

Assessing the Impact of Reading for Blind and Partially Sighted Adults

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 (1).

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) (2) 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 (3) 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 (4), 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.

1. Introduction

RNIB 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.

Scope

The key question addressed by this project is:

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

The impact of reading is a very broad topic, and it was important to define the scope at the outset. The project took as its focus the impact of reading for pleasure, rather than for study or information. Whilst blind and partially sighted children were not included within this project, the impact of reading on this demographic group is an important area of forthcoming research.

In the wider population, factors defining whether or not an individual reads for pleasure include levels of literacy, degree of motivation to read and time available. For blind and partially sighted adults, additional factors include the availability of material in accessible formats, and the skills required to read books in those formats. Visual impairment increases with age, as the ability to acquire new skills decreases. This research focussed on adults' motivations to read and the impact of reading rather than with issues of access, although such issues have been covered where they were raised by the participants.

This report describes the key findings of the research, and relates these to the impact of reading for sighted people where comparative data are available. The report also relates impact to key policy areas in a local authority context including health, well-being and quality of life; stronger and safer communities; learning skills and employability; and value for money.

The main source of comparative data is Reading the Situation. Book reading, buying and borrowing habits in Britain which was published in 2000 (5). Reading the Situation was commissioned by the Library and Information Commission and undertaken by Book Marketing Limited and The Reading Partnership (later The Reading Agency) to explore the reading habits and attitudes of adults and children in Britain. Its findings are based on focus groups with adults and a postal survey to a representative sample of

approximately 2,000 households in Britain with a response rate of 43 per cent. Its data are based on a general household sample rather than the self-selecting sample of blind and partially sighted readers detailed here.

Whilst it is not possible to draw direct comparisons between this research and Reading the Situation due to the different methodologies employed and the changes that have taken place in reading and book consumption over the last decade, it is possible to make some general observations on the impact of reading on blind and partially sighted people compared to sighted people. These comparisons do, however, need to be treated with some caution.

Evidence collection

The primary means of collecting data was a series of structured interviews with blind and partially sighted readers. An interview schedule was developed following an audit of the evidence available on the impact of reading on both the sighted and blind and partially sighted populations. To supplement the interviews, the majority of the questions were also formatted as an online questionnaire. This was intended to gather additional data, and to broaden the potential demographic coverage of the research. Blind and partially sighted readers were recruited via selected RNIB groups, The Reading Agency newsletter and Reading Groups for Everyone website (6) and other organisations such as Calibre Audio Library. A total of 108 individuals were interviewed, by telephone or face-to-face. This was a self-selecting rather than a random sample of blind and partially sighted adult readers. A further 186 people completed the accessible online survey. A total of 294 adults participated in the study.

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.

The research team was supported by a Steering Group from RNIB, which provided invaluable advice on reading formats, and on the types and degrees of sight loss.

Supporting evidence, giving further details of the research methods, copies of the questionnaires and interview protocols, summaries of the quantitative data, anonymised comments made by survey respondents, and detailed case study reports, is available in an additional publication, *Assessing the Impact of Reading for Blind and Partially Sighted Adults: supplementary information* on request from RNIB, or available at: (TBC).

Note on the data analysis

The interview and survey data have been analysed together, in order to provide the most complete picture possible of the views of blind and partially sighted readers. On some questions, there were differences apparent in how the participants in each element of the research responded; where this is the case it has been noted in the accompanying text.

This report does not present an exhaustive analysis of the data by gender, age, extent or duration of visual impairment. Very few differences were identified between respondents with different levels of visual impairment, or who started to lose their sight at different stages in their lives. Where there were sufficient data available for valid comparisons to be made between the demographic groups, significant differences have been described.

About the participants

Overall, there were slightly more female participants in the study, 57 per cent, than male, 43 per cent. A UK wide study, the majority of participants resided in England (83 per cent), with 10 per cent of participants in Scotland, four per cent in Wales and two per cent in Northern Ireland.

Participants' ages ranged from 20 years to more than 80 years; the online survey attracted more participants from the younger age groups than the interviews. Overall, five per cent of participants were aged 20-34 years, 14 per cent were between the ages of 35-49 years, 37 per cent were aged between 50-64 years, 29 per cent were between 65-79 years, and 15 per cent were older.

In relation to sight, respondents were asked to select the statement that best described what they could see from a list of seven options, ranging from having no light perception to being able to recognise a friend across the road. Table 1 gives the number of respondents, and percentages of the total, according to their sight levels. Overall, the largest proportion of participants had no light perception. In terms of the differences between the survey respondents and the interviewees, interviewees tended to have more sight than survey respondents.

Table 1 Sight levels reported by participants

	Number of respondents	Percentage total
No light perception	75	28%
In a room during daytime, I can tell by the light where the windows are	52	19%
I can see the shapes of the furniture in a room	36	13%
I can see well enough to recognise a friend if you get close to his or her face	42	15%
I can see well enough to recognise a friend who is at arm's length away	39	14%
I can see well enough to recognise a friend across the room	21	8%
I can see well enough to recognise a friend across the road	7	3%
Total respondents	272	100%

Just over one-third of participants had had their sight condition since birth. Forty five per cent of respondents lost or started to lose their sight as an adult (between the ages of 19 and 65) whilst over a quarter (26 per cent) lost their sight before the age of 5. Survey respondents tended to have lost their sight earlier in life than interviewees. In terms of duration of visual impairment (proportion of adults who were blind or partially sighted since childhood) and the high proportion of adults with no light perception, this group is not representative of the blind and partially sighted population as a whole, as age-related macular degeneration is by far the leading cause of blindness in adults (7).

2. Reading habits

Blind and partially sighted adults were asked about the reading formats they use to read for pleasure. Eighty-five per cent of participants used multiple reading formats. Overall, the two most used formats were DAISY audio and audiobooks on CD (71 and 66 per cent respectively). Other popular formats used included audiobook downloads (41 per cent), braille (31 per cent) and audiobooks on cassette (27 per cent). Audiobook downloads are a relatively new format whilst DAISY audio replaced RNIB 8 track Talking Books system and CD has largely replaced cassette. eBooks were used by five per cent of all participants. The eBook format was a preference given in the online survey but was not sub-divided into eBook large print, eBook audio or eBook Braille.

Table 2 Reading formats used

	Number of respondents	Percentage total
DAISY Audio book	205	71%
Audio book (CD)	191	66%
Audio book (download)	118	41%
Braille	90	31%
Audio book (cassette)	78	27%
eBook	63	22%
Large print	32	11%
Giant print	11	4%
Other formats	68	24%
Total respondents	286	100%

Other formats used included electronic texts on a PC, with or without speech software; standard print, with or without magnification; being read to by friends or family; reading materials from a USB or memory stick; scanned books; and materials in Moon – another way of reading by touch.

There were some differences noted by gender in the reading formats used – men were more likely than women to read DAISY audio books (83 per cent of men compared to 62 per cent of women read these). Conversely, 34 per cent of women read audio books on cassette, compared to 18 per cent of men who used this format. The popularity of audiobooks on cassette is interesting considering availability of this format – just 12 per cent of the top 1000 books of 2011 were available unabridged in cassette format (8).

DAISY audio was the preferred format of 42 per cent of participants overall, and also the most used, by 49 per cent of participants. Twelve per cent of participants preferred audiobooks on CD and 15 per cent used this format most often. Twelve per cent preferred to download their audio books, while nine per cent read this format most often (Table 3). There were some differences by age, with younger respondents more likely to read DAISY, eBooks and audio downloads than those aged over 65 years.

Braille was the preferred format of 13 per cent of all participants, and most used by nine per cent. By age, the largest group of Braille readers were in the 50-64 years group – half of all respondents in this group read Braille, compared to two in five aged less than 50 years, and 12 per cent of those over 65 years of age. This is interesting when one considers that around five per cent of the blind and partially sighted population read Braille (9) and is probably a reflection of the skewed population responding to the survey.

Table 3 Preferred and most used reading formats

	Preferred		Most used	
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total
DAISY Audio book	120	42%	138	49%
Audio book (CD)	33	12%	43	15%
Audio book (download)	33	12%	24	9%
Braille	37	13%	26	9%
Audio book (cassette)	12	4%	7	2%
eBook	12	4%	15	5%
Large print	9	3%	4	1%
Giant print	4	1%	3	1%
Other formats	25	9%	21	7%
Total	285	100%	281	100%

Other formats in Table 3 include respondents who were unable to select a single option.

Table 3 suggests that certainly in the case of the most popular formats, blind and partially sighted adults are not always able to read for pleasure in the way that they prefer. Overall, a quarter of all participants (78 out of 280) were not able to read in their preferred format most often. There was some variation according to format, for example:

- Of the 117 participants who preferred reading DAISY audio books, 107 (91 per cent) were able to read these most often. However, 31 of the 138 participants who used DAISY formats most often (22 per cent) preferred to read a different format, and 10 participants who preferred DAISY most often read something else

- Of the 33 participants who preferred reading audio books on CD, 29 (88 per cent) most often read these, while just four participants preferred audio books on CD but most often read a different format. However, 14 of the 43 participants who most often read audio books on CD (33 per cent) would prefer to read in another format
- Of the 36 participants who preferred reading braille, 25 (69%) most often read books in this format, whilst 11 read other formats most often. Only one participant who preferred something else read braille most often
- Of the 32 participants who preferred reading downloaded audio books, 15 (47%) most often read these, while 17 (53%) most often read a different format. Eight of the 23 participants who most often read audio downloads (35%) would prefer a different format.

(Note that these figures are based on those participants answering both questions; Table 3 includes all participants who answered either question.)

Of the less commonly used formats, only large print and giant print were the preferred choice of all those who read them most often. Numbers are relatively small, so percentages must be treated with caution. It is clear, however, that there may be significant disparity between how blind and partially sighted readers prefer to access reading materials, and how they most often do so.

Case Study

Marika's preferred format is braille – “always been the way I've accessed written information”. She occasionally listens to audio of the books she loves as an indulgence: “When you live in a one bedroom flat you can't have all the Harry Potter books in braille”.

Case Study

Avril prefers large print (16 point font size) books but tends to read eBooks on a Kindle most frequently, which “enables me to enlarge the print, but there is something comforting about holding a book”.

Case Study

Gordon is hard pushed to say whether he prefers one reading format over another but in the main, he prefers to read braille because it “makes me more aware of the structure of literature” and “It is easier to go back over things, read over a sentence a second time” but he tends to read more audio because of its better availability, “The great advantage of audio is that there is a great deal more available”. He likes to listen to audiobooks when he is doing other things around the home, “listen to books at times I can’t read braille like doing domestic chores, washing up”.

The DAISY audio format was popular for a number of reasons including the quality of the reading and the sound, its ease of navigation and because works are unabridged:

Quotations

“DAISY books are always beautifully read and the sound is very good”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“Picked DAISY because easier to navigate around book than CD or MP3”. (Female, 50-64, England).

“DAISY is so accessible and easy to navigate”. (Male, 50-64, Scotland).

“I prefer to listen to DAISY books because they are never abridged, some ordinary audio books are and I find it very annoying”. (Female, 65-79, England).

Reading format preferences coded as ‘other’ included 14 (out of the 25) participants who were unable to state a preference for one format. The ‘other’ format used most often includes 9 (out of 21) participants who could not state a single format, those who used standard print the most often (4), those who used audio on USB (3), and other audio formats (2).

Participants were asked to explain their reasons for format preference and usage. The comments were coded and a number of reasons emerged including personal preference (41), navigation (27), convenience (26), accessibility (20), portability (19), ease of use (16) and availability (9). In terms of personal preference this was where the participant did not

necessarily have a practical explanation as to why they preferred one format over another, such as it being easier to use, rather than just the format they liked to read the best:

Quotations

“They’re good (giant print) but they’re not as convenient but they have been a blessing to me... You can’t put it in your suitcase to go on holiday with”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“I definitely prefer paper braille. Braille was how I first learnt to read when I was at school and it’s the most relaxing. You get torn pages and things but you don’t have to suddenly stop reading because the batteries have gone flat. That’s always my preferred format but I can’t carry a normal novel around with me as it’s just too bulky”. (Male, 50-64, England).

“Whilst I prefer giant print because I prefer to read for myself, this is now a slow process and I can listen whilst I am washing up and doing other things in the kitchen. I can get through an audiobook so much quicker than a giant print one and there are so many to be read!”. (Female, 50-64, England).

Other factors to explain preference were related to practicalities such as which format interviewees found the most convenient to use, whether the book was navigable, its accessibility, portability and ease of use:

Quotations

“They are all on one disc (DAISY audio) unless it’s a very long book and it’s on two. Just that much easier”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“I don’t have to have a lot of tapes and CDs in the suitcase. It’s very convenient the MP3 format in that respect”. (Male, 65-79, England).

“It’s easier to stop/start and go back to where you were... particularly I find with the newspapers you have to go back to the beginning to get back to the right place. Easier to navigate than ordinary CDs from the library”. (Male, 50-64, England).

“I have cassettes which I prefer because you can stop them whenever you want to”. (Female, 80+, England).

“It’s the only one I can use (DAISY audio). I can’t do braille and I can’t read large print”. (Female, 65-79, Scotland).

“It’s (Victor Reader Stream – DAISY and MP3 player) portability is primarily it. If I could carry all my books around it makes it easier than using a computer”. (Male, 65-79, England).

Although the volume of books read was not covered by this research, in the case studies it was clear that blind and partially sighted readers often have more than one book on the go at a time. This also emerged in the interviews but was not quantified. This compares to engaged sighted readers who were observed to read more than one book at a time in a study from 2009 (10).

Case Study

Janette usually reads three or four books at a time in a variety of audio and eBook formats. She is currently reading Stephen Fry’s *Moab is my Washpot* on DAISY CD from RNIB; a crime story on her iPad using the iBooks app; she has just bought the current bestseller *50 Shades of Grey* from Audible and was pleased to download her first ever eBook by herself, *The Island* by Victoria Hislop. Just for stand-by she has some Harry Potter books on her iPad. The DAISY CD is usually her night time reading whilst she uses the iPad with voiceover when doing the housework. Janette has a Victor Stream (a type of DAISY player) which she takes with her when she goes away and she loads it with DAISY audio, texts and downloads.

Sources of reading materials

Table 4 details the numbers and percentages of participants obtaining reading materials from each source, and the number and percentage indicating each as the main source of their reading material.

The top five overall sources of reading materials were RNIB National Library Service (RNIB NLS) (80 per cent of participants), public libraries (45 per cent), Calibre Audio Library (30 per cent), online download (26 per cent) and gift (25 per cent). Other sources of reading materials included charitable sources such as local and national Talking Newspapers (11), and free online

texts such as those supplied through Project Gutenberg (12). It is worth noting that participation in this study was promoted by RNIB, by Calibre Audio Library and to public library reading groups, which is likely to have influenced the responses to this question.

On average, blind and partially sighted readers reported obtaining their books from three different sources each. Similarly, sighted readers were found to have 2.5 sources of books on average. Other studies suggest that the general population may purchase more of their own reading materials than blind and partially sighted readers. According to Reading the Situation, 55 per cent of readers bought their books from shops, 45 per cent obtained them from the public library, 36 per cent borrowed them from friends, and 38 per cent were given them as gifts, whilst 38 per cent already had them in the house. Overall, 43 per cent of respondents in our study bought books from one or more sources.

Table 4 Sources of reading materials

	Source used		Main source	
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total
Borrow from RNIB National Library Service	230	80%	188	66%
Borrow from the public library	133	45%	36	13%
Borrow from Calibre audio library	86	30%	11	4%
Buy an online download	75	26%	19	7%
Gift	72	25%	2	1%
Buy from a shop online	54	19%	6	2%
Buy from RNIB	47	16%	4	1%
Borrow from other charitable source	45	16%	6	2%
Borrow from a friend	41	14%	-	-
Buy from a shop	41	14%	-	-
Already in the house	25	9%	3	1%
Other source	46	16%	12	4%
Total	285	100%	281	100%

Case Study

Hans can read English, German and French braille. Nowadays he prefers audiobooks for leisure reading on CD and in DAISY format because it is quick and braille for difficult subject matter. He doesn't find he has any problems getting hold of reading materials in braille, for example, from the Médiathèque de l'Association Valentin Haüy (library of the Association Valentin-Haüy in France) and from the Deutsche Zentralbücherei für Blinde (the German Central Library for the Blind). He also gets books from the public library, Calibre Audio Library and RNIB National Library Service.

Types of reading materials

Overall, ninety six per cent of participants read fiction whilst 76 per cent read non-fiction and 11 per cent read poetry. The popularity of fiction may be related to the 47 per cent of participants who are motivated to read for pleasure to escape from real life into a fantasy world or to use their imagination (38 per cent). Other material was mentioned by 19 participants (seven per cent of the total), the majority of which was newspapers and magazines, by 15 participants. However, reading magazines and newspapers was not explicitly investigated in this study and this figure is merely illustrative of those respondents wishing to point this out. Fiction is also the most popular type of reading in the general population. According to data from Reading the Situation, 64 per cent of adults read fiction, 55 per cent read non-fiction and 78 per cent read newspapers (13).

Selection of reading materials

The most frequent ways in which blind and partially sighted adults chose their reading materials were by known author (67 per cent), recommendations from friends (53 per cent), previous experience (46 per cent), availability (45 per cent), and genre (42 per cent). These overall percentages must be interpreted with caution since those completing the survey selected on average, 5.6 selection methods compared with interviewees, who chose 2.5 on average, and mentioned more other sources. Details are given in Table 5.

Table 5 Means of choosing

	Survey		Interview		Total	
	No.	% of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total
Known author	151	85%	40	37%	191	67%
Friend recommendation	161	66%	36	33%	152	53%
Previous experience	123	69%	8	7%	131	46%
Availability in my preferred format	121	63%	17	16%	129	45%
Genre	106	60%	14	13%	120	42%
Accessibility	84	47%	1	1%	85	30%
Family recommendation	69	39%	14	13%	83	29%
Library recommendation	55	31%	18	17%	73	26%
Advertising/publicity	39	22%	18	17%	57	20%
Mood	45	25%	1	1%	46	16%
Website recommendation	34	19%	6	6%	40	14%
Length	28	16%	1	1%	29	10%
Shop recommendation	7	4%	0	0%	7	2%
Other means of choosing	22	12%	92	85%	114	40%
Total respondents	117	100%	108	100%	285	100

Other means of choosing titles included 'RNIB New Books', 'RNIB Read On', RNIB selection and other RNIB resources such as the online catalogue or website; Calibre Audio Library publications or selection; titles heard, reviewed or recommended on the radio; reading group recommendations; and the actual appearance of the book or CD audiobook including its cover or blurb.

Case Study

Gordon gets hold of DAISY audio CDs and braille from RNIB NLS. He also borrows CDs from his local public library sometimes but doesn't find their website very accessible. He makes his reading choices based on the information supplied by RNIB in their new book lists, magazine and website along with recommendations from his son, with whom he likes to talk about books, "My son is a great reader and reads print but if he tells me that a book is really good I will look online and see if it is available in braille or audio". He also chooses books on the basis of author and is currently reading Nevil Shute's entire catalogue "If I have a favourite author I look them up on the Internet on the RNIB website and chose another book from them".

Time spent reading

In terms of reading frequency, 95 per cent of participants read for pleasure more than once a week. This is considerably higher than in the general population - recent figures for England released by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport show that 78 per cent of adults and children surveyed read for pleasure at least once a week. This is based on the data of approximately 9,000 adults and children, almost one quarter of which have a limiting disability (14). It should be noted, however, that our research targeted readers, so a high proportion of frequent readers is to be expected, and no conclusions should be drawn from this comparison.

Table 6 Frequency of reading

	Number	% of total
More than once a week – More than 10 hours	161	57%
More than once a week – Between 7 and 10 hours	62	22%
More than once a week – Between 3 and 6 hours	41	14%
More than once a week – Less than 3 hours	4	1%
All more than once a week	268	95%
About once a week	7	2%
About once a fortnight	3	1%
About once every 3-4 weeks	2	1%
About once a month	2	1%
Less often but read occasionally	1	0%
Total	283	100%

Participants reading more than once a week were asked how many hours per week they read. Over half of participants (57 per cent) read more than 10 hours a week. Indeed, the greatest number of hours mentioned in the interviews by an individual was 70 hours per week. Twenty two per cent of participants read between 7 and 10 hours a week. Just one per cent of participants read for less than 3 hours a week. Details are given in Table 6. Data from 2000 suggests that sighted readers may not read for as many hours a week as blind and partially sighted adults. Reading the Situation revealed that 15 per cent of adults surveyed read for more than 10 hours a week with the largest percentage – 20 per cent – reading between six and 10 hours a week.

While caution needs to be exercised when comparing data sets, this suggests that there may be higher engagement in reading amongst blind and partially sighted adults than amongst the general population, although, as previously noted, the blind and partially sighted participants in our study were already identified as readers, and do not represent the blind and partially sighted population as a whole.

Quotations

“I just love to read and I have a player in the kitchen where I read whenever I am working in the kitchen and I carry a portable player when around the house. I use my iPhone for Audible downloads so always have access to a book wherever I am! I am currently reading three books – one in the kitchen, one on my portable player and one on my iPhone! I know many people think this very odd but I can switch from one book to another with no problem”. (Female, 50-64, England).

“Every night especially if football’s on. I take my Playaway® or whatever I’ve got and I sit there with my earphones on or in the garden. It’s nice to be able to put your earphones on and ignore all the dogs around you and be able to read”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“At least two hours every day because I have a long commute to work. I read in the front room when the rest of the family are watching telly so that’s another hour a day. So around 30 [hours] wouldn’t be an overestimate”. (Male, 50-64, England).

“As well as sitting relaxing and listening to books I listen to them when doing various chores such as washing-up and ironing”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“I am a bad sleeper so some nights I can read for two to four hours at a stretch, some nights I don’t read at all”. (Female, 65-79, England).

Respondents were also asked whether the amount of time they spend reading for pleasure had changed in the last five years. For 36 per cent of all participants there had been no change, for 12 per cent of participants there had been a decrease in the amount of time they spent reading for pleasure whilst for 52 per cent of participants there had been an increase. This is in contrast with available data from sighted readers, according to which 43 per cent of adults said there had been no change in their reading habits whilst only 36 per cent read more than they did five years ago and 21 per cent read less (15). These comparisons do, however, need to be treated with some caution.

Participants were asked for the reasons for any changes, and most offered more than one. Of those who felt the amount of time they spent reading for pleasure had increased over the last five years:

- 60 per cent of participants felt that they had more time available
- 42 per cent of participants said there are more formats available now
- 33 per cent of participants enjoy reading more now.

Quotations

“Unable to do some things previously undertaken due to lack of mobility”. (Male, 80+, England).

“With the eBooks I do read more because I can set it up to the size I need so my reading speed is better”. (Female, 35-49, England).

“I don’t have many other things to do so most of the time I spend reading” (Female, 20-34, Northern Ireland).

“Increased since my husband died. Increased by more than half. We used to listen to books in the car. If he was sitting at the computer he would be listening to what I was listening to. Now I sleep less and I don’t go out much so it fills the time up”. (Female, 50-64, England).

“Stopped watching TV so have more time to spend doing something interactive”. (Female, 50-64, England).

“Reading more since having a computer to listen to books on”. (Female, 50-64, England).

The data for participants’ whose reading had decreased must be treated with caution since only 34 participants reported reading less. The most common reason for reading less was lack of time (15 participants) whilst six adults enjoyed reading less now, and 12 cited other reasons.

Quotations

“I have less time to read because it takes longer to focus and read and I need regular breaks from focussing”. (Female, 50-64, England).

“My marital circumstances have changed. I don’t read as much because I’m not on my own so much... It’s all her fault!” (Male, 50-64, England).

3. The impact of reading

Importance of reading for pleasure

Overall, 82 per cent of study participants agreed that reading for pleasure was 'very important', 14 per cent thought it 'quite important', three per cent said it was 'fairly important', and just one per cent reported that reading for pleasure was 'slightly important'. No respondents selected 'not at all important'. The following quote is typical of the comments made about how important reading for pleasure is:

Quotation

"I believe I would go insane without reading for pleasure. I really do. It's that important. Ever since I was able to read". (Female, 50-64, England).

Respondents were also asked why reading was important to them, and the responses are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7 Why reading for pleasure is important

	Survey No.	Survey % of total	Interview No.	Interview % of total	Total No.	Total % of total
Enjoyment	163	90%	37	34%	200	69%
Learn about new things	132	73%	28	26%	160	55%
Insight into other cultures cultures/world	124	69%	20	19%	144	50%
Reduces stress	113	62%	13	12%	126	44%
Escapism	97	54%	18	17%	115	40%
Companionship: talking about books read	92	51%	7	6%	99	34%
Like to be aware of current affairs	91	39%	14	13%	83	29%
Comfort/ reassurance	51	28%	8	7%	59	20%
Improve self-confidence	36	20%	1	1%	37	13%
Companionship: reading with others	34	19%	1	1%	35	12%
Other importance	18	10%	72	67%	90	31%
Total respondents	181	100%	108	100%	285	100%

The overall percentages given in Table 7 must be interpreted with caution since those completing the survey selected 5.3 reasons on average compared with interviewees, who chose 2.2 on average, and mentioned more ‘other’ reasons. Of the ‘other’ reasons mentioned, reading as a leisure activity or hobby that adults had always done and could still do, whether sighted or blind and partially sighted, was mentioned by 31 respondents (11 per cent of all respondents):

Quotations

“I have read since I was 4 years old and to continue; no matter how hard it becomes, is really important to me, providing a link to my loved ones in my mind at least”. (Female, 50-64, England).

“It’s important to me, probably because I’m visually impaired especially; it’s something I can still do. Whereas there might be other hobbies that I’ve had to give up but I can still read. Well, I can still listen”. (Female, 50-64, Scotland).

Reading to stimulate the mind/brain was of importance to 13 respondents:

Quotation

“Because it helps to keep the brain going. When you can’t see there really is nothing you can do. If you can’t read, you just sit in a chair; maybe listen to the radio, nice to have a book to read, stops your brain from atrophying”. (Male, 65-79, England.)

Reading for pleasure was also associated with maintaining a connection with the local community or wider society by seven respondents:

Quotation

“It’s very important; simply to fill that gap of interaction with what’s really going on in society”. (Male, 65-79, England).

Case Study

Avril believes reading for pleasure “keeps me completely in touch with who I am”. Now 60, she was in her early 40s when her sight began to change as a result of macular dystrophy in both eyes. She felt that people’s perceptions of her changed but reading is “... the one thing I hold on to. I’ve had to change things or give up things but reading keeps me in touch with who I think I am and that’s why it’s so important to me really”.

Case Study

Hans, aged 89, is an activist. He was a member of the Executive Council of RNIB for 30 years and is involved with the National Federation of the Blind of the UK. He joined the Braille Chess Association set up to enable blind people to play correspondence chess in braille and was its Chief Executive for twenty years from the 1960s to the 1980s. 'Beware of Pity' by Stefan Zweig is the book that has made the most impact on Hans' life. A novel which Hans explains, relates directly to the relationship between disabled and non-disabled people. He read it when he was 20 in English braille and has read it more recently in German on audio "and it still makes quite an impact". He said, "Reading has made me what I am. Somebody who can contribute to making the lives of blind people better".

There were no differences in the reported importance of reading between men and women, between respondents in the different age groups, or between those with different levels of sight.

Reasons for reading for pleasure

Participants were asked why they liked to read for pleasure, and the responses are summarised in Table 8.

Table 8 Reasons for reading for pleasure

	Survey		Interview		Total	
	No.	% of total	No.	% of total	No.	% of total
To relax/relieve stress	156	86%	31	29%	187	64%
To get information/ find things out	145	80%	22	20%	167	58%
To improve knowledge/ for self-improvement	127	70%	14	13%	141	49%
Escapism; from real life into a fantasy world	105	58%	32	30%	137	47%
Out of curiosity/ general interest	111	61%	8	7%	119	41%
Chance to use imagination	106	58%	4	4%	110	38%
Mood boosting	66	36%	2	2%	68	23%
Conversation starter/topic	58	32%	5	5%	63	22%
Other reason	32	18%	83	77%	115	40%
Total respondents	182	100%	108	100%	285	100%

The overall percentages given in Table 8 must be interpreted with caution since those completing the survey selected 5.0 reasons on average compared with interviewees, who chose 1.8 on average. Other motivations for reading for pleasure (115 in total) included reading as a habit (16 per cent of all respondents), reading as a leisure activity (nine per cent) and reading for entertainment (five per cent).

Health and well-being

The most frequently cited reason for reading for pleasure was to relax and/or relieve stress, mentioned by almost two-thirds of respondents. Women were more likely to report that they read for pleasure to boost their mood than were men. Similarly, women were more likely than men to report that reading was important to them because it provided comfort and reassurance. Amongst

sighted readers, reading to relax and/or relieve stress was selected by just over half of those questioned – 52 per cent(16).

More detail came from the opportunity to comment at the end of the interview and survey:

Quotations

“It keeps me sane through the pressure of caring for my parents, Mum with dementia and Dad is also very poorly and struggling. Hence the escapism angle”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“It is one of the few things I can do independently without asking for help or having to fit into other people’s schedule”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“It helps take my mind off the other problems that I’ve got”. (Male, 50-64, England).

“It helps when I am very sad or angry or frustrated. It also keeps things in perspective”. (Female, 65-79, Scotland).

In some of the case studies, reading played – and continues to play – an important role in helping people come to terms with events in their lives.

Case Study

Mike, aged 75, now lives alone. Sheila, his partner of 30 years, died last year and Mike is still coming to terms with his loss, “I’m very sad at losing her”. He finds that reading is “a mental comfort if you like, to read the books she bought me. It’s really just part of grieving”. Having cared for her for the last five years, he tries to “do as much as I can so I just read more to absorb myself into what I’m reading really”.

Case Study

Reading for pleasure has also helped Janette through the grieving process following the loss of her husband Tom, eight years ago: “I tried to move on a bit and it’s really difficult and the reading side of things has definitely helped. It’s a comfort blanket. It’s always been with me. I’ve certainly used the Talking Books to help. They’ve gee’d me up sometimes when I’ve felt down. Also my choice of books, I’ve tried to choose books that would give me impetus to move on a little bit more. In a funny sort of way the Talking Books were like my counselling service. I tried to choose books that would make me happy and books that made me understand myself a bit better. I don’t know what I would have done without them at that time”.

Forty-seven per cent of participants were motivated to read for pleasure to escape from real life into a fantasy world and when asked why reading for pleasure was important to them, 40 per cent of adults cited escapism. Thirty-eight per cent of participants read to use their imagination. Amongst sighted readers, reading for pleasure to escape and to use their imagination was a motivating factor for 27 and 24 per cent of adults respectively (17). Other reasons for reading relating to enjoyment included a way of passing time when travelling or occupying the mind when undertaking routine chores.

Quotations

“It’s a way of taking your mind off things. Of taking you to different places. I like reading all sorts of books including places that I’ve been to or that I can imagine so that I can build up a picture and be there”. (Female, 50-64, England).

“I just like to be taken to another world and forget the everyday hustle and bustle”. (Female, 50-64, Scotland).

“It’s just enjoyment, you don’t get the same sort from... you can watch a good film but it’s not quite the same as a good book... The smell of the book, being able to turn the pages and see what’s next, the anticipation. You can really lose yourself”. (Female, 35-49, England).

“I can go out into a book even if I am physically or financially incapable to leave home. It occupies me even if my body feels capable of nothing. I would be insane without reading”. (Female, 50-64, England).

Quality of life

Sixty-nine per cent of participants overall reported that reading for pleasure was important because it provided enjoyment. Amongst sighted readers, reading for pleasure and entertainment was the most cited reason (84 per cent).

Case Study

Marika just loves the act of reading braille. As a child, Marika, 47, had almost 70 operations on her eyes. Born with a rare form of glaucoma – Bartholomaeus – most of the operations took place before the age of seven. She learnt braille as a child and is passionate about it. She is also fanatical about reading. Fortunately, she is able to combine these two passions in her job in braille transcription at The Royal National College for the Blind: “I love my job actually. It is much more than just a job... To have a job that I love doing that involves reading, then I’m very lucky”.

Another quality of life aspect to emerge from the case studies was the value of independence.

Case Study

Janette cherishes choice: “Nobody looking over my shoulder saying ‘you can’t have that’”. She can choose the books she wants to read: “Often before getting a computer I only got books people thought were suitable for (the) blind to read now I can make personal choices and read books from around the world that suit me in a variety of formats”. This probably explains the mixed feelings she has about the reading group she attends at her local public library where the librarian chooses the books.

Learning and skills

Learning is an important motivation for reading for pleasure, with key reasons for reading including obtaining information, self-improvement and out of curiosity – two-thirds of participants reported one or more of these. Learning about new things and getting an insight into other cultures and lives were the second and third most important reasons reported for reading, after general enjoyment. Amongst sighted readers, learning and skills related motivations received similar support: reading to get information/find things out (65 per cent), reading for curiosity/general interest (57 per cent) and to improve knowledge (49 per cent).

Case Study

Gordon reads braille and audio every day often as much as 20 hours over the course of a week. This way he maintains his interests in history and travel, “I’ve also quite considerably extended my knowledge of other countries, of history, which I certainly wouldn’t have done if I hadn’t been reading a lot” and is never bored, “I can live in all sorts of worlds which I wouldn’t know about apart from through the world of books”.

Reading for pleasure can also influence the reader’s future direction, an area explored in the case studies.

Case Study

A chance encounter with a book led to Marika joining a special interest group and making friends. Marika is interested in astronomy and a book’s title, ‘The Cold Moons’ by Aeron Clement on a RNIB list attracted her attention. Thinking it was about the planet Jupiter she ordered it only to discover it was a novel about badgers. Once she had read it, Marika went on to join a voluntary badger conservation group which involved surveying badgers and campaigning against culling: “That was through reading that book”.

Case Study

Avril is currently reading ‘The Alchemist’ by Paulo Coelho and ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ by Charles Dickens, “I usually have two books on the go”. However, the book that made the most impact on her is ‘Sociology’ by Anthony Giddens. Read in 1993, this book opened the gates to the world of study and academia to Avril who went on to achieve a Master’s degree in Social and Political Thought.

Membership of a reading group also supports learning and skills development. Seventy one of the 112 participants who belonged to reading groups (63 per cent) said that one of the best things about such groups was that they were introduced to a wider range of books and authors. Being in a reading group also provides an important social context in which to explore reading.

Quotations

“I find discussing with others what I have read to be a very valuable experience. I am often encouraged to try books/authors/genres I wouldn't have considered, and gained pleasure and food for thought from them. New perspectives are often gained, and reading groups are socially very enjoyable”. (Female, 50-64, England).

“Widens my type of reading matter and makes me try new authors”. (Female, 65-79, England).

Social contact and integration

Although social contact and integration did not emerge as a key benefit of reading for pleasure in the main, it was a key outcome for people who were members of a reading group. Thirty nine per cent of participants overall belonged to a reading group, although it should be noted that reading groups for blind and partially sighted adults were targeted as part of the recruitment of the interview sample. Survey respondents were less likely to belong to a group - 22 per cent compared to 66 per cent of interviewees, and this may be a more accurate representation of reading group membership amongst blind and partially sighted adults. Women were more likely than men to belong to a group, and members reported a variety of perceived benefits from their participation in the groups.

The opportunity to socialise was one of the best things about participation for 73 of the 112 participants who belonged to a group (65 per cent of the total). Sixty-three per cent said that one of the best things about the reading group was that it helped them to explore issues and share ideas and experiences with others, and 61 per cent that it provided an opportunity to talk about what they had read. More than half (54 per cent, 61 participants) said the reading group gave them a chance to meet new people.

Quotations

“Meeting up with others to discuss and finding out what some people like and what some people don’t. Gets you out of the house once a month”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“Meeting other people that are as passionate about reading as I am. My husband isn’t a great reader... looks at me as if I’m bonkers so spending time with a group of people who understand why you are passionate about reading can be quite therapeutic. At the public library one we tend to read the same book. We talk about it and there can be differences of opinion”. (Female, 35-49, England).

“It does put before me books I possibly wouldn’t be otherwise aware of or would consider reading... We are no longer visually impaired for that two hours. We are on an equal footing with people who are not visually impaired. We can indulge in an activity we could do if we were fully sighted without restriction”. (Male, 50-64, England).

“You get to meet other people and hear their opinions. When you’re blind, especially when you can’t see at all, you need to keep in contact. The worst thing about being completely blind is you can’t really start a conversation very easily because you haven’t got eye contact... It’s nice to hear other people’s opinions”. (Male, 65-79, England).

More generally, reading helped people feel connected to the sighted world. Comments included the following:

Quotations

“It keeps me in touch with the world a little. I sometimes feel very isolated now I cannot join in the activities I used to do before my sight loss”. (Female, 65-79, England).

“It is a lifeline. It’s so important because otherwise you’re completely cut off, aren’t you? ... It’s a very lonely thing if you’re not in touch with other people... It’s just feeling normal, part of things”. (Female, 80+, England).

The case studies were able to investigate this aspect in more depth.

Case Study

Talking about books with her sisters and mother often leads to recommendations Marika will follow up on: “I might talk to my sister and she’ll say ‘read this Danielle Steele book’ and I’ll try and read it if it’s available in braille”. It is clearly something she enjoys doing: “I recently read the book of Marley and Me and not so long ago I saw the film. I was able to talk to my mum and my sisters about the comparison. It’s good to feel part of it”.

Case Study

For Avril, reading for pleasure makes her feel she is still engaging in society: “All the time I can still access reading I don’t feel as if I’m outside society. I just feel I’m engaging in a different way. But if I couldn’t read I would feel as if I was completely on the margins”. She also attends a reading group at the library in Selsey, and is the only blind or partially sighted member of the group. Between them the group members suggest books every six months and the library then try and get hold of copies. Avril tends to read the large print copy if there is one available, get an eBook version or very occasionally she misses a meeting if she can’t get hold of the book. Attending the group helps shape Avril’s reading choices, “prompts me to read things I wouldn’t normally have read” because “they don’t want to read latest chick-lit or anything like that”.

Case Study

Mike said, “When you are registered blind or partially sighted there’s not a lot of things you can do like running or cycling or playing football or cricket so you have to find more sedentary things to do”. He attends a Visually Impaired Reading Group at Berkhamsted - “I get picked up and they drive me in the community bus and they pick up other people”. All the members use audiobooks except Mike who reads print. The members of the group share their opinions of what they have read “We always have a laugh and a chinwag and then we talk about the books”. For Mike, the meeting is “a social gathering really, you get a cup of tea and a couple of biscuits”. In addition, the group provides Mike with an opportunity to meet with other blind and partially sighted adults and understand “how other people get on with their visual impairments”.

The impact of not reading

Although the focus of this research was on the positive impacts of reading for pleasure, some participants commented on the perceived negative impacts of not being able to read, and some of the frustrations they experienced as blind and partially sighted readers.

Quotations

“I’d be devastated if I couldn’t. Absolutely devastated”. (Male, 65-79, England).

“Without reading for pleasure, I am and my life is incomplete”. (Female, 65-79, England).

Growing up in a family of avid readers in the Highlands of Scotland, Janette’s family would read books such as ‘The Last of the Mohicans’ by James Fenimore Cooper to her. This book symbolises Janette’s lifelong love of reading and all things historical at a time when she couldn’t read for herself: “I know what it’s like not to read. It’s like a void; you have to wait for someone to read to you”. Gordon commented that, without reading for pleasure, ““I would really feel pretty lonely at times. I’d feel really, really deprived”. Respondents’ comments detailing their frustrations in relation to reading were mainly focussed on the availability of reading materials in most formats, including textual materials such as braille, and in audio:

Quotations

“There are still publishers who chose not to enable the text-to-speech function on Amazon titles so, for example, all of William Boyd’s Amazon titles have text-to-speech not enabled so that to me is... the publisher making a definitively discriminatory choice. They are preventing me having access to those titles and I think that is outrageous really”. (Male, 50-64, England).

“It’s hard to find specific books in audio formats, it tends to just be the popular books and if that’s not your taste then there is a limited selection”. (Female, 20-34, Wales).

“I would like to see more books available in braille definitely. I think there are more titles available in audio and I can see why because it’s obviously cheaper but I’m pretty passionate about braille and there should be more people out there encouraged to use it”. (Female, 35-49, England).

“Frustrated that some books recommended by friends aren’t always available in formats I can use”. (Male, 50-64, England).

“I would love to be a member of BookStream (RNIB’s online DAISY audio streaming service) but I want to download them directly onto my iPhone. If you look at other libraries they’ve got apps for the iPhone but RNIB haven’t”. (Male, 35-49, England).

In the case studies, for example, Marika noted that sometimes the time delay between publication of a book in print and its braille version means that “You can’t keep up with the Jones”. A member of RNIB NLS since she was a child, Marika relies upon them for her reading materials in braille, “I wouldn’t be without them” but she is sometimes frustrated when books aren’t available in braille, “It is a shame sometimes when you can’t have a sequel or follow-up book”.

4. Conclusions

Reading for pleasure clearly plays a key role in the lives of blind and partially sighted readers, and has significant impact on well-being and quality of life, social integration and learning and skills. This section considers the implications of some of the findings of the study and makes a number of recommendations.

Value for money

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. In this respect, supporting the reading lives of blind and partially sighted adults provides a valuable and cost effective service that delivers enormous benefit. Some studies indicate that the prevalence of depression in older blind and partially sighted adults living in the UK, for example, is 13.5 per cent compared to 7.4 per cent for sighted older adults (18). Reading appears to help adults feel well and prevent the onset of mental distress.

Quotation

“I’ve always been visually impaired and I’ve never managed to read books very easily when I was younger, I did have better sight and I was able, sort of, to read but I always found it a struggle so when I discovered the Talking Books service it really way, it’s a bit of a cliché, it really did open the floodgates to a new world... I would be absolutely lost without my books. Absolutely lost”.
(Male, 35-49, England).

Formats read

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.

This study engaged participants via reading groups and websites promoting reading materials to blind and partially sighted readers and did therefore talk to keen readers. It appears that they diversified their reading format options and sources in order to get the widest range of material possible. Interestingly, the most popular sources were all free at the point of use,

whereas the greatest availability of reading materials is commercial, via accessible eBooks. RNIB NLS was the main source of materials for reading for pleasure of 66 per cent of all participants in this study and 80 per cent used the service. Readers were generally happy with the service they received from RNIB in terms of the braille and audio materials they borrowed, the customer service and the information provided to them about new publications. The DAISY audio format was well-liked since it was compact and unabridged with good quality narration.

Frustration was expressed in relation to the lack of reading material in braille and the time lag between print publications and their braille counterparts making an appearance in RNIB NLS. It was also highlighted that whilst many fiction titles are available in audio format, non-fiction and foreign literature were hard to obtain.

A minority of readers purchased books online from the USA or Australia in order to access certain titles. Some also accessed texts illegally. There was some frustration expressed with copyright restrictions facing RNIB and others in providing accessible reading materials.

EBooks and technology

In this study, eBooks were used by five per cent of all participants. Research from 2011 reveals that eBooks make a significant difference to accessibility of books – just six per cent of books were accessible in any traditional format (i.e. hard copy large print, human speech audio or hard copy Braille) but if eBooks are included this increases to 20 per cent (19). If only the most popular titles are considered, 73 per cent of the books in the top 1000 of 2011 were available as an accessible eBook, but only 17 per cent are available as fully accessible hard copy versions of titles (20). Some blind and partially sighted readers use eBook readers to enlarge text, read using electronic braille or listen to audiobooks whilst some use the synthetic speech audio option in order to listen to the book. Research into the accessibility of the most popular books of 2011 (21) highlighted that the text to speech option is not always enabled on eBooks which prevents blind and partially sighted readers from reading certain texts in audio formats.

Some readers were very adept at drawing on a range of technologies including devices and different text formats to read for pleasure:

Quotation

“iPhone, braille, Calibre audiobooks, BBC audio books, online libraries where you can download a book as a PDF or text and I have either a screen reader or the Victor Reader Stream read it back to me. I’ve also recently bought a Pearl camera with OpenBook software so any kind of book I get, whether a physical hardback or softback book I can scan it and the Jaws software or OpenBook’s own software reads it back”. (Male, 35-49, Scotland).

Some readers felt that RNIB NLS was a little behind the times in terms of what it provided online. Comparisons were made with the commercial online audio retailer, ‘Audible’, part of the Amazon group, which sells audio downloads for iPhone, Android, Windows phones and some Kindle eBook readers, and it was suggested that this was the kind of service RNIB NLS should be looking to provide as development of current provision. Similarly, the online book search facilities were criticised for being out-dated.

Public libraries

Blind and partially sighted adults’ perceptions and experiences of their local public libraries in terms of the accessibility and availability of reading materials, and the help and support available from staff varied greatly. Most reading group members thoroughly appreciated the opportunity that the group, hosted and run by library staff, provided them with in terms of meeting other people, talking about books and finding out about new authors. In addition to traditional groups which met regularly to discuss the same book read by the whole group or the individual books read by members, some interviewees attended events at their library specifically aimed at blind and partially sighted adults, where they were presented with book stock in a variety of accessible formats at a session facilitated by a librarian who describes the publications to them.

Quotation

“Every six weeks they have a session led by the two librarians... They serve us tea and coffee and have a trolley with CDs and tapes on... and they read us the synopsis”. (Female, 80+, England).

A source of frustration was the way in which accessible materials were presented in the library. Audiobooks, for example, may be easier for some readers to listen to but it can be difficult to know what the book is about if there are stickers and barcodes on the CD case hiding the book blurb. If the blurb is visible, the reader still may not be able to read it if it is in standard or smaller print. One reader, for example, took along their CD player and tried the CDs at random to ascertain which books he had read before.

Examples of ways to assist blind and partially sighted readers select their books include the PenFriend device which is being used by the Isle of Wight library service. The PenFriend is programmed to read out details of an audiobook's title, author and content – just like reading the cover of a book, using an audio label on the spine. Similarly, some libraries use a reading buddy model where volunteers help readers pick out audiobooks or large print books.

Quotation

“My local library are very good at selecting books for me and when they get new books in on CD they save any that they think I will want to read”. (Female, 65-79, England).

Recommendations

Given the value placed on reading by blind and partially sighted readers, its impact on their lives and because it is such an important alternative to other leisure activities, blind and partially sighted adults are a key client group for reading suppliers, whether they are publishers or libraries, and it is important that they develop appropriate services. The research suggests the following recommendations to widen practical access to reading materials:

Authors and Publishers

- Research findings reinforce the RNIB's request to authors and publishers to ensure that text-to-speech is enabled on all eBooks (22)
- There is scope for greater collaboration between producers of reading materials in accessible formats, publishers and specialist library services to have a joined up conversation about the supply of reading material to this target group, to improve the timeliness of delivery, and avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.

RNIB

- It is important for RNIB to continue to work with publishers to increase availability of accessible formats, including eBooks, beyond the most popular titles
- There is also the need for a feasibility study into the provision of accessible audio loans via the RNIB NLS website.

Public libraries and local authorities

- Public libraries should continue to develop their services guided by the valuable framework provided by Six Steps to library services for blind and partially sighted people from Share the Vision, the Society of Chief Librarians and the Scottish Library & Information Council (23)
- Public libraries should consider how audiobooks and other reading materials for blind and partially sighted readers are presented, to make them accessible and easy to select without sighted assistance
- It is important to make sure that blind and partially sighted adult library users know what is on offer, and that computer accessibility options such as screen magnification software and/or text to speech software are in working order
- Reading groups for blind and partially sighted adults provide a valuable community service and should be promoted to local support groups to increase access to the benefits they offer. Particularly targeting people with greater degrees of visual impairment and those who started to lose their sight as children, who were shown by this study to be less likely to belong to a reading group
- Audiobooks on cassette are still popular amongst blind and partially sighted readers but their production is in decline (24). It is important library staff are aware of alternative formats especially for those readers who currently only use audiobooks on tape. There is a vast array of reading technology available to improve access to reading for blind and partially sighted adults including eBooks. The Reading Sight website (25) has a useful guide to these which also includes the relevant organisations that provide them
- Public libraries and their partners should consider the needs of blind and partially sighted readers when organising reading events and promotions

- They should also continue to build the needs of blind and partially sighted adults into national strategy such as the Universal Reading Offer, one of the Society of Chief Librarians' four national offers.

Further research

This study did not consider the impact on children of reading for pleasure. In the wider population children are reading less as other activities compete for their leisure time (26). Relatively fewer children's books are available in accessible formats compared to adults' (27). We believe there is an urgent need for research into the impact of digitising children's books on reading for pleasure for blind and partially sighted children and young people.

There is a need for up-to-date comparative data, and this research has highlighted the potential for a linked study using samples of blind and partially sighted readers compared to sighted readers to corroborate and extend some of the findings.

Quantifying the benefits to blind and partially sighted adults associated with reading for pleasure, and the consequent benefits to society, was beyond the scope of this research. At a time when budgets are under scrutiny, research into this area could assist in making the case for interventions and services which might otherwise be threatened.

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