



Mercian Disability Forum

Minutes

Thu 7th April 2022

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Present: Simon Satchwell-Giles (Chair, Newman), Rose Roberto (BGU), Gill Evans (Coventry), Jenny Townend (Northampton), John Mackay (NTU), Bernadette Carter (BCU), Liz Mills (Loughborough), Sarah Akhtaruzzaman (Aston), Annmarie Lee (MSDG. BCU), John Phillips (Wolverhampton), Julie Adams (Staffordshire), Sally Forrest (Derby), Chris Powis (Group Sponsor, Northampton)

Apologies: Kate Towlson (De Montfort), Kathryn Devine (Worcester), Carol Keddie (De Montfort)

Summary of Actions

ACTION: Simon and Annmarie to launch joint MSDG/MDF working group on inclusive training

ACTION: Simon and Annmarie to jointly plan towards hosting inclusive training events later this year

ACTION: ALL to consider joining working group and to contact Simon where willing

ACTION: Annmarie to find MSDG members willing to join working group

ACTION: ALL to share updates and experience with Bookshare on the mailing list

ACTION: ALL to share local insights into accessibility support staffing levels on the mailing list

ACTION: ALL Forum members to consider if they are willing and able to step into the MDF Chair role in 2023

ACTION: Simon and GJJ to make arrangements for next meeting, including polling members on prospective dates

22/01 Minutes and actions from last meeting

Simon welcomed everyone to the meeting, noting that the chat will be saved following the meeting should anyone want to share anything. GJJ would also aim to add important comments to the minutes. Introductions were then made and new people to the forum welcomed. Simon provided an overview of the purpose of the group as a forum to exchange experience in the wide realm of disability support and accessibility.ⁱ

22/02 Matters arising

a. Summary of last meeting

Simon offered a brief summary of the previous meeting ([26th Nov 2021](#)). There had been good discussions concerning the 'post' pandemic era, with a lot of commonalities across the Forum members' experiences about juggling both remote and on campus users and staff. The meeting had also explored the return to campus and how it has let us look at things with a fresh eye, alongside meeting some new challenges in supporting the students. The impacts on the staff from these challenges and opportunities though was also a topic of discussion, alongside exchanges with MSDG Chair Sarah Pittaway about future group collaborations.

The minutes were accepted as read.

b. Making staff training inclusive: Collaboration with MSDG

At the last meeting there had been discussions about making staff development events more inclusive, as well as thoughts towards hosting an event on this theme with the [MSDG \(Mercian Staff Development Group\)](#). With the change of MSDG Chair, their new chair Annmarie was in attendance today, and Simon noted his hopes to launch a working group between the two subgroups to discuss these matters in detail. The goal was to produce guidance for events, and also host an event on making training inclusive in the summer. Annmarie offered some context to MSDG discussions who have been looking at how to make their future events more inclusive: online, hybrid and physical. She and the group were keen to hear ideas or suggestions for improvement.

Simon mentioned AbilityNet who offer free seminars with a focus on neurodivergence and inclusivity through presenting people's stories on how they approach interacting the world at the different events they are involved in. Having these voices was powerful and helped with awareness of elements which could make meetings or events more inclusive. They were also a gentle introduction with suggestions for improvements coming from learned and lived experience, using AbilityNet's own staff to deliver the messages. It was suggested within the Collaboration membership we may already have staff and other people who could be interested and prepared to share their own stories we could call on. Rose noted academics at BGU who were looking at overlaps between neurodiversity and inclusivity, with a focus on children's books' depictions of autism. Hence, how libraries support disability through our collections might be an area to consider exploring.

Sally suggested approaching student union disability/inclusion officers as a route to finding willing students to share their experiences about library usage. Bernadette noted her local Disability Group was doing exactly this, with student talking head videos and experiences being shared on university 'pain points'. These were proving especially useful as a staff training tool for backroom staff who have less perception of how their work impacts on the student community. Jenny noted her staff had recently had

a talk on autism from their disability student officer which was very valuable in terms of making staff think about the impacts of their service on the disabled community. It had been especially revelatory in terms of the steps autistic people have to take for brief 'normal' engagements with the wider community, and the toll this takes on them.

John M noted the importance of learning styles being appreciated within training. He cited the example of training for the LMS Alma delivered through a singular video style failing to meet the learning needs of everyone. Simon concurred, highlighting the idea of universal design for learning providing multiple ways to engage with content. This might be challenging for trainers to engage with initially but as an approach was more concerned with rethinking and broadening their training approaches, rather than expanding any workload.

Simon thanked everyone for their comments, which would help start forming the ideas around making staff training more inclusive, as well as helping encourage people to rethink about what and how they approach it. Annmarie highlighted the importance of highlighting all library staff about these issues, and for the MSDG, to ensure any guidance was embedded in their development events. It was noted that hopefully some brief practical guidance could be condensed from the discussions to help everyone better overcome any potential training barriers. Hence, from this respect a checklist or brief toolkit would be most welcome.

It was agreed to look towards a summer event, and or session at the conference to provide a focal point for the wider Collaboration community. Simon was seeking therefore to set up a working group with MSDG and MDF members and would like a few Forum volunteers to join him. He invited all members to think about it after the meeting and get in touch directly to volunteer.

This group would report back to both the MSDG and the MDF, as well as the Steering Group, as their work progressed.

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ACTION: Simon and Annmarie to jointly plan towards hosting inclusive training events later this year

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ACTION: Annmarie to find MSDG members willing to join working group

22/03. Officer Update

GJJ a brief overview of activities across the Mercian Collaboration in recent months.

Subgroup Relaunch: The [Marketing and Communications Group](#) had been relaunched, after a long fallow period, with a new organising committee. The group would be meeting again in May, and welcomed all staff with an interest in library communications, marketing and outreach to attend.

Subgroup Review: Conversely the equally quiet [Copyright Group](#) was still under-review by Steering Group. While efforts to relaunch it continued, they had met with limited success and engagement from the Collaboration community. In the event a committee could not be located, the group would be disbanded.

Conference 2022: See item **22/06** below.

Officer: GJJ's role had been expanded to two days a week to better meet the considerable demands on his time and resource. His exact days of operation will continue to move around the week to meet meeting requests and other demands, but he hoped to be more able to respond rapidly to requests for information etc., as a result. His title had also changed to 'Executive Officer', to better reflect the maturity of the Collaboration's activities.

For a more detailed update he recommended Forum members view his [formal March report](#) or the [minutes of the most recent Board](#) meeting.

22/04 RNIB Bookshare: onboarding and offboarding workflows

Simon noted his experiences in adding/removing users from this service and asked the Forum for thoughts on their own best practices. While Newman had a limited number of users, making the manual process and training currently manageable, it was not future proofed should numbers increase. Bernadette explained at BCU students were triaged by disability unit, so the library doesn't perform processes relating to activating user accounts. She added how recent interactions with RNIB had been exceptional in terms of support and responsiveness.

Rose described by contrast BGU's experiences as a work in progress with only a handful of students currently registered via a manual system. There were desires to promote the service more widely, with a recondition there were likely 100s of other students (including dyslexics) who could benefit from access. Therefore, an automatic template was being piloted by the Systems Librarian and tested with users. This guided students through checking their qualification to be registered with Bookshare and provided information on any next steps to gain access. The aim was to launch this for academic year 22/23.

It was agreed everyone should share any advice or experiences with Bookshare via the mailing list

ACTION: ALL to share updates and experience with Bookshare on the mailing list

Rose asked about default format preferred for Bookshare, which in her experience was Word or PDF. Simon highlighted Dolphin Easy Reader which works with Bookshare and epub formats, along with being an open-source format. Some Dyslexic students prefer word format, but file size can be a problem. PDF is familiar and students often go for if given a choice, but it is a commercial format. Older e-books are photographs, and don't allow for more modern interaction tools. Gill noted their students choose Word or PDF format, with the next most popular being .mp3. Julie agreed that Word was popular for their students too as was MP3, with the same applying to SensusAccess conversions

22/05 Updates from member institutions

Aston: Have reached out to the very busy Enabling Team and as a result increased from 700->1500 students supported. Consequently, the team size supporting them has increased. User feedback seems to support they value the services offered well. All the same, Aston is looking to do more cross dept collaboration and staff training in related support issues.

BCU: Alma is being installed with extensive testing next week of the new system. 25% of each training group has to satisfy EDI requirements too. Additionally, all customer service staff are learning BSL for library interactions.ⁱⁱ

BGU: There's an Autism Group which was started by students who want a place in the library, and now one meeting room is reserved for this as a drop in quieter space. Mental health break activities are being run on campus too. BGU's also been asked to record storytelling sessions, and the videos from these are available internally.

Coventry: Library is trying to make services more visible, including RNIB Bookshare but there are limitations of what can be offered, especially in terms of on-boarding new users. There are more demands for plug-in 2nd screens from users with laptops too. Disability community of practice, including academics and professional staff continues to meet to discuss campus wide issues. The hope is to improve disability support and information campus wide for students, not just as a library initiative.

Loughborough: SensusAccess launched this week, and students manage themselves, but there will be a need for support all the same for some of them. Some problems getting numbers back into the library, with a focus on those users who've made limited or no use of the facilities in the past few years. Very few Bookshare users, possibly because Student Wellbeing team needs to promote it more in their student engagements. In the meantime, looking at accessibility at the library, and Liz would be interested to know how other people are resourced for staff to support this, along with their use of SensusAccess too.

Simon encouraged looking at past minutes for this information, but also suggested people might want to continue this discussion on the mailing list.

ACTION: ALL to share local insights into accessibility support staffing levels on the mailing list

Newman: New LMS has fed into the need to improve the library's website to find information. Students with additional needs are helping assess what improvements are needed. Additionally, there are plans for focus groups and testing groups to help this process along. Library staff are now back fulltime on campus, which has augmented some of the issues faced before in terms of students not knowing library systems and coming up against barriers they didn't expect (e.g., noise policing and acceptable study space behaviour). This has impacted perhaps more on neurodivergent students who can have less control over vocal levels, along with those who have never used a university library physically before. Hybrid workshops have been challenging, as the library lacks the staffing resource to provide a trainer plus an online facilitator. Meanwhile the Student Union raised an issue from a campus disability audit: five hearing loops on campus and none of them work. Now there is a proper testing kit available so this is an improvement, but chances are the equipment needs updating.

Northampton: Disabled Student staff have been running British Sign Language drop in sessions which have been well attended by staff and students. There have also been neurodiversity drop-in sessions for students to share experiences and support needs, which likewise went down well. Wheelchair tours of the library have been on offer to allow non-wheelchair users to experience what using the service is like from this perspective. Finally, the sensory room in the library is now up and running, although users need their ID card adjusted to access it. Not a bookable service, and if others are using it this can preclude access for some users.

NTU: Team meeting today looking at learning experiences from the past few years to drive change and improvements. Library used to be the busiest site on campus, but this is no longer the case, so efforts are being made to promote the library more as a welcoming study space. Looking also at the Microsoft roadmap and making it clearer for users to understand the range of quality tools and resources this offers. Have also been using MazeMapsⁱⁱⁱ, which is like Google maps but for the campus. Can ask it to plot routes across campus, including inside buildings. Can also set it to offer an accessible route, e.g., avoiding stairs. Plans to use it in the future to guide people to collection locations, but this will take time to setup.

Staffordshire: Julie was now working 3 days on/2 days off campus, with appointments often still mainly via Teams although some in person too. Staffordshire's new campus building opened in January which has very limited library stock, but it is the main study space on campus. An accessible guide to campus has been produced, aimed at neurodivergent students who might be triggered by certain sounds or experiences. The guide provides routes, cautions and advice on where to avoid such impacts, and was developed with Student Support team. It has been very well received. Meanwhile there have been significant staffing changes across the university meaning as a result some cross-campus teams haven't met recently. So, the library and others are looking to relaunch these efforts. Julie also noted SensusAccess gets about 55% conversions.

Derby: Library somewhat on the periphery for disability and equality, but desires to make new and stronger links in this area. A new libguide has been launched, but like RNIB Bookshare, could be more visible to users. As role is not dedicated to disability/accessibility, still much to learn, and other demands made on time. In other news, a new LMS is coming in which will be a big challenge. Plus, the new university librarian (Ben Veasey) is repositioning the library in various areas which is an opportunity to raise awareness of these disability services and issues again.

Wolverhampton: Students on distance learning course reported idly didn't like e-resources and wanted print books. This created an issue for the library concerning finding out about student needs in a timely fashion, in order to respond more swiftly. Part of the issue is needing more interaction from lecturers on distance learning courses as well, to close the circle of communication, feedback and recognition of pending needs.

22/06 Mercian Collaboration Conference 2022

GJJ reported that work on the 2022 conference was well underway, and a call for speakers would soon be launched. The theme was [Redefining Engagement](#), which he hoped would be a broad umbrella for a range of topics – including ones important to the MDF. He strongly encouraged submissions from Forum members, or the Forum itself, as they would be looked on very favourably by the organising committee. The event would be held online, hosted by Cranfield, and would be on the [afternoons of Sept 6-7th](#). A keynote speaker had yet to be confirmed, and any suitable suggestions were welcomed. [Sponsorship](#) was also being sought to support the efforts of the Collaboration, via this event.

This year GJJ would also be hosting online 'speaker briefing sessions', short hour-long workshops to support first time and inexperienced speakers in submitting a session proposal. The hope is to encourage staff with valuable knowledge to share, but a potential reluctance to step-forward, to become involved as presenters. These events would be hosted in May, with news about them appearing on the Collaboration site after Easter.

GJJ added that the conference planning team hoped to improve on last year's networking experience for delegates during tea breaks, with subgroups like the MDF planned to be invited to 'sponsor' these through hosting brief discussions. Simon noted the importance of having diverse hosts for these sessions, which GJJ agreed was a very valuable consideration he'd take back to the conference team.^{iv}

22/07 AOB

a. Sponsor Information and Support

Chris P noted he was happy to carry forward any issues, concerns or questions from the MDF to the Steering Group and Board, as its group sponsor. He was always happy to hear from individual members, and is on the group mailing list if anyone wants to reach him easily.

b. MDF Chair 2023

Simon remarked that his term of office would end at the spring 2023 meeting, and it was a good time for Forum members to start thinking about if they were prepared to step into the roll. He would pick this up again at the next meeting but welcomed any informal approaches at any point.

ACTION: ALL Forum members to consider if they are willing and able to step into the MDF Chair role in 2023

c. Next Meeting

The next meeting will be in the autumn, mid-term, date to be confirmed and agreed nearer the time.

ACTION: Simon and GJJ to make arrangements for next meeting, including polling members on prospective dates

As there were no other matters of business, Simon thanked everyone for their attendance and input.

Endnotes

ⁱ For more on the Forum, past meetings, terms of reference etc see: <https://merciancollaboration.org.uk/mercian-disability-forum>

ⁱⁱ BCU Instagram post on BSL training: https://www.instagram.com/tv/CbNbfLdDTuJ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

ⁱⁱⁱ MazeMaps: <https://use.mazemap.com/#v=1&zlevel=-1¢er=-1.154922,52.958112&zoom=19.8&campusid=640&typepois=35557>

^{iv} Julie commented 'I am involved in planning another event in late April where there will be a yoga session in one of the breaks - led by someone who does teach yoga, so would need that, but I can let you know how it goes.'