

Supporting Writing in Irish

the arts
council
= chomhairle
ealaíon

Irish Language Literature Policy
2022–2025

SADHBH DEVLIN

RÓISÍN HAHESSY

GEANSAÍ OTTÓ



Image: Sadhbh Devlin reading from *Geansaí Ottó*,
Sadhbh Devlin & Róisín Haheesy (c) 2020–2022 Futa Fata
Photographer: Mark Devlin

1. Vision

The Arts Council is inspired by the prospect of an Ireland where Irish Language Literature is read, enjoyed and celebrated, where writers at all stages of their careers are supported to make work of literary ambition and quality, and where Irish Language Literature is – and is widely acknowledged to be – a core part of our literary and cultural life.

The Irish Language Literature sector is vibrant and culturally important, with active writers, publishers, journals as well as festivals and events throughout the country. The Arts Council's role in Irish Language Literature is to support the artform, and it is already a major player in provision for the sector in Ireland. As with literature in English, the Council's remit for literature includes poetry, fiction, short fiction, children's literature, critical writing, and some forms of creative non-fiction. The Arts Council's range of supports creates opportunities for both writers and people across the island to create and engage with new writing in Irish. Arts Council support is concentrated on individual writers, publishers, journals, festivals and events, and the Council supports a range of literary resource organisations that provide services and supports to writers working in both Irish and English.

As there are several different agencies and organisations concerned with the promotion of the language, the Arts Council's specific role is to support the creation of excellent literature in Irish and to enable more people to engage with literary writing in Irish.

2. Context

2.1 Legislative Context

At the wider political level, the use of Irish as an official language is provided for in legislation such as the Official Languages Act of 2003 and the recognition of Irish as an official working language of the European Union in 2007.

The Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga was established under the Official Languages Act as an independent statutory office operating as an ombudsman service and as a compliance agency.

It is the responsibility of the Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga to monitor the way the State's public bodies comply with the provisions of the Official Languages Act 2003. The Office takes all necessary measures to ensure that public bodies fulfil their obligations under the Act itself, under the Regulations made under the Act and under language schemes, where these apply.

The Office investigates complaints from the public in cases where it is believed that public bodies may have failed to fulfil their obligations under the Official Languages Act. The Office also enquires into any valid complaints regarding allegations that a provision of any other enactment relating to the status or use of Irish has been contravened.

As part of the 1999 Good Friday Agreement, Foras na Gaeilge was founded as the island-wide body responsible for the development of the Irish language including the speaking and writing of Irish in the public domain.

The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030 was published on 21 December 2010, following cross-party support in the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Strategy promotes a holistic, integrated approach to the Irish language which is consistent with international best practice. Within the strategy, actions aimed at fostering creative Irish language writing and encouraging engagement with Irish Language Literature feature prominently.

2.2 Current provision

Apart from Council support, several existing strategies, policies and initiatives are already in place to encourage literature in Irish.

Foras na Gaeilge advances reading and publishing chiefly through An Gúm, Áis, Clár na Leabhar Gaeilge and initiatives listed below. Through the Publishing Scheme operated by Clár na Leabhar Gaeilge and through the writing schemes for writers in Irish, Foras supports publishers and writers. Foras na Gaeilge also focuses on encouraging people to read and write in Irish.

2. Context

Specific initiatives to promote reading and publishing include:

The Mentorship Scheme, which gives an opportunity to writers at the outset of their careers to be advised by recognised writers about both their own writing and the trade of writing in general; a Commissioning Scheme whose purpose is to ensure sufficient provision in the various areas of literature in Irish; a Literary Projects Scheme for groups and organisations to support, preserve and develop Irish Language Literature; a Publishing Scheme which helps publishers to publish books and provides support in the areas of production, marketing and development.

Ealain na Gaeltachta is a partnership between the Arts Council and Údarás na Gaeltachta. It promotes the development of the contemporary and the traditional arts in the Gaeltacht; it provides services and grant schemes that support the development of arts organisations and individual artists. It also supports training and mentoring, as well as supporting initiatives that help build the capacity of and infrastructure for the arts in the Gaeltacht.

Other influential players include RTÉ, Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4, all of which have been an important outlet for writers and feature prominently within the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030.

3. Statement of Policy

Irish Language Literature is a central and significant part of the Arts Council's overall support for literature as an artform.

The Arts Council believes that contemporary Irish Language Literature should be far more visible and far more central to our literary and cultural lives.

The Council believes that the individual writer is at the heart of Irish Language Literature. Through its range of supports and initiatives, Council works to support the writers making high-quality literary work in Irish and to celebrate the achievement of writers working in Irish.

The Council believes that the best of contemporary Irish Language Literature should be a key part of the life of every person in Ireland, at every stage of their life. The Council believes that Irish Language Literature is a vibrant and exciting part of Ireland's living culture, and that it can and should reach a wide and diverse audience, regardless of people's level of Irish. We work through our initiatives and with others to create opportunities for readers and audiences to have meaningful engagement with high quality, contemporary literature in Irish.

4. Scope of Policy

As the national development for the arts with responsibility for Irish Language Literature as an artform, this policy speaks to artists (writers); those the Arts Council invests in who have an interest in Irish Language Literature; government, local government, public agencies, cultural institutions, professional bodies, other partners; and the public.

A young girl with a floral headband is looking at a book. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a sign that says "eacht le Mamai".

Image: Edith Wilson (8) launching the 2021 Towers and Tales Festival at Lismore Castle
Photographer: Brownes Photography

4. Scope of Policy

4.1 The Artist

Contemporary Irish Language Literature is characterised by standards of artistic excellence and innovation, but a myriad of challenges and blockages face writers working in the area. These include a paucity of opportunities to work with mentors and editors in the early stages of career, absence of formal training opportunities, a lack of media interest and media profile of Irish language writing, and the relative low visibility in bookshops, libraries and literary festivals. Since its establishment, the Arts Council has supported Irish language writers in a number of different ways, and its work complements that of other agencies, such as Foras na Gaeilge and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Local authorities also play a critical role in supporting writers, though their level of support for Irish Language Literature is not mapped at present.

The Arts Council's support for Irish language writers includes the Bursary Award, the Next Generation Artist Award, the Project Award, Commissions, the Agility Award and the Markievicz Award. All with a different focus, these opportunities enable literary writers working in Irish to afford time and space to develop new work, as well as collaborate and experiment with other writers, artists and/or organisations. These awards are adjudicated by Irish language writers and those with expertise in Irish Language Literature. There is a low level of awareness of these opportunities among Irish language literary writers, and there is room to raise the profile of these awards. There may be a need to tailor some supports to the specific needs of Irish language writers.

The Council also supports a residency for an Irish language writer in partnership with Dublin City University. It supports publishers and festivals through its Arts Grant Funding Award, Strategic Funding and Festival Investment schemes. The Council also supports Aosdána, which includes Irish language writers.

Through Ealaín na Gaeltachta, a partnership between the Arts Council and Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Arts Council promotes the development of the contemporary and the traditional arts in the Gaeltacht; it provides services and grant schemes that support the development of arts organisations and individual artists. It also supports training and mentoring, as well as supporting initiatives that help build the capacity of and infrastructure for the arts in the Gaeltacht.

While there is significant activity and investment in Irish Language Literature, there is considerable scope to make Council's role in this area better understood by Irish language literary writers and increase our engagement with, and relevance to, those writers making high-quality literary work in Irish, at all stages of their careers. The number of applications from Irish language writers to Arts Council opportunities is generally low and is not thought to be representative of the number of literary writers working in Irish today. As stated, there is room to be more explicit and tailored in the Council's approach to supporting this area.

Support for Irish language writers tends to be disjointed and not seen as core to the work of resource organisations and others. There is a paucity of critical writing about contemporary Irish Language Literature, which increases the sense of invisibility among writers and does not promote literary excellence.

4. Scope of Policy

Over the course of the policy and strategy, Council will work to make its current supports more visible, and augment those with bespoke initiatives and partnerships which will foster the creation of literary work in Irish. The Council will encourage linkages and cooperation between writers and writers' organisations working in Irish, English and other languages, identifying gaps in services and making Irish language writers and writing more visible, integrated and supported in the wider literary ecosystem. The Council will work to support more critical writing about Irish Language Literature, which in turn supports literary standards and raises the profile of this dynamic part of our literary life.

4.2 Public Engagement

The Arts Council is concerned with providing the public with opportunities to read, listen to and engage actively with high-quality literature in Irish. The Council is already committed to developing engagement through its support of publishers, festivals and projects under Arts Grants Funding, Strategic Funding, the Commission and Project Awards, the Festivals Investments Scheme and through its Scríbhneoir Cónaithe/Writer in Residence partnership with DCU.

Given the high quality of Irish language literary writing and increasingly positive attitudes towards the Irish language, the number of people engaging with this work is low, and this is a core issue to be addressed over the life of the strategy. As above, Irish language writing and writers often feature in a marginalised way in literary festivals, events and programmes. This is often due to under-resourcing and a lack of knowledge and expertise

in the area and has a negative impact on the artform and the way that audiences engage. For readers and audiences, there are numerous barriers, whether real or perceived, to engaging with Irish language literary work. There is an absence of research that could inform readers' behaviours and preferences that could inform publishers, libraries and booksellers in this regard.

Several literary publishers concentrate exclusively on Irish language writing, and the standard of literary publishing in Irish is continuously improving, both in production and in literary terms. The sector, however, is fragile, with many publishers operating as one-person operations. Areas such as succession planning, distribution, human resources and governance require more attention and support. These publishers play a critical role in nurturing new talent and affirming existing talent, and the sector needs ongoing support to address increasing challenges.

Over the course of the policy, working with others and in concert with the ambitions of 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030, the Council will work to strengthen the profile of Irish Language Literature among readers and audiences locally and nationally and to encourage the provision of new opportunities in schools, libraries, and local communities. It will work to increase the visibility of Irish Language Literature at festivals and other literary events, and the increased provision of Irish language literary across various age ranges and readership groups.

4. Scope of Policy

4.3 Other MGAW Areas of Strategic Interest for Irish Language Literature

Young People, Children and Education

In September 2021, enrolment figures indicated that around one in 12 – or about 45,000 – children are now being educated through Irish at primary level, rising to 60,000 when including those at second-level gaelcholáistí; this represents a record high and offers a unique opportunity for young people to engage with Irish Language Literature – both in reading and in writing. These are young people reading Irish language books before – or at the same time – they learn to read books in English; they have a fluency in the language that can and should be met with great works of literature.

While there is a relatively satisfactory level of literary material in Irish available to young children, there is a paucity of literary work for pre-teens and teenagers in Irish.

Among the reasons for this is the fact that it is difficult to sell this material in bookshops, as older children and young adult readers are oriented to English language fiction, and the emphasis on reading work in the Irish language is for educational purposes – rather than for pleasure. Additionally, there is a knowledge gap among parents and teachers when it comes to recommending Irish language titles for children across all ages, though key resource organisations are making good strides in addressing this.

There is little evidence that formal education supports creative writing in Irish in a meaningful way, nor that it supports reading Irish Language Literature for pleasure. Across the consultation, it was noted that it takes exceptional teachers to depart from the curriculum and introduce new Irish language writing and reading for pleasure.

Given the focus of the current Laureate na nÓg, the prominent level of interest in Irish language medium education across Ireland and the relative health of the wider children's and YA literary sector, there is considerable scope to heighten awareness of high-quality Irish language literary work for young people, across all ages, and encourage a new generation of writers and readers of Irish language literary work.

Irish language policy for the Arts Council

This policy is drafted at a time when the Council is developing an overall policy and strategy for the Irish language and the arts. The final policy and strategy for Irish Language Literature will be compatible and in concert with the spirit and actions of the overall Irish language policy. This will involve collaboration with all relevant artform and practice teams in the Arts Council.

Place, Space & People

This policy was drafted when the Council was developing Place, Space & People, a new Arts Council policy framework for socio-spatial equity in the arts. The actions in the strategy will be implemented within the context of this framework and in concert with its priorities.

Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy

The policy is published in the context of the Arts Council's Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy, and will be implemented in line with its principles and priorities. The Arts Council is conscious that new Irish language literary work is being developed by a new generation of writers from diverse backgrounds. The Arts Council is also conscious that work is being presented and published in a variety of ways – online, spoken-word, bilingually – and will ensure that its actions encourage and support these areas of work.



Image: Sally Devereux-O'Connor enjoying peek a boo during Story, Rhythm and Rhyme with Deirdre Ryan during Cork World Book Fest at Cork City Library on Thursday 25 April
Photographer: Clare Keogh

Supporting Writing in Irish

List of Contributors

List of people and organisations who responded to invitation to meet or submit response to draft strategy and policy:

CLÓ IAR-CHONNACHT
Collective staff response

CHILDREN'S BOOKS IRELAND
Collective staff response

FORAS NA GAELIGE
Consultative Meeting

BREANDÁN MAC CRAITH
Foras na Gaeilge

LIAM CARSON
Director, IMRAM

TRISTAN ROSENSTOCK
Comhar & RTÉ RnaG

MICHEÁL Ó CONGHAILE
Cló Iar-Chonnacht

LOUIS DE PAOR
Irish Studies Academic Director, UCG

SIMON Ó FAOLÁIN
Féile Bheag Filíochta

DAIRENA NÍ CHINNÉIDE

AILBHE NÍ GHEARBHUIGH
Univesity College Cork

CAOILFHIONN NICPHÁIDÍN
Cois Life

TADHG MAC DHONNAGÁIN
Futa Fata

ÉAMONN Ó DÓNAILL
Gaelchultúr

CELIA DE FRÉINE

MICHEÁL Ó HUANACHÁIN

SINÉAD MAC AODHA
Literature Ireland

AONTAS NA SCRÍBHNEOIRÍ

BOOKS IRELAND

PATRICK COTTER
Munster Literature Centre

MAUREEN KENNELLY
Formerly Poetry Ireland

MICHAEL CRONIN
Trinity College Dublin

MICHEÁL Ó FEARRAIGH
Ealaín na Gaeltachta

RACHEL HOLSTEAD
Ealaín na Gaeltachta

FEARGHUS Ó CONCHÚIR
Deputy Chair, the Arts Council

RÓISE GOAN
The Arts Council

AOIFE GRANVILLE
The Arts Council

Documents Consulted:

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The Arts Council

70 Merrion Square

Dublin 2, Ireland

artscouncil.ie

facebook.com/artscouncilireland

twitter.com/artscouncil_ie

T +353 1 618 0200

F +353 1 676 1302

Callsave 1850 392492

