



In focus

Large-print books are often shunted into a dusty corner of bookshops, if stocked at all. Yet a new campaign is hoping to change the attitude of the public and retailers. **Anna-Marie Julian** reports

You may have spotted one of the 12,000 Focus posters across the UK over recent weeks, as part of the Royal National Institute of Blind People's (RNIB) campaign to promote large-print titles and give them a higher profile on the high street.

Walk into your average bookshop at the moment and you will be hard-pressed to find a large-print range on the shelves, but the RNIB is hoping to change that by convincing booksellers and publishers there is a viable market for large-print books. According to the charity, around two million people in the UK have significant sight problems, so where do people go to source large-print books, and is the Focus campaign likely to be successful?

John Godber, head of products and publications at the RNIB, says: "We believe there is an economically sustainable market out there, but we have got into a bit of a rut where large print is associated only with old people and romances in the library.

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Nick Forster, sales controller of BBC Audiobooks

Actually people of whatever age and level of sight want to read a wide range of large-print books."

The RNIB has spent a total of £800,000 on the campaign, including £150,000 on advertising with high street posters and national press. The Focus campaign has 53 titles by bestselling authors in large print, to be available in bookshops across the UK on a print-on-demand basis, while seven new and recently published titles are instore. HarperCollins, Penguin and Random House published the seven lead titles, and the campaign has had varied levels of support from booksellers. Borders has displays in each of its stores; Waterstone's put the books into a selection of its largest stores, highlighted with point-of-sale

material and a page on its website; while Foyles promoted the books in its main Charing Cross Road branch.

Shrinking sales

Robert Thirlby, group chief executive of large-print publisher Ulverscroft, says that large-print books are already widely available to order from bookshops—it is just probably not well known by readers. Yet both Thirlby and Nick Forster, sales controller of BBC Audiobooks, which was one of the Focus publishers under its Chivers imprint, point out that the lion's share of large-print books is sold to libraries.

Thirlby says "99.9%" of their stock goes into libraries, but actually very little of what is published gets onto the shelves, and the market is getting tougher. He says: "It's no secret, all the large-print publishers will say so if they're honest, libraries are buying less and less large print. Libraries rely on their money from government and local governments

and none of this money that's made available is ring-fenced for large print. You could say the government makes inadequate provision for partially-sighted people."

Forster, however, says that sales to libraries have "been pretty stable", but where both Forster and Thirlby agree is that the Focus campaign will bring much-needed publicity to large-print books. "I think it will have a positive impact on booksellers' and the general public's awareness of large print," says Forster. "I hope it will tell us a lot about how big the market for large print really is. The RNIB has spent an unprecedented amount on marketing."

Pricing is key

One of Focus' aims is to encourage publishers to simultaneously create large and standard print editions, as publishers sell off large-print rights to publishers such as Ulverscroft and Chivers. The result is that, much like the audiobooks market, large-print titles' releases appear much later. In a discount-driven market, price, too, is an issue for booksellers—you simply cannot have a mass market edition of a large-print book.

Focus has priced the books at £16.99 in hardback and £12.99 in paperback. "Publishers have to be able to do this profitably, so we priced the books so that it's possible to make a modest margin," explains Godber. Yet he stresses that the UK has an ageing population and, as the majority of people with sight loss are over the age of 60, publishers are missing out on a growing market.

Price, though, is one reason Thirlby still believes libraries are the best distributors of large-print books—despite budget cuts. "The best way I think is still through public libraries. Large-print readers generally make up a sector of the community that suffer economic hardship and obviously can't afford to buy a lot of hard-print books," he says.

So far, Focus' marketing consultant Nicky Grimble reports that feedback has been positive and successful enough such that the RNIB is planning a second campaign with a new list of titles this autumn.

According to Kate Gunning, head of buying at Foyles, large-print books have not been commercially viable in the past and have been "a little bit risky" for booksellers to stock. But she adds that the Focus campaign has provided a boost. "So far the books have been moderately successful, some titles selling better than others, obviously. If the market is there then we want to supply that demand and awareness is a big part of this campaign."