THE BRAILLISTS FOUNDATION

ADVOCATING FOR BRAILLE IN THE WIDER WORLD

Matthew Horspool: This episode of Braillecast Extra is made possible thanks to a grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. For more information about the Trust, visit its website at wcmt.org.uk.

Welcome back. Coming up this time, Advocating for Braille in the Wider World, a session recorded on Tuesday, 16th March 2021 and introduced by Dave Williams.

Dave Williams: Good evening and a very warm welcome to the Braillists Foundation Tuesday evening Master Class, where we endeavour to share different ways in which you can use Braille. Tonight, we'll be focusing on advocacy for Braille, how you might get Braille or more Braille in your lives and in the world generally. So, we'll be diving into that with our lead this evening, who is Holly Scott-Gardner. Good evening, Holly.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Hi, Dave.

Dave Williams: Looking forward to this one, Holly, I know you've done a lot of great work around advocacy so I'm sure you've got some fantastic tips to share with everybody.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Hopefully, yes. Thank you.

Dave Williams: Also, I should mention that tonight is the final Braille Master Class in the current series, so on behalf of everybody, Holly, thank you so much for taking the lead on these and if you missed any of the Master Classes, you can find recordings on the Braillists website at braillists.org/media. On that page you will find an audio recording of each session and if they're not there already, coming soon we will be providing transcripts as well and you should also find notes, so a short handout with notes that summarise the key points that go along with each session.

If you have any follow-up questions, then of course you're always very welcome to join the Braillists forum and you can do that from braillists.org/forum and that's a place where you can discuss all things Braille with other people. It's a Google group so it comes in your email so you don't need to sign up for any social media platforms or anything like that and we get all kinds of topics on there.

So, on to this evening and our moderator this evening is Ben. Good evening, Ben.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Good evening.

Dave Williams: So you'll be looking out for those hands when we get to questions and you'll let everybody know what they need to do to raise their hands and then you'll come to people and invite them to unmute.

Ben Mustill-Rose: I will do, indeed.

Dave Williams: So, a little bit of a different session to finish off this series. We've talked a lot in recent weeks about different ways of using Braille for learning music, for learning languages, for making notes for yourself, making notes for others and we've looked at how you use Braille with various kinds of technology but actually sometimes it's the shortage of Braille, it's the availability of Braille that is the problem. Sometimes you want some information in Braille or you actually need that information in Braille and it can be difficult to get. So, sharing her lived experience and advocacy skills and a whole load of tips on advocating for more Braille, Holly Scott-Gardner.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Thank you, Dave, for that introduction. So, today, as was mentioned, I'm going to talk about advocacy and specifically how we advocate for Braille. Last week we sort of touched on this in one sense where we discussed how to get Braille devices or Braille transcription in work and in university. But this is going to look at getting Braille in a more wider sense. So, how do we get Braille in the real world? How do we get Braille when we're out and about? How do we say to a restaurant, "Well, there's no Braille to say which bathroom is which in your restaurant and I'd really like to know?" Or how do we make sure that signs in our local train station have Braille? So, I'm going to go through some of the advocacy strategies I've used but I'm not going to go through them at great length because what I really want to do is open this up for you to ask questions. Maybe you've had a specific situation where you've thought that you really wanted or needed Braille here, but you didn't know how to get it, or you tried and you were met with resistance so what could you have done and I will give you some advice about that.

I will say that every advocacy situation is different and there are situations where a strategy works one time and doesn't work another time. Sometimes you have to look at the different people you're approaching and decide how you are going to approach this particular person and I'm going to go through a couple of different ways of doing this.

So, firstly when advocating for Braille in places like restaurants and shops. You might want Braille in a restaurant. The example I always give is on the bathrooms or in restaurants on the menu, to get Braille menus and I tend to approach this in a more educational way. I make sure that if possible I have a face to face interaction with the person there because I think that can be incredibly helpful, particularly if it's a small independent business. You can often get hold of the actual owner and I think for them seeing you really helps. Obviously in COVID, this isn't necessarily possibly but then with COVID none of us are going out anyway.

What I would do in this situation would be to open up a conversation with them and say, "I really love your business, I love coming in for lunch or for drinks after work and it would be really great if you had a Braille menu and that there were Braille signs on the toilet doors so I know which is which." And I'd say, "You know, Braille menus are so helpful because it means I'm able to read the menu independently. It means I'm able to not take up so much of your time." I talk to them about how Braille menus really benefit me. Then the bathroom doors, I'm quite quick about that and might say, "Well, we all want to know which one we're going in." Most people find that quite funny. So, I try to have this open, educational conversation and I give them the opportunity to ask questions and I also try to point them in the direction of where they can get Braille menus. So I'll say, "Here are some companies which produce Braille. You're welcome to do your own research as well." So I direct people to these resources. Obviously this will vary depending on which country you're in. I'm in the UK. I know people join our Master Classes from other countries, so what resources you point them to will vary.

I do know some blind people who are able to transcribe things themselves and they have access to embossers and they'll say, "I'll emboss you a Braille menu if you can get me an electronic copy of your menu," and they do this as kind of a courtesy to build good will between themselves and that business. You're definitely not obliged to do that and I do think there's an argument to be made here that no sighted person expects to have to essentially foot the bill for producing menus so why should we as blind people? And I absolutely agree with that. In terms of our right to access information, 100%, I think absolutely right, we shouldn't have to do that. However, I do know people who have chosen to do it because they feel like giving the community access to that information is more important and that's your choice as an individual, which strategy you go through.

My hands are tied because I'm dreadful at transcribing so nobody would want a Braille menu that I'd produced so I point businesses in the direction of someone else who can do it and will actually do a good job.

I like to have this really open conversation with them and I take time to educate. Now, if I'm in a situation where I'm dealing with a chain restaurant, I might approach it slightly differently because usually you can't get to speak to the owner. You might get to speak to the manager but they might not even make all the decisions. So, what I tend to do then is reach out online and try to go higher up within the chain because I think ultimately if it's a chain, do I just want the local branch of that chain to have Braille menus or would I want every restaurant in the whole country to have them? And obviously the ideal thing is every restaurant in the whole country and the thing about chain restaurants is that they have the budget to do that or they should. Also, dare I say, it's good PR for them and again, we don't want to be a kind of charity case, "Oh, look, the nice thing they did for the blind people," because I don't think information access is something that is "nice". I think it's our right. We have as much right to access information as anybody else, but we also know that this is how the business is going to view it and ultimately sometimes I care more about getting access to information.

What I will do when it's chain restaurants, I will go higher up and I'll usually try to do email contact because I think with email contact, I have a record of that communication and I do think that certainly the bigger chains have more responsibility to provide me with access to information because they do have the budget to do that. I don't take as much time to educate because I'm doing it in writing and I think I'm not trying to build so much of a relationship with them. I'm probably going to end up getting a generic response anyway, at least at first and I'm probably going to be passed around. That's something you get used to. I try to write a nice email and explain I'm a blind person, access to Braille would-- and very much the same points I would make face to face. Hopefully, based on that, you will get a good response. Sometimes you don't, sometimes you're still met with resistance and there are then different strategies you can take after that. Within chains I always push it further and further up.

There is also the strategy of using social media as a tool. I think social media has great power in advocacy but I also think we have to be really aware of the consequences as well and certainly the consequences are very emotionally draining. Often what we say gets misconstrued and you will get a lot of backlash. There are a lot of people who will think that you're just being entitled so you've got to have a thick skin and be able to deal with that if you choose to go down the social media route.

I would never choose that as the first option with these kinds of things because I think with advocating for Braille, you can usually resolve it without having to go down that route.

If I'm advocating for accessible communication from people like the council or the National Health Service, I take a very different strategy. I take a much more rights based approach. So, we do have the Accessible Information Standard so we should get all NHS communication in an accessible format. We are absolutely entitled to that.

Likewise, if we want information from the DWP (Department for Work and Pensions), if we want information from the council sent to us, that is our right under the Equality Act as well, so I would be writing them a more abrupt email. I don't want to be rude but first I would request the communication in Braille and then if I don't get it, I would then be slightly more abrupt and say, "Under the Accessible Information Standard it states that--"

I will say for these kinds of communications, the RNIB has some excellent tool kits on their website. You can go to their page and it's the campaigning resources page but if you actually type in RNIB tool kits into Google, you'll get it. They have really good tool kits for communicating with the council, getting stuff from the NHS, the Accessible Information Standard and I would definitely using those tool kits. There's no point in reinventing the wheel and actually the hardest thing about advocacy is that it's so emotionally draining and if you've got a template that you can fill in, then absolutely take advantage of that.

I would say as well, it's a tried and tested method, with these RNIB tool kits. They've been used lots and lots of times and they are altered when it becomes apparent that they need to be. So, I've used them and I would definitely recommend them. You also have then the support of their campaigns team if it is something like NHS accessible communication. You can go to their campaigns team and their legal team and get support with challenging that. They're doing a lot of work at the moment around accessibility, both in terms of physical communication like letters and in terms of digital communication online. So, make use of those resources.

Now, slightly different, if you're looking at things like train stations and you'd like platform numbers to be written in Braille. I always find this very tricky because it's never standardised. It's never the case that we know the platform number is going to be in a specific place on every platform. So, you could go to a train station every day for the next year and have no idea that there are Braille platform numbers. So I think this is a very difficult one, but I also think it is something we are absolutely right to advocate for and there are several ways you can do that. Train stations are usually managed by a train company so it's worth reaching out to them, but also local councils do get involved when train stations are being redeveloped. If you know there's a development project going on, try and get involved with that and often there will be groups of people from the local area, stakeholders, as it were, and they're going to be using that train station, they're often brought in to give feedback. So, you can always push the blindness angle and suggest that they want disabled people and they will want to consult on accessibility.

If someone's doing work already, they're often quite happy to throw in some Braille, seeing as they're already digging up the concourse of the train station or whatever. So, it's always worth keeping an eye on what is happening in your local community and take advantage of those situations. We can also look at things like bus stops. Do you want the name or the number of bus stop to be put on the stop? Again, you can go to the local council to talk about this. You can also talk to bus companies and get them to push for it.

I tend to go down all these routes and I send a lot of emails and I think the most important thing is that, whilst we do have a legal right under the Equality Act, often things can be resolved without ever having to go to court. I really stress this, because going to court isn't free, even under the Equality Act. It requires putting a solid case together, you'll want legal representation and also if you lose that case, you would have to pay the fees of the person you've taken to court. So, you really need to make sure your case is watertight and has a chance of being successful.

So, although, again, there are things like Legal Aid, they will look at the likelihood of your case winning and it just takes so much energy, when so much of this can be resolved through communication.

There's a really amazing book about structured negotiation. It's written very much with a United States mindset, so a mindset of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) but a lot of the principles apply because it's about how do you communicate with people, how do you engage in this negotiation before you ever even take anyone to court. I think this is so important because ultimately it's much easier to talk to your local council and get bus numbers put in Braille, through building a positive relationship, than it is with taking them to court and then essentially they'll never want to work with you again. They might be quite scared of you but it doesn't build a good working relationship.

I would very much say the same with businesses. Yes, you have a right to access and I think if that right constantly gets violated, then it can be worth taking people to court and I have done so, over accessible communication and I've been successful, but only after negotiations have really broken down. Always try negotiating first because it's going to be much less stress and much less hassle for you in the long run.

It can help a great deal if you can get a team together, particularly if this is something with a whole area-wise benefit, so for example train stations and bus stations. Find blind people in your area and do a joint letter writing campaign or get a petition together and get friends and family to sign that petition and then deliver it to the council or the company that manages the train station. There is power in numbers and it's much less lonely when you're not the only one speaking out. Advocacy can be extremely lonely and extremely isolating and I always think if I have a group of people, then that is really helpful.

Also, try to get someone to read your letters. If you do write letters and you're not very confident, get other people to read them first. Someone else might have really positive feedback that can help you strengthen that letter. Even if you're asking someone who isn't a blind person, what they might be able to do is suggest different phrasing that would be helpful and again, it's just a lot less lonely.

I've spoken for about 15 minutes so I'd like to open this up for some questions now because it's very hard to give you 100 strategies for advocacy and tell you what to use where. It's always going to vary based on who you're dealing with.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We'll give people a bit of time to raise their hands and if anyone's forgotten how to do this, you can press Alt-Y on Windows, Option-Y on Mac, star-nine if you're dialling in through a telephone or if you're on an iDevice such as iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch, you can press the More button which is in the bottom right of your screen and then press the Raise Hand button. Then we'll bring you in to talk.

Great stuff so far, Holly. I totally agree that sometimes you see these organisations and you just think that you want them to do this thing but where on Earth do I start? It can seem quite daunting. It's really nice to hear about all of these resources and approaches you've taken. I didn't know that the RNIB tool kits existed actually.

We have a couple of hands now so we're going to come to Tina first and then James.

Tina: Firstly, I've personally been having trouble getting information in Braille from the NHS and the various different screening programmes, as I have had help from various forms. The most helpful thing I've found is apparently there's a company called Healthwatch and they are brilliant. I feel as though I'm actually getting somewhere now.

Holly Scott-Gardner: That's good to hear.

Tina: Secondly, my local housing society, it doesn't matter how many times I've asked them to send me rent stamps in Braille, I still have to ask them every time I get a letter, if they could do it in Braille. They say, "You're the only person who asks for it in Braille." But that shouldn't make any difference. So, what do I do for the next stage?

Holly Scott-Gardner: What I would do is look at the RNIB Equality Act tool kit. They do have one which covers the Equality Act and that's really helpful. It will help you to include relevant sections of the Equality Act and that tends to scare people, when you say, "It is my legal right under the Equality Act 2010 that--" You can even reference the relevant section.

If that doesn't work, I would actually call the RNIB's helpline and ask to speak to their legal team. I can't say that they will definitely represent you because it depends on what they're dealing with at the moment and how many cases they have, but I've found them very good, even if they can't represent me, at getting me connected with somebody who can. So, I would recommend doing that because that's quite serious and you do need that.

Tina: It's been 25 years now, where I'm living. They have done it on the odd occasion.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Have you asked them by email or just over the phone?

Tina: I don't really do emails.

Holly Scott-Gardner: If you can do email, or if you can get someone to assist you with it, I would recommend that because it's really good to have it in writing and then if they email you back and say they will but then they don't, then you also have evidence. Equally if they just say no, you've got some really good evidence then. You shouldn't have to put that in writing but it does help. So, you can say, "I've been living here for this long and I've been asking," and then say, "It is my legal right under the Equality Act to have this communication in a format I can access." Then you have that as evidence and at this stage, that's probably your best bet.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, Tina, and hope you get that resolved soon. We're going to come to James next and we currently don't have any hands after James but if anyone does have any questions or comments, we've got plenty of time.

James: I was just going to come back and absolutely agree with Holly's point about getting somebody else to review your written letters. We're all probably very familiar now with writing things in emails and letters and so on, but it's a very difficult medium to communicate well. When you are just speaking, you've got the whole tone of voice thing, you can tell if you're angry or just being sarcastic etc.

I'll give you one example. The sentence, "Why are you here?" has just got four words but it can mean all sorts of different things depending on how you stress each word and getting that right in cold print is very difficult. I remember writing a letter once to a railway station and I showed it to a friend and he just rolled about laughing because he saw the comedy value in it, which I hadn't seen at all.

So, it's always a good idea to get somebody else to read your letters.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I think so and this also applies if you are a bit angry when you write the letter, which you might well be, particularly if we're dealing with an advocacy situation where we've asked for this repeatedly and it hasn't happened. You might want a little bit of your irritation to come across but sometimes we don't notice that what we've actually said might come across as being a bit rude. Tone is very hard to convey in print.

James: Yes, reviewing the day after is also a good tip. I've done that many times.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Yes, definitely and I think now it's so easy to just quickly dash off an email and it's far more immediate than it used to be, so that's always a very good thing to bear in mind.

We've had [PHONETIC: Fola] just raise her hand.

Fola: I just have a comment, going back to restaurants. I went into a chain once and it's the only restaurant I've been in to where they offered me a Braille menu before I even asked. It was so easy.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I think that's always a really nice experience. Whenever I am successful in getting a restaurant to get Braille menus, I tell them that it's always good if they see a blind person to offer it, because they might not read Braille but sometimes I don't even ask, because I just assume they won't have one, whereas if they offer it, it's great.

Fola: Absolutely.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Definitely, and I don't know about you but I find that in restaurants, my preferred medium for menu reading, if I haven't read it beforehand, because I am a little bit obsessive like that, I much prefer Braille to voiceover because, sure, the Braille menu's bulky but to be honest, if I'm in a busy restaurant, I'm probably going to have to have voiceover on quite loud in order to hear what's going on and that is equally as intrusive and as attention-drawing as a Braille menu.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Just being able to go by heading in the menu, it's much easier to flip through a Braille menu very quickly and scan down. Website menus are notoriously badly formatted and they rarely have a table at the top, for example, where I can quickly scan down the table of contents and click on the relevant section. So, I think Braille can be a lot quicker.

Ben Mustill-Rose: At least you know, if you get in Braille, you won't be getting any images of text.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Oh! Yes.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We don't have any hands raised for now, so I think we're good to move on.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Okay. So we've touched on this, but what happens if it isn't working? When you reach out to someone and tell them that you'd really like Braille in this situation, what can you do then? There are several things you can do. Again, for me, it very depends on what the issue is. So, I think sometimes you can team up with existing campaigners and maybe push it through with that. Certainly with bigger organisations like DWP, I might be able to link in with an existing campaign by a blindness organisation. Even though it's my legal right, usually organisations are campaigning on this stuff so if I can jump on that and get involved, then that gets them to take some of the load. Also I find that often if you can become part of one of these campaigns, your case will get pushed through quite quickly and whilst that's not right, it is the reality of things.

I've had this when I've participated in campaigns that really tackle an issue with a particular organisation and then they would deal with my request for Braille but hopefully what this does is make a difference to the wider community.

If you're negotiating with someone like the council or train companies, definitely my tone changes, the more I'm going back and forth with them. The first time, I tend to be very relaxed and very open. I often won't even mention the Equality Act in my first communication, because I think sometimes actually you don't need to and sometimes you can put people on the defensive. Again, they shouldn't be defensive because it is your legal right, but they are and it's about knowing how to communicate with people.

So, often I won't mention it the first time. If they come back and say they don't do this, then I'll mention the relevant section of the Equality Act and quote it. I'm still not abrupt but I'm starting to include some legal language because I think that starts people feeling a bit nervous and unfortunately, it does make people take you more seriously. You shouldn't have to make people fear you in order to get accessible communication, but often we do. The reality isn't the same as what should be.

If they still refuse, I then tend to send a very abrupt email and now stress that is my legal right under the Equality Act 2010 to receive this communication in an accessible format and give them a deadline, after which time I will seek legal representation. I tend to only do this when it's things like council tax where I need it in a format I can read and it's a joke if it's not available. I wouldn't, for example, do this with a restaurant. It's not worth it and honestly you're probably not going to get anywhere. You might feel really strongly about this and decide to take things further but that is something you have to decide for yourself. The hill you choose to die on isn't always the most sensible thing in the world.

I definitely do get much more snappy with people like the council or the DWP and then what I would do is seek out legal representation but I wouldn't take them to court. Again, this is another nuanced thing. Just because you seek out the assistance of a lawyer, doesn't mean you have to go to court. What it does mean is that they can write a letter, and, again, I've known RNIB lawyers to write letters, or if they won't or can't write a letter, often being limited on time, they're very good at pointing you in the direction of lawyers who will either do work for free in some situations or who will assist you with getting legal aid just to write a letter. I've done this with organisations such as Student Finance. I've sought legal help to write a letter and send them that letter and basically file a letter before claim. So, what you can do then, is actually file this letter and you're essentially saying you will make a claim. That's not legally binding, you don't ever have to make a claim, but what you're doing with that letter before action, is you're stating intent to, in the end, take legal action. That really tends to make people very nervous because certainly with things like accessible communication, we have a fairly clear-cut right to access that. Most of these organisations, particularly large ones and particularly governmental ones, know that they're not going to be on the winning side. So, they will often resolve the issue before going to court. The good news is, it's much easier for them and much easier for you too.

Always save emails. This is why I said to Tina to try to do this communication through writing. There's no evidence if you just have a conversation. If you put these requests in writing, it shows that you've made these requests over x amount of time and it shows that you showed willingness to resolve this in a manner that wouldn't involve legal action. That's really important too because most of the time, if you go to court straight away, no-one's going to take you seriously.

So, when I'm starting these kind of campaigns, I'll make a new folder on my email and I do have a folder, unsurprisingly, called Student Finance, for example, and every email I send to Student Finance and every email I receive from them gets put in that folder. You can use rules in Outlook to do that for you.

Maybe they'll say, "Absolutely," and send you Braille and you never have to worry about that again, but it does mean that if they don't, a lot of the work of gathering that information has already been done. One of the reasons why we don't take things further is that it's just exhausting to constantly have to fight but often it's because everything is in so much chaos and we don't know where to find all the emails and it's going to take so much time.

I've also got to the stage where I track things in spreadsheets, if I'm feeling really angry about a particular need for Braille. This tends to be much more with things like NHS communication, councils. I make a very simple spreadsheet, I put down who I'm dealing with, what date I first reached out, what I specifically asked, just a brief sentence, when I received a response, what that response was, who the response was from. Then if I did speak to someone, on the phone, I'll always ask for a name and if they don't provide one, that's concerning. I'll note down the name and also what time I made the call because then I have that extra level of detail so if you do have to take legal action and a year down the line they ask you who you spoke to and when, you might normally say you've no idea and won't be able to remember after that much time has passed, but if you have all that recorded, the information is there at your fingerprints. It is unfair that we might have to do this, we shouldn't have to do this, but the truth is that we do have to do this and by tracking it, it does mean that when it comes to potentially dealing with an advocacy situation, it's a lot smoother than it would have been otherwise.

I'm talking very specifically about Braille here and getting access to Braille is your right under several pieces of legislation, the Accessible Information Standard for the NHS, the Equality Act, slightly less for the new Public Sector Digital Accessibility Regulations. That really applies to online content and there's no real consensus on if that applies to thinks like providing a BRF. That's a very grey area that at the moment and we're still working out what that law means in practice and how we're going to deal with that and this is something that lots and lots of people in the advocacy space are doing lots of work on. Certainly the Accessible Information Standard and the Equality Act state that you have a right to Braille. It is your right to use those laws and to request it. Never feel guilty for wanting information. Information access is so important. Sometimes we're scared to speak up but my advice is to always start off by trying to be nice, try to build positive relationships and really take it as far as you think you have the energy for and if you can find a team, find that team.

I'm going to go now to see if anyone has questions.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We've had a couple of people join since we last went to questions. People can raise their hand for any questions and then I'll bring you in. We had a comment in the chat earlier from Matthew in relation to letters versus emails and he points out that you could send a letter in the post, maybe using something like Recorded Delivery, if email isn't an option.

I have a question but then we're going to come to Alan Dyte and then Tina has another comment.

You touched briefly on digital accessibility but as a high level overview, let's say that I've encountered a website that I think is inaccessible, what can I do to try and resolve that in an advocacy role and maybe in a legal context as well? Of course, we are talking about Braille here but we should remember that actually a website needs to work with a screen reader before we can read it on our Braille displays.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, and I think particularly for deaf-blind people, where they'll be accessing the computer. There are several things you can do. So, again, I would email the web developer and it really depends who it is. I've had success with very small websites. I'm a book blogger so I get sent books by publishers. I read them in advance of publication in exchange for writing reviews and one of the websites that I review on, you've got to rate the book out of five stars and I couldn't click on the stars because they were just pictures. I emailed the developer, it's a very small team and I explained that I'm a blind person using assistive technology and pointed out the bit that I couldn't use. If it's only a small part of the website, always tell them in what situation you can't do what and what happens. So I would say for example that my screen reader doesn't even read out that there are stars to click on, I know I need to give the rating and I can't submit the review without it. Within a week it was fixed. I had this really nice interaction with them and I think it builds a really positive relationship between me and them because I did then put on social media afterwards a good review and tagged them, that it was so good to see them prioritising accessibility and that they took my question really seriously.

I always suggest a more friendly and open approach to start with. I have slightly less patience when it's a big organisation and I have absolutely no patience when it's the public sector because they've known for two years that by September 2020, information had to be accessible. That comes under the Public Sector Digital Accessibility guidelines. Any public sector websites and apps should be accessible. They have to have an accessibility statement and it's really interesting if you read some of these. They'll claim disproportionate burden. Now, you still absolutely can challenge them on that because certain things are blatantly not a disproportionate burden. They're just lazy.

So, if it's public sector, again, I come back to the RNIB but I only come back to them very strongly in this one because they're doing a lot of work around this at the moment. That's a big area that they're working and I know that they would be very grateful to hear where it's failing, even if they can't take up your case individually, they need to know this.

It's also worth mentioning Web Accessibility guidelines. It's not your job necessarily to talk them through it and if you don't have a technical background, you're not going to know how but just pointing them in that direction and advising that they can consult with an accessibility professional and developers who have experience in access.

So, I would go through this email approach to start with. It can be difficult because email addresses aren't always easy to get hold of so sometimes you do have to go down the social media route and post something on their Facebook page or tag them on Twitter, purely because you can't actually chat with them otherwise.

If they ignore me, I will maybe message them again. It gets complicated because websites can be based in different countries and it can be difficult finding out who has responsibility for what but you can then take things down the legal route and reach out to a lawyer. I would reach out to a lawyer who has experience in disability rights because even now, there's still a lot of confusion around digital accessibility. When the DDA (Disability Discrimination Act 1995) came into force, people weren't online as much. Obviously when the Equality Act 2010 came into force, the prevalence of online communication had grown, but even in the last 11 years, so much has changed in how we do business and how we use websites, so it's worth having a lawyer who really has experience in this.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Great advice, thank you. So we're going to come to Alan Dyte first and then Tina.

Alan Dyte: Something happened today in Bristol which I found very odd. The local eye hospital sent out a survey to all blind people, telling them they were going to raise the appointments on a digital form so that people could deal with their appointments on the phone or something like that. They gave us lots of information about how we could do it but the word Braille was not in the letter at all. They never offered Braille. So, I got on to the person who sent out the letter and asked how they sent out this form because I find it difficult to write in it. They said the form was sent out as a pdf file and so you won't be able to write in it. It's being checked on now but I find it odd today that something like a big hospital in Bristol are sending out forms specifically to blind people and are not even thinking Braille, let alone offering it.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I don't actually find this odd at all, unfortunately. This is clearly a massive issue because, again, it's NHS so it would come under the Accessibility Information Standard, also possibly the Equality Act. If it's a pdf and it's just been sent out, if it's on the web, it could even come under public sector regulations. If they resolve it with you based on your contact, that's fine but if they don't, I would refer this on to the RNIB and look at the RNIB tool kit for the Accessible Information Standard because you can scare them with that as well.

You should go down that route because whilst there are ways of challenging the public sector Digital Accessibility Regulations, it ends up as going to Equality and Human Rights and their website doesn't actually comply with it. So, they're the enforcement body and they don't comply with the legislation they're supposed to enforce. Now, I did hear something about the GDS who are pretty good and it's worth reaching out to them but, again, if they can't resolve it, they will send it to the Equality Advisory Support Service who don't comply. It really begs the question how is this going to be enforced when the enforcement body doesn't comply but that's a whole other concern.

Ben Mustill-Rose: The wonderful world of blindness and advocacy.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Oh, yes.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to come to Tina, no other hands after Tina. It's also worth pointing out that we're happy to take questions but also what are your advocacy wins? What have you done that has worked out well for you? I'm sure there are plenty of others who have experience in this. We all kind of have to be advocates to a certain extent out of necessity.

Tina: It's actually my husband.

Ian: We had some correspondence with the tax office and it said if you wanted this in Braille, please request it. I contacted the tax office and asked for the correspondence in Braille. They said, "What is Braille?" Then they said, "We can't do it in Braille." So I advised them that their leaflet says I can request it. They said, "You can request it but what is Braille?"

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I've come across this where people don't even know what Braille is and it's very frustrating. I have a certain level of patience in some situations but obviously no patience when it comes to HMRC.

Ian: With the hospital, Tina's eye clinic is the only one who doesn't write in Braille or contact her by phone, they always do it by print, every time. We got onto the Healthwatch people and I believe now they are going to do it in Braille.

Tina: And I suggest to Alan who's just been asking a question about this thing with Bristol, find out who his local Healthwatch people are because they might be able to help.

Ian: The reason behind is we've been told that they're not very big but they've got teeth and they do get things done.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, great tips. Fola has put something in the chat around Big Hack which is a project that Scope have been working on. Big Hack have been collaborating with GDS to provide a FAQ, Frequently Asked Questions, sheet around how to challenge website accessibility. We'll put that in the handout as well.

We do have another hand, we have Dave Williams, Braillists Foundation chair.

Dave Williams: I just want to reassure Ian that HMRC do indeed send information out in Braille and it's unfortunate that obviously the person you spoke with was unaware of that. Today I received my tax code for the coming tax year. I get all the exciting letters. It was in Braille and I have also received other letters from HMRC in Braille and they have an Accessible Media Unit which I believe is in Scotland who produce their Braille for them. So, if the person that you've got on the end of the phone is unaware, that might be more a training issue or an internal communication issue rather than the fact that they don't do it because they certainly do. So, do persist and try to get your enquiry escalated to somebody more senior within the organisation.

Holly Scott-Gardner: That's definitely good to know. I think your point about asking sometimes to escalate it to someone a bit higher up, that can often help and you do have the right to that. I think sometimes we can feel a bit uncomfortable asking for someone's superior but this is your right to access to information.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We've probably got time for maybe one more comment or question. While we wait, it's probably worth also pointing out, you might wonder why you would want these letters in Braille when you can just use your Seeing AI or OpenBook or OmniPage to scan stuff in, but actually for stuff that has important numbers on them, like IDs where you've got a mixture of letters and numbers, all it takes is for the scanning solution that you're using to get one of those characters wrong and then the whole thing is useless. I had this when I first moved into my flat on my own and I decided to try to go completely paperless. That didn't work so I said send me paper if you have to. I got stuff on paper and tried scanning it. I had loads of problems with numbers, the scanning wasn't working at all and I found that even though my Braille reading isn't that good, it's good enough, I can't read quickly, but even for me it was still a lot easier to get the stuff in Braille than it was to get it in print and then scan it in. So that's something worth thinking about.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, and I think it's worth mentioning that although OCR (optical character recognition) apps are getting much better, particularly if you're trying to handle a table or something, that can often get really pulled out of order. Unless I really know the quality of the software, I wouldn't rely on an OCR app to read a table of information which could potentially be very important.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Yes. exactly. Even things like postcodes, one misplaced character, such as zero versus the letter O, type of thing.

We're going to squeeze in Alan Thorpe.

Alan Thorpe: It's more a comment about having signs and things produced for toilets and hotel rooms and so on. Where do we put those signs? I produce tactile maps and talk to companies all the time, but where do we put them? I'm 6'4" but to put my hand on a door, the Braille needs to be at a height to suit me. Do we put it in the centre of the door? Do we put it by the door handle? It's a bit of a minefield but we should be asking for this.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, it's a really complicated issue because there isn't a good answer. My answer is that actually there needs to be a consensus. I don't know if this is something where there is actually consensus but nobody's following the guidelines or actually those guidelines don't exist, in which case I would suggest we do have a Braille authority. This is something that should be worked on because it's relevant very much to Braille users and whilst it isn't actually about the code in terms of how Braille is written, it is massively relevant to how the community accesses Braille. So, some kind of best practice needs to be created. We have this with tactile paving. There is best practice around where to place tactile paving, for example, and that exists for a reason. Yes, you can't force people to follow that and lots of people will mess it up, but actually I do think some solid guidelines need to be made and this is something I've been going on about for ages and it's something I feel very, very strongly about.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, Alan. I think that's all we've got time for now so over to Holly and Dave.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I'll just wrap up quickly. It's been great talking through these strategies. I really hope it helps some of you and I will be producing a handout for this session. Some of you might have noticed that we're still missing a couple of sessions on the website. There are still some notes to be put together. Keep checking out the media page, braillists.org/media and everything will go up, recordings, handouts and transcripts. On Thursday we have our book club. On Friday we have the event about the census. Then next Tuesday we have just a chat about the Braille library. There are still lots of things happening even though this current serious of Master Classes has now finished, so it isn't an end to Braillists sessions.

Dave Williams: We will let you know through the newsletter when that extra material is uploaded to the website and also if you have suggestions of Master Classes that you'd like us to run in the future, please write to help@braillists.org.

I just wanted to pick up very quickly on Alan's question about where do you put the Braille sign and there isn't an official building regulation or guidance on this, but to me the logical place where you would put Braille signage is a place where you would discover it naturally with your hands, so near the door handle would be my preference and I know some companies already do that.

Thank you, Holly, for these Master Class sessions, excellent job tonight and throughout the series. We have really appreciated having you and I hope you're not going to disappear and you'll still be around the Braillists long into the future.

Thank you, everybody, for your attendance and feedback and participation and great questions. There would be no point, of course, were it not for all of you, so thank you very much. Do share the resources that we make available through the Braillists website and stay tuned to the newsletter for future events and stay in touch.

From all of us on the team, thank you very much to Ben who I think has pretty much moderated all of these sessions and also thank you to Matthew who's often been there in the background with his expertise as well.

Thanks, everybody, take care and stay tuned. Keep advocating for Braille. Bye for now.