



# A REVIEW OF LAUREATE NA NÓG

## Sustain, Strengthen, Recalibrate

2020 marks a decade of Laureate na nÓg. The Arts Council has taken this opportunity to undertake a formal review, considering afresh the aims and ambitions of Laureate na nÓg and ensuring their alignment with those of Making Great Art Work.

The review also sought to evaluate Laureate na nÓg's impact as a programme and makes recommendations for future years. This paper was presented to the Arts Council at its Plenary meeting on 22 April 2020.

A review of Laureate na nÓg: Sustain, Strengthen, Recalibrate

## 1. History and Context of Laureate na nÓg

In 2008, as part of the mid-term review of Partnership for the Arts, the Arts Council led a series of consultations to develop a comprehensive vision, strategy and action plan for children's literature. Central to its aims was a proposal to establish a children's laureate, a role which would celebrate children's literature and its contribution to cultural life.

Laureate na nÓg was established in 2010. Siobhán Parkinson was awarded the honour of being Ireland's first Laureate na nÓg. Since that time there have been four other laureates - Niamh Sharkey, Eoin Colfer, PJ Lynch and Sarah Crossan, who will conclude her term in late April. Each has contributed in their own ways to the aims of the programme. The sixth Laureate na nÓg, Áine Ní Ghlinn, will be announced in May, with her first public event to take place in the final quarter of the year.

## 2. Review

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### 2.1 Brief and Methodology

In late 2019, Janice McAdam was engaged to undertake a formal review of Laureate na nÓg for the Arts Council. A full account of this review is available as a PowerPoint presentation in the Reading Room.

Through desk research and active engagement with a set of key internal and external stakeholders, a review of the Laureate na nÓg honour and programme was undertaken, considering:

- the strength and relevance of the programme today and the external factors which may positively or negatively impact the programme in the future
- the impact and influence of the programme on the sector in general and on writers/ illustrators and writing for children in particular
- the alignment with and potential to advance the strategic objectives of its primary stakeholders – The Arts Council and Children's Books Ireland (who manage the laureate programme)
- the potential to deliver on the Council's EHRD policy & strategy

- the relationship with other laureate initiatives
- the efficacy of the current governance, management and budgetary model

The review was informed by desk research, workshops and focus groups, and a series of in-depth interviews. Focus groups were undertaken with young people (ranging from fifth class students who had not engaged with Laureate na nÓg, to transition year students who had worked with the current laureate, to a very engaged group of young people involved in a local writers' group. One major industry workshop was conducted, and included expertise from booksellers, publishers, writers, illustrators, local authorities, educators and librarians. The former and current laureates were all interviewed, as were all the project partners and relevant stakeholders. Interviews were also undertaken with international laureates/projects.

### 3. Overall findings

In general, there was a great sense of positivity about the environment in which literature for children and young people exists. It was said to be 'quite buoyant'. Participants noted a strong pipeline of merging talent and a sense of collegiality in the sector. Particular strengths were reported in writing for young adult audiences.

Children's Books Ireland was recognised as an increasingly strong and growing organisation, recruiting additional staff and expanding its reach and services. Both DCU and TCD offer postgraduate courses in Children's and Young Adult Literature and Children's Literature respectively, underlining a cultural shift in the seriousness with which children's literature is considered. It was noted that the landscape has also improved for illustrators and continues to strengthen with increasing 'understanding and appreciation' of their work.

It was, of course, reported that there is still considerable 'need for improvement': for 'proper' remuneration and for 'parity of esteem' with other writers.

Laureate na nÓg was commonly seen as a 'hugely impressive' and 'important' initiative that has advanced children and young people's literature in Ireland. It was said to have contributed to building a stronger, more confident, cohesive and vibrant sector. It was widely felt the Laureate has helped to change the perception and raise the profile of literature for children and young people in Ireland and internationally. It was acknowledged that Laureate na nÓg had enabled new connections to be made across various sectors and industries, and had advanced opportunities for children's writers, illustrators and the sector more broadly.

Throughout the consultation process, it was noted that the Laureate and the associate programme was characterised by a 'generosity of approach'. It was seen to be at work nationally and to be reaching those who may be socially or geographically disadvantaged.

As an initiative and an honour, Laureate na nÓg was generally very highly-regarded and considered to have built on its strengths and to have ‘consistently shown leadership’, encouraging the sector, inspiring children, young people and adults and championing genres equitably e.g. the most recent programme, ‘We are the Poets’ was judged to have been ‘very successful in getting so many kids interested in poetry’.

Many of those consulted during this review had also been involved in the development of Laureate na nÓg. As such, they affirmed that its success has been built on the firm foundations of sectoral support, clear objectives, careful management and respectful relationships.

A strong working relationship between the Arts Council and Children’s Books Ireland was understood to be critical to the project’s success, as was the close working relationship of the Head of Literature and the CEO of Children’s Books Ireland.

The choice of Laureates and quality of the programmes they devised and led were also noted as having significantly contributed to the success of the initiative to date. Sharing ‘a motivating passion for connecting children with books’, the Laureates were seen to have assured the laureateship of prestige and to have fulsomely animated its purpose.

All those consulted, children and adults, considered it important that Laureate na nÓg exists. However, consideration of its purpose (why it exists?) gathered a variety of answers and revealed ambitions that ranged from promotion of literature and the joy of reading to advancing literacy, from recognising individual talent to sectoral advocacy. Some participants considered that it was timely for Laureate na nÓg to undertake a similar exercise to ‘refresh’ understanding of its purpose. In particular, it was thought necessary to clarify the ambition and purpose of the Laureate na nÓg in relation to children and young people and considering the YPCE ambitions of the Arts Council, as appropriate.

#### 4. Recommendations

Laureate na nÓg now exists in the context of *Making Great Art Work*, with its twin core priorities of ‘the artist’ and ‘public engagement’, and its focus on children and young people. Alongside this, the Laureate must also be seen in relation to the Council’s newer corporate policies, Paying the Artist and the Equality, Human Rights and Diversity Policy and Strategy.

While Laureate na nÓg may be said to **align with these priorities and policies**, there is scope for attention and action in some areas specifically in relation to the:

- Fair and equitable stipend for Laureate na nÓg when considered alongside Council’s other, comparable honours (Laureate for Irish Fiction and Chair of Poetry)
- Involvement of children and young people

- Diversity of artists (as Laureate) and audiences (those engaged in and by the programme)
- It is recommended that **the vision and purpose of Laureate na nÓg be re-considered to** strengthen its distinction and affirm how it is understood.
- The Arts Council is encouraged to consider the **distinct positioning of Laureate na nÓg**, and work to ensure that it is distinguished primarily as an **honour and a leadership position**.

It is recommended that the Arts Council, in partnership with Children's Books Ireland, implements the following:

- Recalibrate the relationship between the position and the programme, ensuring and affirming Laureate na nÓg as an honour.
- Institute parity across the stipends for the Laureate for Irish Fiction, Laureate na nÓg and Ireland Professor of Poetry
- Recast the programme of work for the Laureate that aligns with their leadership status e.g.
  - Annual lecture or podcast
  - Mentorship of up and coming writers / illustrators
  - Speaking appearance at select events such as CBI Conference, Bologna Children; Book Fair, UK Laureate event etc
  - Peer engagement
- Dedicate time within the Laureate na nÓg honour so that the artist has time dedicated to his or her creative practice.
- Separately, develop with the help of children and young people, an **associate programme** that may continue the engagement and outreach of a relevant theme of work, that aligns with both the aims of Literature, YPCE and CBI. This programme should also attend to the Council's EHRD policy and Paying the Artist.
- Seek opportunities to **advance the involvement of children and young people** in Laureate na nÓg as appropriate.
- Continue to involve a young person in the Selection Panel.
- Diversify the selection process for the Laureate, in line with EHRD policy and strategy

- Institute children and young people informing the associate programme of work through participation in workshops to consider themes, to devise content or to pilot programmes.
- Once the vision and purpose has been articulated and the programme re-cast, support Laureate na nÓg with a **Steering Group** of appropriately skilled and expert individuals. This may include funding partners but also those who may make valuable contributions in others ways.
- Establish a **full-time resource** for Laureate na nÓg to support the curation and management of the programme and specifically to advance the promotion of children and young people's literature.
- Develop a cogent briefing document and clear Terms of Reference for an incoming Laureate na nÓg.
- Develop an **Induction Programme** that ensures their familiarity with key stakeholder and fluency with key communications protocols and messages.