



## Mercian Disability Forum

### Agenda

15<sup>th</sup> March 2021, Online meeting

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**Present:** Laura Waller (Chair, Warwick), Simon Satchwell-Giles (Newman), Bernadette Carter (BCU), Sarah Aktaruzzaman (Aston), Gill Evans (Coventry), Kathryn Devine (Worcester), Liz Mills (Loughborough), Julie Adams (Staffordshire), Rose Roberto (BGU), Gareth J Johnson (Mercian Collaboration)

**Apologies:** Tim Stubbs (Derby), Jenny Townend (Northampton), Amanda Down (Lincoln)

#### 1) Housekeeping

Laura welcomed everyone, and after brief introductions, she set out the ground rules for today's meeting.

#### 2) Minutes from last meeting

Items not on the agenda in terms of actions:

- **Accessibility event:** This had been held in January as part of the virtual networking sessions. GJJ reported there had been positive feedback from the delegates attending.
- **Concerns around RNIB and GDPR:** Laura had reached out about the concerns, which including allowing students to reset passwords. This in particular would hopefully be resolved soon. It was suggested people should talk to local GDPR people or approach RNIB directly with any local concerns and issues.
- **Feedback on the desk card system for facemask exemptions:** Laura recapped the approach at Warwick to give people a card to alert staff to a student being exempt from wearing a mask. She commented this had been really well accepted. This approach had helped to complement the sunflower lanyard scheme.

#### 3) Update from the Wider Mercian Collaboration

GJJ gave a brief update on the Collaboration highlighting a range of events, including a new virtual networking session and one hosted by an external trainer on difficult conversations.<sup>i</sup> He noted the new Steering Group would be appointed from the end of next week, and with this a new group sponsor for the MDF. GJJ also shared his report to the Collaboration's Directors Board and the 2020 Annual Report which might be of interest to the members.<sup>ii</sup>

#### 4) MDF Chair

As Laura had previously noted she was standing down as Chair after today's meeting and two years in the role. She explained being chair is mostly lightweight and doesn't take up a lot of time up. However, she stressed a group chair was needed to keep the conversations going and to arrange future meetings. Simon agreed to take on the role, and will liaise with Laura and GJJ about the handover.

**ACTION: Simon, GJJ and Laura to handle handover of group chair role**

## 5) E-book accessibility

Simon raised this issue, as he had been asked to provide guidance on ebook accessibility to students, which he currently delivered through multiple videos. Availability of guidelines on accessibility features is thin, hidden or non-existent on different platforms. It also differs across different platforms in terms of what you can do, how you achieve it and what help is offered to point users towards it. As a result, you often need to provide a lot of bespoke guidance, which risks becoming rapidly outdated.

Jisc's ebook accessibility project was noted, although this has been underway for some time. Laura noted a multi-dimensional approach, highlighting how platforms are different, which supported by a website giving general advice, rather than making their guides platform specific. Sheffield Hallam for were noted as an example which give a 'top 10 platforms' highlighting their differing accessibility statements.

Gill noted at Coventry how important it was to keep the accessibility statement in sight for users. She agreed the risk in providing a lot of information locally is that things can change and make the material outdated. Exeter and City University were noted as two good examples of practice.<sup>iii</sup> Keeping everything as simple as possible was the best approach, rather than spending extensive time producing local content.

Alexander McNaught writes a lot about ebook accessibility and other related issues and as such is a good source of information and guidance.<sup>iv</sup> Giving the student the skills to apply to different platforms is good but pointing to the accessibility statement are also a key to successfully supporting them in using ebook platforms. Due to the complexity of the issue, these steps, along with local support contact information, is seen as an effective approach.

## 6) Student Service Level Agreements & Disability Awareness Training for Staff

Bernadette noted every organisation has a disability statement, but questioned if there something more personal we could do? For example, she suggested making a SLA with individual students to give better services and engage with them better. She also desired to create a pass/fail course with a base expected level of knowledge and ability which would be used to help staff recognise where their skills and practices in supporting disabled students needed updating. She highlighted in her experience how outsourced training materials were often be poorer and less directly applicable than might be created by library staff.

Laura noted she ran training for staff, but it was optional. She suggested working with the local EDI network to bring the staff training need up the agenda at a more central level. SLA in terms of what libraries offered seemed a good idea, but the onus is on the student to declare and not all do, meaning some could still miss out. Hence, instead it could be valuable to keep looking at services and questioning where barriers could be removed to make them more inclusive (e.g. ungating services previously only be accessible to a limited 'eligible' population). It was suggested fitting a talk into a compulsory staff meeting is another way to reach people you might not otherwise volunteer to engage with the learning, which Julie agreed was a good approach.

Simon suggested engaging with the Student Union as a way of building up a groundswell of pressure to bring things to a wider attention across the institution. It was noting catching staff who work shift patterns can be a challenge as they would not be normally present for in-house training in office hours, although recording training could be a helpful approach. Gill suggested she liked the SLA idea, and noted Coventry's training hour did include training in this area, but agreed more effort in this area would be desirable. It

was noted 'organisational inertia' can be a convenient excuse for some staff to duck this training need. It was suggested putting training in this area as an development objective for all customer facing member of staff, as part of their annual review process, was one possible successful approach to increasing engagement. Additionally, having a 'disability awareness' group to work with, rather than tackling as a lone practitioner, was also advisable – in terms of increasing impact, visibility and buy-in.

## 7) Inclusive Teaching

Laura had met with a student and talked about 'bad' practices in teaching, with respect to accessibility. Being able to use a screen reader on a web page is given too often as a tick as being accessible, rather than embracing wider inclusive practices. This has led to feelings of anxiety and issues around time management. She asked if conversations about this are happening elsewhere?

Bernadette explained how their standard is to tell students to keep their cameras off. Sessions are also recorded, so students can access the material in a time and manner more suited to their needs. Signposting (time stamps) is included in video audio descriptions to give people a guide as to when within a lecture material will be coming up to help them navigate. Simon commented that their library sessions wouldn't expect a camera to be on for participants.

Gill talked about Coventry and their cross-campus community of good practice, which has been slow but gradual in terms of development. Engaging with senior staffers about issues of inclusivity and teaching, to raise its profile was key. She stressed that lecturers need support to gain the skills and confidence to be more inclusive in their teaching practice too. Elements of neurodiversity will be more prominent in teaching practice, although getting the engagement with all staff remains challenging, but she hopes in time practices will improve and culture will normalise to be more inclusive by default for teaching. It was noted for library staff alone to bring about this institutional change was extremely, and really it needs a partnership with academic departments for a coherent development.

Laura noted she had a panel of students and would be running a session to highlight the difficulties each of them had in engaging with training. Pivot to online has helped to raise the importance of these issues more centrally.

## 8) AOB

### a. Charitable Partners

Sarah A had been looking at staff training and awareness raising and asking if it would it be possible to have people share information on the good charities they've worked with: both digital library services and face to face. There was limited information on this, but it was agreed it would be useful to share across the region about what is going on and who is working with whom. Laura said she'd start sharing information about this and hoped everyone would contribute.

**ACTION: ALL to share examples of charities they are working with**

**ACTION: Lara to collate information on charitable partners and share at next meeting**

## b. Human Library

Laura noted Warwick's human library which draws on a Danish organisation, who use library terminology to facilitate conversations between people referred to as 'books' during this event. Can be a really broad range of topics chosen, e.g. anything on discrimination or stereotypical perceptions, and seeks to provide information on a lived experience rather than 'expert' opinion. The Human Library helps challenge stereotypes and preconceptions and can be more attractive than an individual training session. <sup>v</sup> GJJ noted this might make a useful conference talk or future event for the Collaboration.

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<sup>i</sup> See events page for details: <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/events>

<sup>ii</sup> See Annual Reports and Development Officer Updates here for details: <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/key-documents>.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://libguides.city.ac.uk/ebooks/ebook-accessibility>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.textboxdigital.com/aspirelist-platforms>

<sup>v</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/pghub/social/humanlibrary/>