

# Annual Report 2013/2014

The Milton Keynes Reader Service is celebrating this year having reached its 25<sup>th</sup> Birthday!

It was originally formed by visually impaired people in the autumn of 1988 as a pilot project under the umbrella of the Milton Keynes Council of Disabled People.

Since 1992 The Reader Service has been a fully independent charity (Registration no.1013965) which provides free services to any person living within the Unitary Authority of Milton Keynes who finds reading or writing difficult due to physical or visual disabilities.

We originally offered a reading and writing service to visually impaired people living in their homes. We have now expanded our services and offer the following three services:

- **Reading and Writing**

This is a face-to-face reading and writing service for people in their own homes. This can be anything from reading books, magazines, helping with correspondence, filling in forms, or helping with crosswords or even playing scrabble!

Our service is very flexible because our service users are able to arrange visits from their trained volunteer reader to suit their individual needs. Visits may be on a temporary, occasional or permanent basis. Our aim is to 'match' our volunteer to their service user to enable them to develop a long lasting relationship. Many of our service users enjoy both our reading and facilitation services.

- **Facilitation**

We have a growing range of facilitation services which cover the following:

- Our 'shop and see' service; a volunteer will be introduced to a service user and they will make arrangements between them to go shopping. This could be a regular arrangement to cover fortnightly grocery shopping or it could be for pleasure shopping for items such as clothes or presents.
- A service to take service users on 'one off' trips to the theatre, cinema, seminars or educational or cultural activities within Milton Keynes. These have proved to be very popular this year and there is a growing demand for this service.
- We provide volunteers to help with Buck's Vision 'Eye for Art' Group, where sight impaired people meet on the first Thursday of the month to engage in art and craft activities.
- A new service this year has been the provision of volunteers to join service users who wish to participate in the Milton Keynes Art Gallery's workshops for sight impaired people. We also help our service users access the audio guided tours of the latest exhibitions at the Gallery.

- **Transcription**

We offer a transcription service to enable any of our service users to have paperwork transcribed into large print, onto CD, or audio cassette.

## **Service Users**

We have had a steady growth of service users with more than 30 new visually impaired people joining us this year. In addition to self-referrals, service users are signposted to us from agencies such as Ascat, Sarc, Bucks Vision and Age Uk. Many of service users tend to be people over 70 and mainly with macular degeneration, often living alone and isolated within their community. The Reader Service signposts service users to other agencies, for example, Sound News, Bucks Vision clubs and the local MD Group.

## **Volunteers**

We could not provide our services without the high quality commitment of our volunteers. We have about 130 people helping us in various ways or in a number of cases, in several capacities. In addition to our three 'core services', volunteers help in the office, record and edit our transcription work, serve on committees, help at coffee mornings, help at social events, attend networking stands and run the 'talks project'. Most of our volunteers get to know about us from the volunteers centre at Community Action, local flyers such as MK Flyer or Phonebox or networking events. All volunteers are DBS checked and are required to provide 2 references. They are then invited to a full day's training which covers such subjects as eye conditions, how to provide our core services, confidentiality and adults at risk. We held 4 training days this year. We also hold a two hour practical guiding course where volunteers are taught how to guide, including using stairs and escalators and then are paired with a service user to guide visually impaired people around Milton Keynes shopping centre for practice. The co-ordinator will then

'place' the volunteer with a service user, matching them with similar interests or outlooks. She will then monitor them to check that both sides are happy with their 'match'. With the increase in volunteers and service users, we have had a steady increase in placements. This year was triple the number of placements of three years ago.

## **Management**

Under its constitution, the Reader Service is a user-led organisation and run by a Management Committee i.e. Trustees, whose members serve on an annual basis and are volunteers. Five user representatives (including the Chairperson) and four volunteers are elected annually at the AGM. Further committee members can be co-opted as required.

No remuneration is paid to any Trustees in relation to their duties as Trustees during the year.

## **Management Committee Members 2013/2014**

### **User Representatives**

Paula Suchy MBE (Chairperson)

Paula Varey (Fundraiser)

Caroline Pearson

Jeff Bashton

James Goldsworthy (Bucks Vision Representative)

### **Volunteer Representatives**

Michael Baldry (Vice-Chairperson)

Mary Kendall (Treasurer)

Lynn Bovis (Secretary)

Philip Ward (Chairperson – Development Committee)

## **Co-opted**

Mark Lawrence  
James Clifton  
Rose Haigh  
Steve Neale

The work of the Reader Service is conducted by its only employee, a part-time co-ordinator.

## **Chairperson**

Our Chairperson, Paula Suchy received an MBE for services to the blind this year collecting the award from Buckingham Palace in December 2013. She has been involved with the Reader Service since its foundation as both Chairperson over several years and the main fundraiser. She also uses the service with a reader and shopper. Her energies have helped to keep the service moving forward.

## **Development Committee**

The Development Committee meets several times a year and at the moment is concentrating on changing the constitution and changing the Reader Service into a CIO.

## **Funding**

Approximately half of our income comes from two grants from Milton Keynes Council for which we are extremely grateful. We also receive funding from other sources including:

- **Walnut Tree Community Shop**

We are one of the beneficiaries of the profits from this shop. We received a total of £5000 in this financial year. This continues to be a vital source of income for us.

- **Flag Days**

We had flag days at Morrisons and City Centre MK and the Milton Keynes Library and collected over £1000.

- **Car Raffle**

The Reader Service once again participated in the MK Community Foundation's Annual 50/50 raffle and raised £338

- **Donations**

We continue to receive donations throughout the year, this includes £150 from Manor Bowls Club and £50 from Bravissimo.

- **Transcription work**

Apart from providing free transcription to our service users, audio transcription continues to play an important part in our service. For a small charge, we transcribe onto CD or audio tape work for other charities which has included regular transcription of minutes onto audio tape for Milton Keynes Moles, transcription on to CD for MK Disability Access Group (DAG) and for Sensory Services. We have for many years also transcribed into Braille but have discontinued this service because it is too costly to run.

- **Commercial Transcription Work**

We have transcribed the theatre brochures for Aylesbury, Milton Keynes and Northampton and Derngate theatres. A volunteer edits the 'proof' of the brochure and we have a team of volunteers who help with the recording on to CD for each theatre. We also have a volunteer who is an IT expert and deals with the technical problems that we may face.

- **Christmas Display**

We recorded an audio description and commentary about the Christmas display in Middleton Hall and all the other Christmas activities that were taking place in the Centre:MK, with assistance from Three Counties Radio. The recording is then distributed via Sound News, the local talking newspaper to approximately 200 people. It can also be accessed via the Centre:MK's website and our own website. We also produced Braille descriptions for all the major stands within the display.

- **Grant Aid Funding**

We successfully applied to Bletchley and Fenny Stratford town council for £425 towards the cost of one of our training days. We also applied and received £900 for a grant from Community Foundation to cover the cost of taking groups of our service users and volunteers to the pantomime, Snow White and West Side Story.

- **LocalGiving.Com**

We continue to subscribe to this website which enables small charities to promote their organisation in order for people to donate money. Milton Keynes Community Foundation, at various times of the year, offer to 'match' certain donations. We have taken part in these schemes each time. We automatically receive gift aid from most donations.

- **Service User Subscriptions**

The annual voluntary subscription is £18 for each service received by the service user. Many of our service users also gift aid their subscription. This year we raised £1119.

## **Support Meetings**

We hold an annual support meeting for our volunteers every May. This gives us a chance to thank our volunteers over coffee and cake for all their hard work and dedication and update them with any news. This year Marianne Cockburn from AgeUK gave us an interesting talk and informative talk about 'Adults at Risk'. We have now incorporated this information into our own training days.

We also have a coffee morning for all our service users and volunteers in June, which includes our AGM at the beginning of the morning. A further coffee morning is held at the beginning of each year. These events are always popular, we provide homemade cakes and run a raffle. The money raised usually pays for the cost of the events. This year as part of our '25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary', Milton Keynes Mayor Brian White joined us.

## **25th Birthday Celebrations**

We formed a special fundraising committee to run from October 2013 to October 2014 to mark our 25 years of the Reader Service and also use it as a way to publicise our services and raise our profile. We held an afternoon birthday tea party in October with 120 guests including local MP Iain Stewart and former Mayor and now Older People's Champion, Jan Lloyd. Liz Roe, founder of The Reader Service and our first coordinator gave a talk about the early days of the Reader Service and how it has increased its services and number of service users. A volunteer made a wonderful celebratory cake and guests brought raffle prizes.

We have plans to continue celebrating our 25th birthday year with a quiz, trips to the theatre, a sponsored swim and a celebratory AGM and coffee morning.

## **Coffee and Chat**

We run two residential home coffee mornings, Lovat Fields Extracare Village meets every fortnight and Shenley Wood Extracare Village meets every month. These are run by Reader Service volunteers for anyone who is sight impaired and a resident of these homes. The residents are kept updated about activities within their home and about other events run by sight impaired organisations. These mornings have proved to be very popular and they are especially a good way for new sight impaired residents to find out about services and other agencies which may help them whilst also forming new friendships.

## **Publicity and Information**

- **Newsletters**

Our Chairperson writes two newsletters per year which are posted to all our service users and emailed to our volunteers. Our co-ordinator also produces an 'update' leaflet which is emailed to our volunteers detailing latest events and news, volunteers are requested to read the contents to their service users. We try to keep our service users informed about all our activities.

- **Website**

We launched our website last year and have spent this year making improvements. We now use wordpress which is easier to use. We are continuously updating the site with news items, further links to other helpful agencies, case studies and radio interviews. Paula Suchy has been interviewed twice by a local radio

station, Secklow Sounds, regarding her MBE and these interviews are available on our site. The website is a project in development and we shall expand it during the forthcoming year. We have found that potential volunteers use it as a first source for information about volunteering.

- **Stands and Events**

We have attended many events this year in order to publicise our services, to inform potential volunteers about the Reader Service and to offer our help to further service users.

Some of the events we have attended are:

- HealthWatch2 Event
- Great Linford Community Bookshop
- Network Rail
- Snowball Effect
- Great Linford Carnival
- Social Responsibility network event at Baker Tilly
- A Visual Feast

## **Talks Project**

The Talks Group was established in January 2010, by a group of three volunteers. The group give talks about the Reader Service to a wide range of groups and societies within the local community. These talks raise our profile, but also assist in recruiting new volunteers.

## **DBS checks**

In addition to checking all new volunteers, we recheck our volunteers every three years.

## **Annual Car Check**

Petrol for our volunteers is reimbursed at 45p per mile. It is our intention that our volunteers are not 'out of pocket' by volunteering. Some volunteers do not claim and

others claim half and then donate the other half to us. On our training day we ask our new volunteers to tell their insurance companies that they are volunteering, this does not affect their premium. We now have an annual car check scheme, gathering annual returns to check that our volunteers are complying with this policy.

### **Leaflets and Posters**

We have re-designed our posters, included new logos on all our paperwork and are in the process of re-designing our leaflets.

### **Skills Development**

Our coordinator attended a course regarding media and how to get the best from websites and social media for a charity, and another course regarding writing articles for newspapers and their online sites.

### **Our Thanks**

We are grateful to all our providers of income. Our services are provided by our volunteers without which our organisation would not survive and to whom, on behalf of our service users, we offer our wholehearted thanks.