

# Just imagine

How Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, now more than 20 years old, is still encouraging children and families to read. By *Annette Rawstrone*

**D**olly Parton may be a famed country music singer-songwriter, but she is also creating a reading legacy with an international children's book gifting scheme.

Launched in 1995 in her home county of Sevier in East Tennessee, USA, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) came to the UK in 2008 and has also spread to Canada and Australia. Her vision is to enable children to have access to books regardless of household income and to foster a love of reading among young children and their families by sending them a free book each month from birth to five years old. This means children build up a collection of up to 60 books by their fifth birthday.

'Dolly was one of 12 children and grew up in a small two-bedroom shack. Her father couldn't read or write and the only book they had at home was a Bible,' explains Kirsteen Watson, the UK regional director of the Dollywood Foundation, which oversees DPIL. 'She has grown to love books and wants all children to have access to the dreams and aspirations that reading brings.'

## DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES

The books are selected annually by a committee of experts in early childhood literacy, libraries and reading in each country. They are chosen to support developmental milestones – such as starting school – and encourage active involvement, with children lifting flaps, counting, using pictures to tell a story, singing songs and rhymes. In the UK the books include classics, popular characters – such as Peppa Pig and Spot the Dog – and contemporary titles. They are all published by Penguin Random House, which provides the books at a reduced cost.

Children receive Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* as their first book, along with a letter from Dolly Parton, and the last 'graduation' book is *Just Imagine* by Pippa Goodhart and Nick Sharratt. Others include *Each Peach Pear Plum* by Allan and Janet Ahlberg, Rod Campbell's *Dear Zoo* and factual books on bugs and dinosaurs.

'The drip, drip, drip of books every month is a constant reminder to families to read routinely. It helps children to engage with books and be excited about them,' says Ms Watson.

**Right: Dolly Parton, who launched the scheme in 1995 in Tennessee**

**Below: the London team of the Imagination Library**



'Each book is addressed to the individual child and they are excited to receive them.'

A number of research and evaluation studies to assess the effectiveness of DPIL have been carried out since the programme's inception (see box), with the main impact being:

- Children have stronger book handling and early reading skills.
- They are more prepared for school.
- It encourages parental engagement.

**The Dollywood Foundation works with a range of partners and sponsors, including local authorities, individual companies, housing associations, schools and nurseries**

## VALUE FOR MONEY

Dolly Parton does not personally fund the books. In the UK, the Dollywood Foundation works with a range of partners and sponsors, including local authorities, individual companies as a staff benefit, housing associations, schools and nurseries, to provide the books. Each sponsor funds the books and postage – which currently costs £25 per child per year – while the foundation pays for the overheads of running the scheme. The size and scope of the Imagination Library





Ms Watson. 'Along with the benefits of introducing books to children at an early age, it is a light-touch way to gather information and link with families in a non-threatening way. Local authorities also see it as a catalyst for other activities.' (See case studies).

Fourteen local authorities operate DPIL across England, each funded differently. Southwark Council is operating a scheme for all children living in the borough who were born in or after December 2015, paid for by local company DialAFlight for the next three years. A scheme in Bradford, sponsored by literacy charity Canterbury Imagine, is for all under-fives in the Canterbury and Midland Road areas and all looked-after children.

However, three local authorities recently pulled out of the scheme, including the UK's pioneer project run by Rotherham Council. The book-gifting for local residents, which cost the council up to £400,000 a year, was closed in February as part of austerity cuts.

To avoid future schemes closing, Ms Watson says they are encouraging a multi-agency partnership approach to funding.

All looked-after and accommodated children aged from birth to five years in Scotland are enrolled in DPIL, and Ms Watson hopes to do this throughout England too. 'Looked-after children move around a lot and one of the constants that we can give them is books sent directly to them,' she says. 'Dolly firmly believes that by giving all children access to books, they can see beyond their world and not be constrained by it.' ■

depends on the wishes of the sponsor, with them ranging in size from ten to 13,000 children. It is always free for participating families.

'The appeal for local authorities and other organisations is that it is simple to run and good value for money,' says

## DPIL: EVALUATIONS

### School readiness

A peer-reviewed research study in New York (Center for Urban and Applied Research, 2015) found a 29 per cent increase in children assessed as 'ready for school' when they had participated in Dolly Par-ton's Imagination Library for three or more years.

### Reading in the home

A previous peer-reviewed study from the same team found that the percentage of parents reading to

their child more than once per day doubled from 29 per cent to 59.3 per cent.

### UK research and evidence: North Lincolnshire

The scheme launched in 2013 in North Lincolnshire. By 2016, North Lincolnshire was in the top quartile of all local councils with 74 per cent of children achieving a 'good level of development' at age five, compared with 53 per cent in 2013 and 66 per cent nationally.

## CASE STUDIES

### Brenda McMullen, principal, Cliftonville Integrated Primary School, Belfast

'Children were excitedly talking about DPIL in assembly just this morning because they've received another delivery of books. A free book being sent to their homes every month creates a real sense of occasion.

'We joined the scheme two years ago and are grateful to the Carson Award for sponsoring us to register all our nursery children. We're always looking at ways to raise standards and encourage parents to be involved in their children's learning. DPIL enables us to link school and home and give children their own books, which some of our parents can't afford to buy. Our involvement has helped raise the profile of reading among families and we attribute an improvement in language skills and our baseline assessment to families sharing books more.

'Our school was the first in Ireland to join DPIL and we received a letter from Dolly. We're now looking to expand the scheme into the local community.'

### Ioana Jano, mother of five-month-old Erik (pictured), Rotherhithe, Southwark

'I wish this lovely scheme had been launched in Southwark when my older child was born. I grew up in Romania and often ask my British friends what the popular and classic children's books are because I don't know them. I'm keen that my children are exposed to good books and want them to enjoy those that are also read by their peers.

'Erik has now received three books and it's like getting a present every month. They've all been really nice and we like reading them as a family. My daughter especially liked *Peter Rabbit*, so we borrowed other Beatrix Potter books from the library.'



### Sandra Simmons, principal officer, North Lincolnshire Council

'When we launched the scheme in 2013, funded by the council, we decided a free book through the door wasn't enough and wanted a holistic approach to encouraging reading. So we've appointed Imagination Library lead champions in children's centres, schools, early years childcare provision and libraries who consider how best to inform and engage parents in DPIL. They organise regular events and activities linked to the DPIL books, nurseries send home book packs inspired by them and we promote conversations around the books to support the home learning environment. We link DPIL up with Bookstart and other early reading initiatives in the area.

'I'm told we have the highest rate of children enrolled in the scheme, with 85 per cent of children aged birth to five involved. Parents are informed of the scheme by the registrar when they register their child's birth, and midwives and health visitors also promote it. All our looked-after children and those with additional needs are signed up and we track down families who have moved, which helps us to remain engaged with vulnerable families.

'We want to promote a love of books and literacy, and can see the benefits DPIL is having [see evaluations box]. It's a fabulous scheme because the books are age-appropriate and of a high quality, there is an excitement around receiving them and, above all, children and parents love it.'