**ICEB General Assembly, 25th – 30th May 2024**

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

**The Braille Space in Ireland**

Braille in Ireland, both UEB and the Irish braille code UIB, is alive and in use, with a very noticeable move to electronic braille consumption. This was accelerated by the pandemic.

By the autumn of this year, 2024, INBAF will be a member of ICEB for 12 years, which means that we joined only a few months after our official establishment in May 2012.

The same three braille producing organisations who came together to found our braille authority are still maintaining its momentum and advocating for braille literacy:

1. ChildVision with its Reading Services.
2. Vision Ireland (formerly NCBI) with its Library Access Service (formerly Media Centre).
3. Arbour Hill Prison with its unique braille unit within the Irish Prison Service.

As previously reported, four major organisations are working in the field of Visual Impairment in Ireland: Vision Ireland (formerly NCBI), ChildVision (The National Education Centre for Blind Children), Irish Guide Dogs and Fighting Blindness. While each of them have their own core client group and research interests, these might overlap at times. The four organisations have joined forces by working together as VISPA (Visually Impaired Service Providers’ Alliance) to give added weight to VI issues in Ireland.

 **Braille Provision in Ireland 2020 – 2024**

Local government agencies and government departments as well as student support services at universities produce some braille documents on demand and are linking in with the founding members of INBAF.

**Braille Services at Vision Ireland**

The Library Access Service at Vision Ireland supported the Heath Service Executive (HSE) during the COVID pandemic by providing frequent updates to COVID vaccination information leaflets in braille, audio and large print.

The Vaccine information leaflets were updated frequently by the HSE and the turnaround for the production of these leaflets in accessible formats were usually completed by our accessible production units within 24 hours.

The need for up-to-date information during the pandemic emphasized the importance of braille as a means of communicating vital information to our reader audience.

The Library Access Service continues to support pharmaceutical companies in Ireland in the creation and production of Braille labels for pharmaceutical packaging. Our Library Access Service offers an uncontracted Braille

Course specifically designed for pharmaceutical companies aimed at teaching the basics for creating and working with Braille.

The Accessible Production Units within the Library Access Service at Vision Ireland continue to support government departments and private companies in the production of accessible information in Braille, audio and Large print.

The Library Access Service at Vision Ireland developed the Bookshare.ie platform which holds over 1.3 million books in a variety of accessible formats including digital Braille files (BRF).  In addition to our digital Braille books, the

Library Service holds over 8,000 Braille books that are lent out from our location in Dublin via the Free Post for the Blind Service.

**Braille Services at ChildVision**

Reading Services 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. Their 3D-printing facilities supplement that service, as does ChildVision’s children’s library, featuring a large variety of children’s and young adult literature in different formats.

During the first part of the pandemic, ChildVision continued to provide educational and library services to children and young adults with a visual impairment and/or multiple disabilities all over Ireland.

Childvision’s braille transcription and production figures increased during both long lockdowns, which meant that the provision with hardcopy educational material was well advanced for the respective re-opening of schools.

Regular Children’s Braille Events at Reading Services

ChildVision's Reading Services host a number of braille events and outreach programs throughout the year. The biggest of which is **Braille Reading Day**. At this event, students from all over the country come to the campus in Drumcondra, Dublin, read some braille with their peers and have lots of fun. Students then get feedback on their reading from VIP guests. They can then enjoy a sensory story in the library and do some arts and crafts. Last year we held this event in March, the first in-person Braille Reading Day since 2019. This event has been running for over ten years and is the highlight of the year for students and transcribers.

We have continued to grow our relationship with Libraries Ireland especially their Fingal Library Service. In May, we took part in **Cruinniu na nÓg**, a day of free creativity for children which was held in Millennium Park in Blanchardstown. It is an event that is unique to Ireland and is the flagship initiative of the Creative Ireland Programme’s Creative Youth Plan, which aims to enable the creative potential of children and young people. Reading Services had a full display of braille and other formats.

 For the first time Reading Services took part in the **Fingal Festival of Children’s Literature** on a beautiful sunny day in September 2023 in Swords Castle. Reading Services had their full braille and book display and had a great amount of visitors who learned all about braille and experienced their sensory tables. The curator, author Shane Hegarty said, ‘To see so many kids walking around with their braille name badges was fantastic. ChildVision brought something special to the day’. Reading Services are hoping to attend his event again in 2024.

In the Early Education space, Reading Services have participated in the **Towers and Tales** **Book Festival** in Lismore Castle for the last 5 years, hosting sensory stories to an enthusiastic audience and reading stories such as “The Dinosaur who pooped a Princess” using all of the senses. There is an extensive amount of props to touch or hear as well as food to smell or taste. ChildVision also had an information stand to show braille and large print books as well as a wide variety of sensory materials used in ChildVision’s preschools in Cork and Dublin.

Tactile books can provide a gateway to braille and are an avenue by which students learn to use their fingers for sensory processing and exploration. Reading Services have operated a **Tactile Book Project** with secondary schools around the country for the last decade. In this project, Reading Services teach students about tactile books and it concludes with their presentation to us of a new set of tactile books for library that they have made throughout their school year. It was a great pleasure to be back in the classroom teaching the students all about these books and how they benefit library users and their families. ChildVision showcases many different types of tactile books and offers guidance in how to style and design a book.

**Braille Services at Arbour Hill Prison**

The braille unit at Arbour Hill Prison transcribes commercial braille for government agencies and other organisations. It also provides the only fully qualified Perkins repair service for Perkins braillers in the country. The co-operation and professional knowledge exchange continues between the braille unit and the other co-founders of INBAF, which strengthens each member’s production quality and quantity.

It was heavily affected by staff shortages due to Covid-19 lockdown, which translated into some closures and less braille production.

**State Examinations**

Instead of the traditional State Examinations for secondary schools (Junior Certificate for students of ca. 15 years of age and Leaving Certificate, end of secondary school and points achieved crucial for college entry), a calculated grades system was introduced for the classes of 2020 and 2021 (with some in-person adaptions). While no exam braille transcription took place in 2020, limited transcriptions were sought in 2021 and the full transcription and examination timetables returned in 2022. This highly confidential and high pressure transcription work is done by two specialist braille transcribers appointed by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). Both have strong links with INBAF through committees and educational work.

**Braille Technology**

INBAF continues to see interesting trends in how digital braille is being accessed in education, in the workplace and at home.

One of the positive spin-offs of the Covid-19 pandemic has been a greater awareness of this digital Braille technology by parents and guardians, and how they can be supported to work alongside students to maximise its use.

INBAF has worked alongside providers of refreshable Braille technology in the Irish market to insure that modifications to Braille codes, especially Irish, are integrated in a timely manner into relevant access technologies.

We have been keeping abreast of developments in the multi-line Braille space as well, and we see huge potential in this emerging technology in the years to come.

**Quality Assurance**

Until 2022 ChildVision offered a “Learn Braille” Course for mostly sighted learners which was based on the UEB updated Birmingham Braille Course material. During the pandemic, the course was moved to online learning, based on webinars and material worked through on a Moodle platform. Some of the hybrid shape of the course is being maintained and we are planning to offer this course again in late 2024.

INBAF continues to provide the quality assurance for this course as well as Vision Ireland pharmabraille course.
As reported previously, 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.

**INBAF’s other Work from 2020-2024**

Due to the pandemic, INBAF’s committee meetings and offers moved online and have largely stayed so since. This had an impact on possible events and we are only slowly returning to some in-person meetings.

**Updated Irish Braille (UIB) Implementation and Irish Braille sub-committee**

The Irish Braille sub-committee met in 2023 to agree bridging contractions and the latest iteration of the Updated Irish Braille code for Liblouis. Finalising of the latest decisions will take place this year. This was in response to requirements from both the educational and the assistive technology side. The bulk of the work for this committee is therefore nearly concluded and the group will now continue to monitor the use of UIB.

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

 **Maths braille working group**

No new publications have been issued from the maths braille working group. The latest guidelines for Ireland are still the 2017 resources which are available on the INBAF website under <http://inbaf.ie/ueb-resources/>

 **Perkins Loan Scheme**

The Perkins Loan Scheme, launched in 2017, continues to be a successful albeit small undertaking. Unwanted Perkins braillers are collected through INBAF and its members and maintained/repaired by the Arbour Hill Prison Unit. Then they are being sent out free of charge to whoever might need them, whether it is for educational or recreational use. Over the last few years, students transitioning to braille were the largest group of users.

 **Online Work**

INBAF member organisations and the Irish branch of Sight & Sound, led by Stuart Lawler, collaborated during the pandemic to bring braille displays and related technology to the end users as much as was possible with COVID restrictions.

The co-operation with ChildVision has continued and regular events with Sight & Sound are offered within ChildVision’s event and professional development calendar.

Through INBAF’s chairperson’s other role as member of the Board of the Braillists Foundation in the UK, the link between the braille scene in the UK and in Ireland continues to mutual benefit. INBAF committee member also co-operate with UKAAF and RNIB, where appropriate.

The Braillists continue to re-invent the online provision of braille-related information and have attracted an ever increasing global audience.

**Disabled Persons Organisation (DPO)**

INBAF recently met with the Irish DPO for the interests of people with visual impairment VVI (Voice of Vision Impairment, vvi.ie) to discuss differing opinions in relation to the use of UEB in private and public life. We would be happy to hear from other members in relation to the establishment of DPOs in their countries and possible co-operations with braille authorities.

**Vision 2022 Low Vision Conference**

VISPA, the Visually Impaired Service Providers Alliance hosted the 13th International Low Vision Conference by the International Society for Low Vision Research and Rehabilitation (ISLRR) in person in July 2022, which was delayed by two years due to the pandemic.

The conference gave a platform for, amongst many others, braille related research presentations, and helped to establish links between Irish and other participants’ organisations in the field.

**Outlook**

The involvement with and membership of ICEB has been instrumental in bringing INBAF’s role within the Irish braille space to the forefront. We are very grateful to all colleagues for the international co-operation and look forward to another 4 years of great initiatives, ideas and social media presence!

Ilka Stäglin

INBAF Chairperson

March 2024