

Abstract graphic consisting of thick, overlapping lines in red and dark blue, forming a shape reminiscent of a stylized speech bubble or a path.

**MAKING A DIFFERENCE:
LIBRARIES, LOCKDOWN
AND LOOKING AHEAD**

HEADS OF SERVICE INTERVIEWS BACKGROUND REPORT

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with Dr Jenny Peachey**



CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

ABOUT THE CARNEGIE UK TRUST

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds by influencing and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work.

The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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Executive Summary

It will take some time to understand the full impact of Covid-19 on library services. However Heads of Service that were interviewed as part of this research were able to identify the following types of impacts of Covid-19 on library services at the time of interview (July and August 2020):

- immediate impacts and the implementation of lockdown in library services;
- impacts on capacity and library staff in lockdown;
- impacts on service delivery during lockdown and the initial phases of reopening;
- financial impact of Covid-19;
- future impact on library buildings; and
- knock on effect on the future library offer.

Heads of Service were able to identify a broad range of ways in which public library services supported community wellbeing during the Covid-19 lockdown. Positive impacts on community wellbeing were identified in relation to:

- **Delivering library services online:** all library services expanded their e-lending offer and most also created interactive digital offers for local people based on the kinds of activities that had been offered in library buildings. They saw large increases in take-up of these offers during lockdown.
- **Digital enablement:** 7 of the 23 library services included in these interviews continued to provide a home library service and 6 of the 23 library services had provided technology or access to the internet to people identified as vulnerable and/or digitally excluded.
- **Physical services:** most face-to-face services were targeted at specific vulnerable groups and many took place in the form of delivery services although library buildings were also repurposed.

- **Telephone support** (offered as part of the library service): most library services contacted their home library service users or other people who were identified as vulnerable by telephone during lockdown.
- **Partnership activities:** partnership activities enabled library services to reach more vulnerable groups with books and resources, including vulnerable families and children, and homeless people.
- **New services that were developed as part of the Covid-19 response:** some library services were responsible for designing and delivering helplines, shielding contact calls and food and medicine deliveries associated with these calls.

Two key sets of issues were identified by Heads of Service in relation to challenges in service delivery during Covid-19. The first set related to the delivery of digital and online services:

- Increases in e-membership and usage do not replace physical membership and usage.
- Digital activities are not the same as face-to-face activities.
- Digital services reach a limited demographic.
- Some library services have not been able to develop their own digital interactive offer.
- It is not clear what 'good' looks like in digital service delivery.

The second set of issues related to the absence of the physical library space and the negative impact this has had on service delivery and those people who cannot or will not engage with library services online:

- The loss of the library as a community hub.
- Lack of public PC access and assistance.
- Inability to deliver partnerships that are building-based.
- People with hidden vulnerabilities that may have 'slipped through the net' of universal and targeted services.

Heads of Service also identified both internal and external factors which contributed to or inhibited library services being able to support individual and community wellbeing during the crisis. Internal factors included:

- digital skills and access to technology;
- the ability of library staff to adapt to new roles and contexts;
- organisational culture;
- contingency planning; and
- effective communication with the public and building services that respond to need.

External factors included:

- financial support and investment;
- clarity about procedures and attitudes to risk;
- relationships with decision-makers; and
- strength of partnerships.

Heads of Service identify the following key areas where library services can make a contribution to communities in the wake of Covid-19:

- **Employment/economic development** – supporting jobseekers and people who are struggling financially.

- **Wellbeing and mental health** – responding to the psychological impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable people and supporting the community to recover from the experience.
- Some library services (particularly in Scotland) are also focused on supporting schools and caregivers to **'bridge the gap' for children and young people** who have missed out on learning in the previous 5 months.
- Working as "anchor institutions" to **rebuild high street economies** and providing a community space that offers a sense of normality.

The main themes identified in terms of what public library services need to enable them to support rebuilding efforts are:

- secure funding;
- advocacy and recognition;
- national support for e-book lending and infrastructure; and
- a continuing focus on service innovation.



Introduction

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The Carnegie UK Trust has long recognised the significant and enduring contribution public library services make to improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Given that the Covid-19 pandemic saw the vast majority of library buildings close their doors to the UK public during lockdown¹, we were keen to understand the impact this had on the library offer at this time. The rationale for the research was two-fold. First, whilst the building is a core part of the library service offer, it is not the whole of it. Second, lockdown appeared to trigger a growing need for the type of support that public library services and their staff can provide. To gather new data on these issues we conducted public polling of 2,196 UK adults, analysed 1,196 responses to a public library staff survey and carried out in-depth interviews with 22 Heads of Service.

This report summarises the findings from Heads of Service interviews. Separate research reports cover the findings from the [public polling and staff survey](#). [An overarching research and policy report](#), that synthesises learning from the three data sources and puts forward areas for action, is also available.

1 “Lockdown” is used to reflect the various levels of lockdown measures placed across the population in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales from the end of March 2020 to June/July 2020. This is the period in which individuals’ ability to leave their homes was restricted; cafes, restaurants and non-essential shops were closed; travel was banned; workers were placed on furlough or required to work from home; and people were instructed to socially distance themselves from those living outside their immediate household.

METHOD

We undertook 22 x 60 minute telephone or virtual interviews with Heads of Service from across the UK. One of these Heads of Service oversees two library services, meaning that 23 services are represented through the interviews. The sample of participants was constructed to:

- include all UK jurisdictions;
- include all of the nine Government Office Regions (within England);
- include a range of larger and smaller services;
- include services that deliver for a range of geographies (ie. Urban, semi-urban and rural services); and
- include a range of governance and delivery models.

A shortlist of potential participating services was drawn up and those on the shortlist were contacted by email with information about the study and an invitation to take part the research. In one instance a suitable interviewee was established from information given in the online staff survey that was administered between 19 June to 3 July 2020. In three instances where Heads of Service were unable to manage an interview, a member of the Senior Management team was interviewed in their stead. The interviews took place between 2nd July and 5th August 2020.

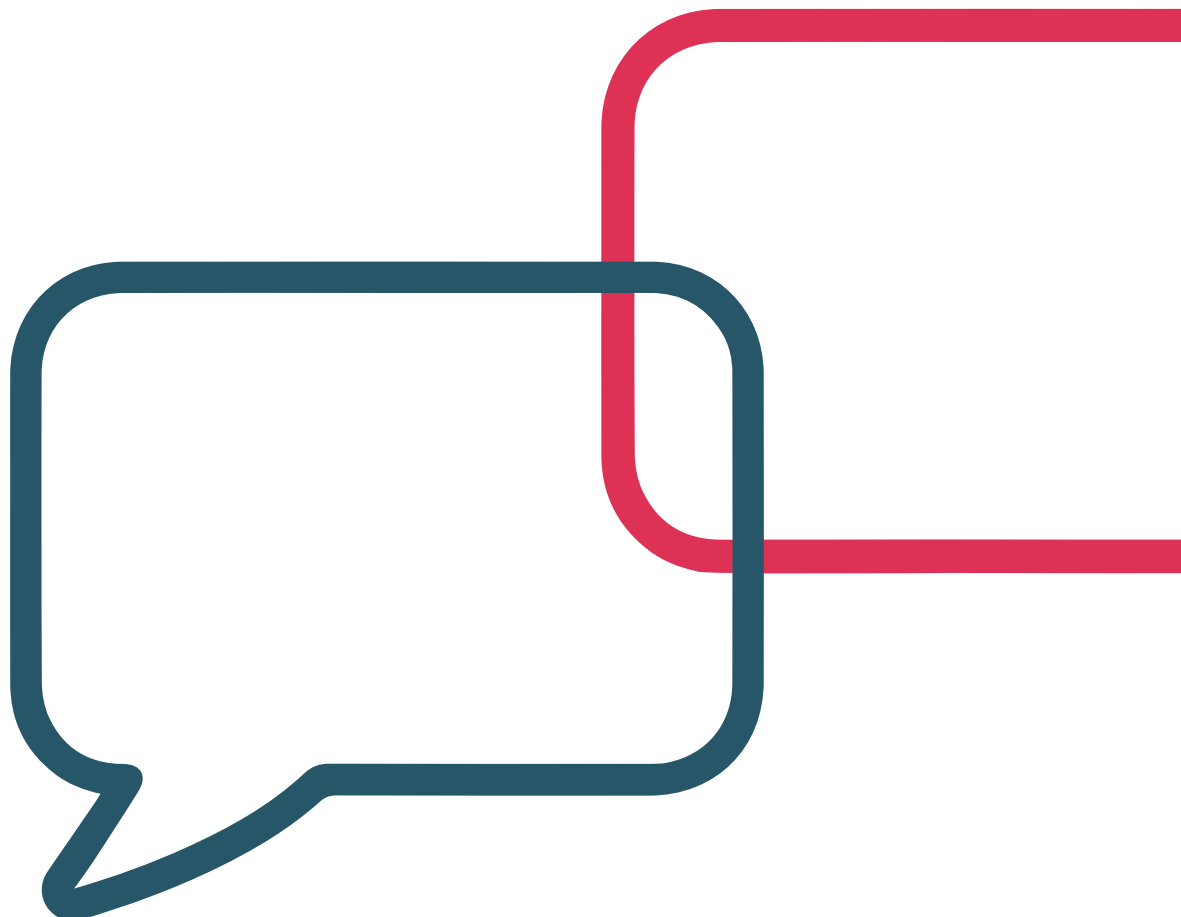
Interview questions covered the following topic areas:

- What are the current and anticipated impacts of Covid-19 on the library sector?
- How have public library services contributed to individual and community wellbeing during the crisis?
- What aspects of 'normal' library services have been impossible or challenging to translate successfully into the digital sphere in the current context?
- What were the success factors and inhibitors in continuing to contribute to individual/ community wellbeing during the crisis?
- What role could library services play in rebuild/ refresh efforts in communities?
- What would public library services need to enable them to do this?

Interview participants were also invited to share any available data about:

- Whether library membership went up during Covid-19 (including e-membership) and by how much.
- Whether usage of digital resources went up and by how much, including e-book loans, e-audio loans and usage of digital magazine and newspaper subscriptions as well as e-reference resources.
- How many book/resource packs were distributed to home library service users (if any).
- How many calls were made to vulnerable service users (if any).
- How many staff were redeployed (if applicable).
- How many staff were furloughed (if applicable).
- How many staff were unable to work for other reasons (if applicable).
- How many staff were working from home (if applicable).

Not all participants were able to submit comprehensive data against all of these questions and in many cases the data submitted was not comparable, so where it is included in the report it is intended for illustrative purposes only.



What are the Current and Anticipated Impacts of Covid-19 on the Library Sector?

It will take some time to understand the full impact of Covid-19 on public library services. However the participants in this research were able to identify the following key themes at the time of interview (July and August 2020):

- Immediate impacts related to the implementation of lockdown in library services.
- Impacts on capacity and library staff in lockdown.
- Impacts on service delivery during lockdown and the initial phases of reopening.
- Financial impact of Covid-19.
- Future impact on library buildings.
- Future library offer.

IMMEDIATE IMPACTS AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCKDOWN IN LIBRARY SERVICES

All of the Heads of Service who participated in this research reported closing all library buildings to the public, at least temporarily, as a response to the announcements by the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on the 18th March 2020. This was an abrupt change for most, although many services had been taking measures to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection in library services before that date.



“It was a big shock for everyone, the pace at which we went from wiping down keyboards to closing facilities and everyone going home.”

Most public library services that we spoke to closed their doors to the public at some point between 16-21 March 2020. In some services library staff continued to work in the building until 25th March 2020 to ensure that they were able to be safely shut up.



“It was awful, we cried a bit. I felt so sad because the physical space is so important to some people. The human element, our staff, even if someone is popping in for a chat, that can be the only person they see that day. It felt like a big deal.”

Although all library services had a business continuity plan to enable them to respond to unforeseen events, these plans were devised to respond to temporary or short-term crises, rather than the much longer shutdown that took place to respond to the pandemic. Lockdown was therefore generally felt to have been ‘unprecedented’ and ‘unfamiliar’, with decisions having to be taken with very little notice in the first instance. This meant that Heads of Service and library staff were often devising a new service and delivery mode ‘on the hop’, without the ability to engage in planning and infrastructure development that would usually accompany such significant changes both to the way the public engage with the service and the way that staff deliver it.

When library buildings closed, staff were generally ‘sent home’. At this point it became clear to those running the library service that there was a clear ‘digital divide’ between those staff who were confident and able to continue to working remotely from home and those who found this very difficult.

None of the library services we spoke to routinely provided frontline staff with personal computers that were able to access corporate network drives. Most management staff had some kind of remote working capability enabled, because they normally tended to work across a range of locations in the library service, but frontline staff often lacked the technology and/or the capabilities to work easily from home.

In some cases the library service was able to source IT equipment for staff using discretionary funds, capital

investment, endowments or via the local authority IT service. However, in the latter case they often faced long wait times because of the number of staff across the local authority who required this support. Where staff had their own IT equipment they may not have been permitted to access the library network server and it was not always easy to gain the permissions to provide them with access. Some library services attempted to resolve this issue by allowing staff to use the library building IT to access the network, however this was not always possible owing to buildings being closed. This meant that some staff had to work from their mobile phones, eg. to do training modules. In some of the services we spoke to, IT equipment was still being rolled out to staff, more than three months after remote working had begun.

The source of some of the challenges encountered in enabling library staff to work effectively from home was the position of the library service in the strict prioritisation adopted by local authorities and in some cases, operating trusts. None of the library services we spoke to were deemed 'essential' or 'critical' services.

The impact of this de-prioritisation of the delivery as 'non-essential' services, alongside the wholesale changes to working arrangements across all local authority services, was that library services often struggled to source adequate equipment to allow all of their staff to work successfully from home, to pass risk assessments to deliver specific services, or allow staff to access library buildings.

IMPACTS ON CAPACITY AND LIBRARY STAFF IN LOCKDOWN

Across the 22 interviews undertaken, which covered activities in 23 library services:

- Four services furloughed staff (generally a significant portion of staff, leaving just a 'skeleton' service).
- 11 services reported staff had been redeployed.
- Eight services neither redeployed nor furloughed staff.

Many library services were not eligible for furlough because they came under the definition of public sector workers. Some library services that operated as trusts or mutuals also deemed their staff ineligible for furlough because their roles were entirely supported

by public subsidy. However other services that were devolved from local authorities needed to furlough staff because the library function was financially subsidised by traded services in other parts of the organisation which were unable to generate income during lockdown.

Among those services who reported redeploying their staff, the proportion of staff redeployed varied considerably. In some cases redeployment required individual staff to sign up voluntarily for specific opportunities across a range of services, whereas in other cases the whole service effectively adapted its delivery to essential Covid-19 related functions (eg. telephone support lines). As a consequence of these different models, in some library services only a handful of staff were redeployed, whilst in other services the vast majority of library staff were redeployed.

Where library staff were involved in planning and organising Covid-19 response services they largely remained redeployed at the time of research (July/August 2020). In some cases this impacted on library services' ability to reopen fully and/or develop and deliver a full range of services in a timely fashion.

In many cases, redeployment had benefits for library staff, including:

- **Raising the profile of their skillset** and its relevance and importance to fulfilling local government functions, including 'softer' skills such as customer service and empathy, and 'harder' skills such as organising and managing information and setting up and implementing systems.
- **Building stronger relationships** with colleagues across other local government departments.
- Providing them with **opportunities to 'make a difference'** in the response to Covid-19 and raising awareness of the levels of need and deprivation in communities providing staff a renewed focus and sense of purpose in delivering library services once they reopen fully.



“We had really good feedback from the [members of the public] we contacted and when the Chief Executive of the Council was thanking key staff during the lockdown, the telephone teams were always mentioned which had a really positive impact on staff.”



“One of the greatest skills library staff have is to tease out what people need: do you want a book on vases because you want to paint them, make them or collect them?”

In some cases, experiences of redeployment were less successful. This was mainly where library staff were redeployed into frontline caring roles for vulnerable adults, where they did not have the appropriate skills or training. When library staff were deployed to support helplines, contact vulnerable and shielding members of the community and to deliver food and medicines, Heads of Service reported greater fit with existing skills and positive impact on communities.

In some cases, where staff were furloughed, they were encouraged to consider volunteering in their community. A number of staff subsequently did so, reporting positive benefits of the experience. In some cases so many staff were furloughed that this impacted the ability of the library service to devise an effective remote service.

For those staff who were not redeployed or furloughed, Heads of Service described a divide between those who had been more actively involved in the development and delivery of an active digital service and those who had been less so:

- In most cases a relatively limited team was needed to develop, publish and promote digital content or provide home delivery services.
- Other staff generally focussed on administrative support, training and development rather than direct service delivery.
- Where library services had undertaken out-bound calls to vulnerable library users this enabled frontline staff to use their customer service skills in a practical way and had been greatly appreciated by both staff and service users.

There were barriers to some staff engaging in any work during Covid-19, either due to shielding or caring responsibilities, in addition to the barriers to engaging in work due to lack of IT equipment and/or digital

skills to continue working from home. This means that while those engaged in designing and delivering new services to respond to Covid-19 may feel they have ‘worked harder than ever before’ other staff have struggled to fill their time with meaningful activity.

Some Heads of Service also mentioned specific measures put in place to support staff mental health during the lockdown. This included:

- Putting in place **guidance and support structures** for people finding it tough.
- Regular video chats and Whatsapp groups for employees to **informally support each other**.
- Putting together **training programmes** to support skills development.
- Being explicit that working hours were for also **learning** and not just creating public-facing content.
- **Trusting staff** to get on with the job from home rather than checking up all the time to ensure they were busy.



“Even though staff [were] isolated, it all just clicked...It’s made us work better as a team.”

Heads of Service also mentioned using staff bulletins to explain key decisions as they were being made (eg. furlough) and the reasoning behind these. Other services used staff surveys to gauge reactions to lockdown and how easy they were finding it to adapt to new ways of working.



“In the staff survey, it’s been interesting to see that rather than the normal curve in terms of attitude, there are instead two bumps: [one] at [the] positive and [one at the] negative end. For some it’s been a great opportunity to think differently, deliver services in very different way and to reflect more broadly on services to stop, start and continue. For others, it’s been a very unsettling time.”

KIRKLEES

Kirklees library service instituted one-to-one and informal check-in processes between managers and staff as well as collective staff engagement activities. Nevertheless, senior management recognised that whilst they had three check-ins a week, others may have been feeling more isolated and less connected with the library service and their peers as a whole. As such, they ran a whole staff online conference to share learning from implementing activities and work during lockdown, and to celebrate successes from across the service. They also organised a two-hour whole staff meeting for 100 staff, which included time for staff to share any particular stories from welfare calls or examples of impact.

IMPACTS ON SERVICE DELIVERY DURING LOCKDOWN AND THE INITIAL PHASES OF REOPENING



“When lockdown started, the physical service disappeared.”

Heads of Service reported that the vast majority of public library offers were delivered digitally during lockdown. All participants reported increasing their stock of e-books and removing barriers to e-membership as first steps to designing a library service for lockdown.

Almost all of the library services interviewed developed their own rhyme and story times for children. The few who did not felt that either they did not have the skills to do this in-house, or that the nationally available offer was so comprehensive that they wouldn't be able to add value to it. Some services also provided a range of other online services including author talks, cookery, gardening, coding and Lego clubs. One service delivered a literature festival online.

Several participants reported using the lockdown period as an opportunity to accelerate the development of digital services that they had not had time to develop before. This was often characterised as a move from a 'passive' digital service to an 'active' one, with facilitated activities and opportunities for interaction online and engagement with the public via social media. There was less emphasis placed on the library website as the primary channel for digital

DENBIGHSHIRE



“We were not doing something new, we were just doing more of what we were already doing.”

Denbighshire Library Service's Bookstart Team had an active YouTube channel which staff had used for some time to provide activities for pre-school children and to promote the use of the Welsh language. It was a core part of their pre-Covid-19 service as the library service serves a rural and sparsely populated area and also aimed to provide content for families to access from home to add value to library activity. During lockdown, Denbighshire Library Service increased the frequency of their rhyme times and songs on the YouTube channel and took advantage of the fact that one of their staff members lives on a farm to use key points in the rural calendar, such as lambing season, as hooks for their activities. They also began Facebook Live sessions the first week after library buildings closed, which gained wide interaction and engagement from the library service's Facebook followers.

The service had 30,000 Facebook interactions over the first four months of lockdown, in a library service area with a total population of 96,000 people. The YouTube videos had 6,000 views and there were over 22,000 Facebook engagements with those YouTube videos embedded in the Facebook page. This included both new content and the back catalogue of videos that they had recorded over the years.

service delivery and more emphasis placed on social media channels which had the ability to reach target communities. Those library services that had active social media presences before lockdown found it easier to expand their service during lockdown.

Those library services which developed new digital services found that their staff needed to use new skills and that these were often 'hidden' skills which had not been used before. Staff who performed music or poetry in their free time were often the new 'stars' of the service. Those who had expertise in filming high quality digital content were often given new roles to support others and develop capacity in the service.

HALTON



“It is important to uncover how to thrive as a dispersed organisation because you can’t spend 18 weeks being disrupted – you need to do things! And next time the transition has to be more seamless than this.”

Before lockdown, Halton was part way through a process called ‘unlocking the potential of the service’. The Head of Service used lockdown to accelerate this process. She created a short term delivery strategy and small agile teams including a mix of front line and development staff to test and learn across 10 different projects. These included projects on reopening, staff wellbeing, extending the home library service and ‘let’s engage’ – a social media project focused on how to teach/engage with the public via digital technology. This way of working challenged staff to think differently about how they work. At times this was difficult as it was a new way of working collaboratively in uniquely difficult circumstances. However, it played a critical role in creating a culture of delivery and accountability.

However, some library services struggled to gain control of their social media and websites to effectively deliver a service via these channels. Others found that staff were not able to easily adapt their face-to-face performance and facilitation skills to a digital format.

In practice, most library services adopted a ‘test and learn’ approach, with involvement from across the staff team, to developing and delivering new services during lockdown, rather than a top-down strategy for service delivery or engaging with service users prior to developing services to understand what services they would need and value.

In some cases this test and learn approach was more structured than others. Some library services reported service innovation being driven by individual members of staff seeing need in their own community and responding to it individually, while others were organised into teams that worked together on different themes and service areas. Some services took an approach that enabled content to be developed and delivered centrally and locally. Some services

also developed a social media programme/plan or had a menu/core offer for online services which was supplemented locally as needed. Library services used central resources and/or signposted to good quality content from national organisations and other library services.

In most of the interviews undertaken, home library services, mobile libraries, outreach services, and Prison and Schools services had to be suspended for all or most of the Covid-19 lockdown due to:

- **staffing issues**, especially where services were delivered by volunteers who were also in potentially vulnerable categories;
- **logistical difficulties** in staffing buildings safely; and
- the need to **quarantine** all reading materials for 72 hours after public contact.

As noted above, the complete suspension of nearly all physical services was also partly because library services were unlikely to be deemed ‘essential’ or ‘critical’ and therefore they were de-prioritised for risk assessment and mitigation. In other instances, the high proportion of staff furloughed or redeployed would have made it impossible for the library service to offer physical services, or even more comprehensive digital services.

The only non-digital services that were widely delivered during lockdown were:

- **Outreach phone calls** to home library service users and vulnerable service users who were known to the library service.
- **Book bags and resources** dropped off at food banks, community crisis support centres or refuges etc.

A handful of the library services included in these interviews continued to provide a home library service and a similar number had provided technology or access to the internet to people identified as vulnerable and/or digitally excluded. However, one service which had been about to roll out tablet lending had to suspend this offer due to social distancing concerns and partner capacity during lockdown.

There was also significant innovation in the delivery of physical library services as services moved out of lockdown and into the reopening phase. Most services

WESTMINSTER AND ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA

In Westminster the home library service (HLS) continued after a brief hiatus at the very beginning of lockdown. The HLS went on to expand its remit during lockdown, developing and delivering a collection for children that could be delivered to vulnerable families. The HLS was a crucial service for isolated people and the service received very positive feedback about keeping it going. They linked up with Shielding Hubs and actually increased their circulation via referrals from the hubs.

The library services offered PC access in a couple of closed buildings with strict health and safety measures in place. This was an emergency, basic offer for people with no internet access at home. Members of the public could use the PC for 45 minutes for a restricted range of services, including making contact with family and friends, banking etc. This offer started in Westminster, where retaining this provision was a corporate priority from the time libraries closed, and Kensington and Chelsea adopted this approach shortly after this. During lockdown, just under 400 access sessions per week were taken up across Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea.

have established some kind of order and collect system, where library staff provide a selection of titles to take away, based on information provided by library users about the books that they like to read. There are varying levels of personalisation available, and in some cases it is also possible to order specific titles for collection without paying reservation charges.

Library services have also had to re-organise their buildings to allow staff to operate safely within them and provide social distancing for customers as they reintroduce IT access and browsing.

HAMPSHIRE

In mid-June Hampshire Library Service launched their 'Ready Reads' book bag service. This service enabled people to request a bag of books either online or by phone to be picked up from a library building. Library staff were responsible for selecting the books for the bags. This has been hugely popular with 4000 subscribers in two weeks and 41,000 books distributed in this time.

The Ready Reads service was developed entirely in-house by staff using technology that was already available. Staff worked out how to create a Microsoft form for people to fill out online that linked to an email address at the relevant branch library. They also set up the call centre in such a way that requests filtered to the relevant branch library. The staff in the library used their professional skills to select books for people and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Staff felt empowered and professionally valued and the public provided positive feedback on the experience of receiving a surprise pack of books that was selected for them.

FINANCIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

Those library services that were devolved from local authority delivery as Trusts or mutuals which relied on substantial earned income or were subsidised by other activities felt the financial impact of Covid-19 first. The need to furlough staff and reduce the library team to a skeleton team has been motivated by cash-flow crises in umbrella organisations. As one Head of Service put it, "financially, the charity 'fell off a cliff'".

Both trusts/mutuals and local authority delivered library services experienced a significant drop in earned income during lockdown. For example, one local authority controlled service has a £0.3 million shortfall this year due to not being able to hire spaces and having to refund rent to partners when buildings were not open or accessible.

One library service that operates as a Trust reported being able to access Third-Sector resilience funding and Tourism and Leisure grants. However this will not replace the amount of lost revenue from other activities.

Those library services still under local authority control were anticipating that local authorities will have to make significant budget cuts to address the costs of Covid-19 and that some of these cuts will fall on the library service. Prior to Covid-19 several services were already planning for significant reductions in operating budgets, and Heads of Service believed that the impact of Covid-19 will exacerbate this position.

One library service reported that the progress of a new library building development was now in question. The planned development was part of a city-centre regeneration project that is currently facing uncertainty. This is due to a major shopping centre chain going into administration. The Head of Service hoped that the development will still go ahead, but financially the situation is very unclear.

Finally, there are significant additional costs associated with reopening library buildings. These relate both to the costs of reopening a building that has been closed for a substantial period of time (eg. electrical checks and water checks) and the additional costs of reconfiguring the spaces and ensuring they are Covid-secure. Some local authority-run services reported that their local authority received some funding that they may be able to use to help with providing PPE and creating Covid-secure workplaces.

FUTURE IMPACT ON LIBRARY BUILDINGS

All of those interviewed feel that Covid-19 has highlighted the role of library buildings as integral to the delivery of a high quality library service which meets the needs of their communities. However, several of the participants in the research expressed doubt about whether all of the library buildings that closed as part of the Covid-19 lockdown will reopen again

Most library buildings at the time of interviewing were operating on reduced opening hours, if they were open at all. Heads of Service did not generally feel that it would be possible to return to pre-Covid opening hours while social distancing was in place because of the demands that places on staffing resource. Some mentioned that people may be reluctant to use public buildings following the strong public health messages they have received during lockdown and are concerned that if footfall decreases significantly it may not be economically viable to keep the library buildings open.

One library service interviewed had already heard that its opening hours will be cut by 20% in a decision taken by the local authority following lockdown.

In some cases library buildings remain closed even where the government has permitted reopening, due to the costs of reopening and the fact that certain spaces may be unsuitable for social distancing. However, some interviewees were concerned that decision-makers may take the opportunity to close library buildings and reduce operating costs. Others felt that this could be a positive development, allowing them to reduce the number of buildings which are unfit for purpose and focus on library service delivery in communities 'beyond buildings'.

Taking a different perspective, one participant mentioned the impact of Covid-19 in creating a trend towards 'hyperlocalism' and reluctance to travel to central locations. They believed that this will increase the importance of small local areas and that this could have implications in terms of willingness to shut small branch libraries. Others agreed that 'hyperlocalism' will be an important organising principle for post-Covid service design and delivery but felt that the service will need to move out of library buildings and into community spaces in order to deliver this.

FUTURE LIBRARY OFFER



"How do we deliver something in a different place that people say 'Yes, that's the library service.'?"



"[With lockdown easing] out of necessity we are hunkering down in buildings/ retreating into buildings – but there's a question about how do we support communities moving forward and how do we liberate the library service ... moving forward... and offer our communities something that is more than just safety and security – and offer something still creative, innovative and inspiring."


Most Heads of Service interviewed as part of this research felt that the post-Covid library offer would be significantly changed by the experience of delivering services during lockdown. This was influenced both by the rapid innovation they have had to embrace to continue to deliver services during lockdown and the

fact that some of the more vulnerable members of the community that library services serve may be reluctant to return to library buildings for the foreseeable future.

Some of the most common changes being considered were:


- Advertising, strengthening and developing the delivery offer to different parts of the community (eg. by potentially tying it in with domiciliary care).
- Continuing to deliver 'active' facilitated digital services and even a hybrid digital/physical model. (However, this may need to be more centralised and streamlined in future eg. one service-wide online rhyme time rather than separate sessions for each branch library.)
- Providing a more diverse range of workshops and activities in future and embracing the idea of library staff as curators of cultural and community activities in their spaces.
- Translating the enhanced or experiential library offer into local community spaces so that they can be delivered in a hyperlocal way without the need to grow and sustain the library service physical infrastructure.

Some library services have found lockdown has provided them with new ways to engage with their community and understand their needs.

 **“If you live in a locality, you are the librarian and you can't get away from your job.”**

- Those who were redeployed into community helplines or shielding contact call centres have deepened their understanding of the needs of vulnerable people in their communities and the extent which those vulnerabilities exist. Realising the extent of the digital divide has been a particular revelation for some.
- Other services found that their community librarians have been engaged in outreach work purely because they are one of the best known and most familiar local faces for many vulnerable people in their community.
- One service administered a reopening survey for residents, which opened in May 2020, to assess what people really wanted from the physical library service and how to prioritise the reinstatement of services.

SOMERSET


 **“We knew at some point we would need to manage reopening but you can't make assumptions about what people will want.”**

Somerset library services had pre-existing 'focus groups' of young people, families and older people which they had set up as part of the pre-Covid-19 service redesign process. They asked these groups about what they thought was working well and how they were using the service during lockdown.

The service undertook a reopening consultation with an online questionnaire. This was launched in May and received 1,800 responses, before they knew when they would be reopening. It had a series of questions that helped them to establish priorities for reopening and understand the appetite for new services eg. order and collect. They found that most people were keen to browse but that order and collect was an acceptable alternative for most.

Another service used analytical tools to help it assess and redesign its services in the wake of Covid 19. They employed the Recover, Retain, Resist and Radical model to assess which services to reintroduce, which to continue from lockdown and which to stop doing. In terms of 'radical' activities they had whole service Team meetings and the whole service became far more familiar and comfortable with online activities eg. Facebook Live sessions. They want to incorporate this into roles going forward.

However, there were some concerns about the library offer in the wake of Covid-19. The services that are most easily reintroduced from buildings, such as order and collect and book browsing can be felt to reduce library services to a 'transactional' service. There was anxiety that this aligned with outdated views that decision-makers can have about what library services offer and so was something that library leaders were keen to avoid. In addition, in order to deliver experiential and added value services in library buildings, services often partner with community organisations, and these building-based partnerships can be difficult to reintroduce at present.

 **“Now we're putting buildings back in – but they [the buildings] are not the service.”**

How have Public Library Services Contributed to Individual and Community Wellbeing During the Crisis?

This section is organised according to the type of service offered during lockdown, with observations about the contribution to wellbeing under each service type:

- Delivering library services online.
- Digital enablement.
- Physical services.
- Telephone support (offered as part of the library service).
- Partnership activities.
- New services that were developed as part of the Covid-19 response.

DELIVERING LIBRARY SERVICES ONLINE

As mentioned in the previous section, all the library services that participated in this research amplified their digital offer in terms of e-book lending, and online newspaper, magazine and comic access. Most also provided new interactive digital services using social media platforms.

All the services we spoke to reported large rises in e-membership, social media interactions and usage of digital resources:

- One service reported a 120% increase in e-book and e-audio loans.
- Another service saw a 138% rise in e-book and e-audio loans over lockdown.
- One service reported a 99% increase e-memberships in comparison with the same period in 2019.
- In one service active e-book users went up 75% with an increase of 244% of new users registering in comparison with the previous equivalent time-period. In this service e-book loans increased by 119% and e-audio by 70%.
- There were also increases in the use of specific online services: in one library service use of PressReader has gone up by 350%, others reported increases in use of their online archive and family history resources as well as in their e-loans.
- At the height of lockdown, one library service was having 12,000 social media interactions per day and each video had thousands of views.


The growth in take-up of e-resources and the large audiences for social media activities suggest that there was a need for these services among the general public during lockdown and that library services stepped up and responded to that need. Despite these very positive figures, it is important to note that in some cases this growth was from a very low base and therefore even triple digit growth could amount to a relatively small proportion of the population accessing digital resources via the library website.

Many library services attempted to replicate as many elements of their face-to-face offer online as possible. There were several examples where this had been successful including:

- The Summer Reading Challenge was delivered primarily online this year, and almost all of those interviewed were actively supporting its uptake and developing their own digital resources around the theme for this year.
- One library service moved their community reading challenge online. It reached 650 people including 114 family groups which was similar to the usual levels of participation.
- Continuing work with a young volunteers employability pipeline using digital/remote channels.
- Some library services successfully transferred reading groups for adults, teens and children online. One service mentioned that they took advantage

of the fact that a number of providers made it possible for certain books to be lent to an unlimited number of people at same time. Reading groups were held over Facebook Chat and Zoom.

- Continuing a Lego club via Facebook: the library staff set a theme for the week and people sent in photos of what they made. These photos were featured on the library service's Facebook page and on a specific Lego Facebook page that the service operates.
- Using social media to promote information from their local authority and other trusted local partners eg. sharing information from employability partners about jobs and bridges in to work schemes; citizens' advice; drug and alcohol service; domestic abuse; and when recycling was reopening etc.
- Running events and commemoration activities online that would usually be delivered in the library building eg. author talks and VE Commemoration events.

 **“The library is a trusted source of information, so we do try to share information from trusted partners.”**

In some cases, there were more activities being delivered digitally than would usually be offered in a face-to-face environment. One library service ran five scheduled activities a day, each for a different age group (pre-school, school-age and adults) called “What’s on today”. New services and groups emerged, including:


- New online language conversation groups which hadn’t been offered previously.
- Teatime and bedtime rhyme and storytime sessions.
- New home learning resources for families and teachers to access.

Some library services offered specific health and wellbeing offers through their digital services, including:

- Issuing specific content on mental health and wellbeing developed in partnership with mental health charities. Locally, branch libraries would put out content like ‘wellbeing thought of the day’ or ‘strategies for being well’.

- Supporting national festivals and awareness events such as Empathy Day or Mental Health Awareness Week by drawing attention to online collections that could support people and/or delivering facilitated online events that people could participate in.
- Buying more e-titles aimed at supporting mental health and wellbeing for the e-library.

SOMERSET

 **“Everyone else has Joe Wicks, we’ve got James the library man.”**

Somerset Library Service offered regular online story and rhyme times and gardening videos. 150 videos were created during lockdown. The service set up a content plan and online events calendar. Whilst this was less extensive than their usual calendar, it did provide regular activity across the county.

Somerset Glass Box, an innovation, enterprise and tech hub run by the library service and based in Taunton, had their own website which was separate to the more restricted Library Service website run by the local authority IT service. The library service was able to use this site to put links to content on that website and links to a wide range of information websites about health issues on the county council website.

The library service experimented with new formats, for example the Outreach Officer in Glastonbury did a podcast interviewing local bands.

They have created a strong community of library users online who may only wish to access online services in future. They have had a lot of new memberships online and have allowed these memberships to become permanent where they used to only be temporary.

The online content they created was high quality – they created guidance that all their branches follow and one member of staff has gained a huge following with members of the public.

In one library service, all local branches created their own content. This was seen as important in terms of supporting the local community and maintaining contact with customers. However, it was sometimes difficult for central staff to know what was happening locally and for partners to engage with the library service via social media:



“The downside to branch efforts is that it’s not very visible: we did a lot but spread across 40 Facebook pages, so in terms of stakeholder visibility that other organisations can point people to... that made it more difficult.”

Most library services adopted a hybrid approach, and the case study below demonstrates how Hampshire Library Service used a ‘test and learn’ approach to refine their digital offer so that it had greatest impact locally while also providing coherence across the whole service.

HAMPSHIRE

Every branch library had a Social Media Champion who all started developing digital services over social media. However, there was almost too much content and the quality of the content and delivery was inconsistent. To help organize and provide a more coherent offering, the central team stepped into oversee the development of digital content and services.

This enabled the service to establish a core of social media services organised centrally which were shared in each branch library’s social media account, and then the branch libraries supplemented this with their own activities.

A daily programme of activities, including rhyme time, story time, learning and group activities (eg. book clubs) was offered. Although Hampshire library services co-ordinated the offer centrally, they found that it is important still to have some local content as “customers want to see recognisable faces”.

DIGITAL ENABLEMENT

The Covid-19 lockdown brought the digital divide into sharp focus for library services. Although many services worked hard to develop and deliver a comprehensive online library offer, they also recognised that this offer would not be accessible to all.

Some technical and administrative ‘fixes’ were put in place to reduce barriers to accessing the library’s services online and to avoid stress and negative mental health impacts for people who use the services, including:

- Allowing **children to join the library online** (where previously not permitted).
- Allowing **e-membership to count as full membership** (often seen only as a temporary solution before lockdown, until people could visit the library to gain full membership).
- **Extending all library cards** that were due to expire so that none would expire over lockdown.
- **Extending all loans** and offering an amnesty on fines for items that had already expired.



“I hate the idea of anybody feeling worried about a library fine.”

Library staff found that by continuing existing activities online, they could engage people who hadn’t previously engaged in digital technologies with this technology. Because they were working with a trusted member of staff and receiving bespoke support to download and use new platforms, people were able to continue doing the activity they enjoyed and learn a new skill at the same time.



“There was something in there about getting digital skills in through the backdoor. I would like us to do more of that.”

Some library services also wrote how-to guides for their service users and published them online and via social media, to support people to access new digital platforms and services.

There were also several examples of library services offering access to digital technology at home, to support those families and individuals who did not have access to equipment that would enable them to take advantage of the public library digital offer. This equipment and access was often delivered in partnership with other agencies, to ensure it reached the people who needed it most:

- One library service worked with colleagues in education to deliver 14,000 Chromebook to vulnerable families. The landing page on the Chromebook directed the user to the Summer Reading Challenge online.
- Another library service had funding as part of an Opportunities Programme to distribute tablets and computers to deprived and digitally excluded families.
- One library service in Scotland worked with a local digital inclusion charity and SCVO to deliver 240 devices to digitally excluded people who were on the shielding list.
- One library service worked with health and social care partners to provide a lending library for devices, casting out WiFi to homeless accommodation and lending books to them.
- One library service was able to offer internet access from the library from a very early point in lockdown (see case study on page 11). During lockdown hundreds of PC access sessions per week were taken up.

“The PC offer has been invaluable – the heavy takeup has also underlined the need for digital inclusion resources in the borough especially at a time when VCS services offering public access computers are closed”

POWYS LIBRARY SERVICE

In the beginning of May, Powys entered a partnership to support those that were digitally excluded through a device loan scheme that also addressed connectivity issues. The service worked with Accessibility Powys, Supporting People, Scope and housing support agencies, considering how best to support the most vulnerable with access to technology. Working in partnership was helpful as Accessibility Powys was able to procure WiFi dongles and prepaid cards with ease, whereas council procurement would have made this more challenging for the library service. Powys library service also registered with the DevicesDotNow scheme for devices and developed a system for gifting this technology.

PHYSICAL SERVICES

Whilst most library services did not offer access to the building to members of the public, there were some examples where library buildings were used to support the wellbeing of local populations in different ways:

- Providing health and wellbeing hubs for care home and care-at-home staff.
- A library co-located in a vulnerable hub for children who were particularly at risk stayed open to support those vulnerable children.
- A library being used as an education hub for children of key workers.
- Some library buildings have been used to store hospital equipment.
- Library facilities and car parks being used as Covid-19 testing sites.
- One library has stayed open to provide access to the Scottish Welfare Fund.
- In one library service two library buildings set up as community hubs where it was possible to get mental health support and order prescriptions, and where staff took calls from the community. Of the eight community hubs set up, two were in library buildings.

NORTH AYRSHIRE

Five library buildings in North Ayrshire were set up as health and wellbeing hubs for care home staff and care-at-home staff. These hubs provided a bridge between work and home life, a space where staff can take time out to recharge their batteries, talk to colleagues and line managers about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on themselves and their service users and access support information on a range of health and wellbeing topics. Feedback from the carers has been very positive and they have enjoyed the light, airy and calm library spaces situated within their own locality. Library staff have been very supportive and empathetic with the carers and have seen many repeat visits of around 560 each week with new relationships being forged. The use of the public library buildings in this way reflects the safe, non-judgmental third space that these buildings provided communities pre-lockdown.

Many library services had to stop their home library service, and at the time of writing, some were still unable to resume the service due to the risks to vulnerable users. However, a handful of the library services interviewed were able to continue their home library service or resume it with very little interruption. These library services were often able to expand their service, offering it to people who were shielding or identified as vulnerable as part of the local response to the pandemic.

HALTON

Halton only missed one set of home library service deliveries. All home library service customers were rung four to five times. The purpose of the calls was to have a chat and check in, but also to refer people to Age UK if they were struggling. The home library service also co-ordinated support for food deliveries, dementia, illness and liaised with Surestart to arrange welfare calls where necessary.

In terms of delivering books, home library delivery partners were unable to continue deliveries so library staff stepped in to deliver the books. Thousands of books were delivered during lockdown and the service extended to shielding and anxious people. Since April 2020, the home library service had been delivering 20 books per person to more than one hundred people per month. They added both temporary and permanent customers during lockdown.

Where library services have been unable to continue their traditional home library service, some developed new temporary delivery services, for example:

- One service worked within its partnership with the Early Help Team as part of the Big Lottery 10 year programme Small Steps Big Change. This programme sought to improve the outcomes for young children in disadvantaged families. During lockdown, the library service supported the development of home packs for these families to support family wellbeing and informal learning.
- A local branch library worked with its Friends Group to buy and deliver fruit and vegetable boxes to families in a deprived area. They were able to draw on their local knowledge to meet an identified need.
- A library service outreach team organised distribution of packs of books and resources to deprived families through partnerships with other agencies.
- A library service worked with education services to deliver book bags to 3,000 priority families and distributed 600 Summer Reading Challenge book packs to vulnerable families.

KIRKLEES

Kirklees Library Service developed a new 'Book Drop' service, separate from the home library service. This had its roots in a book donation project that Kirklees ran in order to support vulnerable communities for some years. During lockdown they found that they still had hundreds of boxes of books which could be gifted to vulnerable people in the community. Given there were some frontline staff who were struggling with not having daily face-to-face contact with clients and were asking to participate in home deliveries, these members of staff packaged up boxes of books to be delivered to care homes and other settings.

TELEPHONE SUPPORT

The telephone support described in this section was delivered as part of the core library offer in lockdown. In some cases a small number of calls were undertaken by staff, but in other services thousands of individuals were identified and contacted. These calls were separate from specific shielding calls or helplines that were set up as part of the local authority's more general response to Covid-19.

- A number of library services contacted **home library service** (HLS) users, especially in areas where the HLS was suspended. In some cases general welfare calls were undertaken, while other areas contacted their registered users prior to resuming the service to consult them about how they would like the service to be reinstated. In the process of undertaking these calls, staff often identified additional needs and placed referrals to support services.
- Some services have worked to **identify 'vulnerable' individuals** on their database, both for a general catch-up and to inform them about the digital library offer available in lockdown and support them to access it or to register them for the home library service if they are interested. In some cases these were one-off calls while in others they developed into regular keep-in-touch conversations. In some cases staff identified individuals experiencing abuse and referred them on for support.
- Other services contacted the members of their **reminiscence or knit and natter groups** to check in and see how they were.

In some library services, local staff in small branch libraries were able to identify vulnerable people who would benefit from contact, while in other services, the library database was used for this purpose.

SUFFOLK

Suffolk Library Service developed a telephone support service, or 'Lifeline Service', during lockdown.

Managers created lists of library user who they thought could be really vulnerable during Covid-19. They looked carefully at GDPR when doing so to ensure they got the balance right between customer privacy and support.

They then bought a hundred mobile phones for staff to enable them to call those who may be really vulnerable. When staff called members of the public, they explained why they were calling and asked the customer's preference/permission in terms of future contact. 80% of those contacted asked to be contacted again. This led to regular phone calls with people who wanted to be contacted every few days or every week. The calls had no agenda and could range from a check in, a general chat and signposting to services or information.

SOMERSET

In May, before resumption of the home library service (HLS) the library service called their five hundred HLS subscribers. They identified around half who had been lonely and requested another call back to hear from someone, 63 who needed signposting to services such as food and medicine collection and delivery and thirteen who needed urgent help and support.

KIRKLEES

Kirklees made over 8,000 welfare calls over lockdown. The idea for welfare calls came from two front line staff. Senior managers supported this idea and the service ensured everyone had kit. No new equipment was purchased. Instead, kit was redistributed from the library service. Spreadsheets were set up by customer service managers. They used information from the library database to register 16-17,000 people over 70, and set up a system for calling them. They tried to arrange this geographically so that customers spoke to people who knew them. Where asked for, they did repeat calls and put customers in touch with other services if struggling or vulnerable.

One member of staff engaged in welfare calls realised two people she was ringing were people in her knit and natter group. Over a few weeks she got in touch with all members of that group, either to help them get online or get their children to help them get online, and did an online tea and cake session. For some of these individuals it was the first time they had engaged in a digital activity of this kind.

Some services continued to offer library information telephone services, providing general information support. In some cases these services were used by individuals seeking emergency help and support.

“A member of the public called the library because they were concerned about a friend and asked the library staff what they could do. Given the nature of the call, it was surprising that they didn’t go straight to the police, but there is something significant in terms of how a library is perceived that they were contacted first.”

PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES

Through partnership, several library services were able to have a positive impact on their local communities during lockdown. This included:

- Partnering with a local cycling delivery service to ensure homeless residents in a temporary hostel had access to books.
- Working with local community councils who had a network of Village Agents looking after vulnerable people.
- One service used to run Talking Cafes in their library buildings – during lockdown they signposted the Talking Cafes taking place on Facebook.
- Issuing physical resources for children and young people through partners.
- Creating information literacy curricula for local schools which were delivered via Google Classroom as part of the remote schooling provision during lockdown.

GLASGOW

“I see you have included sensory/ touch books, books that I can read to my daughter and easy books she can try to read herself. She is going to love each and all of them. This is so helpful to get through the summer months.”

Glasgow Library Service, Glasgow Life, worked with Education Services to deliver book bags to 3,000 priority families. They received funding from two major donors to provide gift books in the packs and they also provided library books on loan and activities for children.

This was just a small proportion of the vulnerable families in Glasgow but it was those who were identified as not able to support their children’s learning from home. The service also distributed 600 Summer Reading Challenge book packs to vulnerable families.²

² Families were identified in one of two ways: Education Services data and data from the library management system. In this latter case, data was filtered by the Every Child a Library Member category, identified ‘literacy hotspots’ and permission to contact individuals. Filtering by ‘literacy hotspot’ enabled the service to target those most in need first.

HALTON

Halton libraries extended their existing partnership with Mako Create, a local digital media education company, to provide educational digital making activities and a Make Fest during lockdown. The focus of the activities was computer game design. The Festival was co-anchored, so the children's librarian was the face of the library service and Mako Create provided the specialist expertise in regard to digital making skills. 7,000 people engaged with Make Fest.

Moving to online activity allowed Halton Library Service to progress and maintain the venue-based creative events programme it had built up over recent years. It showcased Halton Libraries as a relevant and resilient library service and demonstrated that the libraries in Halton had a mental health and wellbeing role to play in helping its local communities navigate the crisis through offering opportunities for children and young people to connect creatively and emotionally during the period of immense change and distress. Commissioning the workshops with Mako Create also demonstrated Halton Libraries' commitment to supporting local creative organisations during lockdown.

NEW SERVICES THAT WERE DEVELOPED AS PART OF THE COVID-19 RESPONSE


As mentioned in the previous section, public library services didn't just adapt their existing services during lockdown, they also developed entirely new services. Some of these were temporary services designed as part of the wider response to Covid-19, while other new services may continue to be delivered once the pandemic has passed.

Temporary services put in place include:

- A production line for **3D PPE printing** for local NHS and care home staff.
- Delivery staff redeployed to **deliver PPE**, using the library vehicle to do this.
- Library staff designing and co-ordinating the local authority **Shielding Call Centre**.
- Library staff designing and co-ordinating the local authority **Helpline**.

The following case studies describe the amount of work that the library service undertook and some of the positive impact they have been able to have on local populations via their delivery of this service.

DENBIGHSHIRE – SHIELDING CALL CENTRE

 **“My manager knew [we] had the skill set of talking to people and helping to solve problems.”**


In April 2020, Denbighshire County Council decided to develop a proactive phone call support service for those that were shielding. The County Council recognised the skillset of library staff, and managers were involved in the shaping and management of the new service, alongside other local authority colleagues. Work included adapting the scripts sent from Welsh Government, setting up the database and organising the teams. 85% of Denbighshire library service staff were redeployed to undertake the phone calls.

The team originally conducted 3,500 interviews with people that were shielding and went on to contact everyone in the Council area aged 70+. This equates to 8,500 people, or 10-15% of the total population.

A core team of 20-40 people from the library service were involved in delivering the service until the end of May/early June when library staff were released to develop and deliver the 'reintroduction' process for the library service itself.

Speaking of her staff team, the Head of Library Service at Denbighshire reflected that, “They were brilliant, they wanted to contribute to the Covid-19 response and support their community. It also kept the library team together to a large extent, working on the same project, having similar experiences. This helped when we started re-introducing library services as the team was still together and we'd all kept in touch.”

MIDDLESBROUGH – HELP BORO HUB

 **“Libraries were an obvious service to redeploy because they have detailed knowledge of communities”**

The Head of Service had discussed using the Central Library as a call centre with colleagues before lockdown started. Following from this, Middlesborough Library Service was responsible for running the ‘Help Boro Hub’. This included setting up a call centre in the Central Library (and later organising working from home) and working alongside public health and health and safety teams to manage the volume of calls.

The number was publicised on a leaflet that went out to all residents. Initially they delivered the call centre from the library building, but later moved to home working for almost all staff. The Help Boro Hub offered delivery of shopping and prescriptions and signposted dog-walking services for callers. Staff both fielded calls and fulfilled requests for support.

They received hundreds of calls a day, often from people with complex needs. Library staff were later joined by public health and health and safety teams to help them manage the volume of calls. The Hub delivered 1,900 food parcels and collected over 500 prescriptions.

Through their work on the helpline staff got clear insight into issues the town was facing more widely in terms of poverty, mental health and social isolation. “It became apparent how many vulnerable people there are in our communities and the impact of the lack of digital access on them.”

Library staff created a spreadsheet logging call details, needs, issues and location of caller, to enable future service design. They also conducted a survey with the call handlers to understand the impact of the service on their mental health and wellbeing because several have experienced distressing situations during the service (eg. neglect, hardship and suicide threats).

As mentioned on page 11, new order and collect services have been widely developed by library services as part of the reintroduction of physical services. Demand for these services was reported to be high and at the time of interview, some services were looking at how they could continue to provide them in future.



What has been Impossible or Challenging to Translate Successfully into the Digital Sphere in the Current Context?

Two key sets of issues were identified by Heads of Service in relation to challenges in service delivery during Covid-19.

The first set of issues related to the delivery of digital and online services:

- Increases in e-membership and usage did not replace physical membership and usage.
- Digital activities were not the same as face-to-face activities.
- Digital services were reaching a limited demographic.
- Some library services were not able to develop their own digital interactive offer.
- It was not clear what 'good' looks like in digital service delivery.

The second set of issues related to the absence of the physical library space and the negative impact this has had on service delivery and those people who cannot or will not engage with library services online:

- The loss of the library as community hub.
- Public PC access and assistance.
- Partnerships that were building-based.
- People with hidden vulnerabilities may have 'slipped through the net'.

INCREASES IN E-MEMBERSHIP AND USAGE DO NOT REPLACE PHYSICAL MEMBERSHIP AND USAGE

Although the number of e-loans increased substantially for all library services interviewed as part of this study, overall loans were much lower than like-for-like annual issues. Below we provide some examples illustrating this trend (which was observed across all those services that provided data about their library membership):

- One library service recorded a 413% increase in e-members, however there was a **23% reduction in total new memberships**.
- Another service recorded an increase of 1540% in online joiners on the same time period in the previous year. However due to the reduction in traditional library joiners, this still represented a **71% reduction in total new memberships for the equivalent period**.
- Although one service saw a 197% increase in new online membership between the end of March and early July in comparison with the same period in the previous year, they also saw a 79% drop in new traditional membership. This represented a **44% reduction in total new memberships** compared to the previous year.

- Another service saw a 101% increase in e-membership between the end of March and early July 2020, but they also saw a 2049% reduction in traditional memberships, which represented a **net decrease of 83% in new memberships**.

Those services which generally received high volumes of new members each year in their library buildings tended to be most affected by substantial decreases in new memberships. Those library services which started from a very low base in terms of e-memberships were most likely to report the highest percentage growth in e-memberships. There were also reports that e-membership surged in the initial weeks of lockdown but settled down to lower numbers joining each month.


Library services reported that they particularly struggled to engage children through e-loans and e-memberships. This gave significant cause for concern, given that supporting early years development and literacy is a key aim of main library services. One service noticed that fewer than 300 children were using the digital library offer in May so they improved the stock but also realised that digital library offers are less likely to engage children than the library buildings themselves.

DIGITAL ACTIVITIES ARE NOT THE SAME AS FACE-TO-FACE ACTIVITIES


Many library services have worked hard to curate a social experience in the library space which supports community wellbeing and positions the library at the heart of the community. For example, one library service reported that they have made a special effort to increase the number of groups using the library space and in recent years have increased library usage by groups ten-fold, with the library service attracting 350,000 visits a year to its library buildings.


 **“We work hard to get people through the doors.”**

Although many library services worked hard during lockdown to provide similar interactive services online to those offered in library buildings, the online experience was felt to be qualitatively different to face-to-face interactions, especially in group settings.


 **“It’s clear that the space libraries provide is what people want.”**

Heads of Service reported that some digital activities function in different ways to face-to-face activities. For example, a collaborative group of Scottish library services have conducted analysis which shows that the average engagement time for children’s activities online (such as story or rhyme times) was five minutes, while adult activities (such as author talks and readings) averaged 17 minutes of engagement. These are both substantially shorter engagement times than in face-to-face activities. Some Heads of Service also reflected that the experience in a face-to-face group session of baby rhyme time was very different to an online session in terms of parent/carer wellbeing and social interaction compared with the focus on engaging the baby or child.

 **“There’s nothing like a room of under fours – it’s about the physicality of book too.”**


 **“In the online context you’re not bringing children together, sharing toys or having interaction. Parents being able to chat is important, so online you only get half the benefit.”**

Services have received feedback that people miss the physical service and are looking forward to library buildings reopening. Even those members of the public who initially embraced digital services were felt to be experiencing ‘zoom fatigue’ and to be looking forward to the reintroduction of face-to-face services.

 **“People are still engaging but asking when will this be over – I just want to talk to a human or go into the library.”**

 **“I’ve been shouted at in Tesco – when are the libraries opening?!”**


Although some library services feel that they are building, and reaching, a new digital audience, others felt that the digital service has been ‘less than’ what would usually be offered in a library building.

 **“Very little of what we’ve actually done... will endure, in that nearly everything we did, if we could do it physically in a library, would be better.”**

DIGITAL SERVICES ARE REACHING A LIMITED DEMOGRAPHIC

Although there has been extensive public take-up of interactive digital services from library services, Heads of Service sometimes worried that they were not engaging a broad audience.

Heads of Service reported that the majority of the interactive/social media offer was based around rhyme and storytimes for children and families. Although some services also offered interactive activities for adults, these were less widespread.

 **“Family and early years translated well because customers were geared up to engaging online. It has been more challenging to get over 55s online.”**

In some cases, it was difficult to replicate existing groups via social media. This has included some book groups and knit and natter groups. Sometimes participants struggled to engage with social media or digital technologies required to engage in the activities remotely. On other occasions the group dynamic had not worked well online and people lacked interest in engaging in that way.

“We have run online book group and facebook activities but these have only been attended by a few people. Knitting groups haven’t been sending in photos of what they have been making – perhaps that demographic aren’t comfortable on social media.”

“Some things you do because you want to do them rather than see on a screen.”

There was also a sense that the ‘digital divide’ has been exacerbated by lockdown. Those who were confident and able to use the internet and who had access to broadband and devices had a wide range of services and activities to choose from. Those without access or digital skills had very little offered to them. One interviewee mentioned that the Twitter question and answer sessions that they held tended to cater to professionals working in heritage, arts and culture rather than the general public.

“There are so many people in Scotland who are not digitally enabled. The digital offer doesn’t cut it for them. They are completely ignored. Not ‘hard to reach’ but ‘easy to ignore.’”

In some locations the library service did not have the skills or capacity to develop its own digital interactive offer, or took the decision not to do so. This was often because:

- They were a small team and **lacked capacity**.
- The library service **lacked the skills and/or equipment** to develop and deliver the offer.
- They had concerns about **quality and delivery** of the digital offer and its ability to replicate the real-life interactions that library services provide.
- An awareness that a wide range of individuals and organisations were providing similar services and activities at a national level, and a concern that the library service would **not be able to compete** with this.

In some locations, the library service was unable to offer truly interactive digital services because they did not have a permission from the local authority to use a particular platform such as Zoom or Facebook Live.

It was also not clear what ‘good’ looked like in digital service delivery.

“I think that we can be quite guilty in libraries of doing something and going ‘That was really great, wasn’t it?’ Yeah, it was nice... but what was the value and impact of it?”

Some of those who did not develop their own interactive digital offer felt that new activities should be designed with a clear audience and impact in mind, rather than as a knee-jerk reaction to the constraints of the lockdown.

The majority of those library services that did develop interactive digital offers were not able to consult with the public either about the planning and delivery of those services or about their views on the quality and impact of the services that had been developed. There were also reports that it was ‘difficult to measure success’ using online participation data. This may be because library teams lacked the analytical expertise to mine the data about people using their online services; lacked experience of using digital tools to capture feedback; or because while online activities provided ready data about numbers, participating staff were unsure about how best to capture information about perceptions of quality and benefit from the activity.

“It was great that staff did book reviews but there’s a zillion of them out there.”

The need to establish evidence-based good practice in terms of digital interactive library services was raised by several participants. This has caused some library services to pause or limit their digital activities until they have a clearer picture of what people want and need.

“We were going to introduce a Bedtime Stories offer but are now holding this to further analyse the Storytimes position and to continue to monitor the Bookbug performance.”


GLASGOW

Glasgow Library Service, Glasgow Life, have a strong children's offer and a particular focus on early years literacy. However, they found that the online Summer Reading Challenge had very low take up this year. In early August they had only had 121 signups where they would usually expect around 4,000.

They began monitoring participation in their online Bookbug sessions closely and at the time of interview were about to start a consultation with children and families to find out what they would like from the digital library service and how best to deliver it.


At the time of interview, Glasgow Library Service was also working with other library services across Scotland to analyse online participation and understand how to improve their online services. Creative Scotland invested £20,000 to support the Scottish Libraries Collaborative to continue to learn, test, develop and build capacity with children's authors and illustrators with a view to delivering online and digital services for children and families.

THE LOSS OF THE LIBRARY AS COMMUNITY HUB


 **“There has been a loss of the public realm in Covid.”**

Heads of Service pointed to the role of the library space in communities and the fact that it was impossible to replicate this in a digital environment. They were able to provide an approximation of the lending offer and of the organised activities in library buildings, for those who have access to the IT and internet connections as well as the skills and motivation to engage with these online. They were also able to reach out directly to those people identified as vulnerable. However, there was nothing that replicated the open, accessible physical space that a library offers: a space in which people are free to do anything or nothing, where they can 'be around' others without having to engage with them directly, and where there can be chance, serendipitous encounters.

There were also some anxieties about the solutions that public library services have used to provide online space for public interactions during Covid-19, given that social media platforms are all commercial entities whose business model runs on targeted advertising – something that physical library spaces do not usually contain.

 **“I wonder what we're asking people to do by inviting them into that space.”**


It is also difficult to maintain the sense of local community and identity through online spaces and activities. While the physical library building will usually attract people from the immediate community, online spaces can include a global rather than local audience, which changes the nature of the interaction.

 **“It's connection... community – how do we translate those things? It's quite a skill to do it digitally and it's not a skill I feel we particularly have.”**

PUBLIC PC ACCESS AND ASSISTANCE

Although two library services were able to keep public PC access running during lockdown, this was very much the exception. Services reported an increase in enquiries about ICT usage. This was in response to DWP announcing that people claiming Jobseekers Allowance and Universal Credit will no longer be exempted from demonstrating that they are actively seeking work.

 **“I'm worried about supporting people around employment and claiming benefits.”**

 **“Libraries have just reopened and we have people coming in to check emails because haven't been able to do so for three months.”**

PARTNERSHIP WORK THAT IS BUILDING-BASED

Although some library services reported new or strengthened partnerships during lockdown, others noted that without buildings as venues for local groups to meet, it was difficult to deliver and maintain partnership relationships. Some local community groups and charities may also have experienced severe cashflow and resourcing issues during lockdown which reduced their capacity for partnership working.

PEOPLE WITH HIDDEN VULNERABILITIES MAY HAVE 'SLIPPED THROUGH THE NET'

“Being vulnerable isn’t as clear cut as you think. I always explain it... there’s a routine that keeps people going, contact that improves wellbeing and mental health. Lots of people are lonely – and a lot of problems stem from loneliness.”

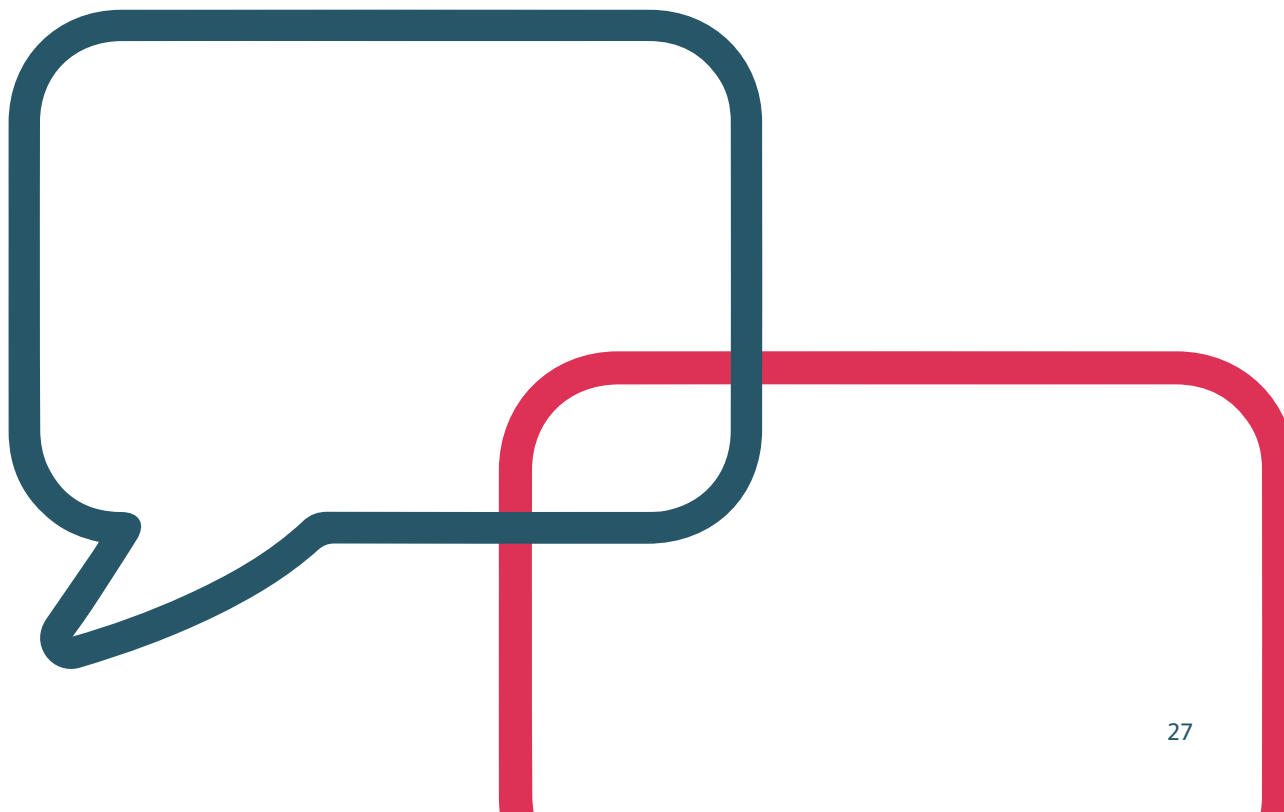
Without access to the library building as an open public space, the service struggled to operate as the ‘safety net’ or service of ‘first resort’ that catches people before they really begin to struggle. At the time of research it was difficult for Heads of Service to identify those who have been left out, but it was felt that this would become apparent as library buildings reopen. However, Heads of Service were concerned about:

- Those who were lonely and isolated but not on any at-risk registers.
- Homeless people who were not engaging with support networks.
- Young people – most services have had very limited engagement with young people during lockdown.
- Vulnerable and Looked After Children.
- New arrivals, refugees and asylum seekers.

“There is something about reaching out and having a conversation – taking the edge off loneliness for someone who is outside the health service.”

“Talking someone through something, helping them find the right resource for self- directed care or being able to encourage people to come to group event or activity.”

“Although we supported vulnerable families through the vulnerable hubs, there are several children and young people that we haven’t seen and we don’t know where they are.”



What were the Success Factors and Inhibitors in the Library Service Continuing to Contribute to Individual/Community Wellbeing During the Crisis?

Heads of Service identified both internal and external factors which contributed to or inhibited the library service being able to support individual and community wellbeing during the crisis.

Internal factors included:

- digital skills and access to technology;
- the ability of library staff to adapt to new roles and contexts;
- organisational culture;
- contingency planning;
- effective communication with the public; and
- building services that respond to need.

External factors included:

- financial support and investment;
- clarity about procedures and attitudes to risk;
- relationships with decision-makers; and
- strength of partnerships.


DIGITAL SKILLS AND ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

Some library services were able to transition to remote and mainly digital service delivery relatively quickly and easily, while others found this difficult. In addition, public take-up of digital services varied widely by location and demographic.

Key factors influencing the speed and success of the transition to remote and digital service delivery were:

- The ability to source remote and homeworking **IT infrastructure** for staff.
- The **flexibility of local authority IT systems** in allowing staff to access the intranet from their own devices if needed.
- **The reliability and resilience of local authority IT infrastructure.**
- The **digital skills of frontline staff.** Most management staff were well placed in terms of remote working equipment, access and skills. However most library services did not offer frontline staff their own IT equipment or access to remote working

before lockdown. This meant that it was often unclear which staff had the skills and equipment at home to continue working and it was difficult to upskill staff in a remote working environment.

 **“We were quite well placed in terms of equipment and access. We could get into VPN from home, had Zoom for 12 months prior to lockdown, had laptops. This made it look like they switched to digital painlessly. Our Government Department, who are more office based, saw us as an example of good practice and referred other government departments to us to find out more about how we did it.”**

The ‘digital divide’ influenced both take-up of library services in communities and the ability of library staff to deliver digital library services in lockdown. While services may have expected that some of their service users would not be able to access digital services, in many places it became clear that this divide was also reflected in the make up of their staff.

Some communities experienced greater digital exclusion than others, and this affected the ability of the services to meet their needs during lockdown. In

places where a significant proportion of the population has no access to either fixed broadband or paid-for internet via their mobile phones, it was difficult to develop a relevant service. The intersection of digital exclusion with vulnerability to Covid-19 meant that it was particularly difficult to design and deliver safe services to these populations.

THE ABILITY OF LIBRARY STAFF TO ADAPT TO NEW ROLES AND CONTEXTS



“Huge credit to all our library staff who really got on to ‘how are we were going to do this?’”

The flexibility, creativity and resilience of staff was often identified by Heads of Service as a key factor that enabled them to deliver library services during lockdown. This involved:

- **Learning new skills** and putting them into practice rapidly, often without any formal support or training.
- **Bringing personal interests and hobbies** into their working life eg. photography, filming and performance skills.
- **Adapting existing professional skills** to new contexts and disciplines, such as managing call centres, organising deliveries of food and medical supplies and providing telephone support to vulnerable members of the local community.
- **Adapting to new working environments** and bringing personal qualities such as resilience, creativity and imagination to help them do this.
- **Not fearing failure** – being able to accept that as they were developing entirely new services in many cases, not all of these would be successful but adopting instead a ‘test and learn’ approach.



“People stepped up to the plate in ways that necessity required, but they were nevertheless going for it!”



“The pandemic has enabled staff to bring their ‘whole selves’ to work”

The Hampshire Ready Reads case study on page 11 is an example of staff-led service innovation. The Ready

Reads service was developed entirely in-house by staff using technology that was already available. Another example is the development of principles and guidelines for social media activities which many services developed ad-hoc as they built their interactive digital service. In at least two services interviewed, this kind of innovation led to individual staff members taking on new formal roles in the service as social media content curators and/or staff trainers to upskill other staff so that they could also produce high quality content.

There were also several examples of staff going above and beyond their professional job descriptions to support their community during lockdown. For example:

- Where library services were unable to source IT in a timely fashion, some staff were willing to use personal computers for work purposes and their own phones and contract minutes to contact vulnerable customers.
- Local library staff identified and visited vulnerable customers in their local area to check up on them and undertake personal services such as collecting prescriptions etc.
- Staff stepped up to provide home library service deliveries when many older volunteers were unable to.


Where staff have been redeployed, they displayed transferrable skills and qualities which were noticed and valued by the local authority and other partners, including:

- **Organisation and co-ordination skills** (eg. supporting community groups to get thousands of food parcels out).
- **People skills** such as relationship building, rapport, excellence of service, caring for people, listening, empathy.



“Customer services are about providing information, how you deal with people and care for people and give them the best experience you can – no matter what service they are accessing.”


Some staff who occupied traditional frontline roles struggled to adapt to new modes of remote service delivery. In many cases this was because they missed face-to-face interactions with the public. However, these staff often excelled when redeployed to front-facing roles.

 “You work in libraries because you’re interested in people... you want to help them... and provide information... We are able to drill down into what it is that people need... You need a real sort of sensitive ear, asking [personal questions] in as unobtrusive manner as possible.”

Heads of Service reported that the successful redeployment of staff had other benefits for the library service including:

- **Raising the profile of the library service within the local authority** and increasing awareness of the value of the work that library staff do as well as the skills they possess.
- **Building partnerships** with other agencies in the local authority that will continue in the future.
- Raising awareness of the levels of need and vulnerability in the community among library staff and **giving them a renewed mission** to meet those needs in the library service.

One service reported that some redeployed staff recorded video diaries of their working day which were shared and celebrated with library teams, widely in the local authority and even by the local authority on social media to show how council staff have been supporting communities during lockdown.


 “I think it’s been eye opening for staff ... in terms of seeing some of the hardship some of the citizens are living in. That will hopefully help shape some of the services we are able to offer [in the future and] more holistically over the council.”

However, some Heads of Service expressed concern that although the skills of library staff have gained greater recognition through redeployment, this had not necessarily translated into a higher profile or priority for the library service in all cases.

Those services which had an established video offer and dedicated teams able to work on story and rhyme times felt confident that they had been able to create high quality, engaging and relevant content. However, for some services these were entirely new activities

which were being developed in response to the lockdown and this presented challenges.


Despite the many successful examples of ways that library staff adapted to Covid-19, some staff struggled to adapt to the new working environment. Services whose staff profile was older and less technically proficient with social media found the adaptation hardest. Although lockdown has been a catalyst to improve staff skills in social media, online performance and presentation and film planning and editing, there was a feeling that not all services have staff with the right skills mix.


 “We shouldn’t be employing anyone who doesn’t have basic tech skills.”

Having enough staff available to deliver the service was key. Although many services reported that they only needed a relatively small team to design and deliver online activities, those services where staff were extensively redeployed (including senior management) or where a large number of staff were furloughed found it more challenging to develop and deliver a comprehensive active online offer during lockdown.

In the reopening phase many library services reported capacity issues, especially where large numbers of staff were furloughed but not all were returning to work, and where they were redeployed and still required in the Covid-19 response teams while the library service sought to reopen.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE


 “Our workforce was ready for a challenge.”

 “Culture is absolutely key... It’s about trust in every colleague to do this... to communicate that ‘you’ve got this’, and ‘we’re doing this all together’.”

Several library services described the importance of organisational culture in supporting staff to adapt to the new scenario. This included:

- Putting an emphasis when **recruiting staff** on skills that are hard to teach eg. resilience, creative thinking and using initiative.

- **Senior management teams consulting and collaborating with frontline staff:** creating an environment where staff felt able to suggest changes to service delivery – and putting these suggestions into action.
- Conducting **staff engagement surveys** at key moments, such as when they were adapting to lockdown and prior to reopening, and responding to feedback.
- **Keeping staff informed** about changes, such as furlough and reopening processes, in particular explaining the reasons why decisions had been made.


 **“When we consulted about the reopening processes, some staff stuck their head above parapet about the process suggested, so senior management rewrote it.”**

Some of the interviewees who worked for library services that operate as trusts or mutual felt that their independent governance structures meant that they were able to be more agile in their response to the pandemic.

Page 8 of this report details a range of engagement techniques that library services used to maintain staff wellbeing and ensure all staff were engaged, including those not working and on furlough.

Some senior management teams adopted a collaborative approach to designing services, which recognised that they did not have a formal plan for service delivery and that they needed staff to work with them to adapt rapidly. This was usually well-received by staff who were willing to bring new ideas and develop the service themselves. Services which enabled ‘leadership at all levels’ felt that this had given them an advantage in terms of rapidly developing new services.

However, it has already been noted that some services found that they needed to bring some central coherence and control to the range of new activities being developed in local branches.

 **“Everyone says there are leaders at every level and this has really shone through at this time.”**

CONTINGENCY PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS

The importance of IT infrastructure for remote working and staff resilience and adaptability has already been considered. Some Heads of Service also mentioned their formal governance and contingency plans and their effect on the service’s ability to respond to Covid-19:

- One Head of Service noted that the **business continuity plan** ensured a smooth closure process but did not envisage a prolonged closure. This was identified as a weakness in the service’s contingency planning that will be addressed so that there is more planning for significant and prolonged home working for frontline staff.
- Other Heads of Service felt that their strong **governance processes** meant that they were able to respond to the crisis while also fulfilling existing requirements such as completing end of year procedures correctly.
- The Westminster and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea case study providing public PC access was contingent on **intensive planning** at the start of lockdown to redesign the layout of the library building, buying PPE and planning how to use the space safely. This planning made it possible to open the building and offer PC access.
- Another library service in an area that was already facing a significant recession and hardship felt that because local services were already on **crisis footing** and the support systems such as food banks were already up and running, they were better placed to respond to Covid-19.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC

Because the library offer has undergone rapid change during Covid-19, some Heads of Service pointed to the importance of effective communication channels with the general public so that they were informed about what services were available. Those library services which adopted a multi-channel approach felt most confident that they have been able to keep their population informed.

- One library service had delivered **radio adverts** to publicise reopening as they were conscious many won't see social media or newspapers. Other library services have been reluctant to publicise reopening because they are concerned that they will not be able to meet demand.
- Another local authority **grew subscriptions** to the library newsletter over lockdown which meant that more people knew about the digital events and activities they were offering.

BUILDING SERVICES THAT RESPOND TO NEED

Previous sections of this report note that many services were developed on an ad-hoc basis rather than in response to established need or consultation with the general public. This has led to some concern about how far the digital service was able to respond to the needs of the broad range of the public who use library services.

Some library services were undertaking research with the public to better understand what they want from a digital library service. Other services regularly reviewed the digital events offer; stopping activities that were not working; and building on stronger activities. Most services providing interactive digital offers developed guidance for staff on ensuring high quality content.

Those services that consulted with the public prior to reopening had greater confidence that their service was meeting public needs than those who did not.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND INVESTMENT

One of the first measures that most library services took following lockdown was to improve their e-book and e-audio stock and to ensure they provided a range of magazines and newspapers online. In addition, several library services had to purchase equipment required for remote working from their own budgets and were not provided with additional resource for this by the local authority.


In England, Arts Council England provided £1,000 to every library service (£150,000 total) to purchase new e-resources as part of lockdown service delivery. In Wales, the Welsh Government invested £250,000 in the National Digital Library Service for Wales.

In Northern Ireland, the government provided £800,000 of additional funding to invest in e-books and other digital stock and services at the start of the pandemic. Several individual library services described ways in which they secured adequate investment in addition to this support, including:

- Using **private endowments/bequests or discretionary funds**.
- Using **capital investment** to purchase IT equipment and e-book stock.
- Bidding into local authority **Covid crisis funding**.

Library services that were able to invest in e-books at the beginning of the crisis reported that this paid off in providing a much better e-book lending service experience in terms of the quantity of titles and, for example, provision for children.

Where library services were unable to secure enough additional funding to support the rapid service transformation they had to undertake, this made it harder for them to deliver against customer expectations and the digital transformation process took longer.

 **“You promise something but can't follow it through.”**

In terms of wider financial challenge, those services that operated as trusts and had made use of the furlough scheme often felt that it had made the difference that allowed their organisation to survive during lockdown.

“Without the job retention scheme, we would be out of business or have gone through all the reserves by September.”

However, those services that operated as trusts that were not able to make use of the scheme due to decisions that were taken in government locally or nationally about their status as government funded services felt that this had put them at a significant financial disadvantage.

“We had a lot of agency staff covering vacancies and were obliged to keep them on and pay full pay.”

Even among those services not eligible for furlough and whose budgets had not yet been reduced, there were significant financial challenges associated with reopening due to the additional staffing requirements for Covid-secure workplaces. None of the services we spoke to had been able to secure additional budget to cover this staffing cost, which points to significant challenges in delivering services of the same scope as the pre-Covid service for the foreseeable future.

CLARITY ABOUT PROCEDURES AND ATTITUDES TO RISK

Library services relied on central government and local decision-making structures responding to Covid-19 to provide clarity about what services they could and could not offer. This was not always forthcoming. For example, one library service was one of the last to close in England because they couldn't secure permission from the local authority to close, which was 'frustrating'.

In some cases library services used this lack of clarity to enable them to continue to offer certain high priority face-to-face services.

“It's your job to problem solve and elements of it are relatable so let's figure out a way... [We need to] try to move people out of crisis mode as quickly as possible to actually start to rebuild and reconnect with communities and to start thinking about why we're here.”

Some library services reported having their access to buildings completely denied or very restricted during lockdown which limited the ways in which the library service was able to support responses to Covid-19 in their local authority.

Where there is a very risk-averse attitude to Covid-19 it has made it very difficult for library services to offer any physical service at all and has delayed reopening and reintroduction of physical services. This local inconsistency has led to patchy delivery of services across the country, particularly in the reopening phase.

“We have tried three to four times to get the home library service up and running but we haven't been able to pass the risk assessments.”

There have also been inconsistent attitudes to risk in relation to the delivery of digital services, which have affected library services' ability to deliver interactive services:

- Some library services did not have permission to use interactive platforms such as Zoom.
- Other library services were unable to secure permission to use free broadcasting software.

Where it was not possible to secure agreement to use interactive services, some library services used 'workarounds' such as external websites that they had access to or else used their social media presence to signpost information and work with partners. Other Heads of Service notice that a number of barriers to IT use have been removed during Covid-19 which led them to question whether the rules that were in place before were necessary.

“If you can go from having all of these rules in local government – and then the next day because of this crisis you get rid of 50% of them – does that mean you needed them? And do we need to put them back?”

RELATIONSHIPS WITH DECISION-MAKERS

“My role with customer services has been very key. I wouldn’t have [had the opportunities] if I was ‘just’ libraries: I have a place at the table and also knowledge of what libraries do and can do. In a lot of authorities that’s not the case.”

Having good relationships with local decision-makers, including elected members and executive structures was perceived as a key enabler for library services to continue to support community wellbeing during Covid-19. Examples of this include:

- Connections with key decision-makers ensuring that **library buildings** were identified as key community hubs.
- **The Head of Service sitting on strategic groups** such as community planning partnerships, health and social care, children’s services planning and therefore having contacts with strategic decision-makers and influence in how plans were implemented.
- **Senior decision-makers who knew and understood the library team’s strengths and skill set** so that they were redeployed into appropriate services which were valued by the public and senior people in the local authority.
- Strong relationships with the local authority which meant that the library service was **trusted to get on and deliver** and that the council ‘had their back’.
- **Library leadership roles which spanned more than just library services** enabling them to scope out the offer and where library services can contribute.
- Having a **clear vision** for what the library could deliver during lockdown and ‘battling away’ to get permission from decision-makers.

Some Heads of Service reported that they were providing more regular updates to commissioners and elected members about the impact library services were having during the Covid-19 lockdown than usual, to ensure that their contribution was recognised and so maintained strong relationships during this period.

Others reported that, although they usually had more influence in local decision-making, during lockdown there was a ‘command and control’ structure which meant that they were excluded from decision-making, which made it harder for the library service to have a voice. This was exacerbated by the fact that library services were not designated as ‘essential services’. This placed them lower in the priority list for delivery of IT support, risk assessment and reopening of services.

“It was only once the First Minister mentioned libraries in her address in May that the command and control board started to think about how library services could be delivered.”

“The library has both a loud voice and not a loud voice. Elected members can see what we bring and how we work with communities because they are closer to communities. It’s different with council officers who are dealing with the policy document or decision of where money goes and therefore have to be slightly removed from it.”

Some noted that they were completely ‘locked out’ of decision-making which meant that the skills and resources of the library service were not effectively used in the response to Covid-19. For example, library buildings not being considered as community hubs, library staff not being redeployed or being redeployed into unsuitable roles and lack of engagement with shielding or community helplines.

Some Heads of Service felt that there was a disconnect between public expectations of library services, particularly once lockdown eased, and the priorities of decision-makers. The public wanted to see normal services resumed as quickly as possible, whereas some local authorities were slow to support library services to reintroduce their services.

“Libraries are not considered a key service but the skills of staff are considered important.”

“We are fighting for our existence.”

“I don’t have a particularly strong voice within the council and so instead

I'm going to collectively use my voice with my team and my service to make a statement... We're here to deliver a service to the community ... and ... it's about what you can do for them. And whilst it's not a greatly personally satisfying situation to be in it, you can still get a lot done if you just stop asking permission."

PARTNERSHIPS

Some library services reported that they were able to maintain and even extend their partnerships with external organisations during the Covid-19 lockdown. This enabled them to maintain contact with vulnerable groups of library users and find new ways to meet needs during lockdown. For example:

- An existing partnership with the Red Cross who were delivering hot meals to vulnerable older people which meant that they were able to **work together to deliver library books**. Being able to continue a home delivery service has meant the library service can move quickly on home delivery service as lockdown eases.
- A pre-existing relationships with health and social care teams enabled library services to be 'on the map' when it came to establishing **health and wellbeing hubs**, of which there were only five and all of which were in library buildings.

NOTTINGHAM CITY

Nottingham City Libraries were able to adapt some of their existing cultural partnerships to the digital space.

For example, Story Parks, funded by the Nottingham Building Society, was an initiative to bring library services and performances to parks in the summertime.

Story Parks needed to move all their activities online and the library service collaborated with them to ensure that it could still be delivered via online channels.

Other library services felt that their involvement in redeployment and the local Covid-19 response had helped them to build new partnerships which they would be able to develop in the future.

"We were working together with others in ways we had never done before. The situation reduced the bureaucracy and hurdles that had been in our way in the past and the level of co-operation was unprecedented."

"It was a remarkable period for inter-organisational co-operation and I hope it has laid the foundation for future working."

However, some library services found it difficult to reach and work with partners during lockdown. This meant that services and support they had previously offered to residents were not available. For example, many residential care homes closed their doors to partners as part of the lockdown measures.

Other library services has led reassessed need in the community as a result of their experience of Covid-19 and this is leading them to reconsider what partnerships they need:

"If there is a second spike, who do we need to be in touch with about being a resource ... and being more involved in response stuff."

What Role Could Library Services Play in Rebuild/Refresh Efforts in Communities?


Heads of Service identified the following key areas where library services could make a contribution to communities in the wake of Covid-19:

- **Employment/economic development** – supporting jobseekers and people who are struggling financially.
- **Wellbeing and mental health** – responding to the psychological impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable people and supporting the community to recover from the experience.
- Some library services (particularly in Scotland) are also focussed on supporting schools and caregivers to **'bridge the gap' for children and young people** who have missed out on learning in the previous five months.

Several interviewees noted that Covid-19 had not changed the strategic priorities of library services, but that it had sharpened their focus and made them acutely aware of the levels of need and vulnerability in communities. Most services will be prioritising access to public PCs following initial reopening, to meet these needs, as well as one-stop-shops, skills for employability and job clubs. Those library services that offer British Intellectual Property Centres (BIPC) were planning to continue to develop support for new and small businesses.


 **“It hasn't changed our direction of travel.”**

One service mentioned adaptations to their public PC offer to support the new environment for job interviews and meetings with job coaches. They are installing a webcam on at least one of their ICT computers to enable people to have virtual meetings with their job coaches and/or job interviews. They have small rooms which are often used by CAB and other partners to support people and they are looking at turning them into private rooms for online interviews. Another service mentioned that they are going to provide everyone who doesn't have their own IT with their own personal headset to use in the library for video calls.

 **“We had a young girl sitting on the steps of the library with her mobile phone using the WiFi because she had just been made redundant and needed access to the computers to start her job hunt.”**

In terms of skills and employability, the experience of Covid-19 has renewed the focus on digital skills. Library services have seen the impact of the 'digital divide' in terms of the services and support that people can access and staff are very motivated to address these issues. Some are rolling out IT kit lending services or gifting services to disadvantaged individuals and families. Others are prioritising these skills in employability clubs and skills development support.

In order to support health and wellbeing, services are planning to work in partnership with local agencies to deliver multi-agency support. They are planning to build on the positive impact they had on mental health and wellbeing during lockdown and focus on the key preventive role of the library building in providing a place where people can go for support before they need to access clinical mental health and other support services. Some library services describe a specific focus on young people aged 16-24 in terms of the wellbeing agenda, because there is recognition that this is a very difficult time to be young and entering the labour market.

 **“Our strength going forward will be supporting wellbeing because it links the business as a whole.”**

Those library services focusing on literacy and education for children and young people anticipate that they will focus on those in greatest need, for example children attending Pupil Referral Units, Looked After Children and children from deprived areas. However, there are some concerns that the public may not wish to return to group sessions in the library building in the near future, particularly those with small children.

Library services were also seen as key ‘anchor institutions’ in town centres and smaller communities, to help attract the public back into public spaces and rebuild a sense of community and support retail and other commercial offers.

“Libraries need to embrace civic mobilisation and work with neighbourhood officers to expand their roles as places of social engagement at the heart of communities.”

“If we can get the partnership right with care homes, sheltered housing, some of our community organisations that organise the transport, once we get to the stage of bringing people back we can really be at the heart of the planning of the organisations that support communities. And really have the library as a hub for that. So I see that as an element of real growth.”

“Libraries are THE place in the community to come and access services, lots of other services deliver from the local library.”

There is also a desire for library services to model ‘normality’ for people and give them a break from the anxiety and fear that has been created during the pandemic.

“Let’s do something that sparks a bit of joy whether that’s creative art or projecting something rather than scurrying to shops and back.”

Many are looking to the future and using the experience of rapid innovation and creativity during Covid-19 to consider new ways of developing and delivering their services. This includes:

- Responding to the ‘**hyperlocal**’ trend away from city centres and into local communities – either looking to ensure that small community library buildings reopen or using mobile libraries and partnerships to allow people to access services in their community.
- Looking at how libraries can become **hubs** for the community as the country starts to recover.

- Library services providing **health and wellbeing support** to local authority staff as they respond to increased demand in the wake of Covid-19, as a crucial way of advocating for the service and bringing it into the council’s awareness.
- Increasingly moving to a **hybrid delivery model** which builds on the successes of digital engagement during lockdown but recognises the importance of physical interaction as well.
- Introducing a **charging model for digital events** similar to the model they use for face-to-face events.
- Broadening the home library service so that it is available to more people and has more of a formal **welfare element**.
- Developing and publicising community-building services such as “**Good Neighbour**” schemes which allow people to borrow books on the behalf of others.
- **Capitalising on the volunteer base** that has grown in response to Covid-19 and seeing if it can be redeployed to support library activities.
- Continuing ‘**order and collect**’ type services and looking at whether they could be chargeable services with a delivery element.

“The small branch libraries will become more important because people may not want to go into the city centre.”

“Are we going to retreat or are we fundamentally changed during this period?”

“We have increased access to e-books and e-audio and now have a strong digital book offer. This will continue to grow and the balance between paper and digital will tip in favour of digital.”

Some services have taken the opportunity to reassess how the library service is delivered and at least two library services will be restructuring in the near future. They expressed that they plan on using the learning from lockdown to inform their future service design and delivery plans.

“It’s forced us to think differently – we can do things that don’t look like a local authority service.”

“We are creating space to ask questions around what we can stop, start and continue.”

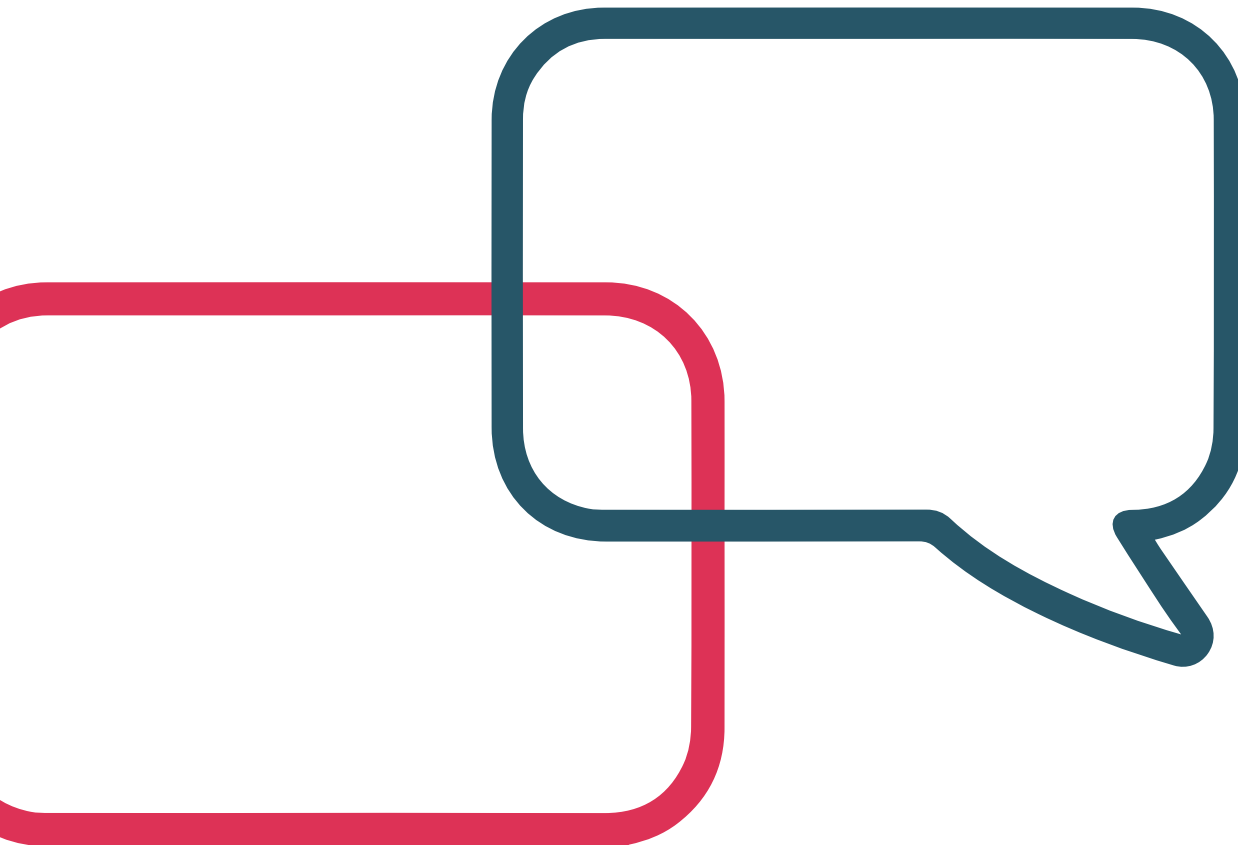
Some Heads of Service had concerns about how well the library service will be able to innovate and provide the services that people need in the context of social distancing and a limited physical service offer. There were particular concerns that local decision-makers may either feel that library services could be delivered exclusively online or that services could return to transactional book lending rather than the other services they offer.

“The one thing that has been restored [book collections] is the one thing that decision-makers think libraries are. While books and reading is still our most used service, we offer so much more, particularly in terms of wellbeing and employment support.”

Services were also anticipating increased financial pressures. Some services have already been contacted and asked to look at ways in which they can make savings in-year. Some local authorities are facing significant financial shortfalls and library services that operate as trusts which rely on earned income to subsidise library services also have significant funding gaps which may mean that services are retrenched, opening hours are rolled back and reopening of buildings is delayed. Yet others pointed out that in times of recession there is usually greater need for library services.

“We will need to have survived long enough to get back to that [normal service] properly.”

“Skills staff can have to help deal with this now will be a positive thing for us going forward because we will go into a heavy recession. The need for libraries will be strong as it ever has been.”




What Would Public Library Services need to Enable Them to Play This Role?


The main themes identified in terms of what the public library service needs to enable it to support rebuilding efforts were:

- Secure funding.
- Advocacy and recognition.
- National support for e-book lending and infrastructure.
- A continuing focus on service innovation.

SECURE FUNDING

The most pressing issue for most library services in rebuilding after the Covid-19 lockdown is funding. Although library services were not generally asking for funding increases, they were keen to have certainty in terms of the budget that they will be working with for the next few years. Unfortunately, they felt quite pessimistic about whether they will be able to achieve even this modest aim.

 **“What worries me now is we’ll be back in austerity and we’ll be fighting to keep what little we’ve got rather than developing the service.”**

 **“It is in times of economic recession that libraries are cut, and that is when they are needed most.”**

ADVOCACY AND RECOGNITION

Library services have appreciated the support from Arts Council England and the Northern Ireland and Welsh Governments for digital services during lockdown and they felt that this sends a message about the value that these organisations place on their services. The work that Libraries Connected has done to bring together advice and good practice to support library services in the pandemic was also appreciated.

However, Heads of Service felt there is still more that can be done across all jurisdictions to raise the profile of libraries and highlight the role that they have played in the Covid-19 response and in communities more generally. There was a concern that libraries are vulnerable, partly because they are not income generating, so in terms of the public purse and funds they are easy to cut.

Messages that Heads of Service would particularly like to see include:

- Emphasising the **role of the physical space** the library service provides **as well as digital services** in meeting community needs.
- Demonstrating that library services have a role to play in **tackling joblessness, mental health and isolation** which results in fewer acute cases further down the line.

There was a feeling that government will be busy and distracted in the next few months and years and that library services need to grab attention so that decision-makers fully understand their potential contribution. For example, library services would like their relevant government departments to take a strong line that library services are key community services and that they need to be restored as a priority.

NATIONAL SUPPORT FOR E-BOOK LENDING AND DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The rise in investment in e-books during the Covid-19 pandemic has brought perennial issues around e-book lending into sharp relief. E-books are expensive for library services to buy and the licenses are very restrictive. There is a desire for a central body to co-ordinate e-book licensing and lending, as currently happens in Wales, and to negotiate more favourable terms with publishers.

In addition, Heads of Service are calling for:

- Advice on what constitutes an appropriate level of e-book stock (“we can’t compete with Amazon”).
- Guidance on what ‘quality’ looks like in terms of a digital offer in a library service.
- Support to specify and maintain appropriate digital infrastructure, both public facing and for staff to ensure that they are ready and equipped for a future situation.
- Guidance and training for staff and the public in digital skills development.

Although services noticed that local content is appreciated by the public on social media, they saw the need for more national digital infrastructure that individual library services can build on.



“We have an ongoing battle about having the right quality IT and training to go alongside it.”

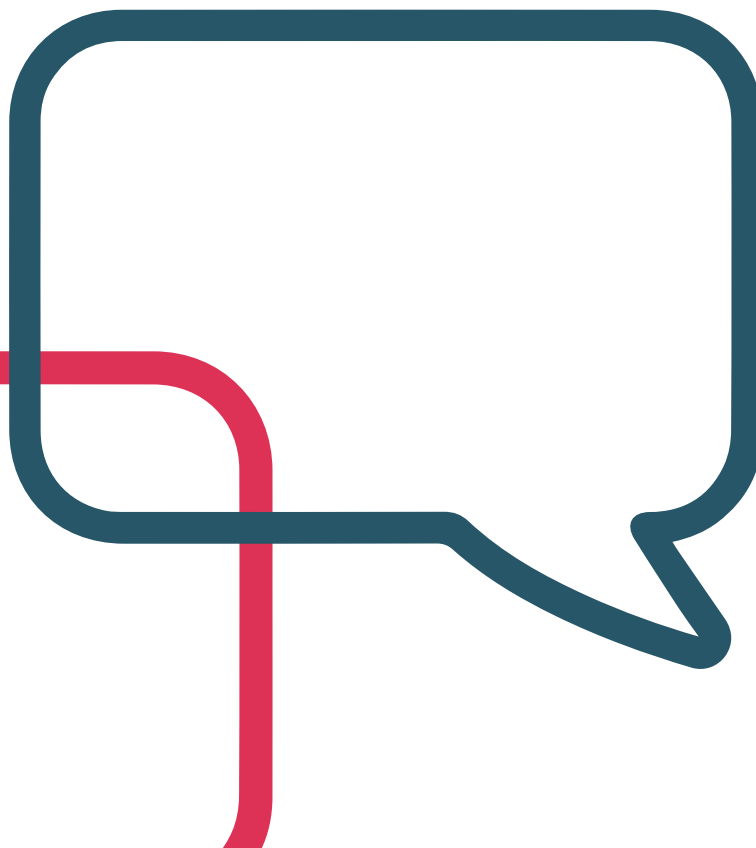


“We need certainty about where libraries are in terms of the balance between online and physical activities.”

A CONTINUING FOCUS ON SERVICE INNOVATION

Seeing the rapid changes that staff have been able to make to respond to Covid-19 has made Heads of Service more ambitious for their workforce. They expressed the desire to see staff remain imaginative, entrepreneurial and digitally connected. They also expressed the desire to retain the creative mind-set which encourages staff to ‘give it a go’ and test and learn as they develop the library offer.

Some Heads of Service also saw Covid-related library closures as an opportunity to repurpose the library estate so that environments are welcoming, fit for purpose in modern age and Covid-secure.



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