

Action Stations

Paul Hannan

An estimated two million people in the UK have a significant visual impairment. In England around 153,000 people are registered blind, with a further 153,600 registered partially sighted.¹

Action for Blind People South West is one of several specialist Action Teams based throughout England. The Team's mission is to deliver practical support to blind and partially-sighted people in their home, rather than them having to attend an office, which for many individuals would present a major barrier to engagement. In this respect all the team's work is outreach.

The team is made up of 'co-ordinators' each of whom specialise in a specific area, for example benefit claims, housing assistance, assistive technology (computers and gadgets), social interaction, self-employment, employment (including job retention) and training and education.

In each of these specialist areas the Exeter-based team, which covers Devon and Cornwall, has built on its success year on year. Success breeds demand and the team has grown over the last seven years to its current complement of twelve, supporting 800 service users in 2008.

Whilst each co-ordinator brings his or her own specialist knowledge to the task, the real strength of the team is its holistic approach to meeting the service user's needs. In a first meeting, typically lasting 1.5 hours, the co-ordinator, chosen in response to the nature of the first enquiry, assesses the service user using a standard questionnaire. This is not simply a paper exercise. Sensitivity and keen observation of the service user's environment is essential to establishing need, and to making appropriate referral to the team's other specialist co-ordinators and other agencies. Co-ordinators share case work on an on-going basis and this shared knowledge and constant communication between the team members is the glue that welds the service together, provides solutions and delivers success.

This approach is underpinned by Action for Blind People's determination to properly consider and incorporate the views of service users in its strategic planning. This thinking is firmly embedded throughout the organisation and is seen as a crucial element in providing a 'service user-led'

service. This is achieved through Action's user-participation programme, in which every service user is invited to participate. Service user's views are canvassed via questionnaires and regular user-participation meetings are held to discuss issues and collect views, which in turn inform Action's local and national service delivery.

This thinking is extended in the team's active engagement with other agencies, for example, with Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) and Devon Social Services Sensory Team Rehabilitation Officers for Visually Impaired People (ROVIs), and underpins its co-operative efforts in delivering creative solutions such as that found for Jim.

Fixing it for Jim

24-year-old Jim was referred to the South West Action Team for employment advice by the local sensory team ROVI. With severe hearing and sight impairment and a fragmented educational background, Jim was low in confidence and a long way off being ready to look for work.

Following an initial interview, the Action Team's employment co-ordinator referred Jim to other team members: an assistive technology co-ordinator to establish his needs and pursue equipment grants, and a benefits co-ordinator to check and improve his DLA benefit claim. Meanwhile the employment co-ordinator introduced him to local community education courses in literacy and numeracy.

However, things don't always go to plan. Jim didn't take to the community education courses and rebuffed other solutions including a residential work preparation course at Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford. However, working together with the ROVI, Jim was persuaded to visit Hereford 'just to see what it's like'. The ROVI accompanied Jim on the visit and both came back enthused and ready to get things moving. The Action Team employment co-ordinator liaised with the Jobcentre DEA to organise funding and make arrangements and Jim is now getting ready to start at Hereford this autumn.

Jim of course still has a long way to go and no-one is expecting a perfect solution, but on his return Jim will be better prepared for work and continue to be supported by the Action Team co-ordinators and local partner agencies.

¹ Source NHS Information Centre 2008 <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/blindpartiallysighted08>

This is just one example of partnership working in action, an example, we like to think, of 'best practice' in which specialists within and outside of the Action Team combine their expertise to create a solution. This co-operative approach is crucial to meeting service users needs and extends throughout all the Action Team's specialist areas. However this is not a top-down design. It is very much rooted in local initiative and the individual efforts of co-ordinators, given their head by an enlightened local management, to network and develop strong relationships with local partners.

Locally designed initiatives, and the active pursuit of work with partner agencies, extends Action's outreach activities in the community. For example, in the field of training and education this year the team has successfully contributed to a transition project (college leavers into work) with the West of England School and College for Young People with Little or No Sight (WESC), and with Devon Adult & Community Learning (DACL), to establish sorely-needed computer and literacy courses for blind and partially-sighted adults. These have subsequently led to integrated study on mainstream courses.

Initiatives such as these have an entrepreneurial element. An individual co-ordinator identifies a need, designs a solution (often in consultation with other members of the team), presents it to the local management for approval, and all things being equal is given the go-ahead supported by the whole team. Several of these initiatives will run alongside each other and every advantage pursued where they converge. This approach, based on a willingness to share expertise, creates its own dynamic and engages the expertise and contribution of the whole team.

The results speak for themselves. In 2008 the team's benefit co-ordinators claimed around £500,000 of previously unclaimed benefits, Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Attendance Allowance (AA) on behalf of individuals in Devon alone. More than 80 housing solutions were found, 113 assistive technology outcomes were recorded, with over £20,000 of equipment grants obtained, as well as several new social groups founded. In addition, five businesses were established and more than 40 people supported into employment, with 25 people retained in their current employment following sight loss.

Challenges ahead

The current stringent economic climate brings into focus the ongoing challenges that lie ahead for both individuals and organisations: how to maintain momentum, guarantee resources and continue to support and improve the lives of service-users.

As a charitable organisation, Action for Blind People is funded by public donations and in common with other voluntary sector outfits, increasingly by contractual income. Contracts provide a sustaining flow of funds for services that might otherwise be pinched or not provided at all, but sometimes they require methodologies inconvenient for the service user group.

Signatures, for example, can prove to be a significant challenge for blind and partially-sighted individuals who are invariably required to commit, by signature, to contract terms that they are unable to read. Service users rely on co-ordinators' descriptions, often an uncomfortable responsibility for the co-ordinator, especially when an individual is required to sign several documents at the same time which have the potential to affect their income and future prospects.

An example of this issue arose in a project in North Devon aimed at tackling rural isolation. A Devon County Council initiative, 'Women on the Up' paid transport costs to bring together a group of women at monthly meetings. When initial funds were exhausted a *nextstep* programme 'Skills for Jobs' was felt to be a close fit and imported to continue support to the group. Its terms required engagement in job search and training, but the sheer weight of signatures required at various stages confused and frustrated some members of the group, who, despite patient explanation, saw this as a gross imposition.

Subsequent discussions with *nextstep* representatives resolved this issue, once Action had explained the challenges that signatures present to our service-user group. This experience demonstrates how crucial it is for agencies to work together to develop flexible solutions that recognise the particular needs of the individual.

2009 has proved an eventful year for Action for Blind People. In April this year Action became an associate charity of The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). This allows the two organisations to share resources, skills and expertise, and to engage and reach more blind and partially-sighted people with even better services.

Paul Hannan
Employment Co-ordinator, Action for Blind People South West

More information

For more information on Action for Blind People, phone us on our National Freephone Helpline 0800 915 4666 or visit our fully accessible website www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk.