

## Summary Report on The Coalition for Books Winter Hui Series 2023



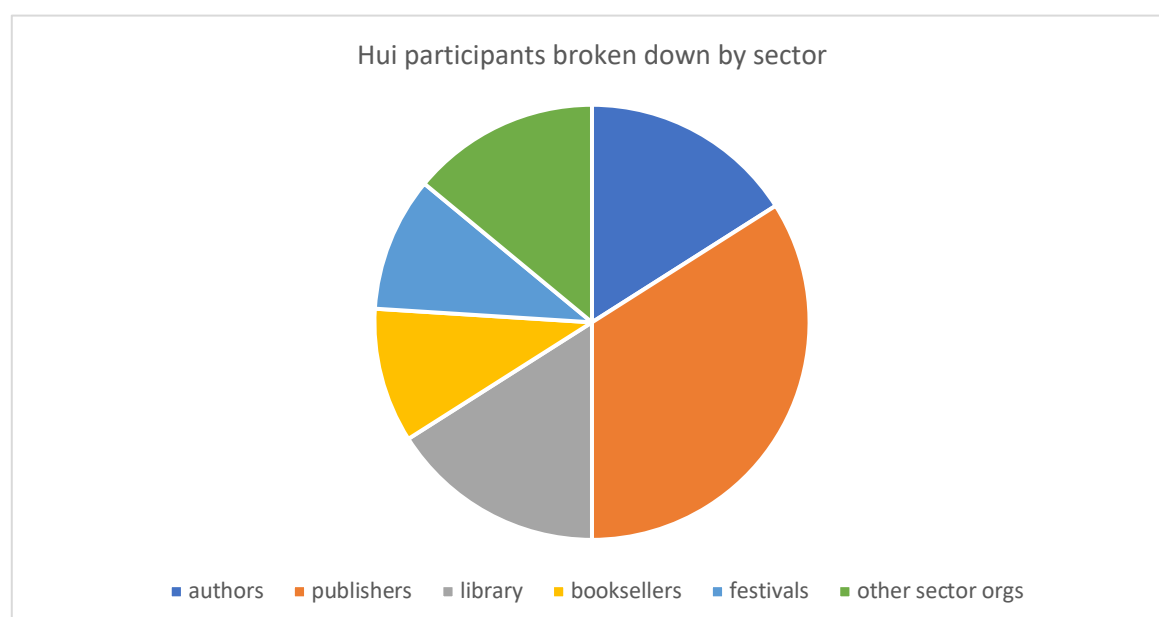
The Coalition for Books hosted its fourth series of hui with participants from across the book sector in July and August 2023. The majority of those who took part are Coalition members or are associated with member organisations.

Key points raised and recommendations are summarised below.

These will be carried forward by The Coalition's Board for next year's strategy and activity planning. This report will also inform the series of Ministry of Culture and Heritage Manatū Taonga (MCH) facilitated discussions between the book sector and government agencies, due to commence later this year.

Topic	Comment
Hui 1: Writers Festivals Post Covid	<i>This session was oversubscribed and a second event subsequently held.</i>
Hui 2: Inspiring Young Readers; Opportunities and Challenges in Children's Books	<i>This session was oversubscribed and a waitlist was set up to help meet demand. Reading Ambassador Alan Dingley was a key speaker and participant.</i>
Hui 3: Digital Book Promotion in Aotearoa 2023	<i>This session was oversubscribed and a second event subsequently held.</i>
Hui 4: Read Local, Buy Local: Book Discoverability in Aotearoa 2023	<i>This session was oversubscribed and a second event subsequently held.</i>

- 63 people attended one session or more (many attended two or three sessions)
- There was a wide cross section of attendees (authors; publishers; libraries; booksellers; festivals)



## Summary of key issues raised

### 1 SECTOR COLLABORATION

- Collaboration between book sector organisations continues to increase.
- A writer festival hui that began during covid continues and remains well attended by both metro and regional festivals.
- Strong partnerships between publishers, booksellers and festivals remain significant and necessary. A question to address is how to expand and include more parts of the sector that engage with readers in the event space.
- Collaboration and sharing of contacts and resources is helping to build and diversify audiences for books and book events. A renewed sector event calendar that targets planning in the medium term would be beneficial.
- The Storylines and Kete collaboration to promote children's junior and YA fiction is welcome gap-filling.
- Publishers, authors and libraries could work more closely on specific campaigns. There is potential to strengthen relationships and to move from the current ad hoc state to something more coordinated and impactful.

#### 2.1 POST COVID CHALLENGES

- 2022 was a year of 'catch-up' for many events and organisations with flexibility around dates leading to several notable events compressed into a shorter timeframe than usual. Teams and organisations across the sector are exhausted as a result.
- Event ticketing has become harder to plan and budget for.
- Sales of New Zealand books in comparison to international titles fell across 2021 and 2022. The increasing shift to the digital environment is making it harder for NZ books to be seen.

#### 2.2 POST COVID OPPORTUNITIES

##### Changing formats post Covid

- Covid necessitated event organisers to pivot to online delivery. In-person events have returned but the new online skills learned continue to deliver additional scope and perspectives, in the festival space especially.
- Some festival organisers remain positive, excited and challenged by the opportunities for hybrid events, podcast or other online activities that can run between in-person, headline annual events. But resourcing and managing these new skills is a challenge.
- There is additional pressure on publishers from audio and ebook demands. Publishers who participated were positive about the changes the MCH Regeneration Fund/Audio book project will make.

##### Audience trends post Covid

- New audiences were found through online delivery of festival sessions. The challenge is how to retain interest and transfer online audiences to physical events.
- Readers continue to source books online in greater numbers than pre-covid.

- New, pay-what-you-can ticketing models are helping attract and retain festival participation from younger audiences. While these models are more dynamic, they make budget surety more challenging.
- Ticket purchasing behaviour: uncertainty may still be affecting how audiences are buying tickets post-covid. Some festivals had observed that no-shows for free, pre-ordered tickets were similar in numbers to on-the-day door sales. Marketing lead times were also being reviewed by some festival participants to address purchasing lulls experienced in longer campaigns.

### **3 FINDING NEW READERS**

- A common point raised at nearly all the hui sessions was the need to take books into communities or outside the traditional access points (bookshops, libraries etc). The corresponding challenge is that to do this effectively significant time and resource are required.
- The book sector is feeling more connected, but can also act as an echo chamber. New ways to expand messaging and communication beyond those already in place need to be found.
- Strong, consistent metadata is critical for book discoverability – both online and through the library network. Metadata for New Zealand books is not always complete or up-to-date and this results in lost sales. Upskilling is needed and will require training and time. This needs to be addressed to enable planned growth for locally produced audio books.
- Identifying where new readers can be found and which social channels they might be using is challenging, both when targeting audiences by format and by genre. How, for example, can publishers find and target audio book users?
- NZ fiction remains the hardest genre to attract new readers to. Greater focus and collaboration across the sector between libraries, publishers, schools, festivals etc should be explored.
- Library curation of New Zealand e-book lists needs to be raised with aggregators.
- The poetry community is one of the strongest online and sharing within it can drive more sales than other marketing activities. There are lessons to learn from this.

### **4 IMPROVING VISIBILITY FOR BOOKS FROM AOTEAROA**

- New Zealand festivals continue to have a strong focus on local books. For some regional festivals, tight budgets don't allow for overseas flights, and programmes exclusively feature New Zealand writers.
- Readership for genre fiction (romance and fantasy especially) is on the rise. Genre fiction has been noted to have particular appeal for the 15–30-year age group and there is an opportunity for greater engagement and for pulling these readers in.
- There has been an increase in programming focussed on specific communities. This necessitates open dialogue with those communities and individual writers about how they are programmed and who will be chairing. Genuine manaakitanga is critical and multiple partners and sector parts are working together to help with these conversations.
- Increasing attendance at festivals is somewhat reliant on growing readers for local content. Book sales at festivals and other events remain high with reports of up to 70% of visitors making a purchase. Festival stalls are a crucial seeding ground and directly contribute to making New Zealand books more accessible.

- Constrained media space and airtime for ALL books – not just those from New Zealand – remain a concern.
- Local libraries are recognised across the sector as a strong conduit and connector between books and local communities.
- Relationships with the large online retail platforms (Amazon, Kobo, Audible etc) in larger publishing companies are often managed by overseas colleagues less likely to support books from Aotearoa. It is extremely challenging to get New Zealand books promoted on home page carousels on these platforms.
- Review space and the number of reviews published are again in decline. Of all media outlets, Radio New Zealand continues to be cited as one of the biggest drivers of sales.
- Kete Books and the Aotearoa NZ Review of books were seen by publicists and publishers as having real value. Can the sector collectively lobby for more mainstream media to share this content?

## **5 CHILDREN'S BOOKS**

- Schools programming and programming for younger readers doesn't always feature strongly on the writers festival circuit. There were calls for ways to explore bringing children's writers into the more mainstream/mid-festival sessions alongside those who write for adults.
- Participants expressed widespread dismay at the continued and growing number of schools which no longer support a library. It is impossible to grow a nation of readers without this critical resource in place. Are there ways that partnerships between larger, better resourced schools can be encouraged? What role can sector organisations, in the children's space especially, play in filling some of the gaps?
- Three years in and most New Zealanders have yet to hear about the Reading Ambassador role. Alan Dingley sees this as a core focus of his tenure.
- New Zealand content needs to be available to younger readers – the opportunity for children to see themselves and their experiences in books is critical. Hui participants noted a direct correlation between lack of access to local content and declining literacy rates.
- Children need greater agency when it comes to the books being read and studied in schools. There are young readers who could influence what their peers are reading but there is no toolkit or formal way to enable this.
- Communicating about new books and engaging with the school network on these is ad-hoc.

## **6 MARKETING & PROMOTING BOOKS**

- Only a small majority of organisations taking part in marketing hui discussions had a dedicated employee managing this function. Scale, time, resource and few opportunities for skill enhancement are constraining book promotion in Aotearoa.
- The knowledge base – especially for digital marketing – is varied and broad. Organisations have different strengths and skillsets. Given the right forum, much could be learned from one another.
- A sense of community needs to be fostered across the sector. Content and know-how across organisations could be more widely shared. One participant noted that building trust in potential readers or customers requires more time than ever before. More frequent collaboration would help in this regard.

- Digital advertising can be expensive and is not always a cost-effective trade for print.
- Concerns were voiced over the impact of AI and what this will mean in the marketing space. There was a strong desire amongst participants to know more.
- EDMs: the importance of EDMs and growing subscriber lists for these (i.e. an audience of people who have already decided they are interested in specific content) were raised. This is heightened as social channels become more complicated and expensive.
- Better knowledge of campaign analytics is needed across the sector.
- Book Hub will offer paid advertising space and new opportunities for reaching a dedicated and local book audience online.

## **7 ADVOCACY AROUND BOOKS**

- New Zealand as a 'nation of readers' is not a perception widely shared outside the book sector. There is a flow-on effect from this in a number of areas, including: securing funding; wellbeing; communicating book news; and more. Greater empowerment of and inspiration for children and young people to see themselves as readers especially is critical.
- Overseas examples can provide new ways and ideas for developing stronger readers and discussing books positively in public forums.
- Buy local messaging needs to start from the top (government) down.
- BookHub – a major new initiative from Booksellers NZ will improve online access to in-store physical stock. Readers will have more options for retaining purchasing power within the local eco-system.

## **8 BOOK SECTOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION**

- Lifting audience reach into new communities remains a strong focus for most organisations.
- A programming model utilised across many festivals in 2023 has seen festivals move from single curators to a team of programmers, able to programme for specific audiences and communities.
- There is a significant increase in Māori authors appearing on festival programmes (one festival noting up to 53%).
- Curators representing specific communities are increasingly recognised as essential for increasing book event engagement with those communities.
- Blind and low vision: finding resources can be challenging. Either they don't exist, or poor metadata hampers discoverability (audio books were cited in this regard in two separate hui). New accessibility requirements will require change by 2025 for sales into the European market.
- Libraries prioritise diversity and inclusion when curating book lists. More ways in which these lists could be shared would be welcomed.

## **9 FUNDING AND COST OF LIVING CHALLENGES**

- Funding relationships cited as constantly challenging. Too many organisations and activities remain reliant on funding. It feels as precarious as ever.
- Books, and many events associated with them, remain luxury items and price points are difficult to juggle. Lots of innovation is happening around event ticket prices and book

RRPs have crept up, but these have not been sufficient to keep up with either inflation or cost increases for businesses more generally.

## FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Finding and retaining new readers and audiences was repeatedly raised during the various hui. It remains as one of the sector's biggest challenges. This is a fluid space and many organisations in the book sector are tackling it with renewed vigour and experimentation. There needs to be a focus on how these efforts and respective outcomes can be expanded and shared.
2. It is heartening to see how much more aware other parts of the sector are regarding activity happening across the library network. To maximise benefits, a more concerted effort is needed to strengthen ties between libraries and other more commercial areas of the book sector.
3. Professional development opportunities that cut across the sector are needed in specific areas. Digital marketing will be covered by the MCH funded programme due to start late in 2023. Hui feedback shows that understanding and creating high quality metadata is another area of pressing concern. There is strong overseas evidence and insight around the importance of good metadata and its relationship to book discoverability in the [NielsenBook Meta Data Report](https://nielsenbook.co.uk/metadata-download/) (https://nielsenbook.co.uk/metadata-download/)
4. Local authors and writing are being embraced more widely and many organisations are finding meaningful new connections with local communities. Not quite a sea-change, but readers' attitude towards local books from Aotearoa are shifting.
5. Many of the issues faced by the NZ book sector are the same issues that overseas publishers, festivals, authors and libraries are dealing with too. Post covid, new consideration of offshore initiatives and what might be learned from them would be timely.
6. The ability to hold these sector hui via the Zoom platform continues to deliver groups of people who, due to geography, would be unlikely to find themselves in the same room. Whilst a huge positive in one sense, the negatives include time restrictions, an impeded flow of conversation and difficulty deep diving to find meaningful solutions. The Coalition needs to look at what alternatives there might be for a sector temperature-check without losing the direct contact with and between the sector that is clearly being asked for.
7. Collaboration on the rise is wonderful to see. There are big issues being grappled with that cannot be solved by organisations on their own – this impacts children's books especially. The Coalition will continue its work to connect the various organisations and segments.