Assessing the Impact of Reading for Blind and Partially Sighted Adults: Executive Summary

Report to RNIB

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Executive summary

RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People) has amassed a body of qualitative evidence on the value and impact of reading for blind and partially sighted people, but this was lacking in quantitative support, and could not be compared with the developing evidence base relating to the impact of reading on the wider population.

RNIB commissioned LISU and The Reading Agency to undertake independent research to address these issues, the key findings of which are outlined in this report.

Research aim and methodology

The research question addressed by this project is:

- What is the impact of reading for pleasure on the lives of blind and partially sighted adults?

Following a review of the relevant literature, the primary means of data collection was a series of structured interviews with 108 blind and partially sighted readers, undertaken by phone and in person. To supplement the interviews, the majority of the questions asked were also formatted as an online questionnaire completed by 186 adults. A total of 294 blind and partially sighted readers participated in the research.

In addition, six case studies were prepared with volunteers from the interviews and survey. The case studies included longer interviews with the reader, exploring specific issues in depth.

Key findings

Reading frequency and impact

Ninety-five per cent of participants (270) read for pleasure more than once a week, with over half (163 – 55 per cent) reading more than 10 hours per week. This appears to be considerably higher than the general population although comparisons should be treated with caution.

The research clearly indicates the value which blind and partially sighted readers attribute to reading for pleasure, with the majority of participants (236 - 82 per cent) stating that reading for pleasure was ‘very important’ in their lives. The main reasons given for this importance were that it was enjoyable and made them feel good (200 - 69 per cent), it enabled them to learn about new things (160 – 55 per cent), it gave insight into other
peoples’ lives and cultures (144 – 50 per cent), it reduced stress (126 - 44 per cent), and it provided an escape from real life into a fantasy world (115 - 40 per cent).

Linked to this impact on quality of life and well-being, the research also reveals that reading plays a significant role in helping blind and partially sighted adults cope with life’s pressures, including significant moments such as bereavement; engaging them in meaningful activity that passes the time, occupies the mind, and represents a stimulating alternative to activities that are no longer easy or possible to undertake.

Reading for pleasure also has a significant impact on learning and skills development for blind and partially sighted readers. This research reveals that a significant number of participants read to obtain information, to improve knowledge and for general interest (58, 49 and 41 per cent respectively).

No differences were identified in the impact of reading for blind and visually impaired readers with different levels of sight loss, or who started to lose their sight at different stages in their lives.

**Reading groups**
Social contact and integration is a key outcome for blind and partially sighted adults who are members of reading groups - 65 per cent of reading group members felt that one of the best things about belonging to a group was the opportunity to socialise. Reading groups also emerge as a key support to learning and skills development introducing readers to a wider range of reading material, new authors and providing them with a social context within which to explore their reading.

Whilst these findings mirror the impact of reading group membership on the general population, the social isolation some blind and partially sighted people experience intensifies the value of reading group provision for this target group. The research reveals that reading groups provide a source of social interaction that make people feel part of a community and connected to the sighted world.

**Formats**
In common with the wider population, most blind and partially sighted readers use multiple reading formats from a range of sources. The two most used formats in this study were DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) audio and audiobooks on CD (71 and 66 per cent respectively). Format choice was related to personal preference, navigation and convenience. Although eBooks were used by just five per cent of all
participants, recent research reveals that eBooks make a significant difference to the accessibility of reading material\textsuperscript{iii} and there were certainly indications that a number of interviewees were considering using them in the future.

**Source of materials**

On average, blind and partially sighted readers obtained books from three different sources. The top five sources of reading materials in this study are the RNIB National Library Service, public libraries, Calibre Audio Library\textsuperscript{iv}, downloads and gifts.

**Lack of reading**

Although we did not set out to investigate the impact of not being able to read, comments from participants in the research suggest that for many blind and partially sighted readers, not being able to read would leave a destabilising void in their lives.

**Conclusions**

This research found that blind and partially sighted readers will use multiple reading formats in different situations, or for different types of material. While many blind and partially sighted readers are positive about their reading experiences, they also experience frustrations in accessing all the material they would like to read.

The research findings indicate that reading plays a key role in maintaining a quality of life that helps people with visual impairment to overcome some of the daily limitations they face. It is an important intervention that helps to deliver mental well-being and to develop learning and skills.


\textsuperscript{ii} DAISY consortium: http://www.daisy.org/ [accessed 11-09-12].


\textsuperscript{iv} Calibre Audio Library: http://www.calibre.org.uk/