



Mercian Disability Forum

Minutes

Tue 10 Jan 2023 11:00 – 13:00 (GMT)

Present

Simon Satchwell Giles (**SSG**) *Chair, Newman*; Deborah Munro (**DM**) *Aston*;
Bernadette Carter (**BC**) *Birmingham City*; Rose Roberto (**RR**) *Bishop Grosseteste 11:30→*;
Gill Evans (**GE**) *Coventry*; Sally Forest (**SF**) *Derby*;
Shamal Lahouni (**SL**) *Keele →11:30*; Amanda Dow (**AD**) *Lincoln*;
Jenny Townend (**JT**) *Northampton →12:00*; John Mackay (**JM**) *Nottingham Trent*;
Manda Laine (**ML**) *Open*; David Sayer (**DS**) *Staffordshire*;
Jane Dashwood (**JD**) *Warwick 12:00→*; John Phillips (**JP**) *Wolverhampton →12:00*;
Ann-Marie Lee (**AML**) *MSDG →11:20*

Apologies

Chris Powis (Mercian Steering Group Sponsor for MDF); Carol Keddie (DMU); Ruth Stubbings (DMU); Julie Adams (Staffordshire)

Summary of Actions

1. **ALL** to investigate whether their library or institution may be willing to host an event in April
2. **ALL** to consider getting involved in task group
3. **MDF/MSDG** task group to reconvene to organise a further session.
4. **DM** to collate any specific feedback from written submissions and circulate to the group
5. **DM** to set up poll to gauge interest and gather ideas on practicalities of mystery shopper events.
6. **ALL** to send summary of the accessible spaces in or adjacent to the Library (or Main library) at their institutions and any experiences they have of using or helping people access these facilities for discussion at future meeting.
7. **ALL** to consider sharing concerns, anecdotes, etc. about safety issues affecting Library users or staff with disabilities or accessibility issues to send them to Simon to compile for a report to the Steering Committee.
8. **ALL** to send resource lists (if available) or suggestions of good, up-to-date resources covering wellbeing or equality, diversity and inclusion to the group for distribution.
9. **SSG** to follow up with **ML** to see if we can arrange a visit from an OU colleague who has relationships with publishers.

Agenda items

1. Housekeeping – apologies – welcome to new members

The chair (**SSG**) welcomed members to the meeting and gave a quick explanation of the functions of Microsoft Teams for those unfamiliar with the platform.



SSG indicated that the meeting would be recorded and a live transcription would be available and advised members what to do if they did not want to appear on the recording. **SSG** explained that the recording would only be available for attendees of the meeting and for the purposes of producing these minutes.

2. Minutes and actions from the meeting of 7 April 2022

SSG reviewed the action from the meeting in Spring 2022. All of the actions had been completed. It was noted that debriefing from some of the actions form part of the agenda for today's meeting. The group agreed that the minutes were accurate.

3. Matters arising from the minutes of the meeting on 7 April 2022.

There were no matters arising.

4. Making staff training accessible – Mercian Conference presentation and future sessions

SSG recapped the small project undertaken in the Spring and Summer of 2022 between members of MDF and MSDG to develop a presentation and workshop to deliver to member institutions of the Mercian Collaboration on how they can be more inclusive in staff training. The project culminated in a 30 minute presentation at the Mercian Conference in September, with a view to developing a longer, more interactive workshop to deliver in the 2022-23 academic year¹.

SSG asked **AML** and **DM** (who was part of the Conference Group) for thoughts and feedback about the presentation and the ongoing project.

AML said that she had seen no written feedback but had verbal feedback to say the session content was interesting, but it was a shame that the time that we had was constrained. This is why MSDG are keen to offer this as a more extensive session as part of the Staff Development programme.

AML thought the personal testimonies and experiences of staff engaging with training and development part of the session was particularly powerful, and she would be keen to see this developed further, with even more diversity of voices, in the sessions.

DM mentioned that they had also received positive feedback about the session but echoed AL's thoughts on the time constraints. The conference sessions and feedback are currently still being collated, but **DM** suggested she could collate feedback related to the session and circulate it to the group.

SSG noted that the constraints were not just about the time the conference team could give us, but also the online format, and that future sessions would be better if they can be delivered in person to enable richer live interaction, networking and relationship building.

AML mentioned that MSDG are currently looking at the calendar for April, and this would be an opportune time to offer the session again.

ACTIONS:

- **ALL to investigate whether their library or institution may be willing to host an event in April**
- **ALL to consider getting involved in task group**
- **MDF/MSDG task group to reconvene to organise a further session.**

¹ Conference presentations are now available from the [Mercian Conference 2022 Minisite](#). The MDF/MSDG session was 4A1



- **DM** to collate any specific feedback from written submissions and circulate to the group

5. Updates from member institutions

SSG opened the floor to members to talk about developments, ideas or new concerns at their institutions.

Aston (Deborah Munro):

Sarah, the previous MDF representative for Aston, has now left for a new position at Aston, so **DM** is here while the position is vacant. There have been several changes to staffing at Aston, with a new head of disability support, Vanessa Francis.

DM has been working with Vanessa on a 'signage audit' and dealing with issues related to doors and lifts. In the short term, they will be turning their focus to the website.

SSG asked about the methodology for the signage audit. **DM** explained that it was a project with student involvement, with two students with different needs paid to walk around, make notes and feedback on their interaction with signs. An example of some feedback received was for a sign saying "phone zone" - and an international student asked whether that meant phones could or could not be used. The results in other areas from student feedback had been similarly helpfully frank.

SSG said he recognised signage as an issue and one that often begins with an anxiety about control over messaging that is difficult to know when to stop.

DM felt student walkarounds from users without familiarity for the environment could be a powerful tool for surfacing issues and could even be done across institutions as a 'mystery shopper' exercise. Other members of the group mentioned this was something that would interest them. **JM** mentioned this had a precedent in the Mercian Collaboration, though not for accessibility and inclusion, but that the technique is ideally suited to the context.

- **ACTION: DM** to set up poll to gauge interest and gather ideas on practicalities of mystery shopper events.

Open University (Manda Laine)

Manda introduced herself to the group as a Learning and Teaching Librarian at the Open University. The OU have a campus library in Milton Keynes, mainly used by postgraduate students, but certainly busy enough to think about being involved in mystery shopping or other initiatives.

Nottingham Trent (John Mackay)

JM's manager now Head of User Experience and Environment. He is hoping that this means that there are opportunities to get accessibility higher on to the agenda. He hopes to form an accessibility working group.

Anecdotally, the Library is noticing an increase in users with mobility needs on campus, including wheelchair users. **JM** has been assessing and problem solving around the Library, uncovering the fact there are no accessible changing spaces on campus. One user has needs that required conversion of Library space. **JM** asking if this extra facility can be retained once permanent facilities are built.

SSG asked the group had any experience or observations about enhanced facilities, such as changing spaces, or toilet facilities with hoists etc. and how close or accessible they are from the Library.



BC Curzon Building on new campus these facilities built in. This is typical of BCU campus.

SSG may be a blind spot in older buildings and may affect the usability of the Library by disabled students, or for them to enjoy it as a study space as other students.

RR BGU Library is in a newer building but attached to an older space, which has a medical room with some facilities; but not specifically toilet services.

GE aware of toilet facilities but not with enhanced facilities such as hoists at Coventry

DM remembered from time at Birmingham University that at least one of the toilets in the Library had enhanced facilities.

AD thought it would be useful to know about facilities across Lincoln campus.

DS noted that, often, it was the work of staff groups concerned with access that raised awareness of the need for these types of facilities. At Staffordshire, facilities were installed in a few locations only after a protracted campaign to ensure they were built in to new facilities from the get-go.

SSG agreed and suggested a census of spaces and their facilities that we could pass on to the management steering group in case it is something we'd like to see more action on in the future.

- **ACTION: Group members to send report on the accessible spaces in or adjacent to the Library (or Main library) at their institutions and any experiences they have of using or helping people access these facilities for discussion at future meeting.**

Northampton (Jenny Townend)

Library ran a Disability History Month campaign in November and December, involving a display, acquisitions focus and created a reading list. **JT** and a graduate trainee also attended an ALISS Disability History Month showcase² and have had various outside speakers come to the Library, including someone from the Disabled People's Archive and the British Library.

Northampton continues to offer Mental Health First Aider courses and making sure that awareness is raised for the service, e.g. through email signatures and badges on lanyards etc.

Northampton has seen 100% increase in students seeking mental health support and access to counsellors – giving a sense of the scale of pressure on services post return to campus teaching. **SSG** mentioned that this was likely to be a combination of factors. Optimistically, we can hope that it is more visibility and uptake of what people are entitled to, but it needs to be matched with the staff resources.

Staffordshire University (David Sayer)

New facilities have kept staff busy in creating new procedures and plans, but these have taken a back-seat while a large restructuring project has been undertaken. This has led to teams and individuals needing to form new links with new teams and partners and rebuild some systems from the group up.

SSG said that the resilience of systems (especially for accessibility) is an issue that comes up quite often in these discussions: there is often a sense that the people who care about it work very hard to

² ALISS: Association of Librarians and Information Professionals in the Social Sciences. Details of the showcase are [now online](#).

get things to work and then find their work upended by changes from higher levels and that it is an important, but often difficult and thankless task to keep the pressure on people in positions of influence to consider the effect their decisions on such a key consideration as accessibility.

Birmingham City University (Bernadette Carter)

Students registered with student support services receive a welcome letter from the Library asking them if they want to book a one-to-one induction or a Library tour. Post return to campus, uptake has been much slacker, so BCU Library are marketing events to try and drive up interest. This includes talks on Eventbrite and publicity to try and engage specifically with students with additional needs. This is running alongside research to find out why uptake is low and what could be done to improve engagement.

Disability History Month was a hit with staff who did not realise how extensive the Library collection was.

An issue that came up recently was how we are looking after our students within safety and emergency operational processes. **BC** mentioned an incident where a student with VI was helped by Library staff during a fire drill – however there was no procedure in place for this and the student had been given no information as to what to do when there was a fire alarm. It was only because the student was known to staff, who knew about her disability, that she appeared to get any help at all. **JT** related a similar story of a disabled student just being told “it’s only a drill so you don’t have to evacuate”(!)

SSG mentioned that this spoke again to the idea of the resilience of systems, and a trust that we have that other parts of the institution (e.g. estates, security) have procedure and plans in place for this – but what if they don’t? Should we demand to know what the procedures are, and test them?

JM mentioned similar concerns. This led to a walk-around with the Fire Safety Manager, challenging people on what they would do, and this brought about a lot of open discussion about the issues.

DS mentioned similar problems: the H&S team are in charge of making sure there are fire wardens, first aiders etc. but since the return to campus, these systems have holes in them due to new working patterns, home working and staff loss.

DM mentioned problems at Aston with external security services who are not able to be trained as Aston Fire wardens, meaning that users with accessibility issues have no support overnight in the Library in the event of an emergency.

SSG suggested this is something that will need to be raised with the Steering Committee, as it appears to be something affecting a number of institutions and thanked colleagues for their interventions.

- **ACTION: Any colleagues with concerns, anecdotes, etc. about safety issues affecting Library users or staff with disabilities or accessibility issues to send them to **SSG** to compile for a report to the Steering Committee.**



Derby University (Sally Darlington)

No one person tasked with EDI³ in the Library; but as a team are trying to work more closely with the new head of the Student Wellbeing Team. New head of Library has also advocated for and secured new money for the Library and some is being directed towards wellbeing and EDI resources. The

Library team at Derby would like to hear from others with suggestions for resources that could be bought with these funds.

Derby have also had a huge system overhaul, with new back-and-front end systems, which has taken up most of the time of the small team and now they are looking to move forward.

Linking back to the point about accessible services and facilities, the Estates Team at Derby have commissioned 'Accessible campus' maps that specifically show all of the facilities available using the sunflower icon. This has been highly-praised by students and staff using the Kedleston Road campus.

- **ACTION: Any colleagues with resource lists or suggestions of good, up-to-date resources covering wellbeing or EDI to send these to the group for distribution.**

Coventry University (Gill Evans)

Due to increase in numbers coming forward with dyslexia and other neurodiversity, Health and Wellbeing support have asked to come in to the Library to meet students 'where they are'. Despite concerns about whether students would want to be 'seen', the tutors believe that this will increase engagement. They will be based on the ground floor, although the Library has also made available a more private space for discussions. The Health and Wellbeing tutors will be in the same area as the 'Student Success Coaches', who all students can have contact with to help them throughout the student lifecycle. This may help 'close the circle' in terms of outreach as the Library can now be more a part of this ecosystem of services.

GE reported that outreach was a major concern in terms of accessibility and inclusion messaging in the Library as there are strict protocols for sending group emails to students etc. There are concerns this means that important things that can really help students, or that they want to target to particular groups are being missed. Having the Student Success Coaches and Health and Wellbeing in the Library has helped the Library push these messages out more directly through word-of-mouth, but there are still gaps and barriers that will be difficult to overcome.

A new Library wellbeing group also provides students with opportunities to de-stress from studies. This has initiated mindfulness activities such as knitting and jigsaws, as well as more 'chill-out' activities such as games and MarioKart tournaments on some Fridays. There have also been drop-in sessions, e.g. with Student Success Coaches and outside agencies.

The Open University (Manda Laine)

Not much to report, but there are changes being made to the physical space at Walton Hall so they are being closely monitored.

SSG mentioned that it is good to have the OU in the group for their perspectives – and the positive commercial clout that they have as a result of their size.

³ Equality, Diversity and Inclusion



Bishop Grosseteste (Rose Roberto)

Dr. Clare Lawrence, who is a senior lecturer at BGU an renowned researcher who is active with the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC) used her Lincolnshire network with local artists to organise an exhibition with the Autism Resource Community Hub. The exhibition was temporarily installed at the BGU Library. This offered a fascinating insight into the way that people with autism interact with the world. **SSG** asked if there were any pictures available of the display as a great showcase – **RR** said that she will look into this.

RR has also been involved in programme to promote use of the RNIB Bookshare service. BGU Library management had previously expressed concerns that ‘floodgates’ might overwhelm library's small team – so she and the system's librarian, Nial, have been working on a system and workflow to strike a balance between providing more students who need this service access to it, but not overwhelming the staff. The workflow that has been put into place is that the Student Services department is responsible for telling students who have been reporting their disability to the university that the RNIB service exists. With the referral from Student Services, the BGU Library emails a form for students to fill out, and then with that information, library assistants note student needs into the BGU library system and RNIB Bookshare with detailed instructions are sent to them. It is up to the students to access what they need. With the help of the Systems Librarian the process that takes care of itself to reduce workload. Uptake of the service (at this time of this meeting) has jumped to about two dozen participants up from three.

ACTION: RR to send pictures of BGU Autism interactions display (if available) to Group list or to SSG to include in the minutes⁴.

Newman University (Simon Satchwell Giles)

Newman has also replaced its LMS this summer and this has opened up new ways of organising library users that allow us to offer more formalised services for disability and inclusion. This has increased referrals to RNIB Bookshare, but administration has been aided by a new Library Accessibility Group.

New member of staff has initiated wellbeing activities for exam period, and outreach and social media is being given an overhaul – we are now on TikTok!

6. Report from the Chair for 2021-23

SSG outlined the report sent to the Mercian Collaboration Steering Committee informing them of the activities and discussions that had taken place in MDF for the previous year⁵. **SSG** felt that the report showed the enthusiasm and engagement that the group generates, and highlighted the value of the discussions we have to members and their respective institutions.

SSG asked for any comments or questions regarding the report. None were forthcoming, but colleagues thanked **SSG** for preparing the report.

⁴ See Appendix 2

⁵ See Appendix 1



7. Election of Group Chair for 2023-2025

SSG took over the chair of MDF in 2021. By a customary arrangement, shadowing the terms of reference of the Mercian Collaboration Steering Committee, the Chair serves a two-year term and is elected by the members of MDF.

SSG outlined the responsibilities of the job, which mainly involve meeting administration and promoting the work of MDF by involvement with wider Mercian Collaboration initiatives, and bringing issues related to MDF's remit to the attention of the Forum. There has been support for the Chair from the Mercian Executive Officer, but this position is currently vacant, which has increased the workload. The Mercian Executive Officer position is currently being recruited and will hopefully be filled shortly. **SSG** offered continued personal support to the new Chair, as he intends to continue to be a member of the Forum after stepping down.

SSG described the benefits of being Chair, including for networking and professional development, as well as being able to creatively lead and set the programme for valuable discussions that make a difference.

SSG said there had been no nominations sent to him ahead of the meeting, but invited nominations from the floor, and was particularly keen to hear from people from diverse backgrounds to lead the group. He said he was prepared to stand again to ensure the group continued but would prefer the group to have fresh leadership.

DM asked how much experience of librarianship or disability and accessibility the new Chair would need.

SSG said that such experience would build up very quickly and the new chair would have the full support of the Forum and him as ex-chair.

BC and **JM** noted that lack of experience in this case could be an advantage and promote fresh directions or thinking.

SSG noted that it is within the gift of the members of the forum to change the [terms of reference](#) and that we could appoint co-chairs, or a vice-chair, to spread the workload and to provide support for someone who wants to build their knowledge and experience.

DM said she would be prepared to nominate herself for Chair, but would need to check with her manager at her institution that this would be appropriate.

SSG said that, if there were no further nominations, a vote to confirm **DM** as the new Chair could take place at the beginning of the next meeting. This was agreed unanimously by the group to be the way forward.

8. E-book accessibility – developments and experiences

Background

The Public Sector Bodies (Website and Mobile Applications) (No.2) Regulations 2018 puts a duty on public bodies (including universities) to make any websites or apps accessible to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA standard⁶. This was a piece of EU Law that has now been

⁶ More information on this can be found on [GOV.uk](https://www.gov.uk).

incorporated into the Equality Act 2010. Private enterprises have no such obligations. This has implications for us as we use private enterprises to provide our systems, our e-books, databases, etc.

SSG wondered what other people's experiences and practices were around this.

Discussion

As an example, JSTOR is ostensibly compliant with the Law, but uses embedded PDFs, and many older texts have substandard Optical Character Recognition (OCR) – which allows PDFs that are images of texts to be read by screen readers.

ML said that the OU try to work with publishers on this, but some are more amenable than others to their approaches, and some interventions have been more successful than others. The OU does its own testing of resources and can say to module teams “please don't use this” because of accessibility issues: but these can be tricky conversations to have at either end. **ML** offered to speak to her colleague that liaises with publishers to see if perhaps she can come along and talk to the group.

SSG said that he had been to an afternoon conference where representatives of Taylor & Francis and Penguin Random House spoke about accessible e-books and the challenges involved. T&F particularly appeared to be engaged and determined to improve accessibility in both their new publications and backlist – but the problems lie in the complex processes that a text goes through from acceptance to publication, and it is a case of surfacing the issues of each stage and then coming up with a solution that is sustainable.

ACTION: SSG to follow up with ML to see if we can arrange a visit from an OU colleague who has relationships with publishers.

Discussion also turned to the websites and VLEs used by institutions themselves and how accessible they are.

SSG noted that platforms like LibGuides are oversold in terms of being ‘easy’ to use with ‘no coding experience necessary’; but this completely masks the complexities behind accessibility and that not everything is about visual design. This may be the same across different platforms, for example institutional VLEs: what sort of controls are in place, what kind of training do people have before uploading content? **AC** mentioned that at the OU things are very stringent in terms of who can do what and how that can be presented, but it is not the case everywhere.

BC (Chat Box) reported that BCU have a pass/fail exam for anyone who edits or publishes LibGuides and one of the stipulations is accessibility checking. For Moodle courses the Library helped to highlight accessibility compliance with various courses, but it was hard to get lecturers to engage. However the Library has now been asked to create information and learning materials on accessible content.

GE (Chat Box) said Coventry provide links to accessibility statements and have intentions to set up guides for e-book platforms as other institutions have done; but this is an arduous task with the increasing numbers of platforms available, each with their own features. **AC** (Chat Box) shared a video resource used by the OU for these purposes⁷.

⁷ Open University [[YouTube](#)]: Library online training session: improving your experience of accessing online resources



SSG noted that a good resource for Accessibility statements is the Aspire and SearchBOX tools⁸ that you can sign up to.

9. AOB

There was no other business.

The next meeting will take place in the Spring as usual. **SSG** will organise a poll to determine the best date around the end of April 2023.

⁸ [ASPIRE from textbox](#): the verification service for accessibility statements



Appendix 1

MDF Annual Report 2022

MDF met only once during 2022, the second meeting being postponed to early 2023 because of industrial action. We continue to meet online, as we have done since the onset of the Pandemic. This has been the general preference of members of the forum as videoconferencing allows them to attend around their roles, many of which have become much busier since the return to campus working.

An important part of all MDF meetings is 'round-table' time for members to bring developments at their institutions, and their experiences of supporting accessibility and inclusion, to the attention of the group. This part of the meeting affords a wide range of discussion points, be it in the form of seeking or offering advice and best practice, or simply contextualising and benchmarking experience and practice against other institutions.

Discussion points this year have focussed on the challenges and opportunities that the return to onsite working has afforded. The experience of Covid-19 has led many institutions – and libraries within them – to a deeper appreciation of the accessibility and inclusion issues. Pleasingly, some colleagues reported that changes, both small and large, made within their service had considered accessibility and inclusion of disabled students and staff from the outset.

There were discussions of several initiatives within libraries around inclusion, in the form of awareness, listening, sharing best practice and co-production of services. Issues around staff time, training, and expertise to offer some of the increased services that were now expected were also brought up. Most colleagues noted a sharp increase in their workloads and, for some, job roles and responsibilities. Members continued to discuss the various platforms and technologies used to provide alternative formats, and shared information on processes and practices for institutions to make the best of these.

As a result of ongoing discussions with Ann-Marie Lee, chair of the Mercian Staff Development Group, this year saw the establishment of the joint MDF-SDG task group. This group met between April and September 2022 with the aim of developing resources for member institutions to assist them in making internal training and CPD more accessible and inclusive to staff with diverse needs. These meetings culminated in a paper delivered at Conference in September. This paper presented the work-in-progress development of a workshop, intended to be delivered as part of the Collaboration's 'All the same but different' programme, as well as some online resources. We are looking forward to pursuing these plans in 2023.

MDF were sad to see the departure of Gaz Johnson, who provided not only an excellent administrative service, but an enthusiasm about and belief in the aims of MDF, and contributed much to our meetings. We wish him all the very best in his future endeavours.

MDF continues to be a well-attended SIG with representation across the region and from a diverse range of institutions. At the next meeting in January 2023 (postponed from November 2022), we will elect a Chair for 2023-25.

Simon Satchwell Giles

Mercian Disability Forum – Chair (2021-23)

Appendix 2

Photographs from ARCH/Bishop Grosseteste University Autism Interactions display

Thanks to Rose Roberto for sharing these photographs.

Without further information, these are assumed to be © All Rights Reserved. Please do not share or use them without permission from the rights holder.











