**ICEB General Assembly, 18th – 22nd October 2020**

**Country Report: Ireland
INBAF, Irish National Braille and Alternative Format Association**

Four major organisations continue to work in the field of Visual Impairment in Ireland: The National Council for the Blind (NCBI), ChildVision (The National Education Centre for Blind Children), Irish Guide Dogs and Fighting Blindness, each with their own emphasis in relation to client groups and research interest. However, as four organisations are a lot for a country as small as Ireland, these organisations work together as VISPA (Visually Impaired Service Provider Alliance) to pursue overarching goals and continue to work as the National Vision Coalition as an umbrella lobby group.

The Marrakesh treaty was written into Irish law in October 2018, following the ratification of same by the EU commission in 2017. For braille provision in Ireland, this was excellent news as the updated copyright regulations for dedicated transcription centres cut down on administrative work prior to transcribing.

In early 2018 Ireland finally ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which already had a positive impact on the choices in relation to preferred and adequate reading formats for people with visual impairment.

**Braille Provision in Ireland – 2016 - 2020**

There are three main braille transcription centres in Ireland:

1. Reading Services (formerly National Braille Production) at ChildVision transcribe educational material covering all primary and secondary subjects for all children with visual impairment in Ireland into both hardcopy and electronic braille
2. The NCBI’s Media Centre transcribes leisure reading, commercial and some third level educational material
3. The braille unit at Arbour Hill Prison (Irish Prison Service) transcribes commercial material into hardcopy braille

Local student support and transcription services at universities and government departments would link in with the three above.

Two libraries for the Blind provide hardcopy braille: NCBI’s media centre and the Reading Services’ Childrens’ Library at ChildVision. Both also buy in books from other transcription centres abroad.

ChildVision continues to offer a yearly “Learn Braille” Course which is based on the UEB updated Birmingham Braille Course material. Over the last 12 years, a network of ca. 200 graduates has been developed to bring braille skills into different areas and schools all over Ireland.

All medicinal packages sold in Ireland have to display the name of the product in Braille. This was due to EU Council Directive 2004/27/EC – Article 56(a).  In 2008, the NCBI Library and Media Centre commenced training delegates from Pharmaceutical companies in Ireland on the production of Grade 1 Braille for medicinal products. In the last ten years over 100 delegates were trained in the production of Braille. Each delegate receives a certificate which is approved by the Medicines Board in Ireland.

**INBAF Approval re. quality assurance**

Both the Learn Braille course at ChildVision and the Pharmabraille course at NCBI have now been approved by INBAF in relation to the standard of braille taught and can carry the INBAF logo in their documentation and certification.

The three main braille producing organisations founded INBAF, the Irish Braille and Alternative Format Association in 2012 and joined ICEB in the same year. Since then, membership of the INBAF committee has been rotated and extended to represent different interest groups and achieve parity between non-sighted and sighted braille readers.

**INBAF’s work from 2016-2020**

**UEB Steering Committee / UEB Implementation**

This committee was set up in 2013 to oversee the implementation of UEB in Ireland at the request of the Irish Department of Education and Skills. The implementation was well underway during the last GA and has, as of September 2017, successfully concluded at all primary and secondary school levels. Feedback from students, who could have finished their exams in SEB but preferred to do so in UEB meant that the switch to UEB at all State Examinations levels was done earlier than initially expected. This work has been a hugely successful undertaking in Ireland and we are grateful that we could learn from the expertise of our partner countries in the ICEB network.

**Updated Irish Braille (UIB) Implementation**

The process of implementing Unified Irish Braille (UIB) hand in hand with UEB was presented at the last GA. Since then two reviews of how the code works have taken place, leading to the first ever implementation of short forms to the Irish braille code in 2017. In 2019 a further extension and update of the code was implemented.

UIB is now fully implemented in the Duxbury template and Liblouis.

For further information on the code itself can be found via <http://inbaf.ie/ueb-updates/>

**Maths braille working group**

This group worked through the Irish primary and secondary maths curriculum, looking at the order of occurrence and importance of signs used in order to compile UEB Technical Material guidelines for braille readers, teachers and transcribers.

Those were published in 2017 and are available on the INBAF website under <http://inbaf.ie/ueb-resources/>

**Music braille working group**

This group aims at improving the knowledge about music braille and to facilitate teaching opportunities for anyone interested in same. As the audience for this work is varied (age profile, academic interest or practitioners/performers), INBAF are working on a strategy to how best address the different interests. An introductory event was held since the last GA, but plans for 2020 had to be shelved due to the pandemic. The working group remains linked in to ICEB as observers on the music committee.

**Perkins Loan Scheme**

INBAF launched a Perkins Loan Scheme in 2017, by collecting unused Perkins Braillers all over Ireland. Those were sent to the Arbour Hill Prison unit for service and repair, where needed. They are being sent out free of charge to whoever might need them, whether it’s for educational or recreational use. While not a widely used scheme, this is a useful option for people who would like to try out writing on a Perkins before they buy their own and for people transitioning to braille.

**Events**

A yearly event is the INBAF Braille Reading Day, which usually takes place in November. Primary and secondary school braille readers from all around the country read out a piece of braille at their level and receive positive feedback on same from the audience and two “judges”, a proficient braille reader and a childrens’ book author. In recent years we have welcomed, amongst others, Judy Curtin, Martina Conlon-McKenna, Denise Deegan and Roddy Doyle.

Since the last GA, INBAF held UEB and Electronic braille information days in Dublin and Cork, which linked updated UEB/UIB information with showcasing the Perkins Smart brailler, the Canute prototype and other devices.

This year, INBAF held a Louis Braille workshop on his birthday, 4th January, in a central Dublin public library. This included hands-on brailling with a Perkins, demos of braille displays, tactile materials and games and a braille coin collection which might feature in this GA’s quirky corner. This event was held for all interested members of the public and was well received.

**Hosting the ICEB Mid-term Executive meeting**

INBAF was honoured to be hosting the ICEB Mid-term Executive meeting in Dublin from 17th – 21st April 2018. The meeting was held on Childvision’s campus, with the welcome reception taking place at NCBI’s training centre and visits to both organisations were part of the agenda. The Executive worked through a full schedule over the five days, reports from all the committees and delegations given and charges updated. Local observers attended some of the sessions. The social programme included a guided walk through Dublin city centre (without a drop of rain) and the conference dinner at ChildVision with live harp music.

**Braille support in Ireland during the Covid-19 crisis**

All schools and colleges in Ireland closed on the 12th March 2020 and are only reopening at the end of August/early September. All State Examinations, which usually take place in June, were cancelled. As in many other countries, tuition happened remotely and digital access paths strengthened out of necessity.

In terms of braille provision, the NCBI’s Library Access Service continued to deliver its bespoke services from its Library premise. The COVID crisis highlighted the importance of the Free Postal Library service- especially for older patrons that may not be digitally connected. The Library also supported an increasing number of students in higher education in accessing digital titles via the Bookshare platform. The NCBI Library was the only operating national library in the country - as all public and academic libraries in Ireland were closed during lockdown.

Please find below a summary of services that continued to operate during the COVID Crisis and lockdown:

1-Digital Access Services

•Instant availability of 600,000 + titles via the NCBI Bookshare.ie platform.

•Instant availability of 1000+ audio download titles via the NCBI Overdrive platform.

•Maintenance of the Digital platforms and the provision of online and telephone support.

 •Creation of Digital Bookclubs

2-Postal Access Services

•Distribution of audio, Braille and Large print books to isolated members via the Free Post service.

•Liaising with Iona Meals on Wheels to deliver Books on wheels to our isolated community.

ChildVision continued to provide educational and library services to children and young adults with a visual impairment and/or multiple disabilities all over Ireland.
While the centre was closed due to the lockdown, individual educational packages were sent out to

* All Early Years children, including for instance pre-braille activities for families
* All (usually) residential students with
* All young adults in the Lifelong Learning programmes, including easy to read information on Covid-19 in alternative formats.

ChildVision’s librarians, Early Years teachers and educators from the Dublin and Cork premises recorded story times of favourite book titles for Early Years and Primary school children, which were distributed via ChildVision’s digital platforms.

Childvision’s braille transcription and production figures increased during lockdown, which means that the provision with hardcopy educational material is well advanced for the re-opening of schools.

In contrast, the braille unit at Arbour Hill prison was affected by staff shortages due to Covid-19 lockdown which meant more closures and less production.

As mentioned in previous reports, braille displays and download services for same are now broadly used in Ireland. INBAF are happy to support this development through further national and international co-operations as this is part of INBAF’s advocacy work for braille and other alternative formats.

INBAF has profited from being linked in with ICEB over the last 8 years and would encourage any small country to consider joining this network of braille experts. Especially during the pandemic, it was of tremendous support to our work to share experiences with colleagues globally to the benefit of all braille readers.

Ilka Stäglin

INBAF Chairperson