

ANNUAL REVIEW 2025 - 2026

SINCE 1959
LISTENING BOOKS

An audiobook lending charity for those who find their illness, mental health, physical or learning disability affects their ability to read the printed word or hold a book.

Registered charity no. 264221

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SINCE 1959
LISTENING BOOKS

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Julia Eccleshare
Nick Forster
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Helen Grant

Chair
Gillian M. Howarth

Treasurer
Charlotte Bainbridge

Patron
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Auditors
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5 Robin Hood Lane
Sutton
Surrey
SM1 2SW



All non-staff and patron photos posed by models

A Word from Gillian Howarth, Chair



In this National Year of Reading, it is a particular pleasure to record our highest yet number of individual members, both direct and via schools, reaching 12,694 at the last count, not forgetting the thousands more we are reaching through hospitals and hospices. Reading is an inspiration in so many ways - connecting us in our inevitably limited single worlds to the lives of others - in the past and future as well as the present. Through these stories of others, their tribulations and their courage, whether real or fictional, we discover their sources of strength. With them, we can laugh and cry, feel awe and joy and certainly feel less alone. Anyone with a learning difficulty or disability is likely to experience at times some sense of isolation but that is just what reading directly addresses. Hence, the special importance that books should be accessible to us all, and fortunately listening can be so much more vivid an experience than merely following words on a page!

The widespread success of audio books over the past decade has been a real blessing for Listening Books members, they now enjoy so much more choice and ever-improving quality in the recordings. We love to have requests and recommendations, our Members' Forum is a valuable resource guiding our selections of titles. This year we added 1349 new titles to our existing catalogue, we are forever grateful to publishers who give us generous terms to meet all our members' needs.

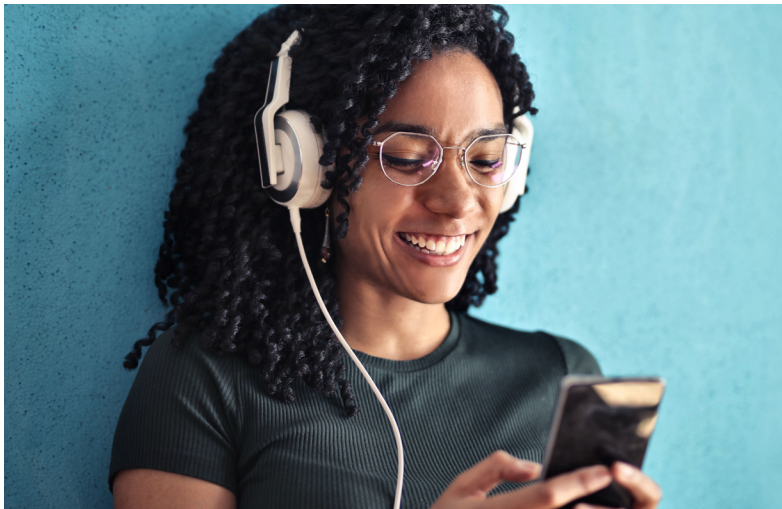
It is also heartening to have ended the year with a small financial surplus. In such a challenging economic environment, it feels like an endorsement from many loyal trusts and foundations. We pride ourselves on running a tight ship, strenuously avoiding waste, always looking for opportunities to work better and leaner. But that creates pressure on staff, we are very conscious of the debt we owe them for the quality of the service we provide.

The many messages of appreciation they get from members does much, I know, to sustain them but their experience and compassion deserve the widest recognition.

Along with fundraising, there is always housekeeping to be done and this year we have completed enhancing our software system, protecting key data, improving our capacity to monitor progress on many fronts. We have also moved from Remote Desktop to SharePoint, enabling staff working from home to connect with each other more effectively - which has, in turn, led to our decision to run the charity next year without an office - an economy which I hope is positive also for staff - saving time and travel costs.

Technology, as stated, is giving us exciting opportunities for enhancing our service but we know it can often be problematic for members living on their own, so the understanding and competence of our staff is vital.

Looking ahead, in a world with so much uncertainty, I nonetheless feel confident that Listening Books will continue to make a difference to the quality of our members' lives. Their testimony gives us heart and, as last year, I will end with just one tribute we received: "Listening Books has been life-changing for my daughter, Maria. She is non-verbal and absolutely loves books. Before discovering Listening Books, she was constantly asking someone to come and read to her because she couldn't access the stories independently. As a family caring for a child with complex needs, it wasn't always possible to stop everything and read whenever she wanted. Now, with the Listening Books app, Maria can choose the books she wants and listen to them by herself. It has given her a sense of independence and allows her to enjoy one of her greatest passions whenever she likes." As shared by a parent of a 14-year-old member.



Our Service

Listening Books' History

Listening Books was founded by Norma Skemp in 1959. When Norma lost most of her vision after an accident, she applied to a charity for help. They said they weren't able to assist her because she had retained some of her eyesight. Norma immediately recognised a gap in provision for people with disabilities and set up Listening Books, with the goal to provide audiobooks to anyone who finds their reading ability is affected by a print impairment.

The way we deliver our service has changed a lot over the last 65 years, from 8-track tapes to cassettes, to CDs and digital downloads. But our aim has always remained the same, to provide essential access to the world of literature through our wide-ranging selection of high-quality audiobooks.

Through both individual memberships and those who have joined via an organisation, we now reach thousands of people with an illness, disability, specific learning difficulty or mental health condition that impacts on their ability to read or hold a book.

Membership and Service Options

Our membership fees start at just £25 a year, providing access to our catalogue of more than 11,000 audiobooks. This is a heavily subsidised fee, and we receive funding to provide free memberships to those who would find the fee a barrier to joining the service. We are delighted to report that between March 2025 and March 2026, our individual membership grew by 13%.

At no additional cost, membership also includes access to PressReader, which offers thousands of narrated newspapers and magazines such as BBC Good Food, Empire, The Economist and many more - along with the addition of daily puzzles. Between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026, the number of unique PressReader users increased by 13% compared with the same period in the previous year.

Schools that sign up for an organisational membership benefit from a dedicated dashboard where they can add or update student accounts, monitor usage and download helpful resources.

Our Audiobook Catalogue

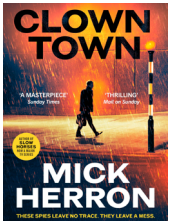
Our extensive catalogue features a mix of long-term member-favourite authors, including Jacqueline Wilson, Stephen King, M.C. Beaton, Ben Aaronovitch and Julia Quinn, alongside newer bestsellers and award-winning authors such as Virginia Evans, Sarah J. Maas, Rachel Reid, Callie Hart and Fredrik Backman.

Our collection features a mix of more than 300 audiobook titles that we've recorded in-house, along with a selection purchased from publishers with whom we've established strong relationships. Thanks to a combination of generous funders and supportive publishers, we're able to offer our members a diverse range of titles. Between April 2025 and March 2026, we added **almost 2,000 new audiobooks** to our catalogue!

We're proud that our collection continues to be member-led, supporting a diverse array of genres, interests and age ranges. We actively encourage members to send us their audiobook requests, whether that's for specific authors or award-winning titles.

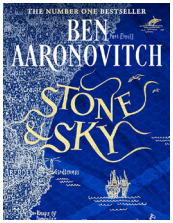
A selection of titles added over the last year:



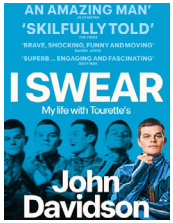








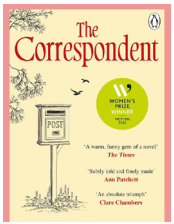


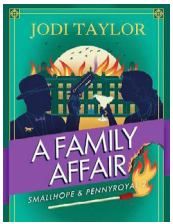


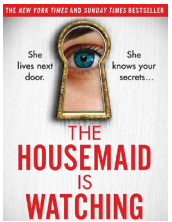


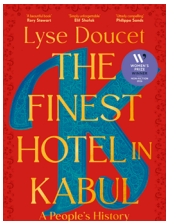




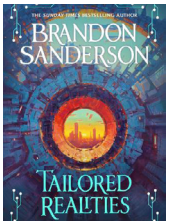












Hospital and Hospice Projects

Listening Books have been regularly supplying audiobooks to hospices across the UK since 2010. Since 2017, we have been providing tablets so that hospices can access the thousands of titles in our online catalogue.

We're currently serving 54 adults' hospices and 33 children's hospices. We're also currently providing our service to 106 children's wards or hospitals. We are delighted to have been able to provide Listening Books to hospices and hospitals free of charge, through the generous donations of our funders.



The Impact of Audio

It's brilliant to see that audiobooks are set to be this decade's fastest-growing digital medium, with a well-documented positive impact on listeners' wellbeing and comprehension, whatever their age.

They're also helping children and young people engage with reading. A 2026 study by the National Literacy Trust found that **50.3%** said listening feels like reading, **36.6%** said listening had sparked their interest in reading, and **30.1%** said they sometimes read along while listening.

Families are benefiting too. Nearly half (**49.7%**) listened to audiobooks to relax, while **40.8%** listened for entertainment. Many also said audiobooks strengthened family bonds (**63.2%**) and helped them feel more involved in their child's interests (**47%**).

These findings highlight the importance of ensuring everyone can experience the joy of stories, regardless of any barriers they may face with traditional print.

Member Testimonies

We love receiving feedback and hearing how our service has helped members through difficult times, with their studies, or to reconnect with literature. Here are some of their stories:

“Listening Books has been an absolute lifeline for me over the last year, particularly as I underwent a series of surgeries and a longer-than-expected recovery. During that time, it provided companionship, entertainment and much-needed distraction.

As my health issues continued, my eyesight deteriorated to the point where reading became extremely difficult. Listening Books then became an invaluable treasure. At a time when feelings of loneliness, isolation and fear were hard to manage, audiobooks reminded me of a world beyond my bedroom and helped me feel less alone.

I hope this shows just how vital Listening Books is and highlights the importance of the service it provides.”

Joyoti - Listening Books member

“Can I just let you know how amazing we have found Listening Books for our son, Mo. Thanks to Percy Jackson being in the library, he has become hooked on the series! I even bought the physical books to read along with, which he did, intermittently. Then the final book wasn’t in the catalogue yet, so we bought that and he read it by himself.

This is a dyslexic child, who was so not interested in reading but loves books. Since then, he’s devoured his way through sooooo many books! It gave him the springboard to independence in reading and boosted his confidence. He still struggles, but the progress is beyond belief, really.”

Parent of a Listening Books member



“Being able to access audiobooks through Listening Books has been a lifesaver for me and my 11-year-old son, as we are both dyslexic and have ADHD traits. I enjoy reading, but I read slowly, and Listening Books has helped me finish more books in the last year than I had managed in many years before.

My son has strong comprehension skills but finds reading fluently a challenge, which has made him reluctant to try longer books. Having access to audiobooks has enabled us to enjoy stories together on long journeys and at bedtime, sparking his interest in longer books and helping him discover series such as Alex Rider. My daughter has also been able to enjoy audiobooks, including Harry Potter, before being ready to tackle the novels independently.

Listening Books has opened up a world of stories for our whole family. For my son, I hope it will continue to build his confidence as he starts secondary school. I have already noticed improvements in his concentration, attention span and vocabulary, and we are so grateful for the service.”

Julie - Listening Books Member



Our Work With Authors

Here at Listening Books, we regularly interview authors and narrators, as we appreciate how much our members enjoy hearing from and engaging with their favourite writers. Each year, we spotlight four author interviews in Connect, our bi-annual audio newsletter for members, and this year we've spoken to Elise Kova, S.J. Bennett, Jodi Taylor and Jessica Fellowes. We also continued our partnership with the Royal Voluntary Service's Virtual Village Hall, with our monthly author Q&A sessions livestreamed across Facebook and YouTube. Over the past year, we've spoken to authors and narrators including Chloe Dalton, Julia Whelan, Tom Hindle and Bea Fitzgerald.

Miranda Hart was also the winner of our fifth annual Members' Choice Award, with members voting for their favourite audiobook from the year's most borrowed titles. Her acceptance video for winning the award for I Haven't Been Entirely Honest with You is both heartfelt and hilarious.

Our Podcast

2026 saw the return of our podcast for its seventh season, featuring new hosts, a brand-new bookish format, and a special celebrity guest (and also author) each month. Interviews have included comedians Adam Buxton and Taskmaster star Isy Suttie (pictured below), former politician and podcaster Ed Balls, broadcasters Kate Humble and Konnie Huq, and Eurovision winner Cheryl Baker.



Statement of Financial Activities for the Year Ended 31 March 2026

LISTENING BOOKS STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES (including Income and Expenditure Account)
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2026

	Notes	Unrestricted Funds General Fund	Intangible Designated Fund	Restricted Funds	2026 Total	Unrestricted Funds General Fund	Intangible Designated Fund	Restricted Funds	Restated 2025 Total
		£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Income from:									
Donations and legacies		**219,435**	**-**	**966,286**	**1,185,721**	226,373	226,373	803,786	1,030,159
Charitable activities		**93,503**	**-**	**-**	**93,503**	82,217	82,217	-	82,217
Investment income		**497**	**-**	**-**	**497**	680	680	-	680
Other trading activities		**850**	**-**	**-**	**850**	-	-	-	-
Total income	2	**314,285**	**-**	**966,286**	**1,280,571**	309,270	309,270	803,786	1,113,056
Expenditure on:									
Raising funds		**28,488**	**-**	**-**	**28,488**	32,431	**-**	**-**	32,431
Charitable activities		**179,486**	**367,990**	**406,940**	**954,416**	323,534	316,965	390,729	1,031,228
Total expenditure	3	**207,974**	**367,990**	**406,940**	**982,904**	355,965	316,965	390,729	1,063,659
Net (losses)/gains on investments	7	**(7,771)**	**-**	**-**	**(7,771)**	(1,874)	**-**	**-**	(1,874)
Net income/(expenditure)		**98,540**	**(367,990)**	**559,346**	**289,896**	(48,569)	(316,965)	413,057	47,523
Transfers between funds		**(733)**	**623,657**	**(622,924)**	**-**	8,287	477,995	(486,282)	**-**
Net movement in funds		**97,807**	**255,667**	**(63,578)**	**289,896**	(40,282)	161,030	(73,225)	47,523
Funds brought forward:									
As previously stated						304,962	-	213,829	518,791
Prior period adjustment	17					-	1,502,983	-	1,502,983
As restated		**264,680**	**1,664,013**	**140,604**	**2,069,297**	304,962	1,502,983	213,829	2,021,774
Funds carried forward		**362,487**	**1,919,680**	**77,026**	**2,359,193**	264,680	1,664,013	140,604	2,069,297

The independent auditor of Listening Books, Xeinadin Audit Limited, has issued an unqualified audit opinion on the full financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2026.

Balance Sheet 31 March 2026

	Notes		2026	Restated 2025
			£	£
FIXED ASSETS				
Tangible fixed assets	5		**4,919**	14,562
Intangible fixed assets	6		**1,919,680**	1,664,013
Investments	7		**118,326**	126,097
			2,042,925	1,804,672
CURRENT ASSETS				
Debtors	8	**171,492**		145,345
Cash at bank and in hand		**190,983**		154,063
		362,475		299,408
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	9	**46,207**		34,783
NET CURRENT ASSETS			**316,268**	264,625
NET ASSETS			**2,359,193**	2,069,297
FUNDS	11			
Unrestricted:	12			
General fund	12		**362,487**	264,680
Intangible (Titles) Designated Fund	12		**1,919,680**	1,664,013
Restricted	13		**77,026**	140,604
NET ASSETS			**2,359,193**	2,069,297

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the provisions applicable to entities subject to the small companies regime.

Approved by the Council of Management and signed on its behalf by:

G Howarth

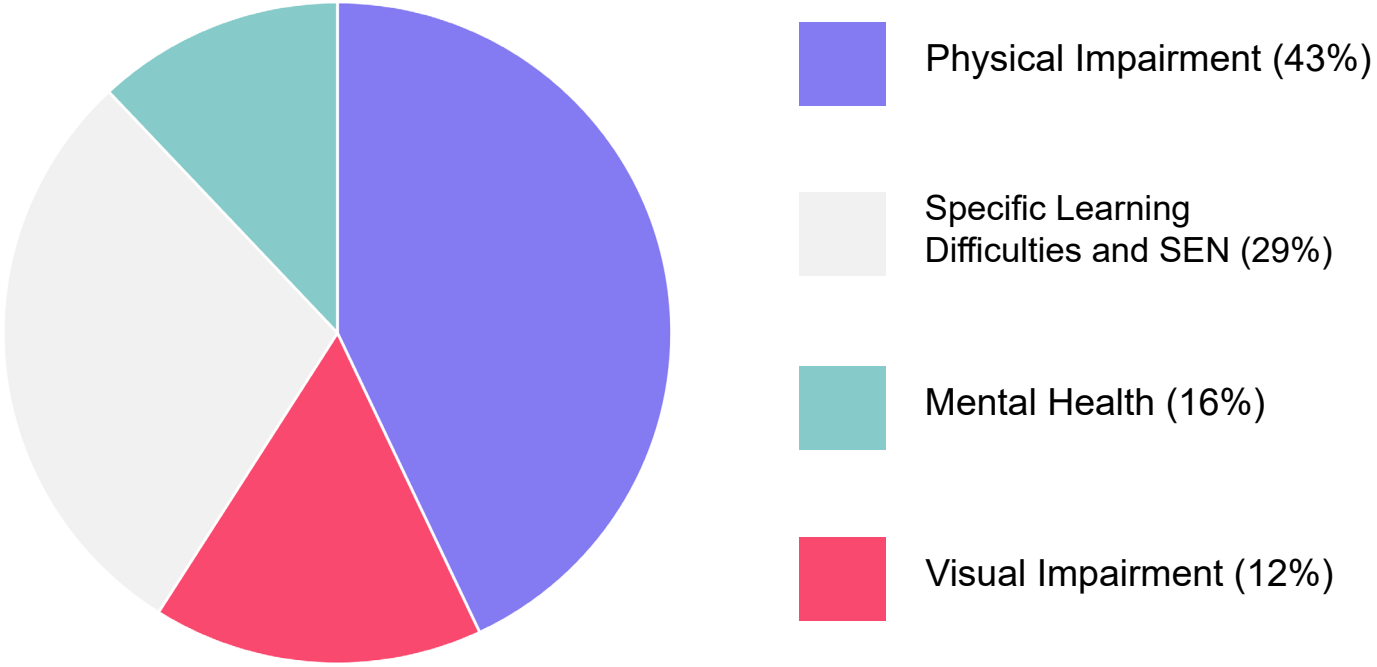
G Howarth
Chairman

Date: 21 October 2026

Company Registration No: 01056004

Our Reach

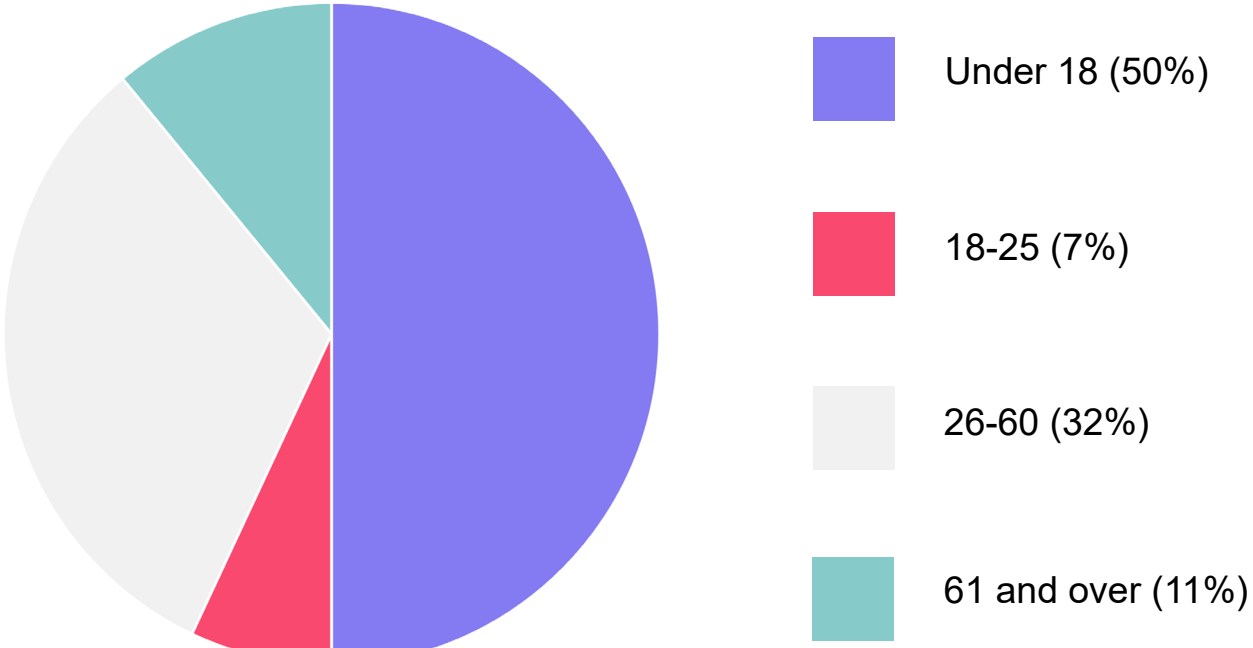
Impairment Groups (Sep 2026)



These figures provide an overview of our total membership. Many of our members have multiple impairments across the groups and the organisations we serve support a wide range of people.

Our Reach

Membership Ages (Sep 2026)



Contact Us

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Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR





“The companionship and delight of a voice telling stories is incomparable. Listening Books distributes pure, undiluted pleasure and friendship. Not many schemes can make such a claim.” - Sir Stephen Fry, patron

Stephen has been patron of Listening Books since 2005. As a creator and lover of literature, and reader of the bestselling ‘Harry Potter’ audiobook series, he understands the importance of promoting the spoken word for all.

SINCE 1959

LISTENING BOOKS