



An Chomhairle Leabharlanna
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INTRODUCTION

An Chomhairle Leabharlanna (ACL) is the state agency which advises local authorities and the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government on library services in Ireland. An Chomhairle welcomes the opportunity to support the Minister for Children in leading the development of harmonised policy and quality integrated service delivery for children, families and communities. In assisting the Department with enabling our young citizens to partake fully in Irish society, ACL describes the policy performance, legislative and governance support provided to ensure delivery of the library service and describes the level of fair access to library services and support to meet those needs in 2011. ACL wishes to support the strategy and all policy instruments which enable the best use of library services in Ireland. The five recommendations are offered to this end.

The library service is the largest cultural and information infrastructure available to this age group in Ireland. In essence, the service has two primary roles, i.e.:

(A) The prime and trusted national **provider of reading material and quality content** in a variety of printed and electronic formats to both children and their families in Ireland. The local authority public library network has a key role to play in improving literacy and encouraging reading for pleasure.

(B) As a **safe and welcoming public space** available in most communities which is open to all, the public library has a fundamental part to play in the development of young people and children's right to recreation and play and to achieving their potential in learning and information gathering.

The policy context and rationale of the service for young people is briefly described here:

Under the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Ireland has committed itself to the following commitments towards our younger citizens:

- 'Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books' (United Nations 1990, Article 17 (c)).
- 'recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' (United Nations 1990, Article 31 (1)).
- 'respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity' (United Nations 1990, Article 31 (2)).

The present *Programme for Government* asserts the Government's commitment to early childhood education ((Ireland 2011a, 9), to developing a national literacy strategy and to examining innovative ways to support teenagers at risk of leaving school early.



The Department of Education and Science's *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* recognises that 'libraries and librarians are an important resource in supporting children's literacy' and that libraries are 'of particular assistance to families who find it difficult to meet the cost of providing a rich range of books and educational resources in the home' (Ireland 2011b, 21).

The local authorities functions in the library service and the functions of An Chomhairle in relation to the library service are set out in the Local Government Act, 2001. The present strategy of the Minister, the local government sector and ACL are outlined in the government's policy on the public library service, *Branching Out: Future Directions* (Ireland, 2008) which is in place until 2012. Being a nationwide community based and socially inclusive support to literacy guidance and reading, the service is particularly focussed on children and young people

http://www.librarycouncil.ie/publications_archive/documents/BranchingOut_FutureDirections.pdf

Recommendations

1. ACL recommends that the important functions undertaken by local authorities through public libraries and in supporting school libraries in the lives of children and young people be acknowledged in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs' statement of strategy and that integrated services have regard to existing government policy in this regard. The strategy statement of the DCYA should add value to the role of libraries in improving the life chances of all young adults and children, should identify how the Department intends engaging with the public library sector to this end, and should include specific targets for all stakeholders in that engagement. An Chomhairle would be pleased to assist further, as appropriate, in this matter.

2. The removal of the Primary School Grants scheme by the Minister for Education and Schools is a most regressive step at a time when there is a widening gap between advantage and disadvantage in education provision. The removal of special needs assistants is also a case in point when reading and comprehension support is required. ACL recommends that such supports should be restored.

3. In order to ensure continued improvement in the range and quality of stock and electronic content as components of library infrastructure to support the full potential of young people through reading and literacy, ACL recommends that the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs re-emphasises the recommendation that continued progress should be made towards a per capita book fund target of €3.77 in each library authority budget and that this target be linked to the Consumer Price Index.

4. Accepting the clear links between literacy and the availability of books and quality content 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). ACL recommends that the Minister has regard to this finding in integrating policy for service delivery for children.



5. ACL recommends that a Steering Committee be established under the aegis of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to take forward the strategy and ensure its implementation; the Steering Committee to include representation from the public library service.

2. THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE

Since its establishment in the 19th century, the public library service promotes literacy through a threefold approach:

to provide access to the world of the imagination;

to be the cultural memory of communities and society at large and

to be sources of information and knowledge.

The public library service hosts a literal and a virtual 'space for all'. The UNESCO *Public Library Manifesto* illustrates the inclusive right as '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).

There are no entry requirements: anyone may come in the doors of the library, can use their services. You do not need to have any 'reason' to enter the library: those who wish to come in to do nothing or to be are as welcome as those who come in with something to do. The financial cost of library usage to the user is either non-existent or very low. Through the range of services and the depth and breadth of the content, library staff endeavour to provide a service for everyone.

Public library managers promote their services at local level, through local media, while An Chomhairle Leabharlanna promotes the service nationally. Ireland's public library network provided by the 32 library authorities consists of 348 libraries, 30 mobile libraries, and library services provided in over 1,000 other locations (prisons, day care centres, schools...) A significant promotional campaign supported by Bord Gáis Energy entitled *READISCOVER Your Local Library Month* (March), relates to a national media campaign and over 200 events in enjoyed in libraries nationwide [2011 figures]. As part of the campaign 1 million households receive library promotional material directly in the post. This might also be a useful avenue to support the role of the Minister in improving literacy and numeracy.

3. LIBRARY SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

Two key missions of the public library service identified in the UNESCO *Manifesto*, to which Ireland subscribes, focus on services to children and young people:

'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 underpinned in the Government's public library policy strategy *Branching Out: Future Directions* (Ireland 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 (Ireland. Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 54).

The following metrics might assist in providing a picture of the existing service. 16.1 million visits are recorded in public libraries each year, with some 5.1 million (32%) made by children [14 years and under] (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna). This is higher than the percentage of children proportionate to the national population. 313,141 children join the library (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna 2010b, 4), representing 36% of the population in the 0-14 age group (Central Statistics Office).

Public library authorities are investing €10.2million on book and other stock in 2011. €8.7 million of local authority budgets and an additional €1.5million for new libraries is invested this year by the Minister for the Environment. A third of the national book fund is spent on children's material.

Public library collections total 12.4 million books and multimedia, 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. The value of the collection is shown by the high rate of borrowing: 45% of library loans are of children's books. Of course, teenagers use adult library matter but we do not have a breakdown of this usage. Online usage of services in the public library is also increasing.

2,000 public internet pcs are accessed free by the library user. Internet usage increased in popularity in libraries continues since 2006 and in 2009 (latest figures available from the Local Government Management Agency 2011), the average number of internet sessions per 1,000 population was 394.56 The electronic services provided by public libraries have been developed alongside the use of internet resources accessed in libraries. 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 Irish government's **Irish Public Lending Remuneration Scheme**, managed by ACL, record that eight of the ten most popular authors whose works are borrowed from Irish libraries in 2010 were children's authors (Public Lending Remuneration 2011).

The Irish public library system will continue to support the reading requirements in whatever format is best suited to users' needs. Content for library users is published online, through individual library websites and portals such as ACL's www.askaboutireland.ie answering a need for accurate and authoritative resources for all aspects of Irish life. This is the 64th most popular website in Ireland and includes material created by the public library sector, the National Museum and is accredited by the Department of Education. The site usage for the Learning Zone of the portal in 2010, aimed at children and young people and tested by them, was 206,575 visits and 1,702,688 page views. The usage to date in the learning zone in 2011 records 296,494 visits and 1,902,925 page views (a 43.5% increase to date on 2010).



An Chomhairle Leabharlanna is drafting guidelines for best practice for library staff to invest further in library activities and services to children and young people and highlighting useful resources for the range of stakeholders in this market. This dedicated website, www.library.ie/youngpeople features also examples of library programming for this target group. An Chomhairle welcomes input of the Department of Children and Youth in this work or views thereon. 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, teenager services and creative writing.

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

School library services

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 removal of the DES in 2008 of the *per capita* grant. 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).

The removal of the Primary School Grants scheme by the Minister for Education and Schools is a most regressive step at a time when there is a widening gap between advantage and disadvantage in education provision. The removal of special needs assistants is also a case in point when reading and comprehension support is required. ACL recommends that such supports should be restored.

Public libraries play a key role in making reading material available to children, their teachers and their families. Through the depth and breadth of their collections, and the extent of the national library network, 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.

4. 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 DES's draft national plan stated (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). Notwithstanding this strong stance, there remains an imperative to protect the support for high standards in supporting all children to this fundamental right. The recommendation of **Branching Out**, (page 7) in this respect should be implemented without delay. This is synthesised in the following recommendation:

In order to ensure continued improvement in the range and quality of stock as a component of library infrastructure to support the full potential of young people through reading and literacy, ACL that the Minister re emphasises the recommendation that continued progress towards a per capita book fund target of €3.77 in each library authority budget and that this target be linked to the Consumer Price Index.



5. 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 32% of the total visits, and 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 day 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, accordingly, 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).

6. READING AND FAMILY AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

This previous recommendation of ACL is also reinforced in the work of Eivers *et al.* pointing 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 quality content 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). ACL recommends that the Minister has regard to this finding in integrating policy for service delivery for children.

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).

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

7. THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY

There is clear evidence, accordingly, that the availability of reading material, and the fostering of reading for pleasure plays a significant role in the children’s reading and learning 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 Irish public 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 the nationwide engagement in Children's Book Festival, for example) shows that public libraries can play an important role in developing children's literacy. 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 lack of integration with other stakeholders in optimising the value of the combined services aimed at this segment of our population is a significant barrier to harmonising integrated service delivery to children, families and communities.

ACL recommends that a Steering Committee be established under the aegis of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to take forward the strategy and ensure its implementation and that the Steering Committee should include representation from the public library service.

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