UK Country Report for
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By James Bowden

(UK Association for Accessible Formats)

# Introduction

UEB is now well-established in the UK and efforts have turned towards promoting braille and improving braille learning and public perception. Below is a summary of some of the highlights in the UK over the past four years.

# UKAAF

The braille groups of UKAAF continue to meet online three or four times a year and work on various ongoing projects.

UKAAF has not needed to publish as many documents in recent years, but one area where it was felt guidance might be worthwhile was for those who have only learnt UEB and wish to read braille in the older code, Standard English Braille. A sheet was produced, similar to the UEB crib sheet, but in the reverse direction. This, and all other UKAAF documents, are available to download from [www.ukaaf.org/braille](http://www.ukaaf.org/braille)

UKAAF continues to host the email list called UEB-Ed. It is a community where you can ask questions about the UEB code and, particularly while UEB was new to people, was a very active international resource. Traffic has significantly slowed, but the email list is still available for those wishing to ask UEB questions.

In recent years, the annual meetings of UKAAF have moved online and have been shorter and less well-attended.

However, starting in January 2022, UKAAF introduced online seminars, initially held monthly, with interviews with people from a range of backgrounds in accessible formats. Speakers have come from technology, publishing, inclusive design and educational organisations and covered a wide range of topics. These have been well-received and past recordings are available on the UKAAF website.

## Duxbury Template

In collaboration with Duxbury Systems, we produced an updated template for the Duxbury Braille Translator, giving improved layout of braille according to UK conventions. Headings, bulleted lists, tables of contents, end markers and much more are included, as well as some revised style names. The previous template has been kept, in case anyone really needs to use it.

We are particularly grateful to Duxbury Systems and experts in RNIB for all their help and willingness to share their expertise. This project proved far more involved than originally anticipated.

## Mathematics

We considered several questions related to mathematics, in particular layout questions and the use of grade 1 indicators, especially where there is more than one "correct" way to write the same expression. We sent a proposal document to spark discussion at ICEB and we are grateful to Clive and the Technical committee for all the helpful comments and feedback. We are pleased that our document has proved helpful to determining a consistent approach and that it may form the basis for international consensus.

UKAAF is also hoping to produce a list of mathematical signs which have an assignment in Nemeth but not in UEB. Such a list may help guide future symbol assignments in UEB.

## Languages

Though UKAAF already has guidance for foreign languages, work is underway on the third book in the RNIB trilogy "Using UEB for …": the final book will be for modern foreign languages. The work was nearly completed, until we discovered discrepancies in the way Spanish inverted punctuation is being treated by various agencies. We hope to resolve this question in the coming months and thus complete the trilogy.

Another question arose what to do with "home nation" languages as second languages, for example English, Welsh and Irish Gaelic (there is no Scottish Gaelic braille code). We were pleased to find the question actually boiled down to using the existing principles for other languages: as the Unified Welsh and Updated Irish Braille codes have aligned all punctuation, numbers and other symbols to UEB, effectively the various suggested "methods" in the existing UKAAF guidance for languages mapped exactly to using the uncontracted (grade 1) or contracted (grade 2) codes of UEB, UWB or UIB.

Talking of Welsh, investigation is underway for adding a set of contraction learning tables to Duxbury for the Welsh language – currently, all the learning tables are for English.

## Reading Courses and Competitions

A concern was raised about the possible overuse of typeform indicators in some documents. Though no action has so far been taken, we continue to monitor the situation with a view, if needed, to prepare additional guidance for producers, whilst at the same time acknowledging that it might be that some readers may not have mastered all the UEB typeform signs.

Another project involves investigating whether a new reading scheme is required to bridge the gap between learning all the contractions of grade 2 braille and then encountering a typical library book, which may contain lots more signs and layout, such as typeforms, new page indications, various additional punctuation signs, tables of contents, footnotes and more.

We are also investigating the re-establishment of an annual reading competition in the UK. Such competitions were held in the past and provided opportunities for stimulating greater proficiency and confidence amongst braille readers. Plans are still at an early stage. We have learned that a school in the UK has successfully entered the US Braille Challenge competition.

Whilst on the topic of reading schemes and teaching braille, we are concerned that there is no official qualification to indicate a person's proficiency in teaching braille - not the code itself, but the ability to teach.

## Music

The Music groups of UKAAF continue to meet three times a year and are active in a number of projects, including talking scores, modified stave notation and, of course, braille.

We are particularly encouraged by the continuing development of music software, such as MuseScore, MakeBraille and SMB. We are very grateful for all the work, and the continuing commitment to accessibility and improvement, not least led by the DAISY Music project. We continue to feed back into these projects and are thrilled to see their ongoing development.

The UKAAF Music group recently published a document summarising all the popular tools which can be used to convert MusicXML into braille music and we hope this summary document will be helpful to those new to this field. Initial feedback has been very positive. A number of users in the UK are beginning to use these tools and the overall feeling is that they can be incredibly helpful.

## ICEB

We are particularly grateful to our ICEB colleagues around the world for all their input whenever we have submitted questions on all kinds of topics: from contraction of particular words to clarifications or requests to amend certain rules. We appreciate the efforts of the Code Maintenance Committee for progress on several of the Charges, the outcomes of which have been welcomed in the UK.

# Braillists Foundation

The Braillists Foundation (www.braillists.org) continues to go from strength to strength. Established by braille readers to promote social inclusion and independence for blind and partially sighted people, since the UK lockdown in 2020, the Braillists has held moderated online community calls weekly, for braille readers, including braille tuition for beginners, masterclasses on particular subjects and the popular Braille Bar where anyone can come and ask braille-related questions.

The online Book Club has become a close-knit community in its own right, highly valued by its members. Books of various complexities are chosen by the group leaders and different virtual rooms are available to suit readers' braille proficiency.

The Braillists Foundation continues to publish BrailleCast (www.braillecast.com), a regular podcast highlighting the many ways in which braille touches our lives. This includes topics ranging from interviews with special guests to focusing on a particular new technology or event.

A wide international audience has been reached with these initiatives and there are nearly 2,000 people subscribed to the Braillists' weekly newsletter.

# RNIB

RNIB continues to be at the forefront of braille in the UK.

## Reading and Library

RNIB launched the online Reading Services platform in 2020, with an expanding range of titles in DAISY audio and electronic braille which can be downloaded. The postal library was closed for a time in 2020 due to national lockdown, so instead of offering readers a postal service, RNIB produced an SD card of books which could be read with the Orbit Reader braille display. The card has been further expanded over several iterations and the present card of around 6,900 books continues to be extremely popular with braille readers using various displays.

In 2021, the RNIB braille library moved from a warehouse-based postal lending service to an on-demand braille library. Customers now receive newly produced, fresh braille books upon request in a smaller form factor. The new style volumes no longer have to be returned and are designed to be 100% recyclable.

## Braille Music Proficiency Awards

The RNIB continues to administer the Gardner's Trust Braille Music Literacy Awards each year. These awards provide an opportunity for people to have their braille music skills assessed. The tests were revised in 2022 to include a wider variety of tasks, including spotting differences, answering musical questions on a score and writing, as well as the existing tasks of reading, memorising and playing. The tests are now open for people of any age.

2023 provided the first opportunity to try the new tests and we were thrilled to have a variety of intrepid candidates, including one at level 4 (out of 5 levels), particularly as this candidate was self-taught.

The Music Advisory Service at RNIB is involved in a wide range of projects in all aspects of supporting blind and partially sighted people and promoting music-making opportunities at all stages of musical development.

## Online braille course

Over recent years, the RNIB has been working on creating an online version of a popular braille course, originally based at Birmingham University for the training of Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (QTVI). In conjunction with ChildVision in Ireland, we are pleased to report this project is finally drawing towards a successful conclusion, though there remains much testing still to do.

## Braille 200

We discovered a surprising thing that if you search online for "when was braille invented", you get a different answer if you use the English or French websites. We have therefore decided to celebrate the 200th anniversary between September 2024 and July 2025 (the academic year in the UK). Plans are underway with several exciting initiatives and events expected.

# In Memoriam

Finally, but by no means least, I wish to acknowledge the tremendous contribution of Bill Poole, who passed away in January 2021. Bill not only served as Chair of the Braille Authority of the United Kingdom for many years and remained committed to the Braille Subject Area of UKAAF until his passing, but also was instrumental in the development of UEB since its inception. We are indebted to his wisdom and experience, gained over many decades.

We were also saddened to hear of the passing of Dr Mike Townsend in November 2023. Mike served for many years in the Braille Authority of the United Kingdom and continued when this merged into UKAAF. He also served as the ICEB Public Relations Officer. Mike was chair of the UK's Technology Association of Visually Impaired People (TAVIP) and a trustee of RNIB and Guide Dogs. He was also chair of Torch Trust, an organisation producing Bibles and Christian literature in accessible formats. Mike brought a wealth of experience in many areas and no-one can doubt his enthusiastic outlook for everything he did.

# Conclusion

The past years have been busy ones including a wide array of projects. I would like to thank my colleagues in RNIB, UKAAF and ICEB for all their help, support, advice and expertise. Your continued contributions are very valuable and much appreciated.