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Achieving inclusion through partnership

Charity, charges and chaos: the story of library services for visually impaired people in the UK

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Abstract

Examines strengths and weaknesses of public libraries and specialist voluntary sector libraries for blind and partially sighted people in the UK. Describes various types and examples of partnership work that have taken place in recent years between the two sectors, but recognises that inherent weaknesses are still present due to lack of integrated management and funding. Technological changes will create opportunities to meet needs in different ways. Calls upon UK government to learn from best practice elsewhere in the world and take responsibility for library services to visually impaired people.

Introduction to the partners

There are 1.7 million blind and partially sighted people in the UK, who rely on a mixture of public and specialist voluntary sector library services to satisfy their reading and information needs.

With 150 years of history behind them, public libraries have many strengths. They have a local presence through branch libraries and they form a national network providing access to a very large quantity and range of materials. In principle, they have a very good knowledge of their communities and they provide a mixture of traditional and new services to meet a range of needs. They are heavily used by older people, who are also most likely to experience sight problems, as 98% of blind and partially sighted people in the UK are over the age of 65.

Under the Public Libraries Act 1964, public libraries are charged with being “comprehensive and efficient”. As they are managed and funded separately by each local government authority, however, there is considerable variation in the services provided for visually impaired people. A recent survey by the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) at Loughborough University (1) found that only 5% of library authorities had an explicit policy statement for services to visually impaired people and fewer than 30% of libraries had a specific budget set aside for this purpose. The most common services provided are lending collections of large print and audio books. Even now, in England, standards for service provision in this area are weak. For example, when the internet was introduced into all public libraries, there was no obligation or standard to make equipment accessible.

Where there are examples of imaginative and pro-active services it has often been as a result of the enthusiasm of an individual member of staff.

As a consequence of the long term shortfall in public library services, library services for the blind in the UK have mainly been provided by charities such as the National Library for the Blind (NLB), which is 123 years old this year (2). However, there are also many other providers, mostly with their origins in the production of different specialist formats and/or subject matter. As far as I am aware, none of these organizations receive any regular government funding.

These specialist organizations are expert in the production and use of accessible formats. They hold significant collections of books in Braille, Moon, audio and large print, and hence achieve certain economies of scale. Thanks to the free postal concession, customers throughout the UK are provided with lending library services delivered directly to their own homes. Over the years these organizations have developed close relationships with their customers, supplying very personalised services. They are often regarded more like book clubs than libraries - and with great affection.

Being outside the culture and governance of the public library service, specialist voluntary sector libraries have been able to set their own regulations, including charges if they wish. And to some extent this was necessary because, as charities, they were - and still are - dependent on being able to raise funds. Even now, it is expensive to transform a book into an accessible format and a constant frustration to be unable to meet increasing demand due to limited capacity.

Another consequence of being outside the mainstream is that they have often been unaware of developments in public library services and failed to keep up with best practice.

Geographical remoteness and the characteristics of the constantly changing user group also make it hard to reach all potential beneficiaries.

Consequences for visually impaired people

The outcome of this situation was that congenitally blind people tended not to use public libraries much and late onset blind people often gave up using public libraries. A further survey by LISU (3) found that 94% of visually impaired people had used a public library in the past but only 37% had used a public library in the last six months, compared with approximately 70% of over 65 year olds.

Our anecdotal evidence is that many people would not find out about all the specialist services they could use or were deterred from joining due to the barriers, such as procedures, charges or the difficulties of using a multitude of organizations. From the user's point of view, it was chaotic and unsatisfactory.

At NLB, we were prompted by this situation to develop and articulate a clear vision that visually impaired people should have the same access to library and information services as sighted people. We believe that public libraries should provide socially inclusive services, and we asked ourselves therefore, should we exist? And if we there is a good reason to exist, how can we work more effectively with public libraries? To a lesser extent this view was shared by some of our partners in the voluntary sector. We realized that we had common objectives with public libraries. As a result we forged new relationships with professional organizations such as CILIP and the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) and embarked on a new phase of working with public libraries.

Developing partnerships

From its earliest stages, NLB was a key partner in the reader development movement spearheaded in UK public libraries by Opening the Book. We participated in Branching Out (4), a major initiative to promote and widen reading experiences, and developed projects of our own such as A Touch Of... and A

Touch More through which we organized reading promotion events and created sampler books.

Funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), we also delivered a range of training packages for libraries on working with visually impaired people, accessible formats, sources of help, using the internet with access technology, and so on.

For four years we have organized an annual awareness campaign called Make a Noise in Libraries which has twin aims to support public libraries to organize activities and find out about the needs of visually impaired users, while encouraging users to make their needs known to libraries. This year we are teaming up with the National Association of Local Societies for Visually Impaired People (NALSVI) to reach even more potential users.

Another major step has been the creation of Revealweb: the National Database of Accessible Resources (5), jointly managed by NLB and RNIB, which is freely available via the web to beneficiaries and libraries alike. The database enables users to search for, identify and locate books in accessible formats in over 200 libraries and other organizations. Its development has been funded by the DCMS.

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and Share the Vision (STV), an umbrella organization of voluntary and public sector service providers, were jointly responsible for producing the invaluable *Library services for visually impaired people: a manual of best practice* (6) which was published on the web and distributed free to all libraries in the UK.

Public libraries have reacted very positively to these developments and we are seeing an increase in awareness of the issues and more activity to support visually impaired users, such as the creation of inclusive reading groups.

NLB member Sue Cowen said: "My local public library in Houghton has set up a new reading group for visually impaired people... I'm really looking forward to it because it's good to talk about books with other people and I think it will encourage me to read books I would not otherwise have chosen".

The political and social environment is supportive. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 have made organizations more conscious of their obligations towards disabled people, and the Department of Culture's action plan for public libraries, Framework for the Future, includes a number of initiatives to support visually impaired people. The Government encourages collaboration between the public and voluntary sectors and indeed for all types of libraries to work more closely together.

So in recent years we have started to see a marked change and improvement in provision of library services as a result of these new forms of collaboration. Partnership work has definitely contributed to the growth of more inclusive services.

Widening partnership

A very recent development is the launch of the Gateway project, an alliance between a number of specialist voluntary sector libraries for the blind and public libraries (7). For any user who is familiar and comfortable with the public library, it will be the gateway to specialist services. Funded by the Ulverscroft Foundation, the project will provide public libraries with comprehensive access to specialist collections, information and advice, training, support and tools.

The disadvantage of this model is that it is still dependent on the generosity of external funders. In the long term, we would like to see such arrangements underpinned by a contract that would cover some of the basic costs of voluntary sector services that support public libraries.

There are many other exciting new developments underway which could also have a big influence on access to books and information for visually impaired people via public libraries. These include downloadable audio books, production and delivery of books in accessible formats on demand, transcription at the point of use and synthetic audio books. Some countries are further advanced along these routes than the UK.

The role of voluntary sector organizations will also have to change in response to technological developments. I believe that there will still be a need for an agency or agencies to provide efficient specialist services, but it is debatable whether so many organizations can survive with the inevitable duplication of processes and competition for funding that must be taking place.

The future?

Cross sector partnership work has brought us many gains, but the best that we have been able to achieve in the UK so far is a rather messy compromise, with different types of organizations taking various roles to capitalize on their respective strengths and weaknesses. At least we have common objectives and are willing to work together, but it is often hard work and the outcomes are still not consistently good for customers.

We look with envy to other countries where governments have integrated specialist library services for print-disabled people with mainstream public library services and, moreover, provide funding.

I urge the UK government to adopt a similar approach and to take responsibility - at long last - for library services to visually impaired people.

Earlier this year, a government committee said “The entire burden of improvement of access to libraries and the facilities therein for people with disabilities and those with visual impairment cannot be left to charity... Provision of access to libraries for people with disabilities should be a high priority for local authorities and this requires a co-ordinated policy”(8). The committee recommended that government should take a lead. We are ready to assist and await developments with interest.

References

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