



6 Bell Yard
London WC2A 2JR
T: 020 7421 4640
E: mail@booksellers.org.uk
www.booksellers.org.uk

Dear Secretary of State,

The Booksellers Association supported the second lockdown when it was announced as a means to achieve widespread public compliance and drive down infection rates, and accepted that bookshops would need to close. However, since the lockdown began, it has become increasingly obvious that current guidance has created huge inconsistencies within the retail sector. Specialist bookshops, such as Waterstones, Foyles, Blackwells, and more than 900 independents have had to close their doors at the very moment when they were poised to start making up lost ground from the first lockdown and three months of lost sales. Meanwhile other retailers, deemed essential under current regulations, are arguably exploiting the situation, putting specialist retailers at a massive disadvantage.

This is potentially ruinous commercially and is also morally problematic. Our members are entirely behind the government's push to suppress infection rates and enforce social distancing and safe behaviour, but they and their customers believe that retail is already a safe, managed environment. Massive investment has gone into making bookshops COVID-compliant and responsible retailers have ensured that staff and consumer safety is at the top of their priority list. And we know that there is no demonstrable evidence for retail locations being the locus of infections.

The lockdown inequities on the high street are confusing for consumers, and clearly unjust in competitive terms. Our members are prevented from opening, yet see garden centres and food shops selling books, when bookshops are quite clearly the best places to sell books to consumers at this crucial time of year. Their livelihoods and those of their staff are already in jeopardy from the first lockdown, and their chances of survival into 2021 would be much improved by having a solid Christmas sales period.

In March, garden centres were not on the original essential businesses list and were added at a later date. Garden centres made the case that spring was their busiest trading period, that if they were unable to trade at that time of year their businesses would not survive, and that gardening would be beneficial to the nation's mental health while at home. For this lockdown, as we go into dark winter nights, products and activities such as books and reading are a vital a way of keeping the nation's spirits up whilst they're locked in their homes.

We urge the government, therefore, to categorise bookshops as essential retailers. This has been undertaken in countries, and the 'essential' categorisation will acknowledge the crucial role that bookshops play in our culture, economy and wider society.

Bookshops deliver an array of benefits:

- They provide mental health benefits to their communities and customers; reading has proven mental health benefits and bookshops provide safe spaces for those in need of help and advice
- They provide reading and educational resources to children and their families – especially important at a time when education is inevitably affected and the need for books in the home greater than ever
- They provide access to information, entertainment, distraction, the thoughts of others, the companionship of words, the comfort of escape that comes from immersion in a creative art form
- They are very often right at the heart of their high street communities; taking leadership roles within their local business organizations, as well as engaging with local writers, schools, reading groups, and libraries
- They deliver financial benefit into their communities, as well as enhancing their local cultural and social ecosystems – they pay taxes, and keep money in the local economy

Bookshops are resilient and creative, and this is not a case of special pleading; this is a request for an acknowledgement that books matter, and that therefore bookshops matter and should be allowed to stay open.

I understand that it must be very difficult to pull the legislation and guidance together at such short notice, and moreover, we understand that the public health agenda is clearly the most important in order to get coronavirus under control. We are eager to help achieve that, but we also know that our bookshops are lanterns of civilisation and, for many, beacons of hope. We urge you to consider classifying them as essential retailers.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Meryl Halls". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Meryl Halls

Managing Director, Booksellers Association

Tel: 020 7421 4692 Email: Meryl.halls@booksellers.org.uk