



Library services to the blind in the United Kingdom and Ireland: a comparative study five years on

SINEAD WILLIAMS

Sinead Williams is an information specialist with LASER, the business information service at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. After graduating from University College, Dublin in 1988, her first professional appointment was with Bain & Company's corporate library in London; she then moved to First Contact (now Disclosure First Contact) an independent information broker also based in London. Sinead has been with LASER since moving to Australia in 1992; she reviews business information publications for the Australian Library & Information Association's monthly journal *Incite*, and her professional interests include business information, online and Internet searching/teaching, and library services to the blind.

Reports results of a survey of library services to blind users in Ireland, conducted as a follow up to the author's previous survey of such services in selected institutions, including three sample public libraries in Dublin, and undertaken five years earlier (Sinead Taylor, *An Leabharlann/The Irish Library*, 7 (2) 1990, 51-4, 56-60. (LISA ref. 913498)). The present survey involved contacting the same libraries and institutions in order to see what changes had taken place in the intervening period. Results suggest that, with the exception of regional talking newspapers and initiatives by the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI), public library services for these users remain as disjointed and disorganized as before, and hopes of introducing a decentralized system in Ireland with enhanced gateway type public libraries for the visually handicapped have not been realized. Summarizes the results of the survey with particular reference to: NCBI activities; the Cork Tape Library; NCBI Braille Library; Braille and talking magazines and newspapers; and Dublin Public Libraries. Contrasts this depressing situation in Ireland with similar services running in the UK. These have become even more vibrant with exciting new projects and facilities. Quotes extensively from the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) Annual Review of 1993/94 and refers to such projects as: the RNIB's 'See it Right' initiative; MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface); and new formats for talking books, including CD-ROMs and CD-I. Concludes with notes on two European Community sponsored projects: the EXLIB project (Expansion of European Library Systems for the Visually Handicapped) which involved both Ireland and the UK; and VISTAS (Visually Impaired Students Telematics Applications Support), designed to harmonize services for visually handicapped students and still awaiting approval at the time of writing.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In my previously published study I surveyed the services provided to the blind community in three sample public libraries in the Dublin area and compared Irish library services to the blind nationally with those in the United Kingdom.

At that time, Irish services compared very unfavourably. I was interested to find out if the situation had improved five years later. I contacted all the institutions surveyed in my earlier study, as well as the co-ordinators of new projects, and from the collection of data, statistics and profiles of new services kindly forwarded to me by the librarians at these institutions, I have been able to compile the following report.

Address: LASER, La Trobe University
Library, Bundoora, Victoria 3083,
Australia.
Fax: (03) 94793018
E-mail: s.williams@latrobe.edu.au

LIBRARY SERVICES TO THE BLIND IN IRELAND

Access 90 (1991), a joint report of the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) and An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, based on their study of library services to visually impaired people in Ireland carried out between April 1990 and March 1991, found services in the Republic of Ireland to be fragmented and well below acceptable levels of provision.

One of the report's main recommendations was that public libraries should serve as the gateway to reading and information services for visually impaired people. Whilst this was seen as a long term aim in the context of a five year development plan, two short term aims of more immediate priority were the establishment of an Irish National Talking Book Service co-ordinated by An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, and a national transcription service to be managed by the National Council for the Blind of Ireland. These latter two services could be taken over by public libraries in the long term, with An Chomhairle Leabharlanna and the National Council for the Blind of Ireland taking on the role of national support agencies. In effect, the study found in favour of a decentralized type of service such as that in operation in Sweden and Denmark, rather than the highly centralized UK system.

This hope of introducing a decentralized system in the Republic of Ireland, with enhanced gateway type public library services for the visually impaired, has not been realized in the past five years. Whilst the National Talking Book Service is in operation, the 3000 titles recommended for acquisition by the *Access 90* report, with a minimum target of 6000-8000 titles at the end of five years, has not been achieved.

It appears that little has improved with respect to library services to the blind in Ireland. The picture that emerges from the data I have collected shows that, with the exception of the regional talking newspapers, which have been developing in several counties throughout Ireland with some success, and a few new initiatives by the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, public library services to the visually impaired remain as disjointed and disorganized in Ireland as they were in 1990.

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE BLIND OF IRELAND (NCBI)

The National Council for the Blind of Ireland currently has 500+ members - just 10 per cent of the NCBI's estimation of 5835 blind people (registered) in Ireland, of whom 1686 live in Dublin. NCBI members are served by a talking book library, known as the National Talking Book Service, providing recorded books on four-track cassette. The talking book collection mainly comprises titles from the US Library

of Congress who have allowed the NCBI unlimited access to their stock of 80 000 four-track cassette books. NCBI currently hold approximately 1600 titles, including fiction, autobiography/biography, cookery, foreign language literature, cookery, history, medical/health books, poetry, essays, plays and books on religion and philosophy.

Books by Irish authors which are not available from the Library of Congress are recorded by NCBI in their own recording studio. There are about 50 titles in this collection to date.

The NCBI provides the special playback machines required for playing the four-track cassettes free of charge to members. However, as demand is so great for these machines, there is a waiting list in operation.

The Cork Tape Library

The NCBI service in Cork provide two-track titles. These are read onto tape by volunteers in their own homes and, from this library stock educational literature, (i.e., Junior and Leaving Certificate curriculum courses) can be provided on tape. Volunteers also support students in third-level education, offering a book transcription request service.

In fact, the Cork Tape Library is one of the most widely used of all NCBI's services. Launched in 1984, the membership has now grown to about 1150 members countrywide and is continuing to grow at the rate of seven per week. The service offers free membership to all visually impaired people nationally. The library currently holds 1275 titles, many by Irish authors, and provides standard tapes which can be played on any normal household tape-player. However, this year the Cork NCBI branch has unfortunately had to close the library to new applicants for a period of six months due to diminishing office space, shortage of book storage space and inability to cope with the additional workload caused by increases in membership over the last few years. It is hoped that in this six month pause in service provision these problems may be tackled.

The NCBI Braille Library

The NCBI also operates a braille library of which there are 147 members, about half of whom are regular users. The braille library has recently been upgraded, with old, obsolete stock being discarded and new stock provided from a very generous donation of modern, popular titles by the Library of Congress. Currently, there are about 1500 braille titles available to readers. However, the Librarian assures me there is still much work to be done in updating the braille library - a catalogue has yet to be completed.

NCBI can now produce braille literature on request. Their computerized braille station produces books, leaflets and government information literature quickly and efficiently. Recently a brailist was contracted to transcribe 11 teenage book titles by contemporary Irish writers into braille, as the teenage blind community was perceived as not being hitherto adequately catered for by NCBI.

Braille and talking magazines and newspapers

A bi-monthly braille magazine, *The Blind Citizen*, is published by NCBI and distributed free of charge, and *Sceal Beo*, a twice monthly tape magazine is produced in the NCBI studios and also distributed free of charge. *Newstape* is a fortnightly 90-minute tape of articles taken from the national newspapers covering current affairs, sports, reviews and interviews, and costs £5.00 for an annual subscription.

The Irish Times is also available daily via computer to any visually impaired person with the necessary equipment - a computer with speech or large-print component, modem and aerial.

The talking newspaper service is one area in which Irish services to the blind have improved considerably since my last report, with many regional newspapers now available on tape. *The Sligo Talking Newspaper* was set up in April 1993 and has a current readership of 80 people for its edited recording of *The Sligo Champion*. *The Tipperary Talking Newspaper*, currently circulated to 70 subscribers, was launched in September 1994 and provides readings by local drama groups from three local newspapers on a 90-minute tape. Other regional talking newspapers launched within the last two years include those in counties Offaly, Laois and Kilkenny.

The Cork Tape Magazine is probably the best known of these services. It was started 10 years ago and is circulated monthly to almost 600 subscribers.

These developments in the area of talking newspapers are particularly encouraging as, at the time of my earlier study, the visually impaired community in Ireland were heavily reliant on talking newspaper services in the United Kingdom (TNAUK), as there were no comparable services available in Ireland at that time.

DUBLIN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

However, despite all this activity in the area of talking newspapers and other services provided by NCBI, the situation at the three public libraries I surveyed five years ago, is still bleak.

The three public libraries I chose for my earlier study all responded to my requests for an updated report of their services to the visually impaired community and I have outlined my evaluation of these responses below. I chose these particular libraries as they represent three very diverse communities across Dublin city. Ballyfermot is an outer suburb of Dublin with a high level of poverty and unemployment. Dundrum is a comfortably middle-class suburb with mainly higher level socio-economic groupings. The Central Library, or ILAC (Irish Life Assurance Company) Centre Library, as it is commonly known, is a public library situated within a large shopping complex in the heart of Dublin city, serving the city centre's business community and city residents.

Dublin public libraries have suffered cutbacks in

recent years, particularly in terms of staffing, and most branches do not currently have a housebound service. Two exceptions to this are Pembroke and Donaghmede libraries, who both run a housebound service in conjunction with the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), which includes visits to the blind community in their areas. Ballyfermot Library hopes to start a housebound service by the end of 1995.

The original large braille plan of Ballyfermot Library, displayed at the entrance, is still mounted but none of the remaining braille features, such as braille notices and shelf markings, which had been heavily vandalized when I visited the library in 1988, have been replaced.

Ballyfermot Library still holds its braille collection which was donated by Alcoholics Anonymous in the early 1980s. However, this collection is rarely used. The Senior Librarian has recently once again tried to interest the NCBI in promoting the braille collection but so far without success.

Two heavily used areas of library stock, however, are the books on tape, of which there are now approximately 700 titles, and the large print books. The tape collection is on open access and mainly holds fiction titles, but also includes a good selection of plays. The growing collection of large print books covers romance, crime, westerns and general adventure. Despite the high issue of these two collections, usage by the blind and partially-sighted community is not monitored. The Senior Librarian is aware that a number of library users borrow from these collections on behalf of elderly relatives with sight problems but has no statistics on this.

Dundrum Library is at the time of writing still a manual branch, with 13 497 registered borrowers. No separate registration records are kept for blind or partially sighted readers. However, the Assistant Librarian has informed me that from desk experience she is aware of an increasing use of the library by the visually impaired community, and some efforts have been made to accommodate them; for example, the local blind community and indeed all housebound readers are eligible to apply for a block loan library ticket to enable them to borrow up to 10 items for a period of two months instead of the usual six items for three weeks.

There are what the Assistant Librarian quotes as 'well meaning or friendly complaints' from the visually impaired community about the lack of selection in both the large print and talking book collections and the lack of any print or audio catalogues specifically for these collections, which could be borrowed for use at home.

Despite this, it should be noted that Dundrum's selection is one of the largest in the Dublin Public Libraries' service. Their current audio-visual stock is 2033 items, including music tapes, language courses and talking books, and the adult issue for cassettes in 1994 was 7117. Regular additions were made to both the large print and talking book stocks in 1994. Fiction is the most popular selection in both formats.

Dundrum Library has no user-friendly shelving or furniture for users of the talking book or large print collections.

Efforts have been made, however, to install a reading area beside the large print section and this has proved popular.

The ILAC Centre Library was one of the better-equipped public libraries I surveyed in my previous report, offering a service on their Kurzweil Reading Machine, the only facility of its kind in Ireland at that time. The machine was used by the blind community for reading new novels not yet available on tape, business and personal letters and other documents. Pages could be placed face down on the machine and the machine would 'read' the words aloud. This machine has been out of use now for some time and library staff are experiencing difficulty in having it repaired. Funds are not currently available to upgrade it.

No statistics are kept on borrowers by category so it is not known how many blind/partially sighted people use the ILAC Centre library. However, stock specifically aimed at visually impaired users includes 2500 large print books, including fiction and non-fiction; 1000 non-fiction talking books; and 1200 talking books in the fiction category.

The library also has an on-going programme of activities including lectures, recitals, readings, courses and demonstrations which, while not specifically catering to the needs of the visually impaired community, may nonetheless be of some interest.

One Dublin public library which is making some effort is Malahide Public Library. In January 1995 they launched a new computerized reading system for their visually impaired users. This technology allows any visually impaired person to read printed text through a voice synthesizer or large-print display. It is the most modern of its kind in Ireland.

It is disappointing that in the five years since my previous study was published, little has improved in the services offered to visually impaired users of public libraries in Dublin, and that services to the blind in Ireland generally are still quite limited - with the notable exception of the valiant efforts of the talking newspaper services throughout the regional counties.

LIBRARY SERVICES TO THE BLIND IN THE UNITED KINGDOM THE ROYAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND (RNIB)

In contrast, services in the United Kingdom have become even more vibrant with exciting new projects and facilities. In the impressive opening statement of the Chairman of the Royal National Institute for the Blind's (RNIB) Annual Review of 1993/94, John Wall (Chairman) outlines the achievements of the 10 year period 1985-1995, which include:

- the doubling of the number of visually impaired people served directly by the RNIB;
- an increase in the number of services provided by the RNIB from 40 to 60;

- UK£40 million invested in rebuilding and refurbishing schools, colleges and other centres;
- a 60 per cent increase in service expenditure.

The Talking Book Service of the Royal National Institute for the Blind in the United Kingdom has 64 000 members, representing 18.28 per cent of Britain's blind/partially sighted population of 350 000. (It should be noted that whilst the RNIB estimate that there are 1 084 000 visually impaired people in the United Kingdom, the Department of Health & Community Services currently has 350 000 people registered as visually impaired). The popular Talking Book Service, at an annual subscription rate of UK£48, is heavily used, with many members reading up to three books per week. This service is, interestingly, also quite widely used by the blind community in Ireland, with about 500 Irish borrowers at the time of writing, only 50 of whom are concurrent members of the NCBI Talking Book Service.

Ten thousand talking books are available for loan, with many popular novels. Talking books are also available in Welsh and Hindi. The tapes are sent to members in tailor-made wallets. Postage is free, as under the Unesco Florence Agreement of the 1950s, items of a cultural and/or informational nature are distributed free of postal charges to the blind and other disabled people worldwide. Tape players are supplied on free loan. They are very easy to use and are serviced by a nationwide team of volunteers. Catalogues of the collection are available in print and braille and there is also a telephone information service providing details of new books.

Weekly circulation is about 60 000 tapes, of which 57 500 are for leisure reading and the remainder for academic purposes. Annual circulation figures are in the region of three million loans and 500 new books (all recorded unabridged) are added to the collection every year.

In addition there is a substantial library of study material and leisure support material on compact cassette. These are available free on loan in either two or four track to any blind or partially sighted person. There are currently some 2000 users borrowing some 100 000 titles per year from a library of over 16 000 titles. Over 1600 titles are added a year.

This library is supported by a network of volunteer transcription services who transcribe onto tape anything people ask for. They transcribe over 27 000 hours of recording a year. That is three hours a day for every hour elapsed, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

Braille books, all of which are non-fiction, computer manuals and magazines like the *Radio Times* and *TV Times* are available from the Braille Library which has 1100 regular borrowers, 40 percent of whom are overseas. They have a stock of 14 000 books and can transcribe textbooks for students on request. Sheet music is also available in braille.

'Share The Vision'

One of the most exciting new initiatives in the United Kingdom is Share The Vision (STV), a project being carried

out by the Royal National Institute for the Blind in conjunction with public library authorities, the National Library for the Blind, Calibre, Talking Newspaper Association UK, Clear Vision, Action for Blind People and other groups. The project began in November 1989 and is funded by the RNIB with grant aid from the Department of National Heritage. Public library authorities in the UK have been very supportive.

Their objective is to promote 'community-based library services for visually-impaired people' with the aim of localizing library and information services for the blind community. STV describes its 'deliverables' as:

- a national database of UK holdings in braille, moon (a simpler method of reading by touch for those who find braille difficult), spoken word and large print publications;
- a directory of national and local transcription agencies which produce and disseminate information in braille, large print and spoken word;
- training seminars on disability awareness of visual impairment and service provision;
- workshops and seminars to support public library authorities with their development plans;
- a quarterly newsletter (STVnews) of current events and products circulated free to libraries and other interested organizations and people;
- directional consultancy and advice service. (Share the Vision)

Two pilot projects under the auspices of STV are PIP (Pilot Interlending Project) which involves Lancashire and Thameside Libraries and the NW Regional Library System, the aim being to 'establish model procedures for the interlending of alternative format materials using the national database'; and the Gloucestershire Project, involving the Gloucestershire County Library, Arts and Museums Service which offers a postal cassette service with a choice of talking book services to local residents.

'See it Right'

The RNIB's 'See it Right' initiative, which was launched in September 1993, also deserves mention. Its aim is to increase public awareness of the need for large print, tape and braille. In defining visually impaired people's rights to 'citizen information', the campaign organizers have attempted to show information providers in public services, libraries, post offices, housing associations, colleges, banks, building societies and local councils how to communicate effectively with blind and partially sighted people. (*Looking forward*, 1993/4)

MIDI

Another exciting facility being promoted by RNIB in the UK is MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface), a system which has been assisting with the special needs of visually-

impaired musicians. MIDI is a computer programming language which is an accepted standard throughout the music industry. Geraldine Page's *Introduction to MIDI for visually impaired people* (1994) outlines the experiences of three visually impaired musicians in using this technology.

CDs

When I first started my research for this paper the RNIB were investigating various new formats for talking books, including 8mm video tape (sound only), rotary-head digital audio tape and compact disc (CD). The EXLIB reports (see below) indicated that the RNIB were co-operating with the NCBI, Library of Congress and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind to set standards for the provision of books on CD and that they also hoped to involve Australian organizations in their experiments. The EXLIB report noted that whilst the English speaking countries appeared to prefer the CD-ROM format for talking books, other European countries were opting for ordinary audio CD or CD-I formats. The advantages of any type of CD format for talking books are that they are considerably more compact and more robust than traditional audio cassettes and do not need rewinding. The user can also bookmark sections of documents or go directly to particular chapters.

The latest information from the RNIB, in November 1995, brought to my attention by Stephen King, the RNIB's TCS (Technical and Consumer Services) Division Director, is that the RNIB is looking at CD-ROM format as a distribution medium but is still keeping its options open on CD-I. It is working with a number of international partners with a view to promoting a worldwide set of standard formats for the next generation of talking book technology. RNIB has built demonstration systems based on CD-ROM and CD-I and will be testing second generation CD-ROM-based systems in 1996.

However, the most important aspect of the project, in Stephen King's view, is not the distribution but the archive format. RNIB is working under the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) umbrella to promote the development of standard file formats for digital audio material. The objective is to ensure the ease of interlibrary cross-border lending. Stephen reports that the RNIB are working with a number of partners and hope that IFLA will publish some draft standards in August 1996 and ratify these in August 1997.

RNIB's future directions

Despite all this vibrant and impressive activity, the RNIB is by no means complacent. They estimate that they reach well over 100 000 people through their direct services but see this figure as being a small percentage of the total population of visually impaired people (counting the blind and partially sighted community) in the United Kingdom. However, many more are being helped indirectly, for example, where teachers using RNIB facilities are actually helping large groups of visually impaired children. The RNIB continue to

advertise on the radio and in the national press. One of their current concerns is increasing the priority given to older visually impaired people. One person in seven over the age of 75 is blind or partially sighted. This would mean a further potential client group of some 700 000 elderly people. It is intended to promote existing services to the over-75s as well as to investigate the possibilities of extending existing services with the special needs of the elderly in mind.

THE EXLIB PROJECT

One project in which both the United Kingdom and Ireland have been involved and which will have a significant impact on services in both countries, but in Ireland in particular, is the EXLIB project. EXLIB (Expansion of European Library Systems for the Visually Disadvantaged) is a European Community (EC) project which took place over 18 months from January 1993 to June 1994, its aim being to produce models for library services to the visually impaired community. The project was led by the Students' Library for the Blind, Amsterdam, in conjunction with the Danish National Library for the Blind, Association Valentin Hauy, Paris, the University of Bradford, UK and Aphelion Management Services, Brussels. The project has focussed on improving library services to the several million blind and partially sighted communities throughout the EC by aiming to provide them with the same level and quality of access to information resources as are available to the normally sighted community. It is hoped that library facilities throughout the EC countries can be harmonized so that the visually disadvantaged and normally sighted communities have equal access to information resources such as catalogues, library services and document delivery.

EXLIB has investigated existing services and technologies in EC countries and made recommendations on service enhancement, including guidelines on standards and specifications. In total, for the purposes of its research, EXLIB surveyed 439 libraries across Europe, of which 284 were public libraries, 121 scientific/commercial libraries and 35 special libraries. Some of the most interesting findings of the survey revealed that just 73 per cent of the libraries surveyed were using computerized catalogues, which means there is still some way to go before a fully automated service can be offered. Interestingly, only 48 per cent of responding libraries in Ireland had computerised catalogues, as against 89 per cent of UK libraries which responded to the survey.

The EXLIB Project also surveyed visually impaired library users across Europe, and the 270 survey respondents were shown to be mostly in the workforce or studying, and had a strong demand for more materials in digital form, improved access to library catalogues, and more titles than the current one per cent of what is available to the normally sighted. It must be noted, however, that the majority of visually handicapped people are elderly and have lost their sight in old age; they are consequently not likely to

have learned braille and are not familiar with computers. Thus EXLIB has to acknowledge that most of the new technological developments are only relevant to a small minority of the current visually impaired population. For this reason, while highlighting the sophisticated facilities of computers and digital text, the EXLIB project also investigated the use of the telephone as a means of access for the less computer literate amongst the visually impaired library users. Specifically with the elderly visually impaired community in mind, the project considered the development of voice response systems whereby readers can use the conventional home telephone to consult catalogues and order reading material.

EXLIB has made recommendations on the introduction of legislation to ensure the production, legal deposit and inclusion in national bibliographies of alternative format materials; copyright legislation to allow for the conversion of materials into digital formats and the extension of free mailing to free data transfer. There have also been proposals for improvements in services to the visually handicapped in public libraries, including appropriate equipment provision, interlibrary loan services and pre- and in-service training for librarians, as well as training for the visually impaired communities in the use of libraries. There is strong emphasis on the importance of standards, not only in terms of the improvement of document interchange, but also in terms of the recognition of the special needs of the visually impaired community in the development of standards.

At the core of EXLIB's outlook for the future is the development of much material onto digital files, with talking books and large print texts continuing to remain as popular formats whilst we still have a situation where not all visually impaired readers are computer literate. While it may be acknowledged that the visually impaired communities of the future will have grown up with computers, it must also be recognized that demographic studies across Europe show an increase in the elderly population as people live longer and it can be expected that this increase in elderly populations will bring a resultant increase in the proportion of visually impaired people in Europe who are not, for the immediate future at least, likely to be computer literate. The resulting issues of storage, access and distribution of the various types of required materials for these very different user groups, as well as the implications for technological developments, have been discussed at length by EXLIB in its final report.

While the project was completed on target in June 1994, much work is still continuing. The project co-ordinators are proceeding to implement some of the recommendations and a new submission will be made in the near future to the EC for further funding. Richard Tucker, Project Co-ordinator in Amsterdam, has informed me that a number of European countries have revised their national library policies as a result of the EXLIB reports. In the case of Scotland, for example, this has involved the insertion of a

paragraph, in Ireland it has meant a major change in national policy. Richard is currently writing the next EC EXLIB Project and is in the process of completing a report on a seminar held in Madrid to round off the last EXLIB Project. The latter will, when published, give indications as to the directions the various EC countries will be taking with respect to library services to the visually disadvantaged.

In the meantime, a trial based on EXLIB's recommendations will be run in Ireland by the NCBI across five university libraries, two special libraries and five selected public libraries. It is proposed that a central catalogue and electronic library of documents specifically for blind students will be established. This electronic service, processed at nine braille stations, will offer documents stored as raw text, formatted to the national braille standard, and capable of being downloaded using a bulletin board system. The five selected public libraries will have links to this central catalogue. Computer workstations will be installed at local libraries, providing access to electronic catalogues, newspapers and other materials, and librarians and blind users will be given training by the trial's organizers. Finally, there are plans for the delivery of the electronic catalogues and documents to local libraries using TV signal based data broadcasting techniques.

The target groups for this Irish trial are librarians, visually impaired readers, including students, and elderly blind users of talking books, who can be indirectly helped through improved local information provision (EXLIB Report 5, p.78).

VISTAS

VISTAS (Visually Impaired Students Telematics Applications Support) is another project submitted to the EC in March 1995, designed to harmonize services for visually handicapped students at all third level educational institutions across Europe. Richard Tucker informs me that the aim is 'to hold three conferences per year over three years on the themes of access to information and materials; the creation of special learning materials; and the development of technologies.'

At the time of writing, this project has not yet been granted but is expected, if accepted, to have considerable impact on library services to the blind in Europe.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be seen from this report that, despite the bright future expected from the eventual implementation of the EXLIB recommendations and the proposed Irish trial described above, library services to the visually impaired community in Ireland, at the present time, continue to compare unfavourably with those in the United Kingdom. Five years on, Dublin public libraries' services to the blind community still leave much to be desired. It is

unfortunate that no statistics are kept at any of the public libraries I surveyed in Dublin on the numbers of visually impaired users, and there are no public library programmes or initiatives currently aimed specifically at the visually impaired community.

The Irish blind community still make significant use of the British talking book services. As a mere 50 of the 500 Irish borrowers of RNIB talking book tapes are concurrently NCBI members, it can be inferred that there are almost as many Irish visually impaired people exclusively using the RNIB services as there are members of the NCBI (ca. 500). It is noteworthy that the NCBI counts as its members only 10 per cent of the registered blind population of Ireland, as against the RNIB's membership figure approximating 18.28 per cent of Britain's registered blind population.

There is much work to be done by the NCBI in enhancing their braille collection, most critically in terms of the provision of a catalogue. It is disappointing that there is still a considerable waiting list for the tape machines required to play the four-track tapes supplied by the NCBI's talking book library, and that the formerly vibrant Cork Tape Library is temporarily closed due to inability to meet demands.

On the positive side, it is encouraging to note that the NCBI have made attempts to cater for the teenage blind community by recently commissioning a brailist to transcribe suitable books, and that the NCBI are now in a position to produce braille literature on request. And, in my view, the most significant development in the provision of services to the visually impaired in Ireland in the past five years has been the launching of so many successful talking newspapers in the regional counties. In terms of their provision of readings for local residents from local newspapers, the volunteers who have initiated these services have taken the first steps towards liberating the visually impaired communities in Ireland from their traditionally heavy reliance on United Kingdom services.

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Vision, 36 Circular Road, Castlerock, Co. Londonderry
BT51 4XA, Northern Ireland

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Siobhan Bermingham, Librarian, National Council for the
Blind of Ireland, PV Doyle House, Whitworth Road,
Drumcondra, Dublin 9, Ireland

Diane Dixon, Senior Librarian, Ballyfermot Library,
Ballyfermot Road, Ballyfermot, Dublin 10, Ireland

Anne O'Leary, Librarian, Learning Resource Centre, Central
Library, ILAC Centre, Henry Street, Dublin 1, Ireland

Maureen Heuston, Assistant Librarian, Dundrum Library,
Main Street, Dundrum, Dublin 16, Ireland

Stephen King, Director, TCS Division;
John Griffiths, Engineering Support & Development
Manager;
Geraldine Page, Assistant Librarian;
Ann Marie Powell, Library Services Officer;
Royal National Institute for the Blind, PO Box 173,
Peterborough PE2 6WS, England

David Harris, Customer Services Advisor (London), Royal
National Institute for the Blind, 224 Great Portland Street,
London W1N 6AA, England

Richard Tucker, Project Co-ordinator (EXLIB), Studie- en
Vakbibliotheek, Molenpad 2, 1016 GM Amsterdam,
Netherlands

Margaret Barwick, British Library Document Supply Centre,
Boston Spa, Wetherby, West Yorkshire LS23 7BQ, England