

Written off

The latest bulletin on the Right to Read campaign, November 2004.

Can't read the braille? Imagine a world where you are excluded from reading books, newspapers or magazines. That world is a reality for the UK's three million people with sight loss, dyslexia or another reading related disability. Over 95 per cent of publications never become available in large print, audio or braille.

This is the message on our cover. Our title is "Written off" - the way you feel when denied the right to read.

"What I wouldn't give to be able to browse around a bookshop for half an hour and come home with a couple of good books."

"It's like walking into a library and finding that almost all the books have been glued shut and you are not allowed to open them."

"I heard on the radio today about this really interesting new book. They said it was now in the shops – but for me it certainly is not, and probably won't ever be."

What the authors say...

"Not being able to read would for me be the biggest imaginable deprivation of them all... I can't imagine what it must be like to be shut out of 95 per cent of all the books that are available to me now. That is why I am so keen to support the Right to Read campaign." Philip Pullman.

"It should be possible for anyone to have any work they need access to, transcribed or taped on demand. We live in a wealthy nation and can afford the small price required to give so much pleasure to so many." A L Kennedy.

"Reading is probably the thing I enjoy doing the most. I never ever travel on a bus or train without a book in my bag. Without my glasses I can't see very well at all. I have always been worried about losing my sight completely because reading means so much to me." Jacqueline Wilson.

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For over two years the Right to Read campaign has been highlighting the scandalously low numbers of books available in accessible formats such as braille, large print or audio, and the way in which this excludes people from learning, leisure and daily living.

New research now paints the harsh reality of this exclusion, vividly confirming that the vast majority of books remain closed to over three million people.

This bulletin highlights the stark figures and calls on the UK and devolved Governments to acknowledge that they have a duty to take prompt, positive and effective action, to make the right to read a reality.

Research findings

Research [1] commissioned by RNIB, on behalf of the Right to Read Alliance, reveals that there has been no let up in the book famine since research published five years ago. Our new research conducted in the summer of 2004, sampled titles published from 1999 to 2003.

- Only 92 out of 2,069 randomly selected titles (4.4 per cent) were found to be available in any format suitable for someone unable to read standard print i.e. braille, audio, or large print.
- Fewer than three titles in every hundred (2.8 per cent) were available on standard audio cassette, with even fewer on other digital or analogue audio formats.
- Only three books in every two hundred (1.5 per cent) were available in large print.
- Fewer than two publications in every hundred (1.9 per cent) were available in braille.

[1] Lockyer, S, Creaser, C and Davies, J Eric, **Availability of Accessible Publications**, November 2004, Library and Information Statistics Unit, Loughborough University.

Reading for interest

If you can't read print and would like to improve your cookery skills, your chances of finding a book you can read are pretty slim. Of 476 titles checked, only nine (1.9 per cent) were available in any accessible format at all. Just one in every hundred cookery titles is available in braille, and even fewer in large print or audio.

Gardeners are also badly served. Of 493 titles checked, a mere three were available in braille and two in large print!

The figures for sport books are even worse, with no large print titles found at all among the sample of 410.

Fiction

Fiction fares better than other categories but the choice is still small with just eight per cent available in braille, 12.5 per cent in large print and 15.7 per cent on standard audio cassette – and this is the highest figure amongst the various audio formats available.

In junior fiction, fewer than nine per cent of titles were available in braille, only seven per cent in large or giant print, and only 6.9 per cent on standard audio cassette.

Same book, same time, same price

Few people with sight problems can read all accessible formats and our survey shows it is large print readers who are particularly ill served, ironic when this is the format which a large proportion of the two million people with sight problems can read.

Even those titles available in an accessible format rarely appear at the same time as, or even very soon after, the print publication.

Where accessible books are produced commercially, purchase price is a significant barrier. Large print titles typically cost £18.99 for hardback, £10.99 for paperback. A full-length audio book can cost over £50. This leads to a small market where these formats are bought mainly by public libraries, and to a vicious circle of low demand, high costs and limited choice.

Where should the responsibility lie?

Charities, with very limited resources, produce most audio and all braille titles. Publishers can help but there is only a small commercial market in large print and unabridged audio. The responsibility should lie with the Government which currently makes virtually no direct contribution to the production of accessible reading matter.

Campaign progress

Parliamentary support

148 Westminster MPs have already signed a motion (Early Day Motion 359) calling on the Government to set up an Access to Reading Fund.

Westminster MPs have asked questions and initiated debates, but the UK Government has not budged. Support has come from Members of the

Scottish Parliament for a motion in support of Right to Read, to be debated during Right to Read Week 2004.

Right to Read Charter

The Right to Read Charter calls on the Government to set up an Access to Reading Fund and to bring down VAT on audio books and ensure that no student is denied opportunities because they cannot read standard print. It calls on publishers, booksellers and libraries greatly to expand the number of accessible titles available.

All over the country, people have been signing up, on the web or on paper. Here are just some examples of the signatories so far:

- 800 visitors to the 2004 Welsh National Eisteddfod.
- Hundreds at the 2004 Edinburgh International Book Festival.
- Almost 200 employees of F.G. Wilson, a leading Northern Ireland engineering company, signed up in just three days.

It is not too late to join them. Sign the charter at www.rnib.org.uk/righttoread

The Right to Read Alliance plans to present the Charter to the UK Government in time for World Book Day in March 2005. Signatures collected in Scotland are to be handed to the First Minister during Right to Read Week in November 2004.

Working with publishers

Digital technology offers exciting scope to integrate mainstream publishing with the production of accessible formats. Leading producers of braille and audio have reached overall agreement with the publishing industry on the way forward, but can only move if funding is found for pilot projects. These are essential if technical and organisational processes are to be tested and refined.

What has Government done?

Writing to RNIB two years ago, Maria Eagle MP, the Minister for Disabled People did acknowledge the shortfall and asserted that: "The Government shares the aim of improving access to published material for visually impaired people." Regrettably, these fine sentiments have not been matched by much action.

The Government has certainly taken some positive steps in areas such as copyright and support for public libraries. However, their main reaction has been to side step the issue of funding accessible format production. They have yet to accept that such support is essential if they are to be true to their pledge to improve rights and opportunities for people with disabilities. They have failed even to decide which Department should take lead responsibility.

However the Scottish Executive has taken action by funding projects in schools to roll out new digital technology for the benefit of pupils with sight problems.

It is unrealistic to expect publishers to publish at a loss, and unreasonable to expect charities to close the huge gap illustrated by our research. Reading is a right: the Government should set aside significant amounts of public money and work with us and publishers on a national plan to turn the right to read into a reality.

Calls to action

We call on the UK and devolved Governments, publishers, authors, booksellers and the general public to support our aim of securing for all those with a reading disability: the same book, at the same time and at the same price.

UK Government

- Adopt a rigorous and joined up approach to this fundamental aspect of social exclusion, backed up with financial commitments.
- Work with the Right to Read Alliance to formulate a national plan, with bold targets, to increase the number of braille, audio and large print books, newspapers and magazines.
- Start now by funding substantial pilot projects to evaluate innovative production methods.

Devolved Governments

- Confirm commitment to Right to Read – set up Access to Reading Funds and initiate national plans.

Publishers

- Join us in sharing expertise and harnessing technology to bring more titles to more people, more promptly.

Authors

- Ask your publishers to ensure your books are published in accessible formats as close as possible to the original publication date.

General public

- Show your support by signing the Right to Read Charter. You will find it at www.rnib.org.uk/righttoread, or contact RNIB for a copy (details on the back page).

Campaign supporters

Jane Asher, Julian Barnes, Sister Wendy Beckett, Dea Birkett, Jim Broadbent, A S Byatt, Eoin Colfer, Jackie Collins, Jilly Cooper, John Cunliffe, Nicholas Evans, Sebastian Faulks, Julian Fellowes, Helen Fielding, Frederick Forsyth, Clare Francis, Carlos Franz, Flora Fraser, Lady Antonia Fraser, Sean French, Nicci Gerard, Iris Gower, Maurice Gray, A C Grayling, Tony Hawks, Wendy Holden, Nick Hornby, P D James, Martin Jarvis, Hugh Johnson, A L Kennedy, Marian Keyes, Penelope Lively, Joanna Lumley, Susana Medina, Sir John Mills, Andrew Motion, Robert Newman, Tim Pears, Philip Pullman, Ruth Rendell, Justin Richards, Alexei Sayle, Chris Smith MP, Sue Townsend, Joanna Trollope, Penny Vincenzi, Arabella Weir, Fay Weldon, Nigel Williams, Jacqueline Wilson OBE

Right to Read Alliance members

British Dyslexia Association
Calibre Cassette Library
ClearVision
Confederation of Transcribed Information Services (COTIS)
LOOK (the National Federation of Families with Visually Impaired Children)
National Association of Local Societies for Visually Impaired People (NALSVI)
National Blind Children's Society
National Federation of the Blind
National League of the Blind and Disabled
National Library for the Blind (NLB)
Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB)
Scottish Braille Press
Scottish National Federation for the Welfare of the Blind
Share the Vision
Talking Newspaper Association of the UK (TNAUK)
Torch Trust for the Blind
UK Association of Braille Producers

Find out more about the Right to Read campaign at www.rnib.org.uk/righttoread where you can also find the Charter and RNIB's full campaign report "Overdue" published in October 2003.

For further copies of this bulletin please email righttoread@rnib.org.uk stating which format you require.

Alternatively, call our campaign hotline on 020 7391 2123.

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