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Models of service II Republic of Ireland: getting to know you

Lina Kouzi

National Council for the Blind in Ireland, Republic of Ireland

Researchers:

Ms Ciara McGettigan

Ms Rebecca Curtis

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to find out what Public Libraries in Dublin know about the Library Services of the National Council for the Blind of Ireland. The tool for measurement and evaluation was a survey conducted from a selection of Public Libraries in the Dublin area.

The Paper can be divided into three sections. The first section introduces the National Council for the Blind of Ireland and more specifically, the Library service. The second section focuses upon the survey. The survey takes the form of a questionnaire and was conducted across twelve Public Libraries in the Dublin area. The third section of the paper contains the results and recommendations.

An Introduction to the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI)

The National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) is a not- for Profit, voluntary organisation offering a nationwide service to over 7000 individuals annually experiencing problems with their sight. The National Council for the Blind of Ireland aims to optimise the intellectual, social and economic independence of visually impaired people and to minimise the effects of visual impairment. Trained staff and volunteers work with NCBI in providing a wide range of quality services to over 6,700 people eligible to use them.

Over 1000 individuals annually, confronted by significant sight loss use the services of NCBI to re-establish their equilibrium as fulfilled, independent people coping successfully with their loss of vision. Services include mobility and daily living skills training, peer counselling and

family therapy, advice, information and support from a nationwide network of community resource workers, centre based rehabilitation training, low vision clinic, Library Services and Media Production Unit, equipment resource centre, teaching aids, employment support service and technology assessment and support unit.

An Introduction to the Library Services at NCBI

NCBI offers a wide range of audio books, Braille books and Large Print books. The collection of catalogued material has now exceeded 9,000 titles and our client numbers have increased to nearly 3,000 clients. Our Library policy is to provide material in accessible format to individuals that are registered as Blind or Vision impaired.

The Library is based in Dublin, and uses the free postal service to loan material to clients. Some clients visit the premises to borrow material, but the majority of correspondence takes place through the postal system. NCBI Library client numbers have increased dramatically over the last couple of years and I believe that this is due to two main factors: firstly, creating awareness of the Library Service, and secondly, the Library prides itself in a having good client focused approach to dealing with enquiries.

Creating awareness has developed from NCBI Libraries attendance at conferences and exhibitions nationally and internationally. This has opened up new channels of communication with other disability organisations and educational institutions. Earlier this year, NCBI Library exhibited at the Irish Library Association Conference in Galway. The exhibition stand had an excellent display of new innovations in technology as well as a display of Braille, audio and Large Print books.

Our good client focused approach in dealing with enquiries stems from listening to our users and finding out their needs. Liasing with International institutions through inter-library loans has helped us meet the varied requirements of our clients. Also, in a reciprocal manner, the production of Irish interest material in audio and Braille has allowed NCBI Library to lend out their material internationally.

The Role of the Library

The Function of all Libraries are essentially the same: “to acquire bibliographic materials related to the interests of a particular user population actual or potential; to organise and display these materials in various ways; and to make them available to users” (Lancaster, 1977)

In the past twenty-five years, the general functions of a Library haven’t changed. The three key phrases “to acquire”, “to organise” and “to make available” lie at the heart of any Library Service.

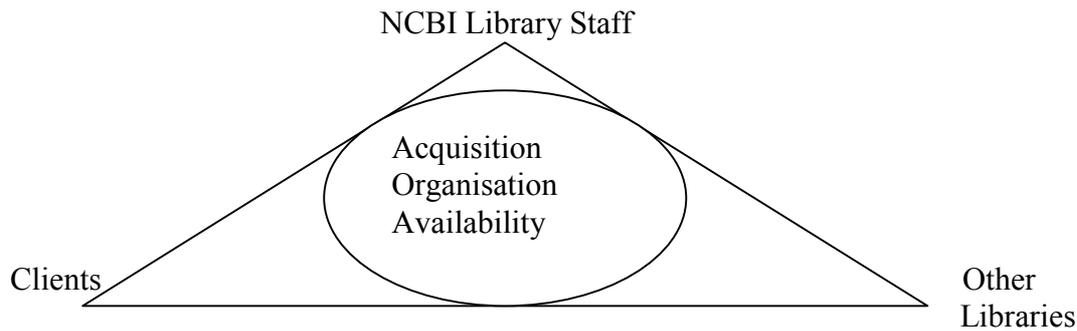


Fig.1

The link that facilitates acquisition, organisation and availability is communication. Communicating with clients, communicating with other Libraries and communicating with staff. In this paper, I will be investigating communication between our Library and the Public Library Service in the Dublin area. The results from the survey are hoped to create awareness of NCBI Library Service and open up new channels of cooperation.

The Survey

The survey was conducted over a two-month period and investigated twelve Public Libraries in the Dublin area. The Questionnaire was divided into two sections:

- 1- The Role of the Public Library and Vision Impairment
- 2- Awareness of NCBI Library Services

The dual objective of this survey was to find out what the Public Library Service has on offer for individuals experiencing problems with their sight, and to create awareness of the Library Service of the National Council for the Blind of Ireland.

The Role of the Public Library and Visual Impairment

The majority of the Public Libraries in the Dublin area have Large Print and 2- track audio collections for adults. These collections are available to the general public with no restrictions. All Public Librarians interviewed claimed that they had not lent out audio material to individuals that are experiencing problems with their sight. Also, Public Librarians claimed that it was elderly individuals that use the Large Print service in the Public Libraries. Public Librarians had not made a link between age and possible sight deterioration.

Interestingly, 50 % of Public Libraries surveyed had no Large Print, or audio material for juniors. In comparison, The Library at the National Council for the Blind of Ireland has a collection of over 1,500 titles in large print and audio made available to junior members that are experiencing problems with their sight.

Although NCBI Library service compliments the Public Library service, a grey area has arisen. Children that have perceptual problems may need access to audio or Large Print books. The National Council for the Blind of Ireland cannot send out material to individuals that are not registered as Blind or vision impaired. Perceptual Problems such as Dyslexia

cannot be registered as a sight problem and therefore children that are dyslexic are not able to use NCBI Library Service. The Public Library Service has failed these children as well. Children's books are not readily available in all public Libraries in Large Print or audio.

Some of the Public Libraries in Ireland have received grants for the purchase and installation of technical aids to assist individuals that are experiencing problems with their sight. One Public Library had responded positively and had purchased Kuzweil. Three Public Library members use that service and none of the Public Librarians have received any formal training on this system.

Approximately ninety percent of the Large Print and audio Collection client's in the Public Libraries in Dublin are elderly. 40% of the Public Libraries surveyed would have failed on accessibility. There are no ramps or lifts and in many cases entering the Public Library premise entailed climbing up a flight of stairs. For an elderly or wheelchair bound person, access to the library would be nearly impossible.

As an information source for the community, the Public Libraries surveyed were asked whether they held any information about eye conditions in their Library. They were also asked about sourcing organisations where individuals could get help or advice. 70% of respondents claimed that they had information in their reference sections about eye conditions. None of the respondents had the information in accessible format such as audio, Braille or Large print. Approximately 50% of Public Libraries would advise the individuals to seek advice on eye conditions from the National Council for the Blind of Ireland.

Public Libraries in Ireland do not hold any Braille books in their collections. The NCBI Library holds the most extensive Braille book collection and production in Ireland.

Awareness of NCBI Library Service

Finding out what Public Librarians know about our specialist service is an integral part of marketing and promoting. The survey was a good exercise to investigate the gaps in the Public Libraries knowledge of NCBI Library Service. NCBI Library Service will be able to build constructively on the "gaps" of knowledge and develop a marketing strategy to create awareness.

All Public Librarians surveyed had heard of the Library Services at the National Council for the Blind of Ireland. 40% of Public Librarians have recommended NCBI Library Services to individuals. When asked about what NCBI Library service offered, 60% mentioned audio and Large Print books. 2 Public Librarians mentioned Braille as being part of the NCBI Library collection.

Public Librarians were not able to source the following which constitute three of NCBI Library core services:

- School books on tape
- Production of audio and Braille commercially
- Production of audio and Braille novels

Recommendations

- Promote the NCBI audio, Large Print and Braille Collections. This can be done by sending up- to- date catalogues of our collection to the Public Libraries and also making them aware of the catalogue availability on the web.
- Liase with the Dyslexia Association and Educational books publishers in Ireland, to make available educational books on tape. This would be a first step in producing audio and Large Print books for Dyslexic students.
- Encourage the Public Libraries to purchase Large Print and audio books for juniors. This would fulfil the demand for the providing leisure reading material for children that are dyslexic.
- Public Libraries need to address the issue of accessibility. The introduction of ramps and lifts, as well as appropriate Large Print signage would be a welcomed advance in most Public Libraries.
- Provide Information Leaflets (in Braille, audio and Large Print) to Public Libraries explaining eye conditions and sources for further information and help.
- Hold awareness days in the summer of 2003 in NCBI Library. This will increase Public Librarian's knowledge of the Library services of NCBI.
- Provide the catalogue of school books on tape available in NCBI to all Public Libraries.
- Provide the Public Libraries with information on Braille and audio commercial services available at NCBI Library.
- Provide Public Libraries with regular updates of Braille and audio novels that are produced at NCBI.
- Provide Public Libraries with information on activities such as Storytime and the Bookclub that are held in NCBI Library.
- Provide support and training through NCBI IT Department on the use of new assistive technology in Public Libraries.

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