

RNIB National Library Service:

A Six Steps survey of public library services for blind and partially sighted people

1. Background

Across the UK, 185 out of 205 library authorities have signed up to undertake six low cost steps to improve what they offer for blind and partially sighted readers. These actions range from providing local collections of audio and large print books, providing access technology in libraries and actively supporting MANIL Fortnight each year.

The Six Steps initiative is led by Share the Vision, of which RNIB is a leading member, in partnership with the Society of Chief Librarians and the Scottish Library and Information Council. Participating library authorities have designated a Six Steps Champion for the reading needs of people with sight loss in their area.

Make a Noise in Libraries Fortnight (MANIL) is an annual campaign, run by RNIB National Library Service for 11 years, to bring together libraries and blind and partially sighted people to improve access to books and information. MANIL 2012 ran from 11 to 24 June and took the Six Steps initiative as its theme. A full evaluation report of this year's campaign is available.

We asked blind and partially sighted readers to help monitor how well libraries are meeting their Six Steps pledge by carrying out a survey during MANIL Fortnight 2012. This report presents a summary of their feedback.

Our aims were to find out

- what accessible services are provided and identify strengths and weaknesses for future development

- what standard of customer service is experienced by blind and partially sighted people when they visit their local library
- how willing and able frontline staff are to answer queries and signpost people with sight loss to other sources of accessible reading material

Their feedback will be shared with libraries to celebrate good practice and highlight areas where improvements can be made.

The survey covered the following questions

- Was it easy to locate the audio/large print books in the library?
- Were you able to browse and choose books easily?
- Was there enough choice? Did you find books you wanted to borrow?
- Is there a PC with screen reading or magnification software such as Jaws or Supernova, or is there CCTV equipment?
- Are you able to use the online catalogue?
- Are there self service machines? Were you able to use them independently?
- Does your library run a reading group that you could join?
- Is your library doing anything for Make a Noise in Libraries Fortnight?

We asked our volunteers to ask their library for advice and to let us know what information they were given.

Main findings

Below is a summary of the responses received from survey participants to each of the questions they asked, together with a number of quotes which illustrate their personal experiences.

Of the 33 participants, 14 currently use their local library, 5 people are occasional library users, and 14 never use their local library (so this survey was their first visit).

Of the 33 libraries visited, 31 provide large print (2 people did not give an answer) and all provide audio books, which is excellent.

Topic 1 - large print and audio books

Was it easy to locate the audio/large print books in the library?

The majority of participants said it was reasonably easy to find the large print and audio book sections in the library. Many said they needed direction initially but felt they would be able to find the books again in future without assistance.

Large signs, well displayed in a prominent position were noted at several libraries. Locating the books near the entrance or in one place was a big help.

Sample comments

"The large print and audio books were situated next to each other and fairly close to the entrance." Firth Park Library, Sheffield

"Staff are going to move all resources to one, well lit area straight opposite the door of the fiction library." Bradford Central Library

"I have no sight so a librarian had to take me. There are super large signs for the sections, which could be read by other people who are registered blind when I asked them to test this for me." Horley Library, Surrey

Were you able to browse and choose books easily?

This was much trickier than finding where the books were located in the first place. Of the 33 participants, nine said they had no problem browsing and choosing books themselves. However, the majority, 24 people, relied on a member of staff to help them.

Those browsing for large print books managed better if their vision was good enough to enable them to read the dust jacket information and shelf labels. Those browsing for audio books had more difficulty because they had poorer vision and the wording on CDs boxes is small.

Overall, there was a strong reliance on staff or a sighted companion to read out information to enable book choices to be made. In this respect, most of the libraries surveyed scored highly with friendly, helpful staff willing to explain what was on the shelf and to help with choosing.

Accessible shelf labelling, an accessible catalogue and logical arrangement of books all make a big difference to someone's ability to find the titles they want. Several people commented on the absence of large print or braille labels and at a couple of libraries CDs were not shelved by genre but just fiction or non-fiction, leaving the customer to browse through everything. Several people noted that it is very difficult to read audio book titles with poor sight if they are stored on a bottom shelf near the ground! Positive examples of good practice included good lighting and, at one library, colour-coding of CDs by genre.

Sample comments

"There is no accessible catalogue of the audio books, but the assistant was able to show me where the audio range was and read the titles to me."

"Not really accessible for a totally blind person, but I managed with my 10 year old daughter's help."

Was there enough choice? Did you find books you wanted to borrow?

Out of the 33 participants, 11 people replied yes and five people said no. The majority, 17 people, said the choice was "reasonable" - they found something to read even if it was not their ideal book choice. The facility to order large print and audio books from other branches was appreciated and helped to make up for the lack of titles in the library being visited.

Quantity and range were the two things people highlighted most as sources of frustration. Many commented on the low number of accessible books available compared to standard print books, a

situation common across publishing and retail, not just the public library sector.

Many found the range of large print and audio book titles was limited, particularly for keen readers and those looking for non fiction or something a bit different. A predominance of crime fiction and biographies was noted in several libraries.

Sample comments

"Choice was reasonable, but small compared to standard print format." Maidstone Library, Kent

"A wide range of choice with the librarian always willing to look up others for me" Banff Library, Aberdeenshire

"I usually find what I want but it's unpredictable" Newbold Verdon Library, Leicestershire

"Many I had read before or were abridged; not a great selection available" St Ninians Library, Stirling

"There could probably never be enough choice as I am a real bookworm but there were some good ones available." Gloucestershire Libraries (Tewkesbury, Dursley, Newent, Cirencester)

Topic 2 - assistive technology in the library

Is there a PC with screen reading or magnification software such as Jaws or Supernova, or is there CCTV equipment?

Out of 33 responses, 23 libraries surveyed had both an accessible PC and a CCTV available. Two libraries had an accessible PC but no CCTV and one library offered CCTV only. Five libraries did not offer either option, usually because the library visited was small. At two libraries, staff were unable to answer the question at all.

The access software installed on library computers varies but Supanova is the most popular as it offers both magnification and

screen reader capability. Other assistive technology noted by our volunteers included Zoomtext, Jaws, Guide, Magic, Kurzweil Reader, Aladdin magnifier.

Provision of assistive technology in libraries is good although not universal. The survey also found that in a number of instances the technology available was not used very much, leading to a lack of staff confidence in advising customers how to use it. In three cases, the equipment had fallen into disuse, was incorrectly installed or had another fault that was being investigated. This is a classic chicken-and-egg situation - if blind and partially sighted people don't request the service, it can lead to a lack of knowledge and confidence on the library's part. If the basics of a service can't be demonstrated or, in some cases, even mentioned then potential customers won't realise it's there.

Sample comments

"No PC available with speech software. Apparently, there used to be but there has been no demand for it and it seems to have stopped being available." Bath Central Library

"We were told that JAWS was available, but we were unable to access it. The library is investigating and will report back" New Malden Library

"Yes, there is a large screen computer with supernova. The desk is a special one which can be adapted for different wheelchairs and the seat already there is also adjustable. There is plenty of space around the desk to accommodate wheelchairs or an assistant sitting with you. Librarians know how to use Supernova and were happy to demonstrate." Horley Library, Surrey

"A notice saying a magnifier is available was in small print behind a trolley. They are going to move it to near the CCTV" Bradford Central Library

"Don't know as the library assistant didn't have a clue as to what I was talking about when I asked him."
Jubilee Street Library, Brighton

Are you able to use the online catalogue?

Of the libraries visited, 15 people successfully used the online catalogue and 13 people reported that they could not use it at all. One library did not have an online catalogue and four people did not answer the question.

Sample comments

"I could use their online catalogue without any problems." Hailsham Library, East Sussex

"I can't access at the moment but I am trying to learn how to do it."

"It is not very good as you cannot find audio or large print books in their own right. You have to search for a title and then look through the editions to see if there is a large print or audio. The situation is saved by our local Talking Newspaper which publishes a list of new additions in Audio and Large print each month."
Reading Central Library

"The lady explained that within the web pages it is possible to use a downloadable piece of software which provides voice navigation around the online library catalogue. She promised to phone me after she had checked it out. She phoned this afternoon and told me that it is not that easy to use and she will investigate further." Cwmbran Library, Torfaen

Are there self service machines? Were you able to use them independently?

The survey found that 20 of the 33 libraries surveyed have self service machines, nine do not and four respondents were unsure.

Three quarters of those who said their library has self service machines (15 out of 20) were unable to use them. The main obstacle was the touch screen design of the machines. Having to locate and scan printed barcodes was also an issue and the type on the screen being too small.

Two people thought they could use the machines with practice and help. One person had enough sight to be able to use the machine reasonably well. The overwhelming feedback was that self service machines are not accessible to blind people. All respondents said that there was no problem asking for help and borrowing and returning books at the main enquiry desk.

Sample comments

"I returned a book but could not find the bar code to take one out as they are in different places. I might be able to with practice." Horley Library, Surrey

"I found them very complicated but should get used to them in time. The headings were not in very large print." York Explore.

"I cannot use the machines independently if ever I needed to." Horsham Library, West Sussex

Does your library run a reading group that you could join?

Out of 33 survey replies, 19 libraries have a reading group, of which 9 also run a VI reading group. Nine libraries did not run a reading group of any kind but one was about to launch a new VI group. Five people did not answer the question.

The findings show that reading groups are a valuable source of companionship, entertainment and a useful way to exchange information about books, players and other sources of books. Local societies are sometimes involved in running VI groups within the library.

Those who were members of a mixed reading group said they were made to feel welcome and every effort was made by library staff to obtain books in accessible formats.

Reading group case studies

"The group meets monthly, is open to all and the library issues large print, audio and text versions of the chosen book every month. It has been running five years and has had members, for example, with mobility issues, four blind members, several people with dementia or other brain damage, stroke victims, people with depression, cancer patients as well as people with no declared needs. The group leader is blind and the deputy leader has a visual impairment."
Horley Library, Surrey

"This proved the most useful part of my visit to do the survey. I had asked about joining a group about six months ago and I was told that the group was full. I asked why they had not started more groups if there was a waiting list and this led me to be introduced to Karen Alvey the stock manager. It proved to be a very useful meeting. She was planning a listening group to be set up in September and was wondering how to get in touch with people who might be interested. Their problem has been getting a volunteer who would be willing to run a group. There have been discussions as to whether it should be a separate group for listeners rather than readers. They understand that listening is a different experience from reading, and agree that a new group is needed. The first meeting will be in September." Marie
Freeman, Bath Central Library

Topic 4 - finding out about services

We wanted to learn if library staff were able to advise blind and partially sighted readers how to get hold of books, newspapers and magazines in accessible formats. We asked our volunteers to ask their library for advice and to let us know what information they

were given. For example, were they told about other sources of audio books, local Talking Newspapers or other ways to get hold of reading material?

The replies received show a mixed response to these questions. Nine libraries were able to answer straight away and provided information and contact details. Another four were willing to look up information on the internet. Five libraries gave weak suggestions and/or poor customer service. Four libraries said they did not know and made no attempt to look up information on the internet. Two libraries rang another branch to ask for advice.

Nine people did not ask the question or left their answer blank.

Where specific services were mentioned, the following were highlighted:

- TNAUK or local Talking Newspaper x10
- RNIB Talking Book Service x7
- Local Blind and Partially Sighted Society x3
- Calibre Audio Library x2
- Audible / downloading to a Kindle x2
- National Library for the Blind (now RNIB National Library Service) - x2
- Own VIP reading service x1
- Torch Trust group x1

The results showed patchy knowledge of other reading services for blind and partially sighted people.

Sample feedback

"I asked the helpful assistant who showed me how to use the machine for taking out a book whether she could tell me what other talking book and/or newspaper services I could access. The assistant could only come up with downloading to a Kindle."
Evesham Library, Worcestershire

"I asked but the librarian was unable to assist with any information stating she was new and would have to ask or phone someone else. I waited for her to get back to me while in the library but she took nearly an hour and said they were busy."

"I got no suggestions. In my opinion the librarian gave the distinct impression I was an alien and should not have been there." Jubilee Street Library, Brighton

"The staff did not know where other sources of accessible reading material could be found and asked me where they should be directing visually impaired people to. They said they would try to be helpful by contacting the local blind society for information but they assumed that blind and partially sighted individuals would already know where to obtain books, etc., before coming into their local library." Firth Park Library, Sheffield

"Very informative and helpful about all services." Denmark Centre, South Shields

"The Library is planning to issue a document, listing all the alternative sources of reading material." Southend Central Library, Essex

And full marks to Horley Library, Surrey, for their response:

"The librarians offered to complete forms for membership of the RNIB Service or Calibre or a northern library with braille books. They told me about the local Talking Newspaper and provided the phone number. They looked up TNAUK and gave some feedback of what they had heard from other people. They told me that other newsletters are often available on audio, for example, the one from MIND as they were aware that people with visual impairments often had other health needs. They mentioned services for veterans, Social Services, the

council help shop, benefits and the local blind society."

Topic 5 - Make a Noise in Libraries Fortnight (MANIL)

We asked participants to check if their library was holding an event, organising a display or doing something else to celebrate Make a Noise in Libraries Fortnight.

14 people said their library was participating in MANIL and 12 people said their library was not. Eight people did not ask the question, notice anything or left the answer blank.

Of those libraries supporting MANIL, the following were noted:

- Information/book display x5
Unspecified event/talk x5
- Author event x1
- Promoting stock x1
- Ebook reader session x1
- Tour of library with opportunity to meet staff x1

In some cases, the member of staff was unaware of MANIL and several expressed an interest in knowing more so they could participate next year. This will be followed up.

Others said they had organised events (this year or previously) but had experienced a low turn-out which was disappointing.

Three participants commented that the library's information/book display for MANIL was very visual so they could not see it themselves although friends and family could. This is an inherent problem with display material although audio books and braille material can help to make it more accessible to potential customers who are blind.

Conclusion

Overall, the experience for most readers was positive with some participants re-discovering their local library and making new contacts with library staff. Regular library users often build up a good, friendly relationship with staff who recognise their needs.

Although instances of poor customer service were cited, most people reported a high level of willingness on the part of library staff to answer questions, find out information and help with choosing books. This is good news indeed because until blind and partially sighted people can search for and borrow books independently in their local library, they will continue to need assistance from a sighted staff member or guide.

Actions

The findings have been discussed with colleagues on the RNIB F49 Project Board, which aims to improve public sector library and information services for blind and partially sighted people. The findings will be shared externally and followed up through the F49 Project.

- Share findings with Six Steps Reading Champions and offer support and advice where appropriate
- Share findings externally and internally through journal articles, reports and on library discussion lists
- Continue to promote Reading Sight (www.readingsight.org.uk) as a source of information for library staff to aid signposting
- Continue to run Make a Noise in Libraries Fortnight and take on board feedback in this survey
- Share summary report with Share the Vision.

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