



An Chomhairle Leabharlanna

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Submission on the draft national plan to improve literacy and
numeracy

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1. INTRODUCTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An Chomhairle Leabharlanna recommends that the important role played by public and school libraries be formally recognised in the literacy and numeracy plan.

Research shows a clear association between the availability of reading material and success in reading.

As the most significant provider of reading material to both children and their families in Ireland, the public library network has a key role to play in improving literacy.

The potential to contribute to the improvement of literacy and numeracy that public libraries offer should be harnessed through specific actions included in the plan.

These actions, and the section(s) of the draft plan to which they relate, are set out below. The rationale for the recommendations is set out in the succeeding sections of the submission.

An Chomhairle is committed to working with partners in the public library service and the education sector to support the implementation of the literacy and numeracy plan.

Recommendations

1. The approved professional development courses provided for primary and L1 teachers, the approved professional development units for second-level teachers, and the guidance and resources for teachers and ECCE practitioners should all include material on role and value of the library service and practical guidance as to how teachers can best exploit what the service can offer - **section 2.5, page 20.**
2. The inclusion of this material should be required of all providers of CPD summer courses - **section 2.5, page 20.**
3. Training and education courses completed by those entering the ECCE work force should also include this material - **section 2.5, page 21.**
4. An Chomhairle Leabharlanna and public library services should work with partners in the education sector to develop the material to be included.
5. The new Primary School Curriculum should give formal recognition of the role of the school and public library in providing 'for a print saturated environment within the infant classroom – **section 4.3, page 28.**
6. In support of 'providing a print saturated environment', schools and the local public library service should work in partnership to develop a programmed and curriculum-centred approach to pupil's engagement with the library service, involving regular planned visits (where possible), the provision of block loans of relevant material for use in the school, and the



continued development by the public library service of relevant children's collections, as recommended in *The Public Library and the School* report (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2010a, 119) – **section 4.3, page 28.**

7. In developing their programme of engagement, teachers and librarians should ensure that 'the reading tastes of boys are catered for' by the provision of expertly selected reading materials – **section 4.5, page 30 and section 4.7, page 31.**
8. The Department of Education and Skills should provide the resources to ensure the continued development of the JCSP School Libraries – **section 5.4.**
9. The training and online support provided for Youthreach and CTC staff should include material on role and value of the library service and practical guidance as to how they can best exploit what the public library service can offer – **section 5.8.**
10. Youthreach Centres and CTCs should work with their local library service to exploit the public library as a supportive non-classroom space in which their client group can engage with a wide variety of reading material and media – **5.8.**
11. Any 'national information campaign to build up awareness of the important role that parents and communities can play in supporting literacy and numeracy learning' should be developed in partnership with the public library service, building on that service's existing promotional campaigns – **section 7.2.**
12. Any materials developed to 'provide direct supports to parents to encourage them to support their children's language, literacy and numeracy' should be developed in partnership with the public library service, building on their existing reading development work and on their expertise in engaging parents and children in reading – **section 7.2.**
13. Family literacy initiatives of the DES and the OMC should be developed in partnership with the public library service, exploiting its status as an informal, supportive, easily accessible non-school environment – **section 7.2.**
14. Representatives of the public library community should be included on the National Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Group – **section 8.2.**
15. Representatives of the public library community should be included on the National Literacy and Numeracy Forum – **section 8.2.**



2. THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE

Since their establishment in the 19th century, and through to the present, public libraries have been agents of literacy. Their purpose is to provide access to the world of the imagination; to the cultural memory of communities and society at large, and to sources of information and knowledge.

The public library service has at its heart a commitment to providing both a literal and a virtual 'space for all'. In describing this commitment, the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto states: 'the services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status' (IFLA/UNESCO 1994).

The services of Irish local authority public libraries are open to everyone in a very real sense. Firstly, there are no entry requirements at all: anyone may come in the doors of the library. Secondly, a visitor does not need to have any 'reason' to enter the library: those who wish to come in to do nothing are as welcome as those who come in with something to do. Thirdly, the financial costs for using the library are either non-existent or very low. Fourthly, through the range of services and the depth and breadth of the collections, libraries endeavour to provide something for everyone.

Ireland's public library network includes 350 branch libraries, mobile libraries, and library services provided in over 1,000 other locations. Library services are also being delivered online, via individual library websites and portals such as www.askaboutireland.ie.

Public Libraries promote their services continually at local level, through local media, while An Chomhairle Leabharlanna promotes the service nationally.

A significant promotional campaign is the Bord Gáis Energy READISCOVER Your Local Library Month (March), which involves a national media campaign and over 200 events in libraries nationwide [2011 figures]. As part of the campaign 1 million households will receive library promotional material directly in the post.



3. LIBRARY SERVICES TO CHILDREN

Two of the first four key missions of the public library identified in the UNESCO Manifesto focus on services to children: 'creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age', and 'stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and young people'.

The importance of services to children is also recognised in the Irish Government's public library policy document *Branching Out: Future Directions* (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government 2008), which states that one of the priorities for the service is:

To support early learning and cultural expression by young people, by introducing them to the world of arts, and to the oral and material heritage of their community, by implementing programmes and events such as exhibitions of children's own work, children's drama and music events, reading programmes, Children's Book Festival, author visits and storytelling (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government 2008, 54).

The latest figures show that there are 14.6 million visits made to public libraries each year, with some 4.5 million of these visits (32%) being made by children [14 years and under] (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2010b).

There are 313,141 children registered as library members (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2010b, 4), 36% of the population in the 0-14 age group (Central Statistics Office).

Public libraries spend €12,269,608 on stock [2009, latest figures available], of which a minimum of 34% is spent on specifically children's material.

Public library collections total 12.4 million books, of which 3.8 million, or 30%, are classified as children's books (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2010b, 14). Children, of course, are not restricted to items which are so classified, and so the number of books to which they have access in the library is greater than 3.8 million.

Although the services provided by public libraries have been developed and extended over the years, the lending of books continues to be the core activity. In 2009 [latest figures available] public libraries loaned some 14.9 million books, of which 6.8 million, or 45%, were classified as children's books (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2010b, 18).

Figures from the Public Lending Remuneration Scheme show that eight of the ten most popular authors in Irish libraries in 2010 were children's authors (Public Lending Remuneration 2011).



The Public Library User Survey (PLUS) in 2007 showed that 66% of those who visited the library did so to use the book lending service and at least 90% found a book to borrow (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2008, 4).

4. SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S READING AND THEIR USE OF THE LIBRARY

Public libraries support children's use of the service through the selection and purchasing of dedicated children's stock. Professional librarians have the expertise and skill to select stock which is appropriate for the full range of reading abilities presented by young library users.

As a result, the 3.8 million items of children's stock represent a significant resource for those with varying levels of literacy. The value of the collection is shown by the high rate of borrowing: 45% of library loans are of children's books, although visits by children account for fewer than 32% of total visits.

An Chomhairle Leabharlanna is producing a set of guidelines for best practice in providing library services to children and young people. The dedicated website, www.library.ie/youngpeople features a large number of examples of library programming for children.

These examples include storytelling sessions for parents and toddlers; class visits; reading groups for children and young people; visits by children's authors; recommended reading lists, and children's summer reading schemes.

Children's Book Festival (CBF), which takes place in October each year, is a significant programme in public libraries. A total of 1,295 events took place in public libraries during the 2010 Festival, reaching a total audience of 49,417 children (Donegan 2011).

A report on the 2007 festival notes that 'It is clear that book-based activities gave children different reading and writing experiences, opening up a wider range of reading choices as well as being a social experience' (Donegan 2008, 11).

The co-ordinators of Children's Book Festival, Children's Books Ireland, note that 'the motivation and commitment of many [public library] co-ordinators remains the driving force behind the festival's regional programmes' (Donegan 2011).

The public library service has long supported reading for children through the dedicated Primary Schools Library Service. The extent and effectiveness of this service has suffered greatly from the cutting by the DES in 2008 of the *per capita* grant.

As the draft literacy and numeracy plan states (Department of Education and Skills 2010, 47), achievement in literacy is strongly linked to access to books.



School library services have been shown to contribute positively to reading development in children, with teachers particularly valuing the range of books, both fiction and non-fiction, provided by the public library service (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2010a, 87).

Public libraries play a key role in making reading material available to children and their families. Through the depth and breadth of their collections, and the extent of the network, public libraries offer an unrivalled choice of reading material. The expertise and knowledge of library staff means that the collections include reading materials of interest to, and suitable for, readers of all ages, reading levels, and background.

Irish Children from households with public library membership tend to achieve higher levels of reading and mathematics (Eivers et al. 2010, 50) and a similar correlation has been found in the UK (National Literacy Trust 2011).

Research shows (see below) that 'reading for pleasure', or 'free voluntary reading', is important in children's attainment of literacy. Any interventions aimed at improving literacy must take this into account.

Public libraries have the potential to contribute more to the improvement of literacy standards, working in partnership with other agencies at both national and local level.

5. READING ACHIEVEMENT AND THE AVAILABILITY OF BOOKS

The association between poor social background and poor reading performance is strong (Eivers et al. 2010, 47), but as the same *2009 National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading* also states, 'There is a very strong association between the numbers of books [in the home] and performance on both reading and mathematics' (2010, 50).

The assessments found that pupils with access to reference books 'obtained mean scores ... significantly higher than the mean scores of pupils' with no access to such books' (2010, 51).

The draft national plan states (Department of Education and Skills 2010, 47) that there is compelling evidence that 'poor performance does not automatically follow from low socio-economic status' (Clark and Akerman 2006, 1).

A 2002 OECD study showed that reading performance is 'weakly linked to students' socio-economic background', and that 'by contrast access to books at home is strongly associated with profiles of reading' (Kirsch et al. 2002, 106), stating that 'students who have access to a larger number of books at home are more diversified in their reading and are more interested in reading other material, such as books (fiction and non-fiction) or comics'.



In their study of Irish pupils, Haslett et al reported 'a strong association between books in the home and preference for books' (Haslett and Children's Books Ireland 2002, 58), noting that '70% of children who say 'yes' to reading books report that there are a lot of books in the home' (2002, 42).

A UK National Literacy Trust study states 'time and again, studies have shown that pupils who have greater access to educational material tended to achieve better academically than students who lack such access' (Clark and Akerman 2006, 2-3). The report concluded that 'consistent with previous research, this study showed that there is a link between a lack of reading enjoyment and a lack of access to reading opportunities' (2006, 9).

The significance of the ready availability of books in the development of literacy in children has also been identified by the Department of Education and Science here in Ireland in its 2004 report, *Succeeding in Reading?* (Eivers 2005, 29).

6. READING FOR PLEASURE

It is evident from the available data that children, despite the ubiquity of visual media, engage in reading to a significant extent. As users of the public library service, children make fewer than 32% of total visits, but account for 45% of library loans.

A 2002 survey of primary school children on the island of Ireland revealed that 59% of pupils liked to read books, a further 33% said they like to read 'now and again', while 8% said that they do not like to read (Haslett & Children's Books Ireland 2002, p.31)

The same survey showed that 21% of pupils visited their local library 'a lot', and 45% visited 'now and again' (Haslett & Children's Books Ireland 2002, p.45).

A more recent study into children's leisure activities revealed that over half of young people read in their free time every or most days (de Roiste & Dineen 2005, p.5).

A 2009 survey of 15-year olds shows that 31.7% reported that reading was one of their favourite hobbies (Office of the Minister for Children 2010, 121).

Reading remains an important activity for children, a clear majority of whom engage in 'free voluntary reading' (Krashen) or 'reading for pleasure'. 'Reading for pleasure' has been defined as:

Reading that we do of our own free will, anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading. It also refers to reading that having begun at someone else's request we continue because we are interested in it. (Clark and Rumbold 2006, 6)



Reading for pleasure has been identified as a significant component in children's acquisition of literacy. 'When children read for pleasure', according to Krashen:

They acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called "language skills" many people are so concerned about: they will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions ... Although free voluntary reading alone will not ensure attainment of the highest levels of literacy, it will at least ensure an acceptable level (Krashen 1993, 85).

Other studies have identified an association between reading for pleasure and increased reading attainment and writing ability, greater breadth of vocabulary and greater general knowledge (Cox and Guthrie 2001).

7. READING AND FAMILY AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Eivers *et al.* also point to the fundamental role of family attitudes to reading: 'the results of the assessment show long-term associations between pupils' reading achievement and regularly reading to children before they enrol in school and regularly reading with them while in Infants classes'.

Blanden (Blanden et al. 2006, 26) found that 'parental engagement is crucial' in children's performance in education, noting the strong relationship between fathers' interest (or lack of) in education and the performance of boys, and a similar relationship between mothers and daughters (2006, 15). This gender difference is important, given that research has consistently found that girls read more than boys (see for example (Office of the Minister for Children 2010, 121).

Accepting the clear links between literacy and the availability of books and family attitudes to reading, the OECD concluded that 'there is evidence in the literature that engagement in reading [reading for pleasure] can "compensate" for low family income and educational background' (Kirsch et al. 2002, 119).

In an important finding, the OECD found that:

...students who are highly engaged readers and whose parents have the lowest occupational status achieve significantly higher average reading scores ... than students whose parents have the highest occupational status but who are poorly engaged in reading... And these highly engaged students whose parents have low occupational status perform as well on average as those students who are in the middle engagement group but whose parents have high-status occupations (2002, 121).



8. THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY

There is clear evidence that the availability of reading material, and the fostering of reading for pleasure plays a significant role in the children's reading performance. Furthermore, the significance of this role is such that is 'strongly associated' with success in reading.

Based on this evidence, interventions to improve children's literacy must aim to improve children's access to reading materials.

In the words of Krashen:

If more access leads to more reading, and if more reading leads to better reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and a larger vocabulary, this means that the first step any literacy campaign needs to take is to make sure children have access to plenty of books (Krashen 2007, 8).

Krashen concludes that 'the place to focus is the library, both the school and public library. Studies show a positive relationship between library quality (school and public) and the amount read, as well as a relationship with reading competence'.

The effectiveness of school library provision has been well documented. In Ireland the evaluation of the Junior Certificate School Library Demonstration Programme found that 'there is a great deal of evidence to support the hypothesis that a good school library, which caters for the needs of students with literacy difficulties, impacts positively on their learning experience and allows them to address and overcome literacy difficulties (Haslett and Curriculum Development Unit (Ireland) 2005, 126).

The continuing popularity of libraries is evidence of the contribution they make to people's reading lives. The high level of use by children suggests that they value the service provided and the enthusiastic engagement of children in library events (in Children's Book Festival for example) shows that public libraries can play an important role to play in developing children's literacy.

As mentioned above, public libraries spend €12,269,608 on stock, of which a minimum of 34% is spent on specifically children's material.

Public library collections total 12.4 million books, of which 3.8 million, or 30%, are classified as children's books (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2010b, 14). Children, of course, are not restricted to items which are so classified, and so the number of books to which they have access in the library is greater than 3.8 million.

Public libraries loan some 14.9 million books in 2009, of which 6.8 million, or 45%, were classified as children's books.



The public library network is staffed with professionally qualified librarians, well placed to select appropriate material, and to advise and support children and parents in their reading choices.

In the planning and delivery of its many activities and services, the public library has at its heart a commitment to providing both a literal and a virtual 'space for all', a space that is welcoming to children and their families, providing a supportive environment for learning and for the crucially important 'Reading for Pleasure'.

The public library network is, therefore, the most significant provider of reading material to both children and their families in Ireland.

Note

Further information on this submission is available from:

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