

# *Blind Voice UK*



## Local heroes: the story of BlindVoice

(note: this article appears in RNIB's "NB" Magazine)

BlindVoice UK (established as Stockton Blind People's Voice) is an unusual grassroots organisation. Founded ten years ago by a group of blind and partially sighted people with a list of grievances about local access to services, it has gone on to introduce a range of services that help plug the gaps in local provision. NB talks to manager Christine Durnion about the way the organisation helps local people with sight loss to achieve their full potential.

In 1997 a small group of blind people from the Stockton on Tees area met informally to discuss a number of issues that were concerning them - among them access to information and communication technology. In the next few years, from this small beginning grew Stockton Blind People's Voice (SBPV) - a group of people who were willing to stand up and take action to get what they needed.

Christine Durnion tells how she became involved with the budding organisation. "I worked for a

local authority and had just set up an IT centre, one of the first in the country. In the library we had some facilities for blind people, and that became my link with SBPV. I would go to meetings and take their various issues back to the council.”

Meanwhile the organisation was getting stronger, and needed to raise funds in order to keep its momentum. In 2003 it applied for Big Lottery funding, only to be told that it was a good project but lacked management structure. Undaunted, the group began to recruit trustees, all blind or partially sighted themselves and with a first-hand knowledge of sight loss, including founder member and chairman George Glass. A further application was rewarded with a grant of around £170,000 over three years, with the condition that they employ a full-time qualified manager. “So I took a leap of faith and came out of security”, says Christine, “and since then we’ve just grown and grown. In 2004, we got the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service and several of us went to London and met the Queen - now we’re really on the map.”

Christine has seen a significant development in the organisation. “In January last year, we

changed our name to BlindVoice UK, because our constitution stated that we could only work in Stockton.

We realised that to reach more people we needed to appeal to the Tees Valley area as a whole.” The other reason for the change was the development of the transcription service, which now operates as a social enterprise and raises money for BlindVoice by doing work for pensions services, the NHS and the like. Little by little, the organisation has expanded from one office to include a training centre, meeting room, manager’s office and the transcription room, housed in premises belonging to Stockton Voluntary Development Agency.

## **Service growth**

Christine explains the philosophy behind the development of Blind Voice. “Our services are responsive to people's needs - we don't overlap with what other societies do. If someone wants a lunch club or help with benefits, we refer them to other societies, RNIB or Action for Blind People.”

One area where the organisation has been able

to step in is that of emotional support. Christine gives an instance of the way that support worker Linda Oliver (herself blind) has been able to help. “Joy was not coping with her sight loss and was constantly in tears. After emotional support sessions with Linda, who is a trained counsellor and life coach, she's become much more proactive and is now one of our trustees - something she never thought would be possible.” Linda is a good role model, adds Christine. “If people can see her doing what she does and know she's been blind since she was 28, it empowers them to think 'well I can get through this'“ The service also provides much-needed support to families of people experiencing sight loss.

The IT and training side of the operation also continues to thrive, with projects for both job-seekers and those with hobby and leisure interests, and students ranging in age from 22 to 77. “It's notoriously hard for blind people to get jobs”, says Christine, describing one of the latest projects. “What we want to do is let employers know that blind people can be supported through Access to Work - it's not going to cost them anything. And if we can get placements for people, it gives them a little bit

of job experience. We find that blind people are often not very self-confident, so we start them with confidence-building courses and then go on to the next stage - interview skills and CVs.”

Having good basic IT skills is also crucial for job-seekers. “In January we started teaching ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence - the baseline qualification for IT proficiency). We're doing it via the Royal National College for the Blind, using their resources which we've bought as a package. One of our students, who's 22, is already on the second module. Other students are doing ITQs (work-based qualifications), and I've delegated them tasks to do as part of that, such as producing a newsletter - so they've already got evidence of their work and may go on to do ECDL.

“We do this teaching in conjunction with Stockton adult education service, whose tutors have worked for us for many years. It's on a one-to-one basis and we think that's important. Things like screen-readers going in the background can be very distracting and especially difficult for people who have hearing problems as well as sight loss. We've had to

struggle with funding and so on to keep it that way, but it's worked for us for four years now, and people are achieving good results.”

## **Social activities**

An important branch of the work is the social and activity side, which is facilitated by trustee Val Hyde. SocialEyes meets regularly and enjoys a number of activities, from fundraising fairs to adventurous activities such as gliding and canoeing. SocialEyes enjoys outings to the country or to arts venues, and there is also a popular theatre club which enjoys trips to Darlington's Civic Theatre for audio-described plays.

As the number of activities grows, so does the need for volunteers. Many are recruited through word of mouth. “We've just got four superb new volunteers who are really proactive and want to do a lot. But the more things we do the more volunteers we need as sighted guides and to help out in other ways.”

## **Training for professionals**

Another area of work is awareness training for

service staff, designed to equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to work with patients and customers who have sight loss and to appreciate their needs more fully. Sessions have taken place in doctors' surgeries, and there is a new contract in the offing to train staff of Darlington and Durham Hospital Trust. The training is tailored to meet the specific requirements of each service provider, whether it's a local college, a company or part of the health service.

## **Blindness through the decades**

This spring will see the conclusion of an ambitious project, run by BlindVoice and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. "Blindness through the decades" is an oral history project charting the history and experiences of local people with sight loss since 1945. It promises to be a fascinating mine of information about such things as hospital treatments, domestic life, employment and education, though Christine says the experience has sometimes been a traumatic one for interviewees. "In the past the norm was to put blind children in homes from the age of two. Some people had a horrendous time at school." The interviews (in which the

interviewers too were blind) will soon be available on CD, and it's hoped that some of them may also be available through the BlindVoice website.

## The challenge

With all its energy and success in the realm of service development, it's easy to forget that BlindVoice is dependent, like all charitable organisations, on fundraising. Last year it was lucky enough to get a second grant from the National Lottery, for £244,000 - a rare achievement - and it has even been invited to feature in the Big Lottery awards. But if it is to achieve all its aims in future, funding will continue to be a concern.

“I think it's the same for everybody”, says Christine, “we can't afford to sit tight. We're actually putting together a business plan at the moment.” She gives the example of Northern Rock as something that can come out of the blue to reduce local activity. And even substantial grants don't last for ever. “The Big Lottery think we've got a fantastic project - but I've never known somebody to get funding from them three times!”

This is why BlindVoice needs a business activity like its transcription service to help make it sustainable. Traditional fundraising also plays a part. “We did a tombola last week and raised £530, which was brilliant. It sounds like a small amount, but if you do a few of those it soon mounts up. What we want to do is to have enough money in the bank so that we can run a year without relying on any new funding - then that gives us an extra year. As part of the Big Lottery I asked for a part-time professional fundraiser as well - so hopefully that will also bear some fruit.

## **Sharing good practice**

As BlindVoice expands and develops new forms of service, it learns from and shares with other organisations, both local and national. The organisation is a member of the National Association of Local Societies for Visually Impaired People (NALSVI) and also has good relationships with other societies in the Tees Valley area, while avoiding duplication of Services.

It is also on good terms with social services, which is the source of many of its referrals. “A

young mum who struggled through her own schooling contacted us recently about her son, who has the same hereditary visual impairment”, says Christine. “He was being barred from using bouncy castles, and couldn't go to kids' parties. I did some research, and eventually managed to persuade Specsavers to make him a pair of goggles, which they did at their expense. The leisure centre had to review its health and safety policy.

“So if somebody else doesn't do it, we'll have a go”, she concludes.

## **Contacts**

BlindVoice is at 27 Yarm Road, Stockton-on-Tees, TS18 3NJ - telephone 01642 803590, [www.blindvoice.co.uk](http://www.blindvoice.co.uk)

## **Moving forward with BlindVoice**

(note: this article appears in RNIB's “NB” Magazine)

Joy Lloyd is in her mid-70s and lives in Stockton with her husband Jack. Between them they have 23 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. She enjoys life to the full and is a

keen amateur genealogist, gardener and Middlesbrough-supporter. But five years ago things were rather different. She tells us about the support she received from Stockton Blind People's Voice and the difference it has made to her life.

My sight started deteriorating about four or five years ago, and I was told that I had age-related macular degeneration. At that time I was really interested in family history, but finding it hard to view the records. I was working in Stockton library where someone introduced me to their CCTV and then told me about the new group that had been formed in Stockton. I went along and was made very welcome, and felt that I was among friends - and it progressed from there.

I had a little bit of vision then and could see faces and make things out. I was still struggling and wanting to do things alone, and not getting much help. My doctor sent a young psychiatry nurse to see me, and she spoke to me about everything under the sun. She said she would put some leaflets through my door. But when they came there was a bundle of leaflets which

I couldn't see! I can look back now and laugh, but it wasn't funny at the time. I really went to the bottom of the pit and couldn't handle it. I wouldn't go out, even with my family, and just stayed in bed. I never ever said "I'm blind" - I couldn't use the word.

Then Christine Durnion, manager at SBPV, told me about Linda Oliver and asked me if I would like some emotional support. And so I started getting counselling. So I went to see Linda and she got the handkerchiefs ready and said, look if you want to cry just cry. And basically she just took me through the motions, listened to me, and that was it. I have a wonderful husband and family who listen and don't interfere, but it was talking to Linda that was the turning point. She was a wonderful example - a young woman who is blind herself and has brought up four children. And when I said "I can't do that", she would say "Yes you can".

Now things are a lot easier, and I know I can cope - at least 99.9 per cent of the time. But looking back I realise it's harder to adjust when you're older, and support from the hospital and social services was virtually nil at the time. These days I've got a lovely lady who tries her

best to nudge me in the right direction. We've had holidays at the Windermere hotel (run by Action for Blind People), and when I came back recently I realised I was ready for some training with a mobility cane - so that's my next move.

Now I get other support from BlindVoice as well. I go to an IT course on Monday and get an hour-long session with my tutor. I've bought a new program called Guide and am going to try it out on my new computer. I'm hoping it will help with my genealogy, though the websites aren't very accessible and I need some help from Jack. But I find my IT skills are great for emailing people in New Zealand and other places, and I love talking to people on the phone.

We go on trips out with BlindVoice occasionally, and I've just been nominated to become a trustee. So I'm moving forward. They say losing your sight is like a bereavement, but I'd say that's not so. Both Jack and I have gone through bereavement (it's a second marriage for both of us), but usually you've got your family around and you can get your foot back on the ladder again. But when sight goes, it's hard to know where to turn. That's why I'm glad to tell other

people about BlindVoice, and to help them myself if I can.



BlindVoice UK members on an Outing

BlindVoice UK

Oral History Project

“Blindness Through the Decades”

The Oral History of Sight Loss in the  
Tees Valley from 1945 to date.

Funded by

The Heritage Lottery

This leaflet is available in Braille, Large Print  
and Audio CD.



BlindVoice UK  
27 Yarm Road  
Stockton-on-Tees  
TS18 3NJ

Tel: 01642 803590

Fax: 01642 803591

Email: [christine.durnion@blindvoice.co.uk](mailto:christine.durnion@blindvoice.co.uk)

Email: [jill.campbell@blindvoice.co.uk](mailto:jill.campbell@blindvoice.co.uk)

Website: [www.blindvoice.co.uk](http://www.blindvoice.co.uk)

Registered Charity: 1078249