

Reading Friends Vision Impairment Project: Co-production findings and learnings

1. Introduction and aims

The Reading Agency received funding from the Ulverscroft Foundation to run a vision impairment project working with selected pilot library authorities in 2023. This funding enabled The Reading Agency to hold six co-production workshops together with local partner Vision Norfolk between August and October 2023.

The aims of these co-production sessions were to gain knowledge and insights directly from people who are blind and partially sighted on their experiences of reading and library use to help inform Reading Friends programme delivery and wider library service delivery.

Working with a local specialist organisation such as Vision Norfolk meant The Reading Agency benefited from expert knowledge and expertise regarding session content and group organisation, leading to more productive workshops as well as an ongoing valuable partnership.

2. Methods

To gather insights from people with lived experience of vision impairment, a methodology incorporating a series of co-production sessions with a consistent set of participants was used. Four sessions were held in Norwich (90 minutes each) and two in Great Yarmouth (60 minutes each).

The sessions were conducted as a primary means of data collection to elucidate shared opinions, attitudes, and experiences on current and developing plans for Reading Friends.

The Reading Agency set up the partnership with Vision Norfolk, produced workshop content, led each workshop, transcribed audio recordings, created this report and incorporated learnings into bespoke training and we will share this report with our networks and partners.

Vision Norfolk recruited group members through their networks, organised an accessible location, date and time for each session, commented on workshop materials, helped facilitate sessions and provided support to group members. Participants were recruited by Vision Norfolk based on previous engagement with reading groups, ensuring a diverse range of insights.

The four sets of sessions were themed around predetermined topics related to experiences of reading – both individual and shared reading – and library use, promotional and programme resources, and evaluation. Discussions were guided to ensure equitable participation and open dialogue for participants to share their thoughts or experiences. The ethical considerations of conducting research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participant wellbeing, were carefully observed throughout the data collection process.

3. Participants

Eighteen people in total took part in the co-production sessions. They were joined by four Vision Norfolk support staff members, two of whom are also blind or partially sighted. Two members of the co-production groups were accompanied by guide dogs and one by a companion, who did not participate in the sessions.

A mixture of men and women of varying ages attended, with participants drawn from different areas of Norfolk (city, town, coastal town, rural village). A range of different backgrounds, experiences of sight loss, and levels of reading confidence were represented across the workshops. Some people had been vision impaired their entire lives with no sight at all; some had experienced sight deterioration during their life and now had little useful sight; some had experienced different eye conditions with some sight deterioration and/or low vision; and others were new to experiencing sight loss and had a larger amount of useful sight.

Through the partnership with Vision Norfolk, the participant group was recruited as a self-selecting convenience sample. While we feel confident that a variety of backgrounds and experiences have been represented here, future co-production sessions should endeavour to include participants representing a wider diversity of age ranges and ethnic backgrounds.

4. Overall summary of findings

The co-production session topics covered experiences of reading and social reading, methods and formats of reading, experiences of different community spaces such as libraries, communication methods for promoting activities, as well as thoughts on accessibility and inclusivity. The key theme of confidence was present throughout all conversation topics and themes. A summary of key findings from the sessions is provided below and covered in greater detail throughout the following sections:

- The sessions highlighted the range of challenges that people who are blind and partially sighted might face – physical, emotional and social – in navigating everyday activities, as well as when engaging in reading and reading-related activities.
- Confidence or lack of confidence in certain areas was a key theme across all discussion topics, with three main aspects highlighted: awareness of and access to reading materials, familiarity with new or unfamiliar spaces, and navigating conversations in new environments or with unfamiliar people.
- Group members spoke about the barriers they had experienced in accessing community spaces such as public libraries, as well as strategies and support mechanisms for enabling accessibility.
- Participants talked about the value of reading for information (news, sports scores, etc.) as well as for learning about the world, supporting wellbeing and feeling connected to others, all similar themes expressed in wider research on reading, regardless of readers' level of sight.

- Audio and other forms of listening to others read or speak (reading aloud, Talking Newspapers, Alexa/phone apps, Audible, RNIB, Calibre Audio, library e-audiobooks, radio, etc) were noted as the most popular reading methods.
- Reading groups incorporating facilitators reading aloud or audiobooks as the primary reading format were valued and noted as inclusive and accessible for those with vision impairments.
- Group members all shared that they enjoyed listening to others read, either at home or in a reading group setting, with many commenting on the ways this sparked memories of being read to, or of feelings of happiness, comfort, and closeness.

This report has been structured into an overview of findings and learnings linked to four key topic areas drawn from across the six co-production sessions, in line with the primary aim of informing practice based on the needs and experiences of those with lived experience of sight loss. These topic areas include:

- Reading
 - Methods and formats of reading
 - Social reading and reading aloud
- Libraries and community spaces
 - Accessing services
- Delivering interventions
 - Group organisation
 - Communication methods
- Evaluation
 - Survey formats
 - Testing the Reading Friends survey and methods

A note on terminology: At the outset of the co-production sessions, The Reading Agency asked participants to reflect on and share what language they felt most comfortable being used in the sessions in relation to experiences of sight loss (e.g., vision/visual impairment, sight loss, low vision, etc.). One group preferred to use the phrase 'blind and partially sighted' while the other group preferred inclusive language that did not mention sight conditions at all. 'Vision impairment' was preferred to 'visually impaired people' as it doesn't focus directly on the person. The language preferred by these groups will be used throughout this report.

Any learnings or recommendations in this paper have been identified by participants in the sessions and therefore come from those with lived experience of vision impairment.

4.1 Reading

Participants talked about the value of reading for information (news, sports scores, etc.) as well as for learning about the world, supporting wellbeing and feeling connected to others – all aspects valued by readers in general, regardless of their level of sight.

4.1.1 Methods and formats of reading

Participants discussed the different formats they read in to support their level of vision, including audio, Braille, e-books and large print.

Audio and other forms of listening to others read or speak (reading aloud, Talking Newspapers, Alexa/phone apps, Audible, RNIB, Calibre Audio, library e-audiobooks, radio, etc) were agreed on as the most popular reading methods.

Participants told us that they often chose books based on availability in audio format and the narrator or voice actor reading the audiobook – in addition to traditional methods such as recommendations from family or friends. For example, many commented that they have preferred narrators, i.e., those they seek out or, conversely, avoid. Participants spoke at length on the importance of the voice itself in their enjoyment of reading an audiobook, for example, the tone of voice, accent, pronunciation, speed, dynamism, etc.

Some participants, however, described an initial barrier to engaging with audiobooks in the early stages of losing their sight. They noted that they had often encountered long waiting lists for audiobooks through library apps or were reliant on support from spouses/partners or friends to load books onto tablets or phones. For those who felt more confident or familiar using audiobooks as their primary method of reading, however, their ability to connect with reading through this format had grown. These wide-ranging views are demonstrated through the following quotes from participants:

"I miss having a book in my hand."

"I only lost my sight a year ago. It feels like a barrier to me. I want to get through that. I'm on the fringe of learning a new way of reading."

"People are passing that knowledge [how to engage with audiobooks] on."

"I'm so hungry for technology, finding new ways to read and learning where and how to open that door."

"It can be an emotional experience listening to an audiobook."

Around half of the co-production group members spoke about feeling confident using Braille, with several having read in Braille since childhood. Many participants noted that they enjoyed reading in Braille and the physical experience of reading a book but that they had found it easier to access books in audio format than in Braille. For example, there are more titles available, and their physical access is easier – even shorter stories, for instance, still require multiple volumes in Braille, taking up physical space and weight. Participants described how sometimes volumes are missing or arrive in the wrong order, making reading longer titles more challenging.

Large print books and e-books were used by a small number of participants but noted as also presenting accessibility challenges – with the former being described as 'big and bulky' and the latter only being accessible under certain circumstances (e.g., when text could be enlarged to a big enough font size and/or where their level of vision still allowed for this format).

Participants also spoke about the wider challenges they experienced when reading, from difficulties accessing books and other reading materials to barriers encountered when browsing for titles. For example, they shared that when deciding what to read, they were unable to make decisions based on the look of the cover or to draw conclusions from visual elements provided on the book jacket. The group agreed on the need to have facilities for previewing audiobooks – that is, listening to a brief excerpt from the content – to better enable browsing. Participants told us:

"I want to listen to a sample first."

"I now rely more on recommendations and sticking with the same author."

4.1.2 Social reading and reading aloud

The co-production groups were asked to share their thoughts about different aspects of social or shared reading and reading aloud. Almost all participants agreed that they found it fun to read as part of a group and enjoyed sharing critiques and views about a text. The group noted, however, previous negative experiences in book clubs where discussions about the physical aspects of a book (e.g., book cover, pictures or layout) were common amongst sighted participants, making audiobook reading groups and facilitators reading aloud more inclusive alternatives.

Participants expressed that they enjoyed listening to others read or currently had family members reading to them on a daily basis. The groups also shared that listening to others read aloud sparked feelings of happiness, comfort and closeness, as well as childhood memories of being read to. Overall, participants felt that listening to someone read was a positive experience, as highlighted by the following quotes from participants:

"There's something special about being read to."

"Feel part of a nice group [listening to someone reading together]."

"Makes it easy to pop in and out [of a story]."

When reading aloud, participants spoke about the tone and speed of reading being of highest importance, followed by emphasis and intonation. Participants described the importance of the narrator or reader, for example:

"The strength of the story depends on the narrator"

"The reader makes or breaks the book."

"[The librarian] does different voices when she reads the book to our group."

"We give marks for [the] reader as well as the book."

Given the importance placed on voice and intonation by participants, we asked them to share their 'top tips for reading aloud':

- "Read it first."
- "Be 2-3 words ahead."
- "Concentrate, don't be automated."

- “They need to show that they’re interested in what they’re reading.”
- “Give a feel of how the text is actually written,” for example, through verbal use of punctuation.
- “Names can be a trip hazard” so readers should be aware of accurate pronunciation.

4.2 Libraries and community spaces

Participants shared their previous experiences of accessing and navigating public library and other community spaces, as well as some of the challenges they had experienced in doing so. While library staff were unanimously noted as friendly and helpful by the co-production groups, these conversations reflected a range of participant views towards the physical library space itself:

“I like to visit the library. It’s part of the community; it’s vital to the community.”

“It’s daunting to visit the library.”

“I don’t think it’s a place I’d spend a lot of time now.”

Barriers accessing library locations were discussed frequently by participants, including challenges of simply getting to the library itself due to distance, travel options, opening hours and closures. The library was noted as too far to travel for some; for others, the nearest local branches had closed in recent years. Concerns about safety were raised by all, especially where it may be awkward, difficult or even dangerous to travel to the library along busy roads. Participants shared the following experiences:

“I don’t know where the [nearest] library is.”

“The main road is treacherous.”

“Biggest thing of all is how you’re going to get there and how you’re going to manage once you arrive.”

4.2.1 Accessing services

While larger libraries were valued by participants for having additional amenities, the size and space of larger or open-plan library buildings was also expressed as potentially daunting or a barrier for entry. For example, participants described experiences where there had not been a front desk or library reception immediately by the entrance, leading to challenges with confidence in navigating the space, finding staff or to knowing how to get to meeting rooms. Participants also mentioned concerns about bumping into other library visitors and difficulties moving around large open spaces. Smaller local branches, by contrast, were noted as often easier to navigate. Regardless of location, familiarity with both the space and the staff helped all co-production participants feel more confident. A selection of these views are presented below:

"The library is a huge open space" with stairs, circular design, and "lots of glass doors and windows."

"What's wheelchair accessible isn't necessarily accessible for people with low vision."

"It's hard to locate things [...] They move things around too much."

"Supermarkets have customer services with a person to take you around and show you the space. Libraries should do something like that."

Some participants had experience of using the mobile library service or home library service, which they found convenient and accessible. However, these same participants had also encountered stock limitation challenges through this service, with audiobooks not always available through the mobile library or needing to be pre-ordered, making browsing more challenging. Some participants also described challenges using digital library services, for example, navigating the online search function on library catalogues.

4.3 Designing and delivering interventions

Participants shared their experiences of attending events and activities, with many noting the effect of low self-confidence on their decision to take part in something new:

"People might be nervous to step outside what they're familiar with."

"I don't go anywhere on my own but here [Vision Norfolk] because I know here."

"I've lost confidence since losing my sight."

"I'm more talkative and make friends when I feel comfortable, but I don't talk much outside of that, when I'm outside my comfort zone."

As a result, while it was noted that individual experiences of sight loss and its impact on individuals varies, there was a preference expressed by participants for taking part in activities primarily targeted to people who are blind or partially sighted. A number of reasons were given for this preference, including:

"Meeting people with sight loss, it's just so liberating to not overcome that first hurdle" of needing to 'explain' one's experience.

"We would have like-minded views."

"There's an assumption [sighted] people in the group will help, but that's not always the case."

4.3.1 Group organisation

Meeting in person was expressed as the preferred method of participating in group activities. While there was some interest in taking part through online sessions, varying levels of confidence

dealing with technology was raised as a both a potential barrier for those taking part – but also noted as a potential area of growth and learning.

The following strategies were highlighted as useful for increasing accessibility within group sessions:

- Arranging chairs and seating positions before beginning. If participants have any other support considerations (e.g., difficulties hearing or are accompanied by a companion or guide dog) they may need to sit in a particular place.
- Using directional cues (e.g., sitting to my left, sitting at the end of the table, etc) and participant names can help aid voice recognition and familiarity. Voices can take time to recognise – just like names/faces – especially when starting a new group or when a new member joins.
- Being aware of the availability of, and participant familiarity with, technology. Some might only have knowledge of specific types of technology, and having the skills to use them can vary dramatically from person-to-person.

4.3.2 Communication methods

To help us understand effective methods of promoting events and activities, The Reading Agency asked participants to share the ways they find out about activities in their local areas and offer suggestions on the best routes for promotion.

Email and newsletters from mailing lists were noted as primary points of access to information about activities happening in the local area. Additional routes included word of mouth, local talking newspapers (Grapevine and Chatterbox), local radio, Magpie News (Vision Norfolk specific), and Let's Talk.

Finding out information from posters was not mentioned organically. When brought up by facilitators, the group commented that these were not used by them personally as a method of accessing information nor did friends/family tend to share information they had seen on posters.

Participants noted that when deciding whether to attend an activity, they take into account information about the activity itself, its location, and the day of the week it's held (i.e., not just the date). They also commented on the timing of an activity as a deciding factor, for example, all participants shared that it was generally easier to travel to and attend in-person activities during the daytime. The groups also requested that contact information include both a phone number and email address to increase accessibility, as well as for a staff member or volunteer to meet them at the door and accompany them to the space on their first visit.

4.4 Evaluation

Participants shared their experiences of being asked to fill in surveys for previous events and activities, noting that completing surveys is a task they have regularly taken part in. It was clear

that participants were all aware of the value of this method of data collection for charities, businesses and other organisations. However, they had also experienced a range of challenges in attempting to complete surveys in the past.

4.4.1 Survey format

When completing a survey online, participants were unanimous in their feeling that the accessibility of a website was often more of a barrier than the content of a survey itself, even for participants with higher confidence levels around using technology. Participants often felt that the length of time needed to complete a survey was not reflective of the experience of someone using assistive technology such as a screen reader. While SurveyMonkey was used most frequently by participants and by Vision Norfolk as an organisation, it was still necessary to test the survey using a screen reader for both functionality and timings. Participants also flagged that assistive technology is not optimised to work with images or emojis and that lengthy questions with multiple tick boxes created barriers to understanding the survey content and their ability to respond.

Most participants also had experiences of completing a survey in person, where a facilitator asked questions off a form and recorded the participants' answers. Some recalled that this had taken place in a group setting and others one-on-one with the facilitator. All participants noted that they felt comfortable answering questions using this method – even on personal and/or sensitive topics such as loneliness or wellbeing, though most preferred the opportunity to do so in a 1:1 setting:

"You might hurt their [the facilitator's] feelings but could still be truthful [about your experience] if you're kind about it."

4.4.2 Testing the Reading Friends survey and methods

The Reading Agency also used these co-production sessions to test and refine their evaluation methodology. Participants commented that from experiences of completing surveys for other projects or activities, it wasn't always clear how or why certain questions might be connected to the activity. It was agreed that the introduction to a survey could help provide that information.

Participants were then asked to reflect on the language used in a series of example questions from past Reading Friends surveys. Participants all felt that the Reading Friends example questions were clearly connected to the aim, purpose and outcomes of the programme. Even the more personal or sensitive topics covered, such as experiences of loneliness and wellbeing, were felt to be appropriate and connected and were not felt to be intrusive. In some cases, participants welcomed the opportunity to be able to speak about these experiences directly, for example:

"If you do live alone, it's nice to have a good chat [about personal topics]."

All participants recommended including questions about building confidence and self-esteem as core outcomes for activity specific to people who are blind and partially sighted. Some participants also suggested selecting a point midway through a programme year where a survey

or group conversation could be conducted to check how the sessions were running and whether any opportunities for improvements were required.

5. Learnings

The co-production findings underpin the following learnings to support library staff and other professionals working with blind or partially sighted audiences:

Methods and formats of reading

The co-production sessions highlighted that reading choices were often limited by the availability of enough copies of titles in accessible formats, as well as difficulties in browsing new genres and authors. The following suggestions were made by the co-production groups:

- Make sure that all stories chosen for sessions are available in e-audio or other accessible formats.
- Have a broad collection of e-audiobooks available with multiple licences for popular titles through library platforms and/or other providers.
- Include activities to read the synopsis, summary or extract of different stories.
- Highlight any content warnings, especially related to language/profanity and if a story is 'not suitable for family listening.'

Findings from the co-production sessions also highlighted a lack of awareness around and/or confidence with new or different technology used to support with reading or sight loss more generally. This indicated the value of methods such as the following to increase accessibility:

- Signpost to different technology available that supports reading – offline and online, including CDs and digital apps – as well as the accessibility functions of library apps such as Libby and Borrowbox.
- Invite digital champions, local sight loss charities or RNIB technology leads to support people or train staff. For example, helping people access free apps or show different accessibility functions on phones.
- Facilitate technology-focused group conversations. For example, a local RNIB technology lead could attend as a speaker or group members could share ideas and experiences with each other.

Social reading and reading aloud

Listening to people reading was a popular activity and discussing narrators of audiobooks led to wide-ranging conversations. This indicates the value of bringing these conversations directly into the group space, by the following suggested methods:

- Include listening to reading into sessions, either with someone reading, or listening to part of an audiobook on a speaker.
- Incorporate activities and questions which focus on discussing narrators as well as authors, genres or themes.
- Read a blurb or extracts from potential stories together with the group to make decisions on selected reading material.

- Be aware of tone, pace and expression when reading aloud. Check the pronunciation of any tricky words or names in advance and correct pronunciation mistakes as/when noted by a group member.

Libraries and community spaces

Lack of familiarity with or confidence and safety in accessing a physical space were the main reasons cited for not attending new in-person activity. The following suggestions were made by participants for increasing accessibility to these spaces:

- Hold sessions in an accessible and easy-to-reach location, for example, local branch libraries with easier access via public transport, with accessible rooms ideally on the ground floor.
- Where libraries are large with no clear front desk (or based within other Council buildings such as leisure centres), have staff or volunteers greet group attendees and take them to the room.
- Hold library induction sessions for people with vision impairments to help build confidence and familiarity in navigating library spaces and engaging with staff/volunteers.

Group organisation

Based on the experience of successfully facilitating these co-production sessions and through guidance from Vision Norfolk, the following steps may be useful in leading group sessions where one or more members has experience of sight loss:

- Take time at the beginning of the first few sessions to make sure everyone can hear.
- Keep the same room layout and seating positions for all future sessions.
- Start off with a more structured conversation style, using people's names to support all group members to recognise names and voices.

Those involved in the co-production sessions also shared the benefits they had gained by spending time with others who had experienced sight loss or low vision. These findings suggest:

- Group activities specifically focused for people who are blind and partially sighted may be a valued space for those with similar experiences.
- When initiated by a participant themselves within a session, hold space for individuals to share their experiences of sight loss if they have chosen to do so.
- Never make assumptions about someone's level of sight. Group members (sighted or not) should all be aware that people have different experiences of vision impairment and all experiences are valid.

Communication methods

Co-production findings around the routes used by people with vision impairments to learn about local events and activities suggest the following strategies to support accessible and inclusive communication:

- Use mailing lists (library and local charities), local radio and talking newspapers/magazines, as well as word of mouth through staff, volunteers and partners.
- Include activity description, location and time, both date and day of the week, and a contact phone number and email address.

Evaluation

The co-production session on evaluation showed that people involved in programmes delivered by organisations such as charities or libraries are generally happy to complete occasional surveys and understand these are needed to improve the sessions. However, it also highlighted that the format and administration of a survey can cause challenges for people who are blind or partially sighted. Based on these learnings, the following steps may increase accessibility and inclusivity of survey design:

- Offer the option to complete a survey either online or in person with a facilitator.
 - If online, test any websites or survey platforms (e.g., SurveyMonkey) using a screen reader function.
 - If in person, find a quiet space to administer surveys 1:1 to allow people privacy and avoid the potential for group bias.
- Be clear at the outset about the length of time needed to complete a survey.
- Minimise the number of questions asked and number of response options offered for multiple-choice questions.
- Use plain text rather than images or emojis.

6. What The Reading Agency are doing differently

The Reading Agency have used the learning from the co-production workshops to make changes to our Reading Friends programme and wider practice. For example:

- We have changed the terminology we use to describe people experiencing sight loss, where descriptions are needed. The groups preferred 'blind and partially sighted' as a term, which is more descriptive and less negative, so we have adopted this and are not using 'visually impaired people.'
- We are not focusing on poster development as an important recruitment route for the programme as other promotional routes were found to be more useful and accessible.
- We have created more training videos than initially planned to capture and share the rich learnings.
- We have created an audiobook-focused session resource to support library staff as audiobooks were the most popular format for reading.
- We have incorporated the learnings into our Equity, Diversity and Inclusion work including our internal design processes and website guidance and policies.
- We have adapted our evaluation methods to offer guidance for facilitators on collecting data verbally in person from participants, and to incorporate bespoke outcomes measures.
- These findings will be shared with the Ulverscroft Foundation, Share the Vision, the Public Library Health Group, the wider library sector and other relevant partners.

Prepared by The Reading Agency
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