



The newspapers that talk...

By Rachel Sloane

When most of us complain about having an overload of news - and that most of it is rather depressing - there is one organisation that aims to bring local positive stories to a section of the community who might not easily access it: those who cannot read local newspapers because they are blind or visually impaired.

That is when Talking Newspapers come to the rescue. It is estimated by the Talking News Federation that across the country there are 25,000 listeners accessing over 1,000 newspapers, because of the teams of volunteers who record an hour of local news each week, and send it to listeners' homes by post.

There are talking newspapers covering the whole of Suffolk and Norfolk. Waveney Words, Sound East covers the Lowestoft and Waveney area, and Three Rivers Talking Newspaper covers the South Norfolk area. The Mardler is for North Norfolk, Chatterbox is in Norwich, Wymondham and Attleborough Talking Newspaper and Vison Link is for Kings Lynn. Three Rivers is for the Halesworth and Bungay area, and Sudbury and Ipswich also have a service. Some are weekly and others fortnightly, but all offer a similar service.

Many have been going for years and although the technology has changed, for example the recorded news is delivered as an MP3 file, on a digital memory stick now (replacing the previous cassette tapes), the basic idea is the same. Stories from local newspapers are read and recorded so that they can be listened to in the home of the listener.

St Edmundsbury Newstalk has been in operation for 45 years and runs with a



friendly and committed team of volunteer readers, editors, producers and processors who provide this free service for people across West Suffolk.

"We have about 80 listeners that we send recordings to

and they are mainly in Bury St Edmunds, Haverhill, Newmarket and Stowmarket but we have one in Ipswich and we even send one to someone in Devon, as they moved there but still like to hear what is happening in Suffolk!" explained Gill Gane, the Chairperson and a reader at St Edmundsbury Newstalk.

The weekly sixty-minute recording is also available as a podcast on Google, Apple Spotify etc, or can be listened to



MAIN: Producer, Ruth Hill

CIRCLE: Readers Sue Cunningham-Snell and Graham Parley

via an Alexa smart speaker, so is available for anyone to hear, with many international listeners.

“The majority of our local listeners are aged over 80 and when I ring to set them up, they often have no idea what a digital stick is as they have never owned a computer,” explained Sue Cunningham-Snell, Membership Secretary and reader. “We provide them with a free player which I advise them to charge for 5 or 6 hours so then they can listen to the recording without the player plugged in. We provide instructions and they are very easy to use. I tell them that, once charged, they can even listen in the garden! We just ask that the player be returned to us if no longer needed, so that someone else can have it.”

The recordings are done at the Newstalk studio in Bury St Edmunds, on a Thursday evening, with a male and a female reader, and that morning two volunteer processors will have been in with a large sack of the plastic postal pouches containing the returned memory sticks from the previous week, to sort ready for the new recording.

On Friday morning another two volunteers arrive, and their job is to copy the recording onto the 80-odd sticks, 24



Thank you letters



Producer Ruth Hill



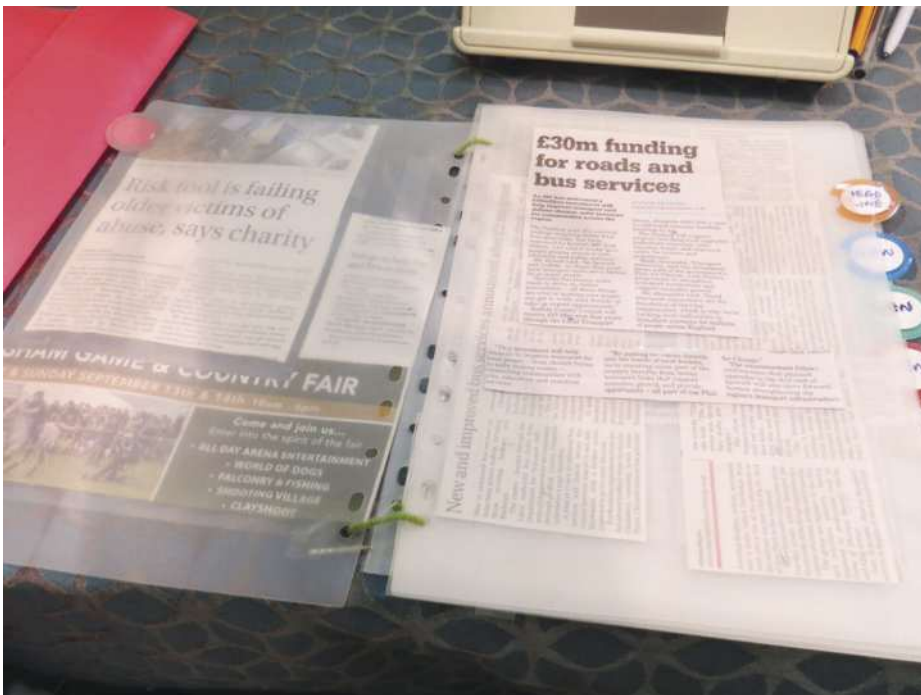
Memory sticks and player

at a time, before placing them in the labelled provided pouches, before posting them all out.

“We have a tick list for who has returned their wallet and if we haven't heard from them in about four weeks, I ring them to see if they have been on holiday or are in hospital or something,” Sue said.

There is no postage to pay under the Royal Mail 'Articles for the Blind' postal agreement, and the charity relies upon donations and grants to cover their running costs.

The roles of the volunteers are clear... the Newstalk editors buy the local papers (for St Edmundsbury Newstalk it is the East Anglian Daily Times, the Bury



Script at the ready

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than ten minutes to look through what we are going to be reading aloud for the next hour. Usually, you are scanning your next bit while your partner is reading theirs, all without focussing on what they are saying!” said Sue.

The producer is responsible for the technical side of the recording.

“We take a break every ten minutes or so and I hold up a card that warns the readers so they can pause for a break. Luckily there is usually little editing to do apart from removing the occasional coughing fit!” explained Ruth Hill, one of the producers. “After the

recording is complete, I also upload it as a podcast, and we have listeners all over the world who like to tune in to find out about what is happening in their home town.”

Gill and the others involved really appreciate the many messages they receive from the listeners to St Edmundsbury Newstalk.

“We get so many letters of thanks and there’s one lady who writes every week and says ‘what would she do without us?’ During Covid, when we couldn’t meet to record, each volunteer had a few listeners they would ring each week for a chat and, as soon as we could, we started recording again, by using husbands and wives or family members who were allowed to sit together in the studio!”

Doing such valuable volunteering brings its own rewards, with the friendly team joking together until the red studio light goes on... then the real work begins. The whole team knows how much their words are appreciated by those who watch out for that special weekly bit of post coming through the letter box, keeping the blind and visually impaired up to date with what is happening in their town or village.

■ **The Talking News Federation:**
www.tnf.org.uk
www.stedmundsburynewstalk.org.uk



TOP: Producer Ruth Hill with Gill Gane, Chairperson

ABOVE: Readers Sue Cunningham-Snell and Graham Parley

Free Press, Newmarket Journal, and Haverhill Echo) and choose and edit the stories that they think the listeners will enjoy.

“It probably takes me about ten hours, reading 5 or 6 papers, and I try to find the positive stories. I don’t put in stories like muggings or anything that might frighten the main age group that listen,” said Graham Parley, editor and reader. “The longer reports we edit before we record so that our listeners don’t switch off if they get bored!”

“We try not to do too much doom and gloom as they get enough of that on the television!” laughed Gill. “Our USP is to be very local, so a footpath in Newmarket, a broken doctor’s window, alongside other important local items.”

The volunteer readers often come from a background of belonging to drama groups or performing, and there is usually a waiting list to join the rota of seven men and women.

“Readers are probably fairly self-confident people, as we don’t have more

