

The greatest debt owed by the authors of this report is to the many members of the public who made submissions to the Public Libraries and the Arts Committee, and to the hundreds who entered the essay competition. To an extent which exceeded our best expectations, their feelings and perceptions shaped our research and influenced our findings and recommendations. The intensity of their emotions about libraries, and the strength of their desire to see the good news broadcast, gave an almost spiritual basis to the work.

**Public Libraries and
the further promotion
of the Arts in Ireland**

ARTS AND THE MAGIC OF THE

WORD

A report by the Public Libraries
and the Arts Committee

Executive Summary

The Arts Council
An Chomhairle Ealaíon



An Chomhairle Leabharlanaí
The Library Council

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Foreword:

by Professor Declan Kiberd, Chairman of the Public Libraries and the Arts Committee

In an age when many churches are often locked for fear of vandals and when bouncers stand in the doorway of many a city pub at evening-time, the public library remains one of the few civic spaces which extends an equal and unconditional welcome to every member of the community. Nobody challenges you when you walk in. Nobody tells you what to do. People who still feel shy of entering a bank have little compunction about walking into a library.

Once inside, you can read a book, consult a reference-guide or sit and savour the unusual blend of sociability and silence. Old people sometimes frequent libraries to meet their friends or to keep warm on winter days. Young people often use the facilities in order to complete a school project. Others go there to borrow the latest winner of a Booker Prize or to discover what interesting new books on the subject of car mechanics have been published in the past year or so. To all of them, the library offers the appeal of a long-standing and trustworthy friend.

Even the most regular users are not always aware of the full range of services on offer. You can not only borrow videos and cassettes, but also books which have long gone out of print in the retail shops or rare novels which can be accessed from afar on inter-library loan. The libraries often publish lists of upcoming events in an area or mount displays on local authors or parish history. In some, budding poets exchange pages at regular meetings of writers' workshops; in others, people of varying ages practise foreign language skills; in more again, those with problems of literacy are equipped with that priceless gift; and already in a few libraries, people learn to play a musical instrument.

Apart from the checking-out of books, none of these experiences is completely quantifiable - the kind that can be entered in a sociological survey or auditors' report. Yet there is now a strong case for treating the library as a central building in many communities, in the strict sense that it is the building in which the community now most commonly identifies itself as such. In other lands, such as the United States of America, town halls have often served that function and still do, but in Ireland the local church was by tradition a weekly meeting-house, providing neutral ground on which aspiring politicians or charity activists could walk and speak, after morning service. Nowadays, with the decline in religious practice and a worrying degree of social atomisation in some places, the library can sometimes offer the one social space that is respected and accepted by all.

In recent years communities have shown a desire to use this space as one in which to debate their own meaning and ultimate destiny. For instance, following the controversy sparked off by Roddy Doyle's television series *Family*, Ballymun Library hosted a debate between the author and his critics. In Mayo there has been a lively debate concerning public policy on the Irish language.

At the same time, libraries have facilitated everything from visits by distinguished poets to meetings of amateur photographic societies, from children's painting sessions to adult sculpting classes, from lectures by members on a favourite novel to formal commemorations of historical events like 1798. Moreover, the mobile service has gone into hospitals and prisons, as well as into remote rural communities. Drop-off and collection points have been arranged for the convenience of those who live at a distance from central libraries.

The ancient Irish love of the word was based on the conviction that there is a demonstrable link between word and action, between the vibrancy of artistic debate and the psychic health of the wider society. Although libraries have updated themselves with the latest technology, the written word will remain at the centre of their concerns. The notion that the world of Internet and word-processor may herald a decline in the people's taste for narrative is probably wrong-headed: after all, there was once a time when the new print technology and its attendant genre, the novel, were both castigated by conservatives as symptoms of a philistine technology which would threaten cultural value. But technologies are strictly neutral. In many ways, the latest advances in word-processing and cheap book-production have made possible many volumes of local interest which now adorn our libraries. There is no necessary or inevitable clash between "literature" and the world of modern technology.

With over three hundred libraries flourishing in the state, there is still more good work to be done by librarians in the promotion of artistic activity and art appreciation among the community. Imbued with that ambition, the Arts Plan 1995-7 contained a proposal that a partnership be developed on a formal basis between the Arts Council and An Chomhairle Leabharlanna (The Library Council) with the aim of increasing public access and involvement by means of the library system. A committee was set up to advise both councils on how the good work already in train might be

further extended. Its members were from diverse backgrounds: a poet, two county managers, a novelist, arts officers, county librarians, a scholar of children's literature and so on. It has been my privilege to chair their vibrant, often irreverent debates over almost two years. At times as I listened to the artist and the administrator reach for very different words to describe a shared world, I felt there was material there for a state-of-Ireland novel. Even more often, as I sat spellbound by the social idealism and cultural creativity of the same contributors, I wished that their exchanges could be made available to fellow-citizens who take an interest in such topics.

It is a mark of the skills of Peter and Anne Kelly, whom we chose to conduct research in the designated field, that the timbre of those varied voices is registered on many a page of this report. The quantitative research is virtually without precedent in this country and necessarily represents more a beginning than a conclusion of such study: but it is the more valuable for that. It will provide guidelines and points of departure for years to come: and it has been immensely enriched by the generous response of both individuals and organisations to our call in the national press for formal submissions. Equally precious has been the contribution of children, whose essays testify to a passionate love of libraries and a thoroughly proper desire to want them even better than they are. This was the first occasion, to our knowledge, when children were asked to make submissions to a project such as ours. The voices of all these participants - artists, users, the disadvantaged and the advantaged - reverberate through the following pages, establishing a sort of dialectic with the more quantitative investigations.

What the report tells us is that the library service is still prized by all, despite the quietness with which its members go about their work: and that the heroic labours of the cadre of arts officers out in the community are also valued and celebrated, especially by those whose access to the arts may in the past have been stymied by limited education or limited means. It tells us also, in that context, that equity does not always mean equality: although everybody has notionally equal access to social services (including those in the arts sector), often it is the already privileged who know how best to use them.

For me the most inspiring aspect of the work has been the deeply democratic philosophy of all my colleagues on the committee, animated by a desire to serve every man, woman and child. After a decade when the public realm seemed to have shrunk, this was encouraging indeed. Nowhere was the sense of solidarity and mutuality more evident than at the one-day conference held at the Davenport Hotel, Dublin on 26 November 1997 and addressed by a over a hundred participants from a schoolgirl to a government minister. Some of its proceedings were subsequently featured on an RTE documentary on 'The Future of the Book.' The major event of the conference was a challenging address by Patrick Conway of the Durham county system who strongly suggested that every man and woman in the community is a potential artist, a point which had already been explored with great sensitivity in position-papers tabled by Robert Dunbar, John Coll and Thomas McCarthy, all members of our committee.

After all this heady activity, I was left wondering why our public figures do not spend even more on arts and libraries, whose limited opening hours remain a source of frustration to the entire public. Some have suggested that there are "no votes" in these areas, but the evidence which we encountered would suggest the contrary. My own suspicion is that our politicians and senior administrators are so engrossed with the round-the-clock task of running our society that few of them still find time to read a book or visit a library. Most Leinster House politicians, when asked at Christmas or summertime about their recent reading, lament the fact that it tends to be confined to official reports. If they read this one, however, they may begin to wonder why they have so often seemed to take for granted the vital services discharged by libraries and arts bodies. If politics is to be about the consolidation of the community and the enhancement of the expressive freedom of individuals, then every pound spent on arts or libraries is well invested. It will be repaid not just in the continuing triumphs of our creative people or in the cash generated by cultural tourism, but in the deepening of social bonds, without which politics is only a clinical systems-maintenance.

The inventors of modern Irish democracy from the Young Irelanders through Michael Davitt down to W.B. Yeats and Arthur Griffith were all upholders of the reading-room ideal. Out of their libraries an entire nation was born. And out of the library system that selfsame nation can be reborn in the next millennium. That rebirth or renaissance will occur every time a discerning librarian places the right book in the right pair of hands and every time an arts officer helps a roomful of children to make their dreams incarnate in a work of their own creation.

All of my colleagues on the committee hope that this report will be read as widely as possible. It is as readable as it is rigorous and we trust that it conveys some sense of our pleasure that went into its making. We welcome all comment, the critical as well as the celebratory.

I should like, as we disband, to pay a special tribute to two persons without whom the project would not have come to fruition. It was the late Lar Cassidy who, with that audacity which characterised his too short life, devised the challenge in his role as Literature Officer of the Arts Council: and it was Norma McDermott of An Chomhairle Leabharlanna who showed that mixture of sympathy and steel which ensured that Lar's often-fragile concept would take a clear shape. It has been a new form of continuing education for this willing conscript from the groves of academe to work with them. I also own more than I can say to the peerless work of Orla Fitzpatrick and Stephanie O'Callaghan, both of An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, who performed daunting and repeated tasks with high intelligence and obvious enjoyment: the enthusiasm of these young people eventually energised all who came into contact with it. The new Literature Officer of the Arts Council, Sinéad MacAodha, has been creative and helpful throughout the project, which owes much to her sensitivity, tact and great good humour.

My understanding of Ireland has been complicated and enriched by the contributions of other committee members: Pat McMahon from Galway, John Coll from Mayo, Fionnuala Hanrahan from Wexford, Mary Linehan from Kildare, Mary Cloake and Marian Flanagan both from the Arts Council, Carmel O'Sullivan of An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, not to mention the wonderful blend of the visionary and pragmatic which I found in our county managers, Niall Bradley of Kildare and Kevin O'Sullivan of Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown. Their shrewd counsel has saved the bohemians among us on more than one occasion from peril but it is only fair to add that that kind favour has been equally returned. Our artists, Mary Morrissey and Thomas McCarthy, have been as creative as we had hoped, but they also served with amazing industry as adjudicators under the chairmanship of Rosemary Hetherington in the children's essay competition.

The sheer volume of work done by all these talented people has been awesome. They have shown great patience through long, sometimes anarchic, discussions, but they have also proven that a truly comprehensive and honest debate does eventually conduce to an orderly world. I thank each and every one of them for a signal service to our people.

Declan Kiberd
28 March 1998
Dublin

Executive Summary

This report has its origins in the Arts Council's Arts Plan 1995-97, which identified the use of strategic partnerships to secure maximum benefit for the arts as one of the Plan's strategic objectives. A number of such partnerships were proposed, among them a partnership with An Chomhairle Leabharlanna/The Library Council "in the field of arts and libraries". Arising out of this proposal, the Public Libraries and the Arts Committee was established to explore how it might best be implemented and this report, drafted by the consultants retained by the Committee, summarises the findings of the project. The report

- outlines the present and potential roles of arts and of libraries in cultural life;
 - describes the present organisation of both in Ireland;
 - summarises the findings of research carried out among artists and arts organisations;
 - presents the views of the public (including young people), and arts and library professionals;
- and
- having summarised the key findings of the project, puts forward a series of recommendations which are designed to facilitate access to and participation in the arts through the public library system.

Arts in the community

Access to the arts has been a key concern of the Arts Council since the 1970s and the Arts Plan 1995-97 highlighted access as one of its six strategic objectives. The potential of the library service for facilitating arts access was reiterated in the context of provision for exhibitions, community arts facilities and for the active engagement of children. Previous Irish studies had identified access and participation as issues, particularly for low income groups and disadvantaged areas, and the library system as significant in terms of access. International research has suggested that inter-agency work, although not without difficulty, can be synergistic and innovative in the development of new services, new ways of working and new values. In Great Britain, where the library/arts partnership has been described as an evolving one, a number of characteristics of the library, including the free, neutral and safe identification of the physical space, are regarded as conducive to access. It provides young people with an introduction to civil society, and community librarianship and community arts have certain shared values, both being needs rather than demand led. However, the very democracy of public usage, and the local nature of the service provided, goes hand in hand with a low level of national prestige and this has tended to reduce the advocacy role of the library service internationally.

Public libraries: existing provision

There are 322 branch libraries in Ireland, under the control of 32 city and county library authorities, which are part of the local government structure. Current expenditure on libraries is of the order of £37.4 million and capital expenditure over £4 million. 1320 staff are employed. Collections in public libraries amount to 12 million items. In terms of book loans and expenditure on library materials per capita of the population, Ireland is around the middle of the European spectrum - higher than Germany and Spain, for example, but much lower than Denmark, the Netherlands, or the United Kingdom. A survey of 1400 adults carried out as part of this project found that 32% of the adult population were library users.

The arts: existing provision

The administration of the arts in Ireland received a major boost from the appointment of a Minister with responsibility for the arts at Cabinet level and more recently from the adoption by Government of the second Arts Plan 1999-2001 which commits to expenditures on the arts amounting to £100 million over the plan period. This injection of funds, combined with the energy of national and local arts organisations, and supported by the growing interest in the arts of the local authorities has led to a new dynamism in cultural activity at all levels.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

The main themes which emerged from the research were:

- **Access and Participation:** the public library system is seen as an exceptionally appropriate host for community arts activities. For national arts institutions which are concerned with the engagement and empowerment of communities, libraries are ideal partners in programmes which deal with information and imagination, as well as for many non-literary arts. The position of trust enjoyed by libraries provides a reassuring and unthreatening environment. However, the atmosphere of some libraries was seen as needing improvement for their arts potential to be realised, while some artists held that one of the library's greatest advantages in other respects - its democratic nature - could in some instances limit its value for some professional artists. Unsuitable and inflexible opening hours were identified as a limiting factor. It was widely felt that most libraries made excellent provision for the needs of young people and people with disability, and many suggestions were made in this regard. However, the overwhelming impression gained through all facets of the study was the suitability of public libraries in general for the practice and enjoyment of most of the arts, and the value which participants had derived from their library experiences.

A virtually universal perception is that the library is a central agent in the cultural and civic life of the community. To the artist in particular, it has three roles:

- through its collections, to be a source of information and inspiration in terms of the artist's profession and its development;
 - again through the quality and range of its collections, to be a key agent in developing the audience for the art; and
 - by making its facilities available, as an important venue for arts events and activities, sometimes the only one in a locality.
- **People:** at least some of the variations in arts/libraries achievement may be put down to differences in individual interests, inclinations, motivation and training on the part of librarians, arts officers and local government officials. But throughout the different strands of the research, we found time after time that children, community arts groups, professional artists, organisations representing people with disabilities, and individuals who made submissions, had had most positive and life-enhancing experiences with libraries, and experienced the warmest feelings towards the librarians they encountered. Combined with the obvious success which local authority arts officers have had in helping to energise the arts in their areas, this is a very strong foundation on which to build a partnership. At the same time, the significant differences between the two professions - in culture, training, strategic objectives and day-to-day focus - must be recognised, as must the extent to which librarians may need support through training and otherwise if they are to achieve their objective of making libraries a central part of arts delivery.
 - **Infrastructure:** in every part of the country, libraries are used for arts activities and events. Most were not built with this in mind, although through considerable ingenuity on the part of library staffs, many are dynamic centres for wider cultural development. The limited availability of suitable space in libraries was identified in the research as the most important obstacle to the full realisation of the library service's role in the arts. Restricted opening hours and days compound the problem. At least equal importance must be attached to the atmosphere and "friendliness" of public library spaces.
 - **Collections:** while in general the literature collections held by the public library service for adults are seen as adequate, criticism was voiced of children's collections, and, more trenchantly, of collections suitable for young adults. Literature in Irish is also seen as inadequately represented, and many artists were disappointed by the range and timeliness of specialised materials relating to their art forms. Given that the core artistic and cultural roles of libraries are in the literature and information fields, these are significant findings. It seems that the book funds in public libraries have not recovered from the cut-backs of the 1980s, something which needs attention if the potential of the library service to contribute to the personal and artistic development of the individual is to be fully exploited.

- Partnerships: there are fruitful opportunities for partnership not just between arts and libraries, but also, and very importantly, between both disciplines and a wide range of other agencies and groups. Prominent among these are the other departments and functions of local authorities. It is hoped that the establishment of Strategic Policy Committees within local authorities will help develop many and varied strands of collaboration which will make possible greater arts inputs into every facet of local administration.

A model of strategic partnership development was presented, in which partners may move from simple transactions through joint ventures to the development of information-sharing networks and finally to co-ordinated tasks, initially on an ad hoc basis, but leading later to ongoing collaboration. Currently, examples abound of library/arts partnerships of all these types, and the challenge is to build on the best partnership experiences.

- Public image: Libraries seem to have achieved high esteem in the public eye almost in spite of themselves. They are slow to publicise themselves, or to exploit their vast "market". Raising the profile of the public library service through its involvement in the arts will enhance its ability to expand and to fulfil its broad civic role. In return, using the existing infrastructure of the library service to promote the arts will enhance the position of the arts in the community and proclaim them more widely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that action is required by a number of policy-making bodies, individually and in partnership, if progress is to be made in developing arts and libraries services. These are as follows:

Recommended actions by the Arts Council

- Review writers-in-libraries policy with a view to enlarging budgetary provision
- Improve the availability of musical instruments in libraries and consider the appointment of musicians-in-the library programme. It is particularly appropriate to consider the appointment of a musician-in-residence.
- Provide for a number of cross-disciplinary residencies in appropriate libraries

Recommended actions by An Chomhairle Leabharlanna

- Encourage the formation, in the area of each branch library, of a Library User Committee, which should include, as well as library staff, a number of active library members (of whom at least one should be a young adult) and representatives of local organisations and individuals active in civic affairs, the arts, education, social exclusion and other areas, in order to help maintain the relevance of the library's services to the community, and to enlist support (including resources) for its activities. The local Arts Officer should participate in the work of such Committees as deemed appropriate and necessary. Such an initiative would assist in involving library users who are not generally encouraged to contribute to or participate in the development of services
- Encourage library authorities to develop in conjunction with young people mission statements outlining their aims and objectives for young people and to distinguish in their policies between children and young adults
- Review with representative organisations for people with disabilities how library policy in relation to disability access can be co-ordinated with the Arts Council's policy in this area
- Provide quarterly newsletter for users, detailing arts activities

Recommended actions by the Department of Environment and Local Government

- Review of library staffing and service delivery, including opening hours, to ensure flexibility
- Correction of built infrastructure deficiencies, including capital investment backlog
- Consideration of opportunities for arts/libraries provision in mixed public/commercial building developments such as shopping centres and urban renewal projects

Recommended Joint Actions

- the appointment of an arts officer based in An Chomhairle Leabharlanna with responsibility for the co-ordination of projects and reporting to the Committee.
- the development by the Arts Council, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna and the local authorities of a national arts and libraries strategy to optimise the utilisation of scarce national resources. This would include an arts input to Library Development Plans and the provision of designated arts spaces in new library buildings and the development of guidelines for such spaces. A strategic approach is appropriate at this time with the emergence in local authorities of Strategic Policy Committees, which will provide a forum for the closer co-ordination of arts not just with the library service, but also with other elements of local administration
- an initiative by the same two bodies focusing on training/human resource issues for arts/library services for all levels of arts and libraries provision in local authorities
- a national plan for access to arts and library services for disadvantaged groups and areas. This would involve the two Councils, Department of the Environment and Local Government, Combat Poverty and CAFE and would build on existing research. It is particularly important to address the issue of equality versus equity in access to arts and libraries, and to this end we recommend that a pilot survey be initiated to test how the problem can be addressed
- a specific library-based national project aimed at children and the visual arts, identified frequently during the research as a neglected area, to be developed by An Chomhairle Leabharlanna and the Arts Council
- a capital investment study involving the Arts Council and An Chomhairle Leabharlanna which would evaluate existing exhibition/general arts spaces in the libraries where they are available (identified in 16 libraries by the research) with a view to upgrading these and developing guidelines for their use
- the preparation of guidelines (to be agreed with the Department of the Environment and Local Government) to be applied to the design of new library buildings or to the reconstruction of existing buildings which would allow for appropriate arts space to be planned into all new capital spending



70 Merrion Square
Dublin 2
Ireland

Telephone 353 1 618 0200

Callsave 1850 392 492

Facsimile 353 1 661 0349

353 1 676 1302

email info@artscouncil.ie

website <http://www.artscouncil.ie>