultural life. 93% of audiences described BLF's programme as diverse and inclusive, while 85% agreed that the festival amplifies the voices of marginalised communities.

The programme brings histories, identities and cultural traditions that are often underrepresented in mainstream cultural life into conversation with more familiar subjects and voices. This broadens the range of perspectives present within public cultural life and gives audiences a richer understanding of the society they share.

The social experience of the festival is equally important. 39% of audiences attended an event by themselves, yet entered an environment designed around shared experience.

Conversations before and after events, participation in workshops and activities, and time spent together across festival spaces all create opportunities for informal connection as well as intellectual exchange.

Taken together, these experiences contribute to a culture of participation in which difference becomes a source of learning rather than separation. BLF creates the conditions for greater understanding, stronger relationships and a deeper sense of shared ownership of cultural and civic life.

"Mixing with a host of different people coming to the festival is as valuable to me as the speakers. For that reason, I love coming on my own."

Visitor





IMPACT: WELLBEING

Cultural participation also has a significant personal impact. In 2026, 89% of audiences said attending BLF had a positive effect on their wellbeing.

Wellbeing at BLF is created through the experience of culture itself. A compelling conversation can stimulate curiosity and reflection. Music and performance can bring joy, emotional release or moments of stillness. Literature can offer new ways of understanding personal experience, while creative participation can provide absorption, expression and a sense of achievement.

The festival offers audiences opportunities to step outside everyday routines and give sustained attention to something that interests, moves or challenges them. These experiences can be intellectually stimulating as well as restorative, creating space for enjoyment, discovery, reflection and renewed perspective.

These benefits are also social. In 2026, 39% of audience respondents attended an event by themselves, yet entered an environment built around shared cultural experience. Conversations before and after events, participation in workshops and time spent across festival spaces create opportunities for informal connection, helping people feel part of a wider cultural community and strengthening a sense of welcome, connection and belonging.

Participatory activity adds another dimension. Yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, guided journalling and Emotional Freedom Technique offered opportunities for movement, reflection and emotional regulation, while workshops across writing, art and making enabled people to engage actively rather than solely as spectators.

The programme also explored experiences that shape wellbeing across the life course, including mental health, neurodivergence, disability, ageing, identity and social isolation. By placing these subjects within cultural conversation rather than treating them only through a clinical lens, BLF created space to consider how people navigate change, vulnerability, resilience and meaning.

The 89% wellbeing result therefore reflects more than the presence of dedicated wellbeing activity. It captures the cumulative value of cultural participation itself through pleasure, stimulation, reflection, creativity, emotional engagement and the opportunity to experience something meaningful.

Together, BLF's impact on social cohesion and wellbeing demonstrates the wider role culture can play in strengthening relationships, deepening participation and supporting more connected, resilient communities.

"Without the benefits ticket, I could not have attended. The festival lifted my mood, supported my mental health and helped pull me out of isolation."

Visitor





IMPACT: SOCIO-ECONOMIC REGENERATION

BLF contributes to Bradford's regeneration by creating cultural and economic activity now while investing in the people, skills and opportunities that support longer-term growth. The festival brings audiences, artists and organisations into the city, supports Bradford's cultural and visitor economy, develops creative careers and widens access to the knowledge and experiences that can shape future opportunity.

Current Economic Impact

Over more than a decade, BLF has helped strengthen Bradford's cultural economy and the infrastructure around it. The festival builds audiences for large-scale cultural activity, creates sustained relationships between venues, artists and organisations, and connects the city with major national and international cultural institutions.

These relationships increase what can be originated, hosted and delivered from Bradford, while ensuring the city participates in cultural exchange at a national and global level. This builds on a model established from BLF's earliest years, when strengthening Bradford's cultural ecology and its connections beyond the city were identified as central to regeneration.

The festival also generates wider economic activity across the city. Audiences, artists, speakers and partners travelling to Bradford create demand across accommodation, hospitality, retail and transport, while the programme brings sustained footfall into cultural venues, civic buildings and public spaces.

In 2026, 86% of surveyed audiences spent money on food and drink or eating out during their festival visit, demonstrating how cultural activity circulates into the wider city economy.

BLF contributes directly to the creative economy through the artists, practitioners, venues and specialist businesses involved in the festival. In 2026, 28% of artists were local and 19% regional, connecting 47% of the artist programme to Bradford and the wider region while placing that talent within a programme which draws artists and organisations from across the UK and internationally.

Developing creative careers is an important part of this role. In 2026, 26% of artists were emerging or early-career and 30% presented a debut, premiere or new work. Emerging practitioners appear alongside established national and internationally renowned artists, giving their work greater visibility and allowing professional relationships to develop within a much wider cultural environment.

BLF has developed this approach over successive festivals. Meet the Publisher sessions, Careers in Publishing, the Art of Writing and Politics of Publishing activity, workshops and masterclasses connect writers and practitioners with publishers, editors and experienced professionals. Artists also return at different stages of their careers, allowing BLF to support progression over time rather than viewing each festival appearance in isolation.

This has wider national and international significance. Publishing and many parts of the cultural sector

"The Festival brings thousands of visitors to Bradford and shines a light on the city. It lifts Bradford and shows what a great place it can be."

Visitor





remain concentrated around established centres, particularly London. BLF brings publishers, artists, institutions and sector expertise to Bradford while placing Northern talent within a programme with national and international reach.

In doing so, it broadens where professional development takes place and where new talent can be identified, supported and progressed.

Future Skills and Opportunity

BLF's longer-term socio-economic impact lies in widening who has the opportunity to develop the skills, confidence and cultural knowledge that can shape future education, employment and participation in society. Between 2023 and 2026, the festival provided £3.29 million worth of free cultural access, helping ensure that those opportunities are available across different incomes and circumstances.

Children and young people are central to this long-term approach. Through the Education Programme and wider festival, BLF supports literacy, communication, creativity, critical thinking and confidence while expanding young people's understanding of the subjects and careers open to them.

This is not limited to cultural professions. The programme spans publishing, artificial intelligence, science, politics, world affairs, history, public policy and the creative industries, connecting cultural participation with the knowledge and capabilities required in a changing economy.

The value of this work develops over time. BLF's approach is longitudinal and intergenerational, creating opportunities for people to engage at different stages of their education and development rather than through a single intervention.

Early experiences of literature, performance and ideas can develop into deeper cultural participation, greater confidence and a broader understanding of educational and professional possibilities.

In this way, the festival contributes to social mobility by widening the experiences and knowledge from which future choices can be made. This principle has run through BLF's work from its earliest years, when cultural engagement was explicitly connected with aspiration, skills and future opportunity.

In 2026, this approach also included scholars from the Avicenna Foundation, which develops the next generation of changemakers through education, mentoring and leadership development. Participation in BLF provided an additional setting for that development, giving scholars opportunities to deepen their judgement, engage seriously with different perspectives and build confidence in public discussion.

BLF's socio-economic contribution therefore operates across generations and across different timescales. It strengthens Bradford's cultural and visitor economy today, develops creative talent and connects the city into wider cultural systems, while expanding the skills and opportunities from which future careers and economic participation can grow.

"Arts and culture are always a luxury of life, but BLF removes this, allowing everyone to learn and grow."

Visitor







Bradford Literature Festival brings our diverse community together and gives me a peaceful sense of belonging.

Visitor

BLF VOLUNTEERS

Volunteering at BLF gives people meaningful responsibility within a major cultural event, creating opportunities for personal development, professional experience and connection with others. In 2026, 163 volunteers contributed 2,921 hours across the Education Programme and Main Festival, supporting the delivery of hundreds of events.

Volunteers worked across audience-facing, artist liaison, production and technical roles, gaining first-hand experience of how a large festival operates. Taking responsibility within live event environments developed communication, teamwork, judgement, organisation and confidence, while providing insight into the professional standards and range of roles required to deliver a complex cultural programme.

The programme included 43 student volunteers. For younger participants, this provides valuable early experience of a professional working environment at a stage when opportunities to demonstrate capability beyond education can be limited. Contributing to the delivery of a national festival allows them to build practical skills, understand professional expectations and develop experience they can take into further study and employment.

BLF is also developing a wider pool of experienced volunteers. In 2026, 49 volunteers had previously volunteered with the festival, demonstrating continued engagement with the programme.

The knowledge and experience developed through BLF can be carried into future festivals, professional organisations, community activity and employment, building capacity that extends beyond a single festival year.

The value of this experience is strengthened by the scale and reach of BLF itself. Volunteers contribute to a festival that brings together nationally and internationally recognised artists, writers, public figures, cultural organisations and partners.

Access to events, artists and learning emerged strongly in volunteer feedback, with participants valuing the opportunity to experience the festival from behind the scenes and become part of a cultural platform with national and international reach.

The programme also creates a distinctive form of social participation. Volunteers ranged in age from under 20 to over 75, and 37% identified as ethnically diverse. People from different generations, communities and stages of life worked together towards a shared purpose, creating opportunities to exchange knowledge, form relationships and grow in confidence through collective activity.

This social value is strongly reflected in volunteer feedback. 73% highlighted meeting people, teamwork or a sense of community as one of the most rewarding aspects of volunteering. Volunteers are also central to the experience audiences receive, with their knowledge, care and presence helping to create the welcoming and open atmosphere associated with BLF.

The strength of the programme is reflected in a volunteer rating of 9 out of 10. As volunteers develop experience and return across festival years, BLF is also helping to build a growing pool of people equipped to contribute to festivals, professional organisations and cultural activity in the future.

"I enjoyed meeting other volunteers from all walks of life, the conversations we had, the events we were part of, and feeling like a member of a team."

Festival Volunteer







I loved the sheer variety and volume of events. I am so pleased that speakers from all over the world come to Bradford to deliver incredible talks and presentations. This is so important for young people in the city.

Visitor

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