

Document 7.1

Children's literature: discussion document

At its Policy and Strategy Committee meeting in April 2008, when considering its progress on achieving the goals outlined in its literature strategy, the Arts Council committed to the introduction of a specific policy on children's literature.

This paper outlines the current challenges and opportunities facing children's literature in Ireland. Council is asked to **consider** a range of approaches and options for addressing these issues.

Background

Partnership for the Arts prioritises the development of specific policies that 'clarify the Arts Council's position and priorities across the range of circumstances in which children and young people might and do interface with the arts.'

At its Policy and Strategy Committee meeting in April 2008, when considering its progress on achieving the goals outlined in its literature strategy, the Arts Council committed to the introduction of a specific policy on children's literature. To this end, a series of focus groups were convened with writers, illustrators, publishers, resource organisations, teachers, librarians and others involved in this area to establish the strengths, challenges and opportunities facing this sector, and what the Arts Council and others should prioritise in a policy document. The focus groups were overwhelmingly positive and constructive and the sector welcomed the Arts Council's engagement and interest in children's literature.

Profile of the sector

Writers and illustrators

Ireland is home to a number of internationally regarded children's writers and illustrators, including Eoin Colfer, Siobhán Parkinson, Conor Kostick, PJ Lynch and Niamh Sharkey; and more recently, Oisín McGann and Celine Kiernan have demonstrated that Ireland continues to produce talented illustrators and writers for this audience. As with all writers, making a living solely from one's writing career is challenging and writers rely on other sources of income to survive. Illustrators face similar challenges and, because of the relative dearth of publishers of illustrated children's books in the country, most move abroad early in their professional life in order to establish a career.

Publishers

Today, two children's publishers dominate the Irish market. The O'Brien Press produces some 20 new titles and 70 reprints annually and An Gúm produces 15–20 new titles in Irish (original works and translations) each year, and reprints about 10 titles. Other publishers producing a few children's books annually each include: Children's Press; Collins; Mercier and O'Donnell Press; and in Irish, Cló Mhaigh Eo; Coiscéim; Cló Iar Chonnachta; Cois Life, Móinín and Futa Faya. Mercier and O'Brien continue to publish work for children that is of literary value, as well as publishing titles that are more commercially or academically focused. Other publishers produce occasional children's titles each year, and New Island is in the process of developing a children's imprint, Little Island. The total output from all these is modest and reflects the real difficulty of making publishing for children in Ireland an economically viable business. Most publishers opt for the more lucrative adult markets and, it is worth noting that in Ireland, children's books are a small part of most publishers' lists. Elsewhere, including European countries, children's publishers are not dependant on an adult list. Factors that have a negative impact on the publishing industry in Ireland include pricing, excess supply from the multi-national publishers UK and the USA and the problems of scale. Children's publishing operates in a price sensitive market in Ireland where prices are low and determined primarily by non- Irish based, multi-national conglomerates for which Ireland is add-on territory. In most European countries, children's book prices are higher than in Ireland.

Resource organisations, libraries and festivals

Children's Books Ireland and IBBY Ireland both play an important role in promoting and developing children's literature in Ireland, through initiatives such as Children's Book Week, the Bisto Book Award and the 2001 National Reading Initiative, which all seek to increase the profile and audiences for Irish children's literature. Publications like *Inis*, *What's the Story* (both published by CBI) and *Bookbird* (published by IBBY) increasingly highlight the importance of children's literature in cultural life and provide a roadmap to teachers, parents and young people in selecting quality children's literature. Other literary organisations, such as CLÉ, Ireland Literature Exchange and Poetry Ireland, promote and support children's literature through their main programmes and through occasional projects and events. Specific examples have included a joint conference on children's publishing in Ireland organised by CLÉ and Children's Books Ireland; the ongoing support of ILE for the translation and promotion of Irish children's writers including Eoin Colfer, John Boyne, Celine Kiernan and Conor Kostick; and Poetry Ireland's successful Writers-in-Schools Scheme, which sees writers undertake visits or longer-term residencies in schools.

Irish libraries play a significant role in building audiences for children's literature and encouraging interaction between writers, libraries and other key partners. Children's Books Ireland's involvement in the Arts Council's Touring Experiment sought to test how libraries can work to promote live literature events for young people and identify what supports should be in place to expand readership and develop audiences for children's writing. All of the programmes above, however, are organised by diverse and varied players and there is a lack of collaboration and coordination among the various players to ensure that programmes have maximum impact.

Digital books and new media

Children's literature is uniquely defined by its audience, which is rapidly and continuously changing. Young people today have never known a pre-digital age and appealing to this audience requires an active and innovative engagement with the web and new media.

Today, digital books can be downloaded, either over the internet or through special kiosks, on to PCs, mobile phones or special e-book readers such as the Amazon Kindle and the Sony Reader. Digital books and new media are currently a significant area of debate in the publishing industry and publishers such as Mercier and O'Brien Press are already exploring ways to publish work, particularly for the young adult market, in digital format. While the global electronic book market is still small, with educational e-books selling faster than fiction or general non-fiction, there remains significant scope for Irish publishers to expand their activity in this area, particularly in light of the current economic climate and the importance of global sales to Irish publishers. Given that PSPs and I-phones now have the capability to accept and display e-books, and considering the recent improvements to the Sony Reader and the expansion of Google Books, the young adult market has been identified as ideal for further development.

Additionally, the web offers increased scope for communication with a broad range of stakeholders, including libraries, teachers, writers, illustrators, resource organisations and publishers, and Children's Books Ireland is currently improving its web presence to facilitate greater information exchange and the pooling of resources. In the UK, the Children's Laureate website has demonstrated the potential for such a virtual portal through its innovative use of blogging, video links and other resources, which all seek to increase the profile of, and extend engagement with, children's literature.

Arts Council support

Writers of work for children and young people have consistently been awarded funding under the Bursary programme, but only in very small numbers (approximately 1 per round). There appears to be no track record of support for illustrators. Anecdotally and reiterated throughout the focus groups, it has been noted that children's writers do not feel that the Arts Council holds children's writing and illustrating as a priority. There remains scope to increase writers' and illustrators' understanding of the Arts Council's remit in this area, encouraging children's writers and illustrators' to seek support from the Arts Council and identifying how Council defines quality within this field.

Publishers of literature for children and young people currently supported by the Arts Council have noted their total reliance on Arts Council support to continue publishing children's literature, as it is not a commercially viable area of publishing in Ireland, due to numerous factors within the current marketplace. While Council previously supported a number of other publishers in their children's programmes, funding was ended due to financial constraints, the ability of the publishers to earn income from the commercial streams of their programmes and waning quality in the production and literary content of these programmes. The rationale for these decisions, however, does not appear to have been adequately communicated to the sector and, anecdotally, publishers have communicated a lack of understanding around Arts Council decisions and policies in this area. There remains scope to encourage publishers to enter into this area of publishing.

Challenges

The current challenges facing the children's literary sector include:

- limited number of Irish publishers publishing for children and young people
- negative factors that impact on Irish publishers' ability to publish children's titles
- difficulty in making a living as a children's writer and/or illustrator
- lack of collaboration among children's literary infrastructure
- limited visibility of indigenous Irish children's literature
- low level of quality illustrated books produced in Ireland
- limited support for high quality illustrators in Ireland
- lack of understanding or awareness of the Arts Council's current supports and awards

- low level of confidence and perceived inadequacy of this area of literature, particularly when compared to literature for adults

Opportunities

The strengths and opportunities for the sector include:

- number of high quality children's publishers working in Ireland
- increased activity of resource organisations dedicated to promoting and advancing Irish children's literature
- number of high quality children's writers and illustrators emerging from Ireland year on year
- expansion of Arts Council supports for individual artists
- openness to partnership and collaboration within the sector
- potential of the web and digital publishing to extend audiences
- high degree of sectoral consensus around key priorities for the artform

Vision

In response to these challenges and opportunities, and in light of the extensive consultation with the sector, a long-term vision (10 – 15 years) is proposed. Council is asked to consider the following vision statement:

- 1 Establish children's literature on an equal basis with all other artform/practice areas**
- 2 Nurture the artistic impulse of writers and illustrators for children**
- 3 Support publishers to bring high quality children's literature to market**
- 4 Increase access for audiences to high quality children's literature**

Actions

A number of actions are proposed to progress the above vision statement; some actions would require further investment, while others are cost-neutral. Council is asked to consider the following action plan.

- 1 Establish children's literature on an equal basis with all other artform/practice areas**

It is proposed that the Arts Council work in partnership with others in order to redefine the place of children's literature in Ireland. The following actions are recommended to achieve the above:

- Establish a children's laureate in order to raise awareness and communicate the value of children's literature. The Laureate position would be supported by a focussed media campaign and a series of activities, perhaps modelled on the UK Children's Laureate (currently Michael Rosen). The Arts Council's role would be in developing and funding this concept, in partnership with other key agencies and organisations, including the Office of the Minister for Children; Poetry Ireland and Children's Books Ireland. Both Children's Books Ireland and Poetry Ireland have already articulated a commitment to financially resourcing this initiative.
- Work in partnership with others (libraries; Library Council, RTÉ, Irish Times etc) to increase the profile of this area of practice.
- Celebrate what the sector achieves on a regular basis, and include announcements in relation to the sector on the Arts Council website and in its newsletter.
- Lead and/or support gatherings of all aspects of children's literature industry on a regular basis to ensure information sharing and greater partnership.
- Continue to support those organisations that are already raising the profile of this area, including Children's Books Ireland, Poetry Ireland and IBBY Ireland.

2 Nurture the artistic impulse of writers and illustrators for children

A healthy and vibrant children's literature sector is dependent on the talent of its writers and illustrators. The needs of writers for children and young people are the same as writers for adult audiences; the needs of illustrators are the same as visual artists: the need for time, space and financial freedom to create their work. To date, while such supports are available from the Arts Council, the Council receives few applications from this sector and, by extension, the Council offers funding to very few. To help achieve the above, the following actions are proposed:

- Make explicit that the Arts Council provides support to children's writers and illustrators and provide improved access to information on Arts Council funding opportunities.
- Ensure that funding opportunities are utilised by writers and illustrators of children's work and that appropriate means for assessment are in place.
- Continue to support key resource organisations that are supporting writers and illustrators (ie Children's Books Ireland, IBBY),

3 Support publishers to bring high quality children's literature to market

As detailed above, publishers face specific challenges in publishing children's literature. As a result, a very small number of Irish publishers are working in this area and the diversity and quantity of Irish children's books is relatively low.

Support for Irish publishing for children is a necessity, so as to ensure that books are that reflect Irish life are available to children and young people. The following actions are proposed to support publishing:

- Continue to support Irish publishers that are publishing quality literature for children and young people and support those that have plans to develop high quality children's literature programmes.
- Prioritise support to publishers that are marketing their work effectively and building audiences for children's literature.
- Support resource organisations in the development of promotional platforms, including digital and new media platforms, for Irish children's publishing.

4 Increase access for audiences to high quality children's literature

The audience for children's literature is constantly changing and it is imperative to anticipate and respond to these changes. The following actions are recommended to assist in building audiences:

- Re-imagine and re-introduce the Writers-in-Libraries Scheme.
- Continue to support the Writers in Schools Scheme.
- Work with libraries and the Library Council to develop a system to guarantee that every library in Ireland has a standing order for 2 copies of every book published by an Irish publisher, to ensure access to Irish children's literature for audiences.
- Initiate a project with relevant new media partners aimed at bringing Irish published children's titles into digital formats.