

Cabinet Office - Prime Minister's Strategy Unit

**Improving the life chances of disabled people: analytical report,
June 2004**

Response from the National Library for the Blind (NLB)

Introduction

The National Library for the Blind warmly welcomes this project which aims to identify and propose policies which will remove barriers and improve outcomes for disabled people. We were very pleased to be able to contribute to Phase Two of the project via a discussion with Clare Lombardelli and by submitting written briefing notes.

We would now like to offer a few comments and suggestions in response to this analytical report, focusing particularly on print-disabled people and

- The extent to which they are disadvantaged
- The reasons why this is happening
- What can be done to improve the situation

Overall, we thought that the report was extremely thorough and insightful. Naturally our focus is on the needs of blind, partially sighted and other print-disabled people and so it was disappointing that the barriers that they face were hardly acknowledged in the report.

However, we appreciate that the report identified generic issues that are applicable to disabled people in general, and many of them are clearly very relevant to print-disabled people.

We hope that our evidence will help persuade Government to make policy recommendations and take action in Phase 3 of the project that will deliver real improvements to their life chances of the three million print-disabled people in the UK.

Our two main suggestions are

- to appoint a national co-ordinator for visually impaired children's library services
- to carry out a feasibility study into the creation of a National Accessible Library Service

Definition of the problem

Disadvantage: We endorse the view that disabled people are faring less well than non-disabled people, and can provide examples which illustrate the gravity of the situation for blind and partially sighted people

- One third of visually impaired children do not have the school books they need
- 25% of visually impaired people are in employment, compared with 49% of disabled people and 81% of non disabled people
- We estimate that no more than 20% of visually impaired people have access to a computer compared with 88% of the population in general

Access to books and information is a combination of

- Acquiring literacy in accessible formats
- Availability of required books and information in a format that he or she can read
- Access to technology
- Appropriate training and support

The lack of books and information in accessible formats is a major problem. Fewer than 5% of books published in the UK are ever transcribed into formats that print-disabled people can use.

Lack of access to books and information is a barrier to literacy and hence to opportunities at every stage in life identified in the report. The Government has recognised the importance of literacy by setting targets in this area and a recent report from Demos says that "life chances are improved by reading". The report gives just one example that illustrates the problems caused by lack of accessible information about transport (p165), but lack of access to books and

information has much wider ramifications than that. It means that print-disabled people lose out on educational and employment opportunities, cannot easily get health information, cannot participate in community activities, and are at risk of losing their confidence, independence and well being.

While we very much liked the report's approach, using a framework of life chances, the danger is that it obscures issues which are common barriers throughout life for one group of disabled people. The report itself suggests that it is useful to compare different groups of disabled people (p7), yet it has missed the opportunity to highlight the specific disadvantage experienced by print-disabled people in not having access to books and information.

The report gives examples of impairment-specific barriers (p27) including the problems of transport for visually impaired people. Without taking away from this concern, we would argue that a specific and monumental concern for print-disabled people is not having access to 81% of websites and 95% of books.

Fragmentation: The report emphasises in various places that there are many services in place, but that they are often fragmented and their effectiveness may be low. This is especially pertinent in the field of library services to visually impaired people.

At Government level, there are numerous departments that have some interest in this area including DCMS, MLAC, DfES, DTI, DWP and others, yet no department takes overall leadership, and there is no national management or plan which brings together the various stakeholders. In other countries, such as the USA, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, this role is frequently taken by the national library or the Department of Culture.

At operational level, services are delivered by a mixture of public-funded libraries (public, academic and national libraries) and voluntary sector organisations.

The situation is therefore confusing for users, many of whom never find out about all the choices that are available and who in any case are presented with a multiplicity of procedures and regulations.

Despite an increase in joint work, providers inevitably duplicate processes, which is wasteful.

Reliance on the voluntary sector also means that capacity to develop and deliver services depends entirely on significant and continuing public generosity. NLB, for example, is a charity and receives no government funding to cover day-to-day running costs of around £2 million p.a. The effectiveness of some organisations may well be limited because they simply cannot afford to deliver more services, reach more users or to invest in research and development.

The Government is currently showing a great deal of interest in persuading the voluntary sector to work closer together with the public sector, and there would be merits in a mixed economy of this kind in the provision of library services to print-disabled people. General support and delivery could be provided locally by mainstream libraries, with specialist resources and support provided by specialist organisations. This is the model that has already evolved in Sweden. However, it would require a number of factors to be in place

- willingness and ability on the part of mainstream libraries to deliver services locally, ideally to a consistent standard
- willingness and ability on the part of voluntary sector organisations to work together to develop and deliver services, in response to customers' needs, and that will add value to the mainstream offerings
- a sustainable funding model that would enable public and voluntary sectors to fulfil their respective roles (balancing cost sharing fairly)

In the past, voluntary sector organisations did not work very much together, perhaps due to their independent histories and governance. We are pleased to say that there is increasing evidence that voluntary sector agencies can work successfully together in partnerships.

At present, there is considerable scepticism amongst voluntary sector organisations that either public libraries or central government could or would meet the true costs of the voluntary sector organisations to take this role.

Empowerment: We agree from experience that disabled people are not empowered. Their expectations appear to be quite low and are often not articulated, although we are seeing some signs of change amongst younger people and those who are able to communicate online. Combined with other factors such as isolation and lack of mobility, the impact is that public libraries often say that they do not encounter many visually impaired users or have a clear idea of their needs.

Hence the work that we are doing with user groups such as the National Association of Local Societies for Visually Impaired People (NALSVI) and our Make a Noise in Libraries campaign, to encourage users and potential users to visit their public library and express their needs.

Best practice: The report suggests that barriers are created by the failure to implement best practice in policy-making and in service design and delivery. We heartily endorse this point and would argue that all the factors mentioned, namely

- Complicated by different sectors
- Separation of budgets
- Focus on process rather than outcomes
- Lack of overall vision and framework for disability policy supported by robust performance measurement

are exemplified in the mixed provision of library services for visually impaired people described above.

We support the suggestion that disabled people should be at the heart of how relevant [public and other] services are designed and delivered, that services should be personalised, providers should be accountable and that disabled people should have increased choice. This approach has been at the heart of the Gateway project to improve services, which we are developing jointly with members of Share the Vision and the Society of Chief Librarians. However, we have not yet found funding to put the main elements in place.

Changes over time: We agree that disability is changing over time.

Improvements in health care and medical technology mean that people are living into old age with visual and often other impairments. The Government Actuary's Department forecasts that the number of over 60s will increase by 64% in 36 years.

Attitudes are slow to change, hence the programme of training that we have been delivering in recent years to support staff in public libraries.

Assistive technology does indeed offer new communications options but can be excluding. The main barrier is the price of specialist hardware and software. For example, JAWS software costs in the region of £700, while a PowerBraille keyboard costs around £8000. Another major barrier is the inaccessibility of most websites – 81% of websites are inaccessible according to a recent report from the Disability Rights Commission. Also there is a shortage of appropriate support and training for users.

NLB is helping to address the problem of inaccessible websites by the Visionary Design campaign which targets website owners and designers.

A vision for the future

With regard to improving library services for visually impaired people, we agree that

- Government policy remains fragmented and does not always pull in the same direction
- Society needs to remove barriers and support individuals to become empowered
- Disabled people often have additional requirements, notably print-disabled people need to have access to books and information in formats that they can read

We welcome the objectives for Government described on p35

- To work with disabled people and stakeholders to identify and address barriers to inclusion

- Government commitment to help meet additional/varying needs of disabled people
- Government to negotiate level of support so that the balance of cost sharing is predictable and fair
- Clear lines of responsibility

We accept that the level of personal choice may need to be balanced against overall resource allocation. A good example of this is the provision of a library service, where the needs of the community outweigh but may also meet the needs of the individual.

We agree that there are a number of roles for Government as outlined on p39 (legislative, fiscal, programmes, leadership) and that all of these are relevant to the changes we would like to see put in place in our area of service (see our suggestions below).

We agree that there is a lack of clarity (p41), for example, that there is no overall statement of what disabled people can expect from Government. Specifically, there is no clear statement of what visually impaired people can expect from public libraries. In 2000, only 5% of library authorities had a policy statement about services for visually impaired people.

The absence of an appropriate framework (p42) leads to all the problems in our sphere, mentioned above.

Analysis of the issues: early years

Our evidence about visually impaired children supports the general picture given in the report. There are around 23,000 blind and partially sighted children, with a variety of eye conditions, in the UK, thus thinly spread with around 100 in each LEA. They are increasingly educated in mainstream schools (60%) and there is a rising proportion of visually impaired children with other disabilities (56%).

In addition to RNIB's survey "Shaping the future", there is plenty of compelling anecdotal evidence from teachers and carers that visually impaired children do not have timely access to books and information that they need for their studies, with the risk that they are prevented

from developing literacy skills. Yet Demos says “Young people need to be equipped with high level reading skills to get the most out of cultural and social life and to meet the challenges of the 21st century job market”.

The responsibility to provide accessible books and information lies with schools and LEAs, and we are repeatedly told by DfES that funding is available through the Schools Access Initiative (SAI) to ensure that adequate provision is in place. Yet there is no data to show how the funding is deployed and examples come to our attention daily demonstrating that needs are not being met, due to lack of capacity in schools.

Some gaps are partly filled by a number of voluntary sector organisations such as ClearVision, NLB, RNIB, Calibre Cassette Library and the National Blind Children’s Society (NBCS). These organisations are increasingly working together collaboratively, such as NLB and NBCS working together on a giant print lending library. Nevertheless, problems such as fragmentation, lack of co-ordination and information sharing, combined with limited resources, put barriers in the way of the child getting all the books he or she needs.

In 2001, DfES funded a study which recommended that a national co-ordinator should be appointed to work with the existing stakeholders to identify needs, seek funding, co-ordinate production and give advice. DfES has declined to fund this role and suggests seeking funding directly from schools. The voluntary sector agencies concerned are exploring this option as a possible bid to Futurebuilders. Nevertheless it seems an inefficient way of putting arrangements in place and we believe it would be more cost-effective to fund this initiative at national level.

This situation needs to be addressed urgently so that consistent and satisfactory levels of learning support, in the form of accessible books and information, are available to all visually impaired children when required. We would value your support for this initiative.

Analysis of the issues: from childhood to adulthood, preparation and prevention, routes into employment, wider roles, over 50s

As indicated above, we recognise the importance of all of these critical transitions in life. Access to books and information plays an essential role at all stages, enabling each person to inform themselves, learn skills, make independent decisions and reach their potential.

At present we believe that, for all the reasons described above, most print-disabled people do not get the additional support that they need and that this is a shameful situation which should not be tolerated.

Next steps

In order to address this situation, and given the indications of Government commitment in the report, we recommend that Government should fund a study into the feasibility of establishing a National Accessible Library Service. It could become a “national offering” as described in DCMS’s “Framework for the future”.

The study should amongst other things

- review users’ needs
- identify appropriate roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders across public, private and voluntary sectors
- establish clear leadership in Government
- look at integration into mainstream library systems e.g. as part of the national library
- examine the appropriate balance of funding including statutory sources
- look at legislative/regulatory sticks required
- learn from best practice models overseas

if you are interested, we would be pleased to discuss this proposal in more detail.

Conclusions

We are glad to have had the opportunity to contribute to this valuable work in progress and look forward to seeing the outcomes of Phase 3. We hope that our comments are useful and that our suggestions will be adopted.

Helen Brazier
Chief Executive
National Library for the Blind
August 2004

Further reading

“Access to the curriculum by blind and partially sighted children and young people”, paper submitted to the DfES on behalf of RNIB and the Children’s Response Group, June 2003.

“Co-ordinating alternative format title selection: final report”. CPI, 2000.

“Creative reading: young people, reading and public libraries” by John Holden. Demos, 2004.

“Library services for visually impaired people: a manual of best practice”. Rev. ed. Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries/STV, 2002.

“Out of sight but not out of mind: visually impaired people’s perspectives of library and information services”. Library and Information Statistics Unit, Loughborough University, 2001.

“Overdue”. RNIB, 2003.

“Shaping the future: the educational experiences of five to sixteen year-old blind and partially sighted children and young people”. RNIB, 2000.

“Supporting literacy for visually impaired children and young people”, a proposal to the Department for Education and Skills from the Children’s Response Group, 2002

“The web: access and inclusion for disabled people”. Disability Rights Commission, 2004.

NLB Online <www.nlb-online.org>