Editorial
Disability Issues and Libraries: a Scottish Perspective

Abstract

Purpose of this paper	To give an overview of recent advances in thinking on disability issues in libraries, with a particular emphasis on Scottish initiatives.
Design/methodology/approach	A summary of recent professional trends.
Findings	That service provision in this regard has improved significantly in recent years, but that there is still capacity for further advance.
Research limitations/implications	A descriptive account of past and present trends which only points to theoretical and research implications to be developed elsewhere.
Practical implications	This opinion piece gives some clear and practical concepts which can illuminate the background to disability provision in modern libraries.
What is original/value of the paper?	This editorial briefly sketches the legislative underpinning to advances in the area of library disability service provision, but points out the role of the customer service values inherent in the library profession which should not be underestimated as a contributing factor to this story of improvement. And in particular, this editorial emphasises the need to focus on the human rather than the technological side of this subject.

Keywords: Disabled Users; Library Services; Scotland

Over the last ten to fifteen years, libraries in Scotland, the UK, and across the world, have experienced a significant change in expectations about how they deal with disability issues. Broadly speaking, librarians have been asked to raise standards in order to 'enable' groups of users who were effectively 'disabled' by the way services were provided hitherto. In the past, if certain library services could not be used by a full range of potential customers in the community, there was no

legal obligation to reach out to would-be users. If they couldn't adapt to the way we provided services, then the sad fact was that the obligation to improve matters was moral and professional, but not judicial. For librarians who wished to expand services but who rarely controlled the resources needed to facilitate such expansion, there was little remedy open to them.

Although the term itself may not have been used much at the time, there existed to a greater or lesser extent a mindset wherein disability was viewed as a 'medically' defined phenomenon – that is, disability was seen as a medical deficit inherent in the disabled individual which could be expressed purely by some sort of clinical label The subsequent radical change in our thinking about disability issues was in many ways sparked by the advent of a new school of thought which saw disability as a socially defined phenomenon. The so-called 'social model' of disability does not attribute disability as a problem to the individual, but rather sees it as a result of society refusing to adapt itself to the nature of certain groups ('the disabled') who therefore become socially excluded. Libraries are part of society and so can contribute to a disabling environment. Libraries therefore also have a part to play in empowering the disabled to take their full and rightful place in community life (Beaton, 2005).

In practice, the shift in understanding from the medical to the social model needed to be reinforced by legislation. This represents a worldwide trend, one in which laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) have backed up the move towards of the social model of disability. The two most important pieces of legislation in the UK have been the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1995 -) (which put the onus on service providers to adapt to disability, but which exempted large sections of society from the obligation – including education), and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA, 1991, which qualified the parallel DDA legislation and extended it to education). Recent amendments to UK copyright law have also helped extend services to the visually impaired.[1]

However, it is fair to say that many libraries have reacted to the change in thinking on disability issues by looking at it as an extension of the user service ethos of librarianship, rather than as a defensive manoeuvre prompted by a fear of litigation (Pinder, 2005). Thus, rather than seeing the improvement in disability services in libraries over the last ten to fifteen years purely as an outcome of general social and legislative trends, it would also be correct to understand this improvement as part of the profession's permanent and ongoing commitment towards greater service delivery in libraries.

So, just as new information technology has made it possible for libraries to invest more in giving access to collections rather than simply building collections, some of the staffing resources freed up by time-saving library IT can be dedicated to servicing new customer groups where inter-personal services are highly valued and indispensable – something that is certainly true in the area of support for the disabled. And similarly, many of the improvements in IT-based access technologies which are available specifically for disabled readers have opened up possibilities for new library services, and the profession has seized on these opportunities very readily. Web-based accessibility initiatives have been particularly important in this regard and has been discussed in some detail by a variety of authors, both in Scotland (Wallis, 2005) and elsewhere (Schmetzke (a) and (b)). All of this can be seen as simply mirroring the growth in general IT-based library services over the same period.

Another way of looking at this change in approach to disability issues and library services is to see it as asking service providers to anticipate needs rather than react

to needs. If a library does not adjust its services in advance to the demands of all its customers, then that is what creates a disabling environment for certain client groups. At worst, the now outdated reaction to an expression of need on the part of a disabled reader might have been, 'Oh, if we'd known you were coming, we'd have done something for you!' Now, as far as is reasonably possible, we have to have the service in place, or at least be poised to put something in place should the need be expressed.

This may seem to set a frighteningly high standard of provision for libraries. How can we ever anticipate every demand that may be placed upon us, in any area of service, let alone disability services? Personal accounts by disabled library users show how specialised their needs can be (McAulay, 2005). In practice, the pattern of anticipation that it is reasonable to implement in any given library will vary across the spectrum of different types of libraries, although the end result can be equally effective regardless of context.

Some libraries are small, have a similarly small group of users and are not resourced to spend massive amounts on assistive technologies for any and every disabled requirement. However, their small size and intimate knowledge of their particular user group mean they can focus very effectively on removing disabling features from the local library environment for the those users who present with some sort of need for accommodation. What such libraries lack in scale of provision they can make up for in terms of the focus and tailoring of their services.

Larger libraries may have much greater resources to build an extensive suite of services (for example, offering high quality IT-based assistive technologies, and implementing excellent infrastructural improvements to enhance the physical accessibility of the library environment). However, they may lack the intimate relationship with the customer that marks the small special library, and some readers may fall through the net of provision as a result. Given the potential complexity of any user's needs, the ability to get to know one's clientele well is a great advantage sometimes denied to the big library. And the best of both worlds can be aspired to by mean of cross-sectoral cooperation. Expensive facilities at large libraries can be used by less well-resourced libraries as part of regional collaborations or by means of formal consortial arrangements, although software licensing restrictions together with library network security barriers make this more problematic than in the days of traditional library cooperation based on sharing physical access to hardcopy collections.

Like the profession world-wide, the Scottish library profession has evolved a variety of effective strategies to deal with the challenges of modern disability issues. One particular consortial response in Scotland has been the creation of the SCURL special needs group[2], which has attempted to bring about some of the collaborative advantages described above and also has tried to create a community of practice by facilitating meetings for the exchange of knowledge and experience. The experience of the group in the four years since its inception has shown a changing pattern of concerns as particular areas of service have come into focus through time. Initially, visual and mobility impairment were of prime concern, after which dyslexia and hearing impairment became the focus of attention, followed more recently by mental health issues.

To some extent this evolving sequence of engagements with specific issues implies a short-term unevenness of provision as practitioners build up expertise in different areas at different times. The general cumulative outcome, as shown through the process of regional or national audit (Whyte, 2005) is that once standards are raised, they remain high while attention moves on to raising other services to an

equal level of provision. The end result is an overall levelling up and maintenance of standards across the board. There has been an incremental process of improvement, and service quality will probably improve again from the present impressive (if not perfect!) state of provision over the coming years.

Part of this process of improvement can be seen in the emphasis given to training staff and adapting procedures so that library bureaucracy becomes enabling rather disabling (Charles, 2005). For example, for services to be delivered to certain client groups, disclosure of need from individual members of the group to the service provider may need to take place. In one sense this is simply a bureaucratic procedure. But this procedure also has to be handled intelligently by well-trained staff so that issues of stigmatisation, confidentiality, Data Protection and the like are sensitively and correctly dealt with. This requires high quality training, and again, the customer service ethos of libraries has been invaluable in progressing this training agenda.

Overall, therefore, it is fair to say that the last decade has been remarkable in the way our vision of disability issues in libraries has been transformed. Scotland in particular has provided its own perspective on this process of transformation. And in choosing to write about various aspects of this national project in a dedicated special issue (Joint, 2005), we have attempted to highlight different areas of interest from other writers who have concentrated on IT-related facets of disability provision (Schmetzke, op. cit.). Rather, our focus is on the human rather than the technological side of the subject. With this approach we hope that we have produced material that complements what has gone before, thus offering something of universal interest and applicability for the library community as a whole.

Nicholas Joint,
Editor,
'Library Review'

Notes

1. http://scurl.ac.uk/WG/SNG/documents/presentations/MacneilageJ.htm [accessed 31.5.05]
2. http://scurl.ac.uk/WG/SNG/ [accessed 31.5.05]

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ADA, Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990 < http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm > [accessed 31.5.05]

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DDA, Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 - < http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts.htm > [accessed 31.5.05]

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