

**Helping Blind and Disabled People**

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**MILTON KEYNES READER SERVICE**

**Business Plan**

**March 2011**

## **Executive Summary.**

**Milton Keynes Reader Service is a charity (No 1013965) that provides reading, writing, facilitation and transcription services to adults with sight impairment or other disabilities in Milton Keynes. An audio recording service is also offered to commercial organizations within Milton Keynes.**

**The Service has been established for over 20 years and has 70 - 80 trained volunteers providing services for around 50 users.**

**The audio service provides recordings of theatre programmes for The Ambassador Theatre Group in Milton Keynes and Aylesbury.**

**The service is managed by a Management Committee comprising a Chair, who has to be a disabled user of the service, three other users and a group of co-opted members including users and volunteers. The service employs a part-time Service Coordinator who is managed by the Chair of the committee**

**Key services provided are:**

- A reading and writing service in a user's own home**
- An audio recording service, either digital or analogue**
- A Shop and See service to assist users with shopping**

- **A facilitation service to enable users to participate in educational and cultural activities**

**The target audience comprises any sight impaired or disabled person in Milton Keynes who would benefit from assistance. It is estimated that there are currently between 2000 and 3000 sight impaired residents in Milton Keynes a proportion of whom could benefit from the Service. Commercial opportunities arise from requirements stipulated by non-discrimination legislation.**

**The current turnover is around £20,000 per annum with the majority provided by grants from local authority. The Service is also the beneficiary of a proportion of the profit from a community (charity) shop. The Service is actively looking to diversify its sources of funding.**

## **VISION.**

**A society where everyone has equal access to written information.**

## **MISSION.**

**To enhance the independence and quality of life of adults with sight impairment or other disabilities living within Milton Keynes by the provision of reading, writing, facilitation and transcription services.**

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES.**

- To be perceived by the local social and business communities as the preferred provider of reading, facilitation and transcription services**
- To be in a financial position where further developments of the service can be funded.**
- To maintain the current high reputation of the Service with users, volunteers and the wider community.**

## **BACKGROUND**

**Milton Keynes Reader Service (MKRS or The Service) was set up in 1988 as the result of a consultation between “Milton Keynes Council of Disabled People” (MKDP) and a group of sight impaired residents of Milton Keynes. A user led organization was established as an independent charity with the initial objective of recruiting a group of volunteers to help the sight impaired access the written word. Volunteers would visit users in their own homes at agreed times to help with a range of tasks including:**

- **reading and responding to mail;**
- **helping manage finances by checking bank statements and household bills and writing cheques;**
- **addressing birthday and Christmas cards;**
- **reading instruction booklets;**
- **reading books, magazines and newspapers.**

**A transcription service, providing cassette tapes and Braille versions of documents on request was introduced at a later date.**

**The fledging Reader Service was initially managed by a steering group comprising sight impaired residents and a representative of MK**

**Development Corporation (MKDC). MKDC also provided a small honorarium to cover the costs of a volunteer coordinator. The coordinator, working from home, established the foundations of the current service and was responsible wholly or in part for developing the varied handouts and posters necessary for the recruitment of both service users and volunteers.**

**The Milton Keynes Community Trust, now the Community Foundation was very helpful in providing funds to cover start-up costs and for acquiring recording equipment and a braille.**

**This arrangement continued until 1991 when, with funding from Milton Keynes Borough Council, MKDC and The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, an office in Neath Hill was rented. Money for the employment of a part time Volunteer Coordinator was also obtained at this time.**

**In 1994 the office moved to larger premises in Kingston and the Service continued to expand and develop. In 1996 it became clear that there was demand for additional services and a guided shopping service called “Shop and See” was launched. With the support of numerous generous donors MKRS continues to grow over the next 10 years.**

**In 2007 major changes occurred to the funding pattern. The Committee became concerned over the cost of the Kingston Office and with the help of MK Council found a less expensive facility in the Tinkers Bridge Local Centre.**

**In 2009 the Service entered into a three year funding agreement with Milton Keynes Council covering 2009 – 2012 and embarked on a development programme to identify and implement strategies to expand the reach of the service with respect to both volunteer recruitment and user awareness. This is managed by a Development Committee that reports to the Management Committee.**

**At this time it also became clear that recording sound digitally to CDs or memory sticks was superseding the older analogue method using cassette tapes. MKRS made the necessary investment in digital technology and now offers recordings in both digital and analogue forms. Analogue recordings will be phased out over time as user equipment becomes obsolete.**

**In November 2007 MKRS had the good fortune to become a beneficiary of a portion of the profits from the Community Shop located in the Walnut Tree**

**Local Centre. This has provided welcome additional funds at a time of general cost cutting.**

**Currently MKRS has between 70 and 80 volunteers providing services to around 50 users with some users having the services of more than one volunteer. Different individuals are often provided if a user requests both a reader and a “Shop and See” volunteer.**

**Managing existing volunteers, users and the volunteer/user interface is critical to the success of the service as is the recruitment and training of new volunteers. Managing outreach to a broader client base for all our core services is also vital and MKRS continues to employ a Service Coordinator on a part time basis.**

## **CORE SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES**

- **Recruitment and training of Volunteers.**

We currently have between 70 and 80 volunteers trained and matched to users.

Volunteers are recruited through MK Volunteer Centre, Volunteer fairs, word of mouth and advertisements for the Service in a wide variety of locations. A series of talks to local groups with the aim of increasing awareness and possibly sourcing additional volunteers was started in 2010 as part of the development programme.

Following initial interview by the Service Coordinator and initiation of enhanced CRB checks, volunteers are trained by a group consisting of users and the Coordinator. The Service runs two or three training courses per year, depending on the number of volunteers applying.

- **Matching Users and Volunteers**

Once a volunteer is trained and CRB checks completed the coordinator will match a potential user to the volunteer profile. The initial introduction

takes place in the user's home accompanied by the coordinator. Subsequent visits are by arrangement between the user and the volunteer.

The coordinator remains in regular contact with both parties to monitor progress. Should problems arise on either side and mediation fail to resolve them then the volunteer is withdrawn and an alternative sought. It is a credit to all concerned that this scenario is extremely rare and many user/volunteer pairings have been established for over a decade.

- Providing opportunities for two way feedback.

All users and volunteers are invited to an annual meeting. At this meeting the two groups meet separately to discuss issues and sensitive questions and then combine for a general discussion. The meeting usually concludes with an invited speaker and/or presentations on relevant material by officers of the Service.

In addition an annual volunteer meeting, an annual social event and the Annual General Meeting provide opportunities for networking.

- **Audio-recording**

Using analogue or digital technology the Service provides, free of cost to members, audio-recordings of a range of materials as required. This service is also available at low cost to other charities. Additionally a commercial service is provided to external organisations who need recorded information.

Agencies requesting this service include:

- Milton Keynes Social Services
- The Ambassador Theatre Group
- The Centre: MK

- **Shop and See**

A number of users require support when shopping and this is provided by a group of volunteers. Arrangements are made directly between the user and volunteer and it is a very successful extension of the service. There are currently around 16 users of this service.

- **Facilitation**

**The Facilitation Service was first introduced to support sight impaired people who wanted to attend Adult Education classes. As the potential of this service to allow more people to take up activities outside their homes grew it was decided to extend its scope.**

**The Facilitation Service provides a sighted guide and pair of eyes to enable a sight impaired person to take part, as fully as possible, in a range of educational, leisure and cultural activities. Examples include learning a foreign language, visiting museums, supporting an individual at the local Eye-for-Art Group or accompanying someone to the theatre. A good rapport between the volunteer and the user is needed so that practical tasks can be shared e.g. in art or cookery classes. Additionally, tasks like reading important information such as late handouts can be dealt with promptly in the classroom and descriptions of objects on a museum tour can be made instantly accessible. The skill of the volunteer is to work under the direction of the user to provide sighted assistance which enables a sight impaired person to integrate, as far as they can, in a range of activities.**

▪ **Surveys of attitudes of users and volunteers**

Opinions of the Service held by both users and volunteers are sought on a regular basis. To ensure a representative response from sight impaired users each user is telephoned by a volunteer and if they are willing, the questionnaire is completed during the ensuing discussion. Using this procedure a response rate close to 100% is achieved. The complete results are publicized in a newsletter and discussed at one of the regular meetings.

In the latest survey, completed in 2009, responses from both users and volunteers were highly complimentary. Almost 90% of users rated the service highly (30 of 34) and only 3% (1 of 34) gave the service a low rating. Awareness of the range of services on offer in addition to reading varied with around 75% of users aware of any one service when prompted. There was unanimous agreement that they would recommend the service to friends.

A similar picture was obtained from volunteers with 96% (25 of 26) rating the service highly. The level of knowledge about other services on offer

**was 100%, as would be expected following training, and all would recommend the service from the point of view of volunteering.**

**All criticisms and comments relating to the service have been reviewed and in most cases acted upon. In addition the Development Committee is using the feedback as they work on a development programme for the coming years.**

## **THE MARKETPLACE AND COMPETITION**

- **The Marketplace.**

**The population of Milton Keynes, as at June 2009, was 238,000 and this is expected to rise by about 20% to 285,000 over the next 15 years.**

**Currently (March 2011), there are approximately 1,000 people registered with sight impairment, but this figure is known to be just the tip of the iceberg. For various reasons some people do not want to be registered or “labeled” resulting in a low registration figure.**

**It is widely accepted nationally that around one person in sixty will experience sight impairment in their later years. If this estimate is correct the number of people in Milton Keynes with sight impairment problems would be expected to be nearer 4,000. However as the age distribution of the population of Milton Keynes is currently biased towards younger people the true number of affected people is likely to be in the 2,000 to 3,000 range.**

**This figure is expected to rise due both to population increase and to an adjustment of the distribution towards a higher age range as residents age. Additionally the number of people experiencing sight loss due to the**

**effects of diabetes and other life-style related illnesses will swell the number.**

**▪ Competition:**

**No other local organization provides the range of services offered by MKRS. However there is a degree of overlap with a number of providers, both voluntary and statutory, some of which work in partnership with The Reader Service.**

**The following list summarizes these activities:**

- BucksVision: Befriending and shopping**
- MK Social Services: Shopping (NB. A charge is made)**
- Sound News: Provide recorded information**
- AgeUK: Befriending**
- Private transcription services**
- Audio books and Magazines: Calibre**
- RNIB: Audio services**

- **Distinctive characteristics of Milton Keynes Reader Service.**

**The following factors distinguish MKRS from other service providers:**

- **Wide range of services available under one roof**
- **Trained professionalism of volunteers**
- **Unique in area**
- **Link between users and volunteers is strong and long lived**
- **Investment in transcription services**

## **STRATEGIES**

### **Short term: within one year**

- **Train more readers in digital technology**
  - **Five readers trained by financial year end 2011/12**
- **Continue current development programme with regular reviews.**
  - **10 Talks given by financial year end 2011/12**
  - **Literature aimed at increasing awareness developed by calendar year end**
- **Recruit a replacement Service Coordinator**
  - **Person appointed by July 2011 with review six months after start date**
- **Research alternative funding options for FY 2012/13 onwards**
  - **Development Committee researches options by October 2011**
- **Develop relationship with area theatres**
  - **Derngate and possibly The Stables added to theatre roster by financial year end 2011/12**

- **Use annual meeting of users and volunteers to discuss financial position and recruit a team to develop ideas for fundraising**
  - **Team of volunteers and users established and fundraising programme under development by end FY 2011/12**
- **Continue to identify new volunteers and users using established methods**
  - **Run two training programmes in FY 2011/12**
- **Creation of website initiated**
  - **Decision on lead role, volunteer or commercial, taken by calendar year end 2011**
  - **Web site running by financial year end 2011/12**

## **Medium term: Within three years**

- **Work with local theatres and other groups to train local audio describers**
  
- **Appoint new younger active members onto the Management Committee**
  - **Networking within the sight impaired community to identify two replacements for retiring committee members by AGM 2012**
  
- **To have a broader range of funding sources for the service and a secure financial position with the ability to expand the role of the service coordinator as required**
  
- **Expand development programme**
  - **Identify sources of potential volunteers and sight impaired users and target them for talks, leafleting and other publicity**
  - **Create and distribute information on services to a broad range of large and medium sized business organizations highlighting ways in which the Reader**

**Service can assist them in meeting their legal obligations**

- **Enhance awareness of the service within the local area as measured by survey and by number of users**
- **Contacts between the Reader Service and eye clinics, statutory authorities and other charities focused on sensory loss to be developed so that an increased proportion of potential users are made aware of the Service**
- **To establish an ongoing relationship with adult education and museum authorities with the aim of expanding the facilitation service**

## **MANAGEMENT**

### **Management Committee.**

**The management committee comprises:**

- 1. One disabled person to be Chair of the Service who must also be a user of the Service**
- 2. Three users of the Service plus two others who may be co-opted when thought appropriate**
- 3. Three volunteers co-opted by the committee**
- 4. One representative from each of the following:**
  - a. Milton Keynes Council (observer)**
  - b. Milton Keynes Centre for Integrated Living (Observer)**
  - c. BucksVision (CMK Division representative)**
- 5. Any employee may be invited to attend committee meetings except those where terms and conditions of employment are discussed**
- 6. Two of the committee are nominated as Treasurer and Secretary respectively.**
- 7. Quorum is five voting members.**

**The Service Coordinator, the only paid member of staff, is managed on a day-to-day basis by the Chair of the Service.**

**The full committee meets on a bimonthly basis to review finances and take such actions as are necessary for the continuation of the Service.**

**A sub-committee of the Management Committee – The Development Committee – meets as necessary to pursue new ideas for the betterment of the Service and to work on specific projects, inappropriate for the full committee. Proposals from the Development Committee are presented for consideration to the full Management Committee before action is taken.**

## **FINANCIAL INFORMATION.**

**The Service has an annual turnover of around £20,000 (2010).**

**This is financed by primarily grants, income from the Community Shop, donations and work done.**

**Since the Service has become a beneficiary of the Walnut Tree Community Shop the annual accounts have run at a small surplus; prior to this there was a small deficit.**

**The level of investment in fixed assets has been significant over the past two years as the move to digital recording has been made and new computers and a braille machine purchased.**

**Grants from Milton Keynes Council and Promoting Independence are a volatile source of funds and are likely to diminish dramatically in the prevailing financial climate.**