**ICEB General Assembly 21st – 26th May 2016**

**Country Report: Ireland**

Ireland joined the ICEB in late 2012 via its Braille Authority, INBAF (Irish National Braille and Alternative Format Association). INBAF was only established around the time of the last General Assembly in May 2012. This was much helped and encouraged by both the then president of the ICEB, Pete Osborne, and the past president, Mary Schnackenberg, who also provided practical advice on the set-up of a new authority. Ireland was also warmly welcomed at Executive level, so on behalf of INBAF I would like to express sincere thanks for all the help received.

The Republic of Ireland is a small country with a total population of ca. 4.6 million. There are several organisations working in the field of Visual Impairment: The National Council for the Blind (NCBI), ChildVision (The education centre for blind children), Irish Guide Dogs and Fighting Blindness. Most of these organisations have come together in recent years to form the National Vision Coalition as an umbrella lobby group. While Ireland has signed up to the WHO’s Vision 2020 plans in 2003 it has yet to deliver on its National Vision Strategy and the creation of a commission, so the National Vision Coalition is working towards that goal.

**Braille Provision in Ireland**

Prior to the establishment of INBAF all Irish braille readers, educators and transcribers would refer to guidelines issued by UKAAF (and previously BAUK, for braille only), but there was no lobby in Ireland for alternative formats. There also was no formal representation for the unique Irish braille code, i.e. the braille code for the Irish language (Gaelige), Ireland’s second official language besides English.

There are three main braille transcription centres in Ireland:

1. National Braille Production at ChildVision transcribes educational material covering all primary and secondary subjects for all children with visual impairment.
2. The NCBI’s Media Centre transcribes leisure reading and commercial material
3. The braille unit at Arbour Hill Prison (Irish Prison Service) transcribes commercial material

In addition to that, most government departments have their own transcription services, often linking in with any of the three above. Universities and colleges are responsible for access paths via the Student Services Departments and again, those would link in with any of the centres mentioned.

The two libraries for the Blind, NCBI’s media centre and the Childrens’ Library at ChildVision also buy in books from other transcription centres abroad.

ChildVision runs a yearly “Learn Braille” Course for sighted learners, based on the UEB updated Birmingham Braille Course material and accredited by the Irish Qualifications Framework (QQI). To date ca. 75 course participants have been trained to achieve a basic transcriber’s level and help the establishment of a network of knowledge about braille all over Ireland.

**INBAF’s work from 2012-2016**

**2012 and 2013**

With the formation of INBAF, an overseeing INBAF committee and two working groups were established.

One working group was tasked with developing Irish Braille, the other to oversee the UEB implementation in Ireland. Following a meeting with the Department of Education and Skills in the autumn of 2013, the latter was expanded to become a UEB Steering Committee with full representation from the Department’s Visiting Teacher Service for the Visually Impaired, teachers from the two schools for visually impaired, adult braille readers and INBAF members.

The Irish Braille Working group started considering a first draft for a new Irish Braille code in line with UEB punctuation and worked its way through several improvement stages.

UEB training was received by most INBAF member staff groups in August 2013, delivered by colleagues from UKAAF. This was followed up with INBAF led training especially to braille proofreaders and adult braille readers.

UEB was officially adopted on December 2nd 2013. A schedule was agreed which foresaw the implementation for the first three years of primary school in September 2014, with the remaining 5 primary school years to be covered in 2015.

**2014 and 2015**

UIB, the Updated Irish Braille Code, was agreed on by the Irish Braille Working Group and formally adopted on the 3rd March 2014. This meant that implementation of UEB and UIB could be done simultaneously from then on, which made a lot of sense for children learning braille.

In May 2014 all Visiting Teachers for the Visually Impaired received UEB training.

A series of informal information sessions on both UEB and UIB started in October 2014. INBAF was inspired by ICEB information on braille parties in Canada and decided to go with an informal format of coffee afternoons and discussion of information material. These sessions were held in Cork in October 2014, Dublin in December 2014, Galway in March 2015 and Letterkenny 2015. Out of the session in Letterkenny came a request by colleagues from Northern Ireland for a tailored UEB training session for the QTVIs (Qualified Teachers for Visually Impaired) in the North. This was tailored and delivered in November 2015.

UEB/UIB was implemented at Junior Infant, Senior Infant and 1st class primary school level in September 2014. It was hoped to extend that to all primary school levels by September 2015, but this was delayed. Whilst fully supporting the ideas behind UEB and UIB, the Department of Education and Skills did not fund the necessary training for teachers and resources for transcribers, so the UEB Steering Committee had to alter the plan accordingly and September 2015 only saw the implementation go up by one additional primary school year to ensure continuity for those children who had started to learn UEB/UIB.

Teacher training in UIB was provided by INBAF in April 2015 at no cost to the Department of Education and Skills. No further additional funding was received in relation to the UEB/UIB implementation. The UEB Steering Committee hence had to make a decision to either implement year by year (which would have led to full implementation in 2025, due to the 14-year long schooling in Ireland) or to take the leap to implement in a block into firstly primary schools in 2016 and then secondary schools in 2017/18. As everyone agreed to not have a drawn out dual production period in both UEB and UIB, the decision was made for a quicker, albeit financially more difficult implementation with the risk of more serious delays.

However, transcribers will have to work in 4 codes until the full implementation in 2018 (SEB/UEB, Irish braille/UIB), which is demanding.

Contact was made with the State Examinations Commission when these issues were discussed to make them aware of the upcoming code changes and how and when it would affect the provision of state examination papers in braille. This work is on-going.

Also in 2015, INBAF made contact with the Canute development team, Bristol Braille Technologies and the Bristol braillists, which led to INBAF testing a prototype in Ireland in September 2015. Further trials are scheduled. This area of work was very worthwhile, as the two braillists meetings in Dublin were exceptionally well attended and provided a forum for INBAF to also inform about other braille developments.

Two music braille days were held in 2014/2015 under the INBAF umbrella and the beginnings of a music working group associated with INBAF evolved. Group members are now members or observers on the ICEB music committee.

**2016**

With the implementation of UEB/UIB in 2014 and 2015 came queries about changes to maths notation. A maths braille working group was established which consisted of teachers and transcribers. This group looked at the order in which symbols are being introduced in the Irish maths primary school curriculum. The group has since developed a guide to UEB and maths for primary school and is starting to look at secondary school level. This was a very positive and practical outcome for everyone involved and will assist both teachers and new transcribers.

A new type of information session will be run on the 5th May in Galway, this time looking at refreshable braille and UEB, to expand on the previous sessions and to explore possibilities with braille users. The motto for the day is “Braille in the West”!

INBAF will oversee the full implementation of UEB to primary schools. The focus will then shift to secondary schools and exams and to raising more awareness at 3rd level and for adult readers. Those have already been supplied with information through the information days and directly via the library and media centre. Many receive journals from the UK which are now in UEB. However, there are no resources available to produce large amounts of fresh reading material in hardcopy UEB at the moment.

In conclusion, the last four years were eventful for Ireland in terms of the changes to braille. The positive outcome is that more awareness has been raised for braille in general.

The INBAF delegates and indeed all INBAF members look forward to the continuing good working relationship with colleagues within the ICEB network.