



# Volunteer Handbook



# Introduction

## Hello and welcome

Thank you for your interest in Birmingham Talking Newspapers for the Blind & Visually Impaired. (BTNBVI)

This booklet is written primarily for those who are considering joining us as volunteers. We hope you find it interesting and helpful. If you have any unanswered questions, do please contact us at [info@btnbvi.org](mailto:info@btnbvi.org) or by telephone on 0300 330 1404.

A fuller version of the Handbook is being developed and will be available on our website during 2024. It will have a range of material, from newcomer induction to online volunteer training and other essential documents. You can listen to our most recent audio publications on the website. We hope you find it interesting.

## Overview

The formal constitutional object of BTNBVI is “to relieve the blind or visually impaired in the Birmingham area by the provision of recorded material read primarily from newspapers and magazines.” Rather starchy legal language, but it means that each week we read and record 4-5 hours of local news and other articles taken from newspapers and magazines which are delivered by post to around 300 blind and visually impaired listeners across Birmingham.

Visual impairment (ranging from total blindness to sight impaired by problems like macular degeneration or cataracts) affects over 25000 people across Birmingham but only some of these people actually register as blind.

The idea of Talking Newspapers was introduced in the UK in 1971 by Ronald Sturt, a Welsh university librarian. Today there are 450 TNs across the UK. They all depend on readers, technicians, appropriate reading material and the availability of simple and affordable recording and playback machines – and, of course, listeners.

In Birmingham David Chakravarti, a local businessman, formed Birmingham Talking Newspaper Association and began operating on 5 Nov 1976. Some founder members are still active now, in 2024.

The service really took off when cassette recorders became commonplace in the 1970s. Today technology has moved on and recording is fully digital.

Despite modern devices like screen readers and smart speakers like Alexa or Siri, TNs still have teams of human readers – the core principle is still that of sighted readers helping visually-impaired neighbours.

Reading material is drawn from local newspapers and magazines, working within special copyright exemptions available to help visually-handicapped people.

### How we operate

Recordings are produced in two studios, one in South Birmingham and the other in Sutton Coldfield. We produce roughly 4 hours of recordings each week: News, Magazine, History, and two monthly magazines (a different style each week). Both studios use material from the Birmingham Mail and other newspapers. We try to choose items with a North or South bias for each area though the nature of local news in the written press is changing and it's not always possible to adhere to this principle.

BTNBVI has around 300 people on its mailing list. Our numbers dropped during the COVID epidemic but are now recovering. When we receive referrals, we talk to our potential listeners to confirm they understand our service, and to assess what equipment they will need. Traditionally a listener is issued with two postal pouches and USB sticks that carry the recordings as mp3 tracks, and a USB player. Increasingly, online service is popular via a home computer, Alexa-style smart speakers or the Talking Newspaper app on smartphones.

There are about 70 volunteers divided into small teams. The task for the team each week is jointly to prepare the recordings for the week. This is a team task and includes, for example, collecting the pouches from the sorting office, recording the number of pouches returned, preparing the USB sticks and, of course, reading and recording the week's material. Volunteers work in small teams.

The News teams meet every 7 weeks to produce a one-hour recording; the Magazine teams work on a similar cycle. They add the recordings to a master recording alongside other pre-recorded material. There will normally be a technician, 3 or 4 readers and 2 or 3 people in the postroom. Multi-tasking is usual; indeed it is essential.

## Funding and fundraising

We are fortunate that at present we have a mix of legacy and grant funding plus some annual donations, so fundraising is not an urgent concern. We also benefit significantly from the Royal Mail *Articles for the Blind* free-to-use first-class post service which is an in-kind contribution to BTNBVI of roughly £40000 per year.

## Volunteering with BTNBVI

### You are thinking of volunteering?

**Readers.** We use small teams, typically of 4 readers, to provide some variety of voices in the recording.

Material is taken from local newspapers and needs to be read clearly into a microphone. Colleagues help with difficult pronunciations or with small text changes that work better in the recording

A normal finished News folder will have 20-30 news articles in the hour's recording so articles are quite short. The actual recording session lasts for about 90 minutes allowing for stops and starts, retakes and editing.

**Recording Technicians.** Usually the silent person in the room hiding behind a laptop screen! A recording session uses up to four microphones, one per reader. These run via a mixer or control desk to a laptop that runs recording software.

The recording is visible on-screen as a trace. This sample trace has four normally-spoken sentences, each separated by a brief (natural) gap.



Typical on screen trace

Ideally we make a perfect recording with the first take. In reality the actual recording usually needs a tidy-up before it is adjusted so that the volume stays fairly constant for the listener. The final step is to split the continuous recording

into individual tracks before copying the result onto a master USB recording.

**Post-room.** Each week the admin team in each studio receives a mail sack of incoming yellow postal pouches. The teams keep a record the incoming pouches, empty them (mostly they contain USB sticks but also occasional notes of different types), and reformat the USB sticks on USB copy machines, ready for reuse. The same machines are then used to duplicate fresh master-recordings onto the outgoing USBs which are then zipped into pouches and the refilled mail sacks are taken back to the Sorting Office on Friday evening.



Copying machine



USB Player

We provide a simple commercial player to our listeners free of charge. This is one of only two we found that matched the facilities of the earlier specialised model which is no longer available. . Fortunately the new players are significantly less-expensive!Team effort

The production of our programmes each week is very much a team effort. As you may discover, our volunteers enjoy working as a team towards the shared goal of producing the completed USB stick ready go to the Sorting Office for delivery to listeners on Saturday morning. For most volunteers, reading is the central activity but equally important are the admin tasks required to make the venture a success.

### **Becoming a Recording Technician**

If you are comfortable using a laptop and would like to try the technician role, we would be very please to hear from you. Although we currently work with single technicians, in the past it was common for two people to work together. This was particularly useful for training and support. Indeed it's the way we train new technicians.

Although the technician role is specialised, it is not as complicated as it looks. In many respects it's exactly the same as word processing a document to correct the spelling and layout before printing it.

Do please consider this role also.

### BTNBVI Governance

BTNBVI is a registered Charitable Incorporated Organisation. It was formed in October 2019 as a replacement for the Birmingham Talking Newspaper Association (BTNA). This change provided a more modern business model that includes limited liability for trustees. It is overseen by a Board of up to 12 elected trustees drawn ideally from its membership – primarily the volunteers who provide the service.

In the Resources section of the website you will find our our Constitution, which is our governing document.

You will also find our most recent *Trustees Annual Report* and *Accounts*. These are a summary of our activities for the year. As a registered charity we are required to submit them to the Charity Commission each year.

## Historical Background

### Ronald Sturt: The man who brought us talking newspapers

David Matthews: *The Guardian* Wednesday 12 February 2003



The librarian, Ronald Sturt, who has died aged 81 founded the first talking newspaper in Britain.

In 1968, while visiting Vasteras (in northern Sweden) to study public library services for disabled people, he found a tape recording of the local newspaper made for blind people. Back home in Aberystwyth, his enthusiastic talks about the experience drew the offer of financial support from the local Round Table if he would "do something about it."

So, with the support of the proprietors of the Cambrian News and the Cardigan & Tivyside Advertiser, Sturt launched the Cardiganshire talking newspaper on January 1 1970. Initially, the tapes went to 18 local blind people, but the idea was quickly taken up in neighbouring Montgomery (now Powys), and today it goes to some 250 "readers" in English or Welsh.

Through example, and Sturt's tireless evangelism, the idea spread to the whole of Britain. By 1974, there were sufficient local groups to form the Talking Newspaper Association of the United Kingdom (TNAUK). Sturt was chairman, and later president, and retained a keen interest in the project until his death. TNAUK also developed a commercial venture, producing many daily newspapers and magazines in aural and machine-readable forms.

Sturt was born in Chobham, Surrey, and educated at Woking grammar school. In 1939, he began a career in accountancy, but this was interrupted by tuberculosis, and sanatorium life sparked a lifelong love of books and reading.

In 1947, he switched to librarianship, working in Surrey, Brighton and Westminster, before, in 1954, becoming regional librarian for mid-Hertfordshire, where he took books in to patients at the local psychiatric hospital. Later, he designed the first professionally run, integrated library service for hospital patients and staff, at the Queen Elizabeth II hospital in Welwyn Garden City.

In 1963, this initiative led to the formation of the Library Association's hospital libraries & handicapped readers' group. Sturt served on its standards committee, was chairman of the group and edited its quarterly periodical.

In 1964, he was headhunted to lecture at the College of Librarianship Wales (now the department of library and information studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth). By the time he departed in 1972, the college had 400 students and 40 teaching staff, and had acquired an international reputation as the largest library school in the UK.

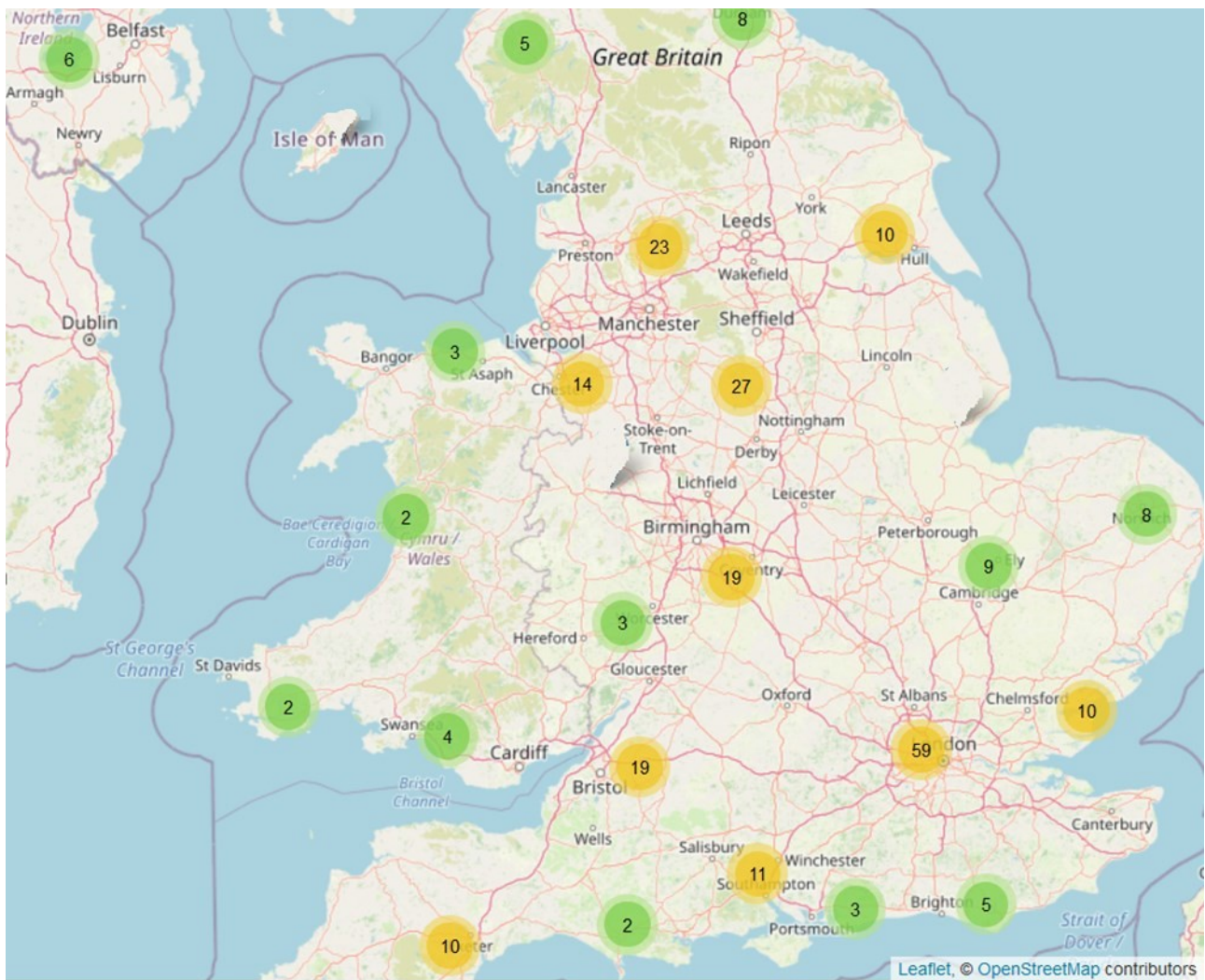
Sturt himself moved on to the City of London Polytechnic (now London Guildhall University), first as chief librarian and, shortly afterwards, as assistant provost, the post he held until retirement in 1981. While in London, he made another important innovation by founding the National Bureau for Handicapped Students (now Skill) in 1975.

Sturt was affably benevolent, a devoted Methodist, a lively-minded man relaxed in manner and superbly organised. In 1990, when his second wife, Felicity, also a librarian, was mayor of Chelmsford, Essex, he was happy to attend official functions with her as "Mr Mayoress".

He is survived by Felicity, whom he married in 1961, their daughter and two sons, and the daughter of his first marriage.

***Ronald Ernest Sturt, librarian and pioneer of talking newspapers,  
born 21 October 1921; died 6 January 2003***

## Map showing the spread of Talking Newspapers



National spread of Talking Newspapers  
<https://tnf.org.uk/find-a-talking-newspaper>



## Volunteer Induction Training

This next section of the Volunteer Handbook contains material that will be introduced by team leaders to new team members.

### Practical Information for New Volunteers

#### NORTH

It is normally possible to park in the Methodist Centre car park. Alternatively there is a public car park opposite.

Access to the recording studio is via the intercom system. At the entrance press the button for Room 9. A colleague will open the door for you. Go straight ahead and left at the end of the corridor.

Toilets and tea/coffee making facilities are near to the recording studio.

Please pay particular attention to safe working practices and report any concerns to the team leader. For significant problems there is an 'Accident Report' book available to all volunteers.

At an early stage your team leader will invite you to read our policies and sign the register to record that you have done so.

Contact details (address, phone number, email) for all volunteers are kept securely, and used to organise the teams and send out documents when required. You will also be invited to provide an

#### SOUTH

South is currently moving to a new centre. Arrangements are not yet clear

emergency contact number should the need arise to contact somebody on your behalf. Both you and any person named as a contact have the right to see the information held.

## **Expectations**

It is useful if there is clarity at the outset about your expectations and ours—what we should expect from each other.

Fundamentally we are usually all mature adults with a common focus on producing very good audio material for people who are blind or visually impaired. We would therefore expect people to treat one another with courtesy and respect, and to act inclusively with respect to colleagues, especially newcomers.

## **BTNBVI Policies**

As individuals (and as a registered charity) we are obliged to work within legal constraints. Typical areas include data protection, health and safety and safeguarding. Topics of this kind are covered by BTNBVI policies and related training. All volunteers will be required to complete training (normally online.)

Team leaders will support the online training, and online access will be available in studio although we envisage most volunteers would become self-confident in using the online training from home.

The Charities Commission publishes a list of recommended policies not all of which apply to a small organisation like BTNBVI.

## Practical Guidelines for Effective Reading

### Preparation

Most of us can feel tense before any public speaking. This can result in short breaths which in turn leads to a lack of oxygen in the lungs. Try some deep, slow breathing immediately before talking. This will prevent difficulty in articulating the words when you commence speaking.

### Read the text through in advance.

Practise words and phrases which need emphasis.

Be clear about the flow of the text from line to line.

Check unfamiliar words, foreign names, or awkward numbers before you begin.

Make small changes to the text if you feel it does not 'work.' Major changes need to be agreed with the Team Leader.

### Reading and Recording

Noise: Switch telephones off and avoid shuffling and rustling papers. It can be heard on the recording.

Get your article ready. Look for a signal from the tech to start your reading.

**Do not rush.** Read slowly and pause when appropriate Remember that many of our listeners have problems with hearing.

If you make a mistake: pause - continue reading and start that sentence or paragraph again.

Similarly, coughing when **you** are reading: pause - cough - pause - continue reading.

If you feel you have to stop, raise your hand and say STOP.

After any stoppage, look for the signal from the tech to continue reading.

As you reach the end, raise your hand for the tech as you start the final sentence

### Good readers.....

- Put their own personality into the reading.
- Read as though they are enjoying it and finding it interesting
- Read clearly and slowly - but not too slowly. Pause when appropriate eg for emphasis or simply to take a breath.
- Read punctuation correctly. eg commas are normally there for a purpose. Read so that the text flows.
- Know when or where to alter the tone of voice. eg a question can end with a slightly higher pitch
- Show in the voice any words that are direct quotations

### **Special Items**

- Change 'day' words eg today, yesterday, and tomorrow. Change to a named day eg On Monday this week..... (The event referred to may already have passed.)
- Read units correctly e.g. £20,000 is 'twenty thousand pounds (not pound)
- Read decimals correctly e.g 5.29 is 'five point two nine' not 'five point twenty nine.' Read internet web or e-mail addresses correctly.
- If giving a phone number, read it slowly so that it can be written down by the listener. Always repeat the phone number so they can check it.
- Show in the voice any words that are direct quotations