
Sharing a Vision to Improve Library Services for Visually Impaired People in the United Kingdom

DAVID OWEN

ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom has an unplanned, mixed library economy of services for visually impaired people compared with other developed countries. This article sets out the historical context within which this has come about; attempts made to improve these services since the creation of Share the Vision in 1989 via enhanced partnership working within and between the voluntary and public sectors; and practical measures to achieve this and campaigning work to include consideration of the needs of visually impaired people within mainstream services and to persuade the UK government to adopt a more proactive role. It sets out an ambitious vision statement for library services for visually impaired people in the UK that has still to be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Depending on the nature and extent of their sight impairment, all visually impaired people throughout the world need to make adjustments to normal reading methods in order to have access to content. For some of these people it is possible to make self-adjustments that permit them to carry on reading, most obviously enhanced illumination and a magnifying glass. However, the ageing process dictates that these people, like the remainder of visually impaired people, are primarily dependent on the adjustments that society makes to enable them to carry on reading later in life or, if born blind, to commence reading in the first instance. The provision of alternative format reading materials and the exploitation of information technology are the obvious ways of removing the personal and societal barriers imposed by their sensory impairment.

In all countries the major social agency responsible for providing access to content is the publicly funded library, but not all countries have adopted a national, planned structure for addressing the special needs of visually impaired and other print disabled people. Other articles in this issue set out the approach adopted in the United States and the Scandinavian countries. This article attempts to outline how publicly funded libraries in the United Kingdom (UK), another developed country, have so far failed to address the needs of visually impaired people in an adequate manner appropriate for their special circumstances and comparatively recent attempts to improve this situation.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Public libraries in the UK funded from local rates were founded from 1851 onwards under the terms of the Public Libraries Act 1850, which permitted municipalities with a population of over 10,000 to vote whether to spend a ½d rate (“the halfpenny rate,” equivalent to 1/480th of the current £ sterling) to establish a library building but not to buy books. The honor of establishing the first library under these provisions went to the ancient city of Winchester in Hampshire, which had once been the capital of England; but, not surprisingly, the major northern cities of Manchester and Liverpool quickly followed suit in 1852. Kelly records in his *History of Public Libraries in Great Britain 1945–1975* (1977) that another thirty-nine authorities established public libraries over the next twenty years, but only one was in a London borough.

In the meantime, Thomas Rhodes Armitage had established the British and Foreign Blind Association for promoting the education of the blind in 1868. This organization became the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB)—the leading charity in the United Kingdom for all matters relating to blind people. Armitage was convinced that the alleviation of the destitution of most blind people was dependent on their being able to be educated. Armitage recognized the need to have a standardised embossed print for the production of reading materials and set about investigating what was the most appropriate method. Today most people associate blind readers with the Braille system invented in France by Louis Braille in 1827 when the first Braille book was produced. However, in 1868 there was a multiplicity of alternative systems. The Moon system, invented by Dr. William Moon in 1845, remains in use to this day, but Thomas (n.d.) lists at least nine other systems in existence in 1868.

Armitage decided that a committee of highly educated blind men should determine which system of embossed type should become the standard. The guiding principle was that they should be conversant with at least three of the systems and have no pecuniary interest in any. In May 1870 the committee announced: “It was unanimously decided that the Braille ought to be adopted as the written character, though the members

present were equally unanimous that something better might be devised for the printed character, and that Moon's type approached the nearest of any of the existing types to which is needed" (as cited in Thomas, n.d.). This historic decision shaped the future provision of library services for blind people in the UK and elsewhere.

As is typical in most matters charitable, the key factor is the determination of one individual to address a problem. As Braille books became more available, Martha Arnold, herself blind, decided to establish the Lending Library for the Blind in her London home in 1882. As membership grew it was realized that the service could not be solely dependent on volunteers to produce and administer the collection of Braille books. In 1898 the Lending Library was registered as "The Incorporated National Lending Library for the Blind" (now the National Library for the Blind or NLB) and employed paid staff for the first time.

At this stage in the development of public libraries Kelly notes,

The provision of books for the blind was a matter of concern in many places. Most libraries provided and issued the books themselves, but some preferred to assist local institutes for the blind. Bradford, for example, established in 1912 a branch for the blind in the Royal National Institute for the Blind, which transferred its own stock to the library's control. Manchester, which at one stage employed two or three blind copyists continuously in the making of Braille texts, eventually transferred its library to the Manchester Blind Aid Society and agreed to subsidize the Society's work. In 1918 the Society was reconstituted as the Northern Branch of the National Library for the Blind and it was this latter body, founded as a voluntary association in 1882, which gradually assumed the major responsibility for the supply and distribution of books for blind readers. (1977, p. 190)

Accordingly, within fifty years of the establishment of publicly funded libraries in the UK, the trend had begun whereby the special needs of blind people were detached from mainstream provision used by the remainder of the population. Whatever the logic and merits of such arrangements, the dependency of blind people on charitable efforts to provide basic services was being instituted at an early stage.

Indeed, this separation was reinforced by the seminal Kenyon Report of 1927, which had been charged "to enquire into the adequacy of the library provision already made under the Public Libraries Acts, and the means of extending and completing such provision throughout England and Wales" (as cited in Kelly, 1977, p. 234). By this time the NLB in Westminster had 100,000 volumes and 10,000 readers, whereas only 41 of several hundred public libraries had their own special collections. Accordingly, Kenyon recommended that "any new scheme would probably best take the form of a subscription to the National Library and the delivery of books from the National Library direct to the blind reader or to the institution for the blind which the blind reader attends" (as cited in Kelly,

1977, p. 241). This recommendation was adopted as Kelly records that in the 1930s "Few libraries now maintained a special collection of books for the blind, the general practice being to subscribe to the National Library for the Blind. The operations of this continued to expand, and the enlarged and reconstructed building in Westminster which was completed in 1935 had accommodation for over a quarter of a million volumes (1977, p. 288). At the same time library services for blind people took a momentous leap forward with the launch of the RNIB's Talking Book Service in November 1935. The motivation for introducing this new service was to address the needs of the many men blinded in the First World War who could not read Braille. The original system was based on recording books onto long-playing records that were played on standard gramophones, and it quickly became popular. Within a year, 2,639 books were available to the 966 members who had been sent gramophones, according to Salandiak (2005). By the 1960s, Kelly states in relation to public libraries,

Concerning provision for blind readers there is by this date little to be said. For the most part such readers now secured their books direct from the National Library for the Blind. A few public libraries, mainly in the north of England and in Scotland, operated a service with bulk supplies from the National Library; fewer still now held their own stocks. For blind people who found difficulty in reading by touch an invaluable alternative was provided by the British Talking Book Service for the Blind, which was established in 1935. (1977, p. 395)

In little over 100 years public libraries had totally handed over responsibility for library service provision for blind people to the two main national charities in this field. The Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964 places a statutory duty on every public library authority to provide "a comprehensive and efficient service for all persons desiring to make use thereof" (Great Britain, 1964). It did not go on to state, "except if you are blind in which case you must depend on the efforts of two charities to raise donations to meet your special needs." Similarly, the British Library Act 1972, which established the new British Library from various existing agencies, does not mention any responsibility to address the needs of blind and other disabled people. Clearly, the British had no intention of following the U.S. model, but public libraries had, in the meantime, been forced to readdress the needs of visually impaired people because of two important developments.

In 1964 Dr. Frederick Thorpe published the first large print books specially designed to meet the needs of readers with low vision. These books were specifically targeted at the library market because of their comparatively high production costs. If the primarily older age group for whom they were intended could not afford them, it was essential that public libraries should purchase them, and the Ulverscroft Large Print Group has followed this marketing plan to the present day. Consequently, older

readers whose sight was deteriorating came to expect their local public library to assist them to carry on reading. They also made use of the increasing level of recorded music available in public libraries, and as the commercial publishers slowly caught up with RNIB's appreciation of the potential of talking books, this alternative format also became a relevant component of public library audio collections.

In 1974 a third major voluntary sector agency was established. The Calibre Cassette Library, as ever, was an attempt by a determined individual, Monica Poels, to meet a perceived need by creating a simple home loan service of recorded books that utilized basic and familiar domestic playing equipment ("Monica Poels," 2006). Despite entering a market already supplied by both the RNIB's specialized service and the public library provision of collections of commercial audio books, Calibre was quickly able to establish its niche in the market and has continued to flourish ever since.

For all of these agencies the 1980s brought the challenge of new information technology developments, which presented public libraries with a new opportunity to increase their newly established relevance to visually impaired users. The Kurzweil Reading Machine was the dawn of a new age of assistive technology that would necessitate a reevaluation of how public libraries could and should address the needs of visually impaired people. Within a mere twenty years we had moved from "there is little to be said" concerning public library provision for blind people in the UK to there being a lot of opportunity to enhance the relevance of public library services.

ATTEMPTING TO SHARE A VISION

From the above account it is possible to summarize the position of library service provision for visually impaired people in the UK in the 1980s. It was very much a mixed library economy of producers and service providers. The three main voluntary sector organizations, RNIB, NLB, and Calibre, were both national producers and library service providers of Braille, Moon, large print, giant print, and audio books. In addition there were hundreds of smaller charities producing alternative format reading materials. The public libraries were primarily suppliers of large print and audio books to local residents. The commercial sector comprised a range of producers of large print and audio books, although the latter were not primarily intended for visually impaired people but for the general public. Furthermore, the major commercial supplier of large print books, Ulverscroft Large Print Group, had been put in the ownership of the Ulverscroft Foundation in 1972 by its founder, Dr. Frederick Thorpe. Thorpe's intention was to use the group's profits to "relieve and assist, and to provide treatment and education for sick or handicapped persons and in particular persons suffering from defective eyesight" (Ulverscroft Foundation, n.d.).

It is fair to state that there was not at that time a planned and rational national infrastructure for the provision of library and information services for visually impaired people, and there was most definitely no policy guidance or investment from the central government. As ever in this area, one very determined individual decided to try to improve matters. In 1986 John Godber, now a senior manager at RNIB, visited the United States as a Churchill Fellow. Having studied the services of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) in Washington and its relationship with the New York Public Library, which provided an extensive range of Braille, audio books, and Perkins Braille writers for individuals to use, he compared this with his frustrations as a blind man attempting to use his own local public library in England. Realizing that he could not hope to achieve the level of central government funding needed to replicate the partnership between the NLS and its regional and local network, Godber nevertheless determined that it was time to address the detachment between the voluntary and public sectors in the UK and to promote partnerships working in the interests of visually impaired people.

On his return to the UK Godber contacted the Library Association (now the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, or CILIP) to seek advice, and he was referred to Peter Craddock. Craddock was a lecturer at the Department of Information Studies at Queen's University, Belfast, who had a particular interest in this area and had published *The Public Library and Blind People: A Survey and Review of Current Practice* in 1985. Craddock had concluded that "There is a pressing need for some form of composite national body in the area of library and information services for the blind or print-handicapped generally which can provide a focus for national initiatives in areas such as the co-ordination, utilisation and promotion of resources and services and in the support of services at local and regional level" (p. 71). Godber decided Craddock could provide the professional library credibility and expertise he needed to develop his vision, and in 1989 Share the Vision (STV) was established by RNIB with Craddock as director.

Godber and Craddock were agreed from the outset that STV should not be viewed as an agency of RNIB but had to attempt to embrace the involvement of as many relevant partners as possible. The first meeting of the steering committee did not take place until May 1992 and was attended by representatives of the Federation of Local Authority Chief Librarians (later to become the Society of Chief Librarians, or SCL), the British Library, the Library Association, NLB, and two public librarians specializing in services for visually impaired people as well as RNIB staff. STV became a company limited by guarantee in 1996, and its stated aims and objective were "To improve the quality and availability of library and information services and products which provide for the reading and information needs of visually impaired and other print disabled people" (STV, 1996).

Today its membership is comprised of RNIB, NLB, Calibre, ClearVision, and the Talking Newspapers Association from the voluntary sector and the British Library, CILIP, the Library and Information Services Council: Northern Ireland, the Scottish Library and Information Council, the Society of Chief Librarians, and the Society of College, National, and University Libraries from the public/professional sector. The Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council (MLA) and its Welsh counterpart, CyMAL, have observer status on STV's board as Non-Departmental Public Bodies. Godber's vision of a voluntary, public, and professional sector partnership across the United Kingdom has been achieved.

Much was achieved by STV between 1989 and 1997 when Craddock retired. In terms of promoting interest in and information about services for visually impaired people, the launch of the quarterly *STV News* in 1991 proved very successful with over 200 subscribers. *STV News* continued until issue 39 (winter 2001), when RNIB could no longer afford the level of subsidy required. Craddock also organized a series of STV Roadshows around the UK, which were successful in promoting STV's objectives, bringing agencies and users together at the local and regional levels, and forging new partnerships. Craddock was also successful in being invited to address professional and voluntary sector seminars and conferences.

The first major publication from STV was the *Directory of Transcription Services: Braille, Tape, Moon and Large Print* in 1994. This was based on a comprehensive survey of alternative format producers in the UK and was designed to provide a practical guidebook for librarians and other service providers. It was published in loose-leaf format in the hope that it would be regularly updated, but the actual time commitment and costs incurred by RNIB made this prohibitive. A solution to this problem was to be achieved a decade later via the Revealweb Collections Register.

In 1996 Craddock published *Project Libra: The Provision and Use of Reading Aids for Visually Impaired and Other Print Handicapped People in UK Public Libraries*. This was based on a survey of 130 public library authorities and was designed to identify ways in which reading aids could be better used. His research found that the majority of public library authorities were making such provision and that the main factors that influenced the actual degree of use were user awareness of their availability, the range and type of aids provided, access features, and the existence of community and support systems. This research project provided practical guidance for libraries attempting to enhance their relevance to visually impaired people.

Practical guidance of this sort was particularly welcome at this time because of the Disability Discrimination Act, which was passed on November 8, 1995. This act was to have a staged implementation over the next few years, and one of its requirements was that service providers had to make "reasonable adjustments" to permit access by disabled users. Many people

assumed that this meant the provision of ramps for people in wheelchairs, but STV was quick to point out to colleagues that reasonable adjustments meant much more, including the provision of reading aids, assistive technology, and alternative formats. The DDA, as it became popularly known, was to become a major spur for public library authorities to address the needs of visually impaired and other disabled people.

A major development in assisting this to come about was the publication by STV and the Library Association of *Library and Information Services for Visually Impaired People: National Guidelines* (Machell, 1996). For the first time in the UK, library staff in all sectors had access to a comprehensive and authoritative set of guidelines that covered equality of access; physical access to buildings and services; staffing; service provision; service delivery; client groups; reading resources; reading aids and equipment; information; and promotion and publicity. The guidelines were compiled by Jean Machell, who was a library consultant specializing in services to disabled people and had attended the early meetings of STV's national steering committee in 1992. Machell's guidelines were well received and have stood the test of time.

Throughout the early 1990s RNIB, with the assistance of STV, had begun working toward the establishment of a National Union Catalogue of Alternative Formats (NUCAF) of its own extensive holdings and those of other agencies. This was the essential building block or cornerstone for the creation of a national infrastructure of library services for visually impaired people. In order to extend its availability to mainstream library settings, Craddock negotiated for its then 60,000 records to be included in the Unity System, a national database of 10 million records of library holdings covering most parts of the UK, except London and the southeast and West Midlands regions of England. Accordingly, STV was able to utilize the Unity System to initiate a Pilot Interlending Project in the northwest of England, which involved volunteer visually impaired users of Lancashire, Manchester, and Tameside libraries. By providing access to assistive technology at workstations in all three sites, these users were able to make independent searches of the NUCAF and Unity databases to locate and request materials. This project formed the UK contribution to the European Commission-funded research project TESTLAB: Testing Systems using Telematics for Library Access for Blind and Visually Handicapped Readers. TESTLAB included projects in Ireland, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, and Greece as well as the UK and led to service developments that have continued to this day in all of those countries. In the case of the UK, NUCAF and TESTLAB played a crucial development role in the later attempt to create a national infrastructure.

When Craddock decided to retire in 1997, the STV board reviewed its position and realized that it did not have the resources to continue operating in the same manner as it had from 1989. Pump-priming, one-off con-

tributions from the Ulverscroft Foundation and the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association had long been spent. In essence, STV was dependent on cash contributions from RNIB, NLB, and Calibre along with substantial in-kind support from RNIB. The board realized it could no longer afford to operate with a full-time director and decided to recruit a part-time executive director who would be expected to adopt a more campaigning and promotional role rather than concentrate on the practical service delivery and improvements role that had been pursued previously. Much had been achieved, but STV needed to change track.

THE LONG-AWAITED WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

The author took up the post of executive director in May 1998, and within three months had an embarrassing form of luck that had avoided Craddock. The new Labour government, which had been elected in 1997, carried out a Comprehensive Spending Review, which resulted in each government department setting out its budget plan for the three years of 1999 to 2002 in August 1998. For reasons that were never made clear, the new Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) decided to take an annual £200,000 grant to RNIB for the production of Braille and transfer it to the Library and Information Commission (LIC) to improve library and reading services for visually impaired people. The LIC was the newly created body charged with advising the government on all matters concerning library and information services across government departments. Within three years it was to become part of the newly merged Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council, which holds the same responsibility today. We protested that this was not a meaningful investment of new money to achieve the social inclusion of visually impaired people but rather was “robbing Peter to pay Paul.” Nevertheless, we had to be pragmatic and attempt to ensure that the money was spent on a program that would further our objectives. As would be expected of any incoming senior library manager, STV had already commenced a major review of the status quo and was therefore able to present an initial analysis to the chief executive of LIC at a prearranged meeting in August 1998. Accordingly, STV was invited to present its analysis to the next LIC board meeting on November 26, 1998. As it was crucial to furthering STV’s objectives to secure LIC’s support, our analysis of the status quo at August 1998 had to be short and to the point. It included the following:

There are a whole range of services in this field, but they are not properly co-ordinated.

Unlike in other English speaking countries, our national library does not provide these services nor does it give any lead.

In typical British fashion, services have developed ad hoc to fill the needs not met by the British Library or public libraries.

For very many years voluntary agencies such as RNIB, NLB and

Calibre have provided these services and they tend to be format based (often as a result of the initiative of determined individuals).

Consequently, public library provision is variable although it has improved in the last 10 years. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee of minimum standards.

Copyright clearance is an unnecessary and time-consuming burden for all services providers in this field.

There is a huge lack of content; most publications are not available in an alternative format accessible to visually impaired people.

Even where alternative formats are available they are not included in the national bibliography so how do readers and library staff trace them?

That it is much more difficult for visually impaired people than sighted people to borrow the items they need in formats they prefer whoever may hold it. No national interlending arrangements are in place.

ICT provides a unique opportunity to dramatically improve access to services providing systems are designed from the outset to cater for the interests of visually impaired people. (Owen, 1998)

Following this presentation STV was invited to draft a three-year work program for LIC to commence in April 1999. We established a LIC/STV Joint Working Group and agreed on the following program to address some of the identified shortcomings:

- Developing and maintaining the National Union Catalogue of Alternative Formats
- Commission a metadata technical specification to improve the quality and coverage of the database
- Commence a retrospective conversion project to eliminate the backlog of data entries
- Enhancing ease of access to required materials for visually impaired people
- Develop a national interlibrary lending procedure for visually impaired people
- Develop a single-enrollment procedure
- Enhancing access to library-based ICT services for visually impaired people
- Working with local authorities to ensure best practice/best value
- Carry out a survey of current service provision in public libraries
- Produce a best practice manual for library staff
- Conate *STV News* to every Public Library Authority for one year
- Revive STV roadshows and executive briefings at an appropriate juncture
- Co-ordinating alternative format title selection

To reinforce our plans STV published a vision statement in issue 29 of *STV News* (Owen, 1999) that was also circulated directly to numerous relevant

organizations throughout the UK. We were attempting to win over hearts and minds to our cause, but we also needed to demonstrate that we could convert our work program into practical achievements, which would assist our vision to become more of a reality. The following is a summary of what has been achieved since 1998.

REVEALWEB

We commissioned the United Kingdom Office for Library and Information Networking at Bath University (UKOLN) to produce a metadata specification for an enhanced NUCAF and RNIB/NLB to investigate the extent of the retrospective conversion project required to make it comprehensive (Chapman, 1999). Ann Chapman of UKOLN has written extensively on the work involved in the development of what eventually became Revealweb: the National Database of Resources in Accessible Formats (Chapman, 2000, 2004, 2005). After much trial and tribulation, Revealweb was finally launched at the Public Library Authorities Conference in September 2003. At last we had a state-of-the-art, Web-based, comprehensive, freely available, multifunctional national database of alternative formats and a Collections Register of producers and suppliers. Today the database holds records for 113,360 titles for 192,000 items in different alternative formats, and the average number of monthly visits to the Web site is 35,000. Revealweb (at www.revealweb.org.uk) is indeed the cornerstone of our developing national infrastructure.

ENHANCING ACCESS

The former North Western Regional Library System (now Libraries North West) was commissioned to develop the national interlending system building on the work they had undertaken on the TESTLAB project; it quickly produced procedural documents that were circulated throughout the UK. As anticipated, demand to access alternative format materials via interlibrary loans from mainstream libraries has never been great because it is still the tendency for visually impaired people to rely on suppliers they know and trust. Hence the new system was christened Bee Aware (Libraries North West, n.d.) in order to encourage greater awareness by visually impaired people and the library staff who serve them. Another problem is that some library authorities remain reluctant to lend their audio books to other library authorities on behalf of their visually impaired users because of the perceived loss of income from a charged service. Such attitudes remain all too prevalent in the UK library scene despite the DDA and probably require a successful legal challenge under the DDA in order to change them overnight.

Similarly, it has not proved easy to establish a single enrollment form that can be used by visually impaired people to access all services whether in the public or voluntary sectors. Entrenched inward-looking attitudes are

the problem, and they do not enhance the reputation of libraries as being customer focused. STV is still working on this irritation but had much more success in enhancing access to library-based ICT services. Following a comprehensive tendering process a contract was awarded to HumanITy, an information technology-based charity, to produce a set of proposals on how this might be achieved (HumanITy, 2000). We were fortunate that Chris Batt, the LIC's chief network adviser at the time (now the chief executive of MLA) took a personal interest, and HumanITy's work helped to shape the design of the People's Network, which was a major national initiative to establish Internet connections in every public library in the UK. Ever since, MLA has striven to ensure that its own information technology (IT) developments and those it sponsors are exemplars of accessibility.

PROMOTING BEST VALUE

Second only in importance to Revealweb was our plan to produce a Best Practice Manual. Having produced a detailed specification of its contents, STV was pleased that its own chair, Linda Hopkins, agreed to undertake the formidable task of editing this publication, which contains seventeen chapters commissioned from the leading experts in their field in the UK. *Library Services for Visually Impaired People: A Manual of Best Practice* was launched at the British Library by the Minister for the Arts on November 28, 2000. It was published simultaneously in print, Braille, audio, and computer disk formats and on the NLB's Web site. A printed copy was donated to every public library authority, university library, college library, national library, university library and information school, and regional library system in the UK. The LIC/STV message was quite simple: "now you have no excuse for not knowing what the issues are and how to address them." The manual was well received and was updated as a Web version only for financial reasons in June 2002 (see <http://bpm.nlb-online.org>). Hopefully funds will become available to update it again because of the speed of modern development.

The Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) at Loughborough University was commissioned to undertake the survey of service provision in public libraries and published their report in March 2000 (Kinnell, Liangzhi, & Creaser, 2000). Their research was based on a desktop literature search and a questionnaire sent to all 208 public library authorities in the UK, which produced 141 responses (68 percent). Their major findings were that many authorities did not have a specific policy statement or a specific budget allocation for these services. Staff awareness training was inadequate and marketing of services was not carried out in an intelligent manner. As anticipated, this report proved the need for the Best Practice Manual, and ideally the research should have been repeated by now to ascertain whether STV's activities have made any difference over the last six years.

STV also commissioned LISU in 2000 to conduct the first ever survey of the views of users, ex-users, and nonusers of library services for visually impaired people. As it is not possible to conduct a nationwide user survey of this target group by conventional methods, LISU had to devise an appropriate method to achieve an authentic sample frame. They conducted interviews with a representative sample of 582 people either face to face in different parts of the UK or by telephone. Their report, *Out of Sight but Not Out of Mind* (Davies, Wisdom, & Creaser, 2001), provided a mass of extremely useful feedback information for library managers in both the voluntary and public sectors when it was published in 2001. The most intriguing finding was that 23 percent of respondents claimed to use computers, of whom 64 percent had a computer at home. The advisory group for the project queried whether such a high percentage of computer users at that time indicated that the sample was steered toward younger people, but a recheck by LISU confirmed that the sample was representative. Clearly, if 76 percent of these computer users were using the Internet in 2000, there was tremendous potential for publicly funded libraries to provide services that were appropriate for their information needs, providing their Web sites were designed to be accessible in the first place.

STV was able to achieve its plan to conduct a series of roadshows/seminars in partnership with local authorities in different parts of the country, as well as a series of executive briefings in partnership with the Library Association and a special seminar for British Library staff. As anticipated, these are especially time-consuming events to organize for a part-time operation, but the cooperation and enthusiasm of the partner organizations ensured that they were uniformly successful.

COORDINATING ALTERNATIVE FORMAT SELECTION

This was an ambitious project to test how many books are reproduced in alternative formats in the UK and to identify how the book selection techniques that had been developed to ensure that public libraries achieve best value might be applied to the voluntary agencies. The contract was awarded to Capital Planning Information, who published their report in April 2000. The headline finding from their report, which was to be much quoted in later years, was that of the 100,000 new titles published in the UK each year, only about 4,000 are reproduced in one or more alternative formats. As had been expected, the most commonly reproduced titles were in the popular fiction category, but it was disturbing to learn that children's literature was very poorly represented. The report identified the lack of coordination between the voluntary agencies and the need for public investment to enhance the range of materials available. Experience indicated that this would not easily be achieved, but the main voluntary agencies—RNIB, NLB, and Calibre—set in train a series of actions to improve their coordination, which have continued to this day. In this they

were greatly assisted by the establishment of Revealweb, which is not only an authoritative database of which titles have already been produced in an alternative format but records which titles are planned to be reproduced by which agency to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.

Another benefit of Revealweb is that it provided a basis to retest the availability of titles in alternative formats, and in 2004 RNIB commissioned LISU to carry out the research. *Availability of Accessible Publications* (Lockyer, Creaser, & Davies, 2005) confirmed the earlier CPI finding. Only 4.4 percent of the output of UK publishers between 1999 and 2003 was available in an alternative format. Part of the problem is that UK publishers' output of titles increased from about 100,000 in 1997 to about 150,000 in 2005. The voluntary sector cannot hope to keep up no matter how successful their fundraising and production techniques, which makes it imperative that their book selection techniques are as sophisticated as possible.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

While the period of 1999 to 2002 was project intensive, STV was involved in numerous other activities during that period that have continued since then to date. As stated earlier, the STV Board reviewed its plans in 1997 upon Craddock's retirement and determined that it wished STV to adopt more of a campaigning and promotional role. Since 1998 STV has operated on the basis that it will represent the interests of visually impaired people in all relevant consultations, whether invited to do so or not. A review of STV's annual reports since 1998 reveals that we have forwarded responses to 11 DCMS consultations; 9 to other national agencies; 7 to the European Commission; 6 to other central government departments; 5 to the British Library; 4 to MLA; 3 to House of Commons Committees; 2 to CILIP; and 1 each to the IFLA, Scottish National Executive, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland government, and Irish Library Council. This is a total of at least 52 submissions in 8 years. During the same period STV has provided papers at 37 conferences and seminars in the UK and organized 9 major promotional events of its own. In addition, STV has provided papers at international conferences or organized workshops in Crimea, Mexico, Cuba, Washington, Glasgow (IFLA), Chile, Mexico again, Vietnam, Brazil, and Ireland. During this period STV was represented on at least 15 committees, advisory groups, working groups, etc. In terms of furthering STV's objectives, a few of these activities merit highlighting because they are important in their own right but also because they illustrate the difficulties faced in attempting to create a coherent infrastructure of services for visually impaired people in the UK.

Public Library Standards

In May 2000 DCMS issued draft public library standards and naturally STV responded. This was the first ever attempt by the central government to define “comprehensive and efficient services” as required by the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act, which placed upon the secretary of state a statutory duty to superintend these services. STV was keen to ensure that these standards addressed the needs of visually impaired and other disabled people, but the draft standards did not do so. We were invited to meet DCMS officials and then to submit our own proposals for the standards and the new Annual Library Planning Guidelines. The final standards published in May 2001 included the provision of large print books and books on tape. They also included a requirement to take “requests for items in alternative formats which meet the needs of people with disabilities” (DCMS, 2001, p. 12). Similarly, the final Annual Library Planning Guidelines published in April 2001 addressed the needs of socially excluded groups and recommend community profiling to identify those needs, as we had recommended. We did not achieve everything we sought, but this was real progress.

In April 2004 DCMS issued a consultation paper on revising the standards launched in 2001. The objective was to reduce the administrative burden on local authorities by reducing the number of standards from nineteen to ten (DCMS, 2004b). Some cynics believed it was more to do with reducing the requirements on local authorities to spend money on specified library services. Whatever the truth of the negotiations between DCMS, which has responsibility for the service, and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which controls local authority expenditure levels, the revised standards did not include the earlier requirements regarding the provision of alternative format materials and requests for such materials. As usual, STV protested and made recommendations for their reinstatement and the inclusion of accessible electronic workstations, but the final standards, which were published in October 2004, did not include any mention of these basic requirements (DCMS, 2004a).

Naturally, STV was bitterly disappointed that DCMS had set back the cause of the social inclusion of visually impaired people in mainstream library services. Ironically, when the House of Commons Culture, Media, and Sport Committee published its report on public libraries in March 2005, it recommended “that DCMS takes a lead within Government in securing funding to support the production of a much greater range of material in alternative formats which are accessible to people with disabilities. We believe that the provision of materials in such formats should be the subject of a national standard” (para. 111).

Framework for the Future

In February 2003 the DCMS published its long-awaited vision for public libraries for the next decade. This was not a consultation paper but was the then minister for the arts' vision, which had been compiled for her by an outside consultant. Needless to say, it made no mention of disabled people except for a passing reference to housebound services for elderly people. STV sent an uninvited response to the minister querying her commitment to the government's social inclusion policies and received a reassurance that STV's comments would be taken into account by MLA. MLA had been charged with responsibility for drafting the Framework Implementation Plan to translate the vision into reality with an extra £1 million per annum for three years. Our longstanding partnership with MLA and the keen interest of the new minister for the arts meant that we were able to benefit from DCMS's original *faux pas*.

The most immediate benefit was that MLA pledged £100,000 per annum for three years to maintain and develop Revealweb. It also agreed to fund a feasibility study of the potential for publishers to provide their electronic files of books to agencies for people with visual disabilities before publication. This had been a longstanding ambition of STV, in which the new minister for the arts and the last but one minister were interested. If RNIB, NLB, and others had access to these files, not only would it reduce the cost of transformatting into alternative formats but it would greatly speed up the production processes. Furthermore, the whole organization of service delivery could be revolutionized to permit the end-user to specify their preferred format (Braille, large or giant print, synthetic audio output, or an electronic file to their PC) for any book they requested. STV drafted a specification for the feasibility study, which MLA contracted Rightscom to carry out. Rightscom reported that it was feasible to come to such an arrangement if the publishers could be reassured about the secure use of their files (2005). At the present time RNIB and NLB are in discussions with DCMS and the Department of Trade and Industry to carry out a pilot project.

Copyright

Such is the crucial importance of intellectual property rights in the world of library and information services for visually impaired people that the STV Board resolved in 2000 to make "copyright developments" a standing item for the agenda of every meeting. In the same year the RNIB proposed that we should establish a Copyright Round Table of STV members and other interested parties to prepare for the forthcoming European Commission (EC) Directive on the Harmonisation of Certain Aspects of Copyright and Related Rights in the Information Society (usually known as the Information Society Directive), which was passed in April 2001. Our concern was to ensure that the directive included an exception for

disabled people, and Article 5.3b of directive 2001/29 EC permits member states of the European Union to provide an exception “for the benefit of people with a disability . . . to the extent required by the specific disability” (European Commission, 2001). Now we had to persuade the British government to legislate for the implementation of this exception. This was achieved under the brilliant leadership of RNIB, which drafted a Parliamentary Private Members Bill that was taken up by Rachel Squire MP, who had secured a high place in the ballot of MP’s to introduce private (that is, nongovernment) bills. With all party support the Copyright (Visually Impaired Persons) Act became law in 2002. This was a tremendous breakthrough because our voluntary sector agencies no longer needed to undergo the costly and time-consuming process of securing copyright permission before they reformatted a book into alternative format versions for visually impaired people. Additionally, libraries were able to provide an alternative format for an individual user without having to seek permission.

All of these developments were excellent, but the problem is that the exception only applies to visually impaired people and not to other disabled people with a print handicap, such as dyslexia or learning difficulties. The Copyright Round Table faced a stark challenge during the passage of this act. If we attempted to amend it to include the needs of other disabled people, as permitted by the EC Directive, it was likely that the bill would fail for lack of Parliamentary time. A pragmatic approach was deemed necessary, but we are now having to campaign to extend the exception in UK law to people with other print handicaps.

The treasury has recently announced that it has commissioned an independent review of intellectual property rights in the UK, and we intend to attempt to right this wrong. We also intend to press for the right to lend alternative formats produced in the UK to users and libraries in any country in the world and to have reciprocal rights to borrow such items. The IFLA Libraries for the Blind Section, the IFLA Committee on Copyright and other Legal Matters, and the World Blind Union are campaigning to persuade the World Intellectual Property organization to legislate such a right. Every national body for professional librarians should surely support this campaign for the basic right to have access to any book in an alternative format wherever it might have been produced in the world.

THE FUTURE

The above account illustrates the challenges faced by STV. We seem to take one or one and a half steps forward and then we are forced one step back. At no stage can we secure adequate and appropriate public funding for the services visually impaired people are entitled to. For instance, STV was particularly infuriated by the lack of recognition of the rights of disabled people in the Framework for the Future report (DCMS, 2003) and

decided to review its own vision statement originally produced in 1999. By the end of 2003 we issued a new vision, which is appended to this paper.

We can only hope that we can bring this vision to fruition, but we have to be realistic about our prospects. Contrary to the perception of many people in the UK, we do not respect and fund our services for disabled people, public libraries, and especially library services for disabled people in a way that bears comparison with other developed countries. As I wrote in the last issue of *STV News* in 2001:

In other developed countries they do things differently and better. Consider these levels of state support for library services for visually impaired people in 2000:

United Kingdom: 11.76 pence per annum

United States: £3.83 per annum

Sweden: £38.71 per annum

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we preach social inclusion whereas they put their money in and practice it. (Owen 2001)

To illustrate the need for realism we have to report that the public funding for the maintenance and development of *Revealweb* is guaranteed only until March 2007. Therefore, we need to look to our own devices to attempt to create a better way forward.

Two recent developments encourage the hope that this is possible. First, and most importantly, RNIB and NLB have recently announced their intention to merge their library services by March 2007. It is difficult to underestimate the potential of this proposal. Second, STV and SCL have worked together since 2003 to establish the Gateway Project, which was launched in June 2005. This is a one-stop shop for all library staff to consult whenever they have a query regarding services for visually impaired people (see www.gateway-uk.org). It has quickly proved its value, but unfortunately it is dependent on generous support from the Ulvercroft Foundation as public funding is not available for such projects. We are realistically optimistic, however, that we can metamorphose STV once more and revert from a campaigning organization to a more practical support agency via a formal compact between the voluntary and public sectors to fund the Gateway Project. STV has shared a vision; it has not succeeded in translating it into a reality, but it has not entirely failed in making change happen.

APPENDIX: LIBRARY SERVICES FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED PEOPLE: A VISION OF WHAT MIGHT BE BEFORE 2013

The Framework for the Future report sets out a vision for libraries in 2013 in the form of 11 possible future practical service scenarios. Our vision is that all of these scenarios will apply equally to visually impaired people before 2013.

The Wider Information and Library Issues Project report sets out a more philosophical “vision for library and information services”:

- Users are information-literate and have seamless and unfettered access to information resources at the time and place of their choosing and in the form that they want, no matter where the resources are located.
- Access is facilitated by more and more information being *available electronically*, including a wider range of older resources made accessible through digitisation.
- The library is the focus for access to the *wider range of services*.
- The library’s role is more closely *geared to customers’ needs*, supporting self-navigation by users, helping them develop information literacy skills or providing intermediation, according to requirements. (Ede, 2003)

STV was part of the WILIP consultation process, and we share this vision in terms of addressing the needs of visually impaired people.

In order to achieve this before 2013 (visually impaired people have waited too long already), we need to set out some specific and more prosaic requirements that reflect the realities that apply to visually impaired people.

This is our vision:

1. That no matter what their personal circumstances are (born blind or losing sight through infirmity of accident) VIP’s will be able to access a continuum of library and information services (LIS) throughout their life which is equal to that available to sighted people but which meets their personal needs.
2. The totality of these LIS will be available in their preferred accessible formats via their preferred point(s) of contact wherever they may be situated in the LIS continuum.
3. That in order for this to be realised, all LIS providers will ensure that their policies and practices are reviewed in order to put the needs of their users first; in this case the needs of VIP’s whether they are users of public libraries, mainstream school libraries, specialist school libraries, college libraries, university libraries, workplace libraries, voluntary sector libraries or others.
4. That, given the lack of content in accessible formats, LIS will reaffirm and adapt their longstanding tradition of co-operation and resource sharing in order to ensure maximum access to content for VIP’s.
5. That, in order for this to be possible, all LIS whatever their sector will support the creation and on-going operation of a one-stop national referral agency which can advise and assist VIP’s and those serving them.
6. That all LIS will provide access to the wider range of services from other non-LIS agencies which can assist the life opportunities and quality of life for VIP’s.

7. That all LIS will ensure enhanced opportunities to access content either remotely or on site via accessible design of websites, opacs, digitisation projects etc. . . . and the provision of assistive technology.
8. That all LIS staff are provided with the basic training which will enable them to assist the achievement of this vision.

We anticipate that all publicly funded LIS will welcome and endorse this vision as it will help them to achieve their new responsibilities to promote equality of opportunities under clause 8 of the Draft Disability Discrimination Bill.

Any VIP should be able to contact any LIS of their choice and be able to request any item in whatever format they prefer; whether for leisure, educational or other purposes and feel confident that all reasonable and informed steps will be taken to ensure that it is located and retrieved, or possibly reproduced in the requested format, and forwarded to them at their preferred location. Then we will have a national offer to a national standard which removes the current postcode lottery!

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David Owen has been executive director of Share the Vision since May 1998. After graduating from Manchester University in 1965 he commenced his career as a trainee librarian with Nottingham City Libraries before undertaking the Postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship course at the University of Sheffield (1966–67). He then worked for Liverpool City Libraries in various roles, culminating in the post of assistant city librarian. In 1980 he took up the post of director of libraries, Manchester City Council, becoming director of libraries and theatres in 1986. He has contributed articles to various library journals and conference papers throughout his career and was awarded the O.B.E. for services to library and information services in 1998.