



**Libraries
Connected**

Libraries in lockdown:

Connecting Communities in
Crisis

October 2020



Acknowledgements

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Introduction from Carol Stump, President, Libraries Connected

When buildings shut in March, libraries did not stop supporting their communities. Online lending surged, with 3.5 million¹ more ebooks loaned by the end of July, library staff made thousands of calls to check up on vulnerable residents, clubbed together with charities to get books out to families, and were redeployed across local services responding to the crisis.

The experience of lockdown has highlighted the role of libraries and their staff in keeping communities connected and supporting the most vulnerable in our society. It has also demonstrated their skills, empathy and flexibility to meet the immediate and long-term changes in what their community needs, for example:

- Ongoing engagement with people at risk of isolation: Suffolk Libraries alone made 7,000 phone calls to library users while the building has been closed.
- Growth in digital offering: including rhyming and reading sessions for young children, instruction sessions to access online services, author led events, school readiness programmes, jobs and art clubs. These events averaged at around 1,000 views each, with some reaching over 20,000².
- Redeployment of library buildings and staff into community support hubs providing services such as volunteer support, coordination and delivery of shielding operations, arranging food deliveries, and contact centres for health and social care.
- Demonstrating innovation and creativity: Gateshead Libraries used their 3D printers to create visors and other PPE for local care homes and health centres.

The role of libraries will be crucial as we begin to see the longer-term impact of Coronavirus on our health, our economy and our society. The Libraries in Lockdown report demonstrates the amazing achievements of libraries during lockdown as well as some the challenges they faced, and continue to face, as they begin to reopen their buildings.

At Libraries Connected, we plan to focus our efforts on ensuring that we build a strong advocacy campaign, with key sector partners, to emphasise the vital role library services and buildings will play in community rebuilding after the pandemic. We will gather and share accurate information about the sector and its evolving needs to the key decisionmakers in central and local government.

We're all very concerned that the major risk for library services may come in the next few months and years, when local and national government budgets will be tight, and savings will have to be made. We need to begin to prepare now to meet these challenges.

Public libraries help people to access employment and job seeking skills; create support networks and local interventions for families, people at risk of isolation and people with chronic health needs; and engage children with reading and learning. We offer incredible value for money given all that we deliver.

¹ Libraries Connected analysis of Digital Content Aggregator Data

² Libraries Connected Evaluation of Libraries from Home activities



When I became President in June, I pledged to do all that I could to ensure that libraries are seen as part of the solution to recovery. We are uniquely placed, in the heart of our communities, to support a return to whatever the new normal looks like and we are determined to position libraries as a place to rebuild and reconnect. I'm excited that the learning from this report will enable us to position libraries to play an even greater role in shaping a more positive future for everyone.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Carol Stump", on a white background.

Carol Stump,
President, Libraries Connected



Key findings

Library membership and usage during lockdown

- Despite library buildings being closed for four months, library services managed to increase membership by up to 32%, while total library membership remained stable during this period
- Membership to access digital resources increased by 27% with some library services more than doubling the number of those signing up for these services
- Data collection about the demographic profile of new members is patchy and compounded by restrictions on collecting data from third-party platforms which libraries used to broadcast digital content
- Library services are concerned most about the impact of libraries being closed on those without internet access, people living alone and jobseekers.

#LibrariesfromHome – a dynamic response

- Digital lending increased significantly during lockdown. Ebook use increased by 146%. These increases were largely sustained as libraries re-opened.
- Despite the significant increases in digital lending, its scale is still small compared to lending of physical material.
- The increased investment in digital lending by library services may double its costs in this calendar year, which is unlikely to be sustainable.
- Over 75% of library services delivered #librariesfromhome events. More than half 56% increased their audience for events during lockdown, despite 63% saying they had limited experience in delivering events online. Many staff developed new skills and confidence in delivering online events.
- The impact of this digital engagement was beneficial for families and individuals in lockdown but may have exacerbated existing digital divides.
- Some library services were restricted in their digital engagement, particularly in the first weeks of lockdown by corporate policies, IT systems and lack of equipment.
- Even services with the strongest online offer recognise that the usability and interactivity of the digital public library offer still require huge improvement to match the most popular commercial retail and streaming services.

‘We reached new audiences who had previously thought digital was not for them including one 94-year-old who signed up for digital audio. An additional 2,160 residents joined online during lockdown so they could access digital offer, and we offered telephone digital support which was really successful. Elected members and senior officers realised the range of our digital offer. Staff learnt new digital skills very quickly. We realised we could do things we hadn't tried before, and I was reminded how creative, adaptable and capable our library staff are in a crisis!’



Remote library services – opportunity knocks

- Library staff demonstrated essential skills and capabilities, which were highly valued by councils in responding to the pandemic, particularly customer service and communication and for their flexible and collaborative approach to working with colleagues and partners
- 60% of services managed to continue delivering a Home Library Service, providing vital comfort and books to very vulnerable users
- Almost one in five library services operated an ‘enhanced’ Home Library Service open to more people, with additional support to help combat loneliness and improving digital skills
- The availability of older volunteers was a significant factor for many services in whether they could deliver a Home Library Service during lockdown
- Keep-in-touch (KIT) calls were a major intervention reaching 100,000s of people nationally, and showcasing library services and staff skills and knowledge to council colleagues
- Remote services will continue to be an important vehicle for creating a ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ service marrying the digital and physical offer to reach those who need library services most.

‘Many thanks to the member of library staff who very kindly delivered books to my mother. Like many older people, my mother loves her reading and being without books is a great loss in her life as they keep her mentally agile and helps her wellbeing. I know you are all working in very difficult circumstances so taking the time to get a good collection of books together and deliver them was really appreciated. Thank you’

How library staff supported the local pandemic response

- Redeployed library staff provided vital capacity to deliver the local pandemic response.
- Redeployment often generated a beneficial (two-way) integration of library staff with other council departments/services for supporting vulnerable people which will continue to produce value for councils in the future.
- Library staff were often singled out for praise by elected members and senior managers. Large volumes of calls and deliveries were made to residents although data collection varied.
- Opportunities were missed to use library staff skills more in some local authorities.

‘I want to pay tribute to my staff - they were superb. They came forward wanting to know what they could do. They saw the fact that they were serving their communities. It brought out staff skills not fully used previously. Some of them are real community leaders.’

Re-opening and recovery – learning from lockdown

- Regular users have welcomed re-opening and footfall is comparable to wider high-street patterns.
- Many library services have built up their offer gradually and are now offering browsing in addition to click-and-collect and PC access by appointment. However, there is a wide divergence between library service recovery strategies and services on offer, which may be confusing for the public.

- 'Blended' or 'hybrid' models of provision are emerging to meet the challenges of ongoing distancing conditions which offer exciting opportunities. However, these have resource implications which will entail planning and prioritisation especially if local lockdowns continue for the foreseeable future.
- The pandemic has inevitably increased the pressure on local authority funding and this poses a significant risk to library services.

'My concern coming out of this is that... we are about to enter a brutal round of public finances - I cannot expand due to capacity and organisational reasons, the public expect us to, and I know what's likely to come... I also am personally struggling with the fact that the entire job now is about risk management and safety... it is extremely challenging and draining to be where I am and it isn't sustainable long term. I feel really conflicted that I now actively stop people using the service I have given my entire career to.'



1. New frontiers for public libraries?

Context

Public libraries have the broadest reach and usage of any cultural sector in the UK. Although public debate about the state of public libraries often focuses on the decline in usage, closures and claims of a crisis of identity for libraries, this reach is still significant, with 3,583 libraries and 226m visits over the last year (CIPFA 2019), a third of the population visiting a library at least once, with a user base which broadly reflects the UK population (DCMS Taking Part 2019).

The evidence from our research shows that during lockdown the majority of library services responded to the shuttering of library buildings by innovating online, upskilling staff and reaching out to their communities in ways which had a profound impact for communities, genuinely saving lives in many cases.

Yet the Institute for Fiscal Studies have now warned of a council funding shortfall as big as £2bn in the current financial year alone, due to the increased costs of services such as social care and a decrease in income.³ The LGA estimates that the funding gap may be as large as £9.8 billion by 2023/24.⁴ Another study suggests that 131 English councils face bankruptcy or cuts because of the pandemic.⁵

Libraries' experience of lockdown therefore presents a particularly acute set of challenges and important questions about digital and in-person services. With social distancing restrictions now in place until at least Spring 2021 and likely beyond, significant change is the emerging trend in our research, but different scenarios could emerge for public libraries which need to be considered.

Libraries' experience during lockdown points to a potential renaissance, in which the huge contribution made towards supporting communities during this unprecedented crisis puts them front-and-centre of communities' social and economic recovery. Opportunities for extending digital engagement are married with library staff's strengths in supporting wellbeing for individuals, combatting isolation and bringing people together, while potentially reinventing how the library offer is delivered physically as well as digitally.

Such an outcome is obviously not a given. As well as pressure on budgets, the library sector is not alone in wondering to what extent customer habits may be changed permanently by the pandemic, similar to discussions raised in other cultural sectors like cinema and theatre.

The evidence in this report is encouraging but charting a course towards a more positive future for libraries will continue to require the considerable leadership and collaboration within the sector that it demonstrated during lockdown. It will also require a commitment to funding, investment and partnership from government, to ensure that the benefits of the strongest library services become the standard which the public can expect wherever they live.

³ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14977>

⁴ <https://www.local.gov.uk/re-thinking-public-finances>

⁵ <https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/why-the-government-needs-to-pay-up-before-levelling-up>



The lockdown timeline for public libraries

The timeline affecting UK library services was complex, with the English, Welsh and Northern Irish governments issuing separate guidelines at different times. Table 1.1 provides some of the key milestones which set the context for these nuances which we refer to during the report but have not been explored in detail.

Table 1.1: Public libraries timeline during lockdown

Date	Key events
w/c 9 March	Public libraries begin to restrict services, reduce hours and close some branches.
20 March	Northern Ireland libraries begin to close.
23 March	English public libraries required to close under Government announcement of national lockdowns.
1 April	Announcement of additional funds for digital resources in Wales by Welsh Government.
7 April	Libraries Connected launches #LibrariesfromHome website.
23 April	Announcement of additional funds for digital resources in England by ACE.
8 May	First Minister Mark Drakeford announces that Libraries in Wales can begin to plan to re-open.
11 May	Welsh Government Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) amended to allow libraries to reopen.
Early June	First library services reopen in Torfaen and Cardiff. Other Welsh libraries begin opening over the course of the month.
29 June	Libraries Connected publishes Service Recovery Toolkit.
4 July	English libraries permitted to re-open under UK Government roadmap.
13 July	Welsh Government publishes guidance on re-opening cultural sector including libraries.
16 July	Joint DCMS/LGA letter to Councils on public library service recovery (see Appendix iv).
20 July	Northern Ireland libraries start to re-open.

Purpose of the report

This research report explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on public library services across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands. Our findings reveal the scale and scope of libraries' support for communities during the lockdown despite physical libraries being entirely closed. They also highlight some of the challenges and barriers which library staff experienced in trying to do more for their communities.

Our recommendations are intended to inform policymaking about service recovery; gaps in provision and support for vulnerable groups; and strategic policymaking as government and councils address the likely funding crisis and requirements to reconfigure local services. It also complements other research underway within the sector during the second half of 2020, including LGA case studies and the Carnegie Trust workforce and public attitudes survey.⁶

Background to the report

The research aims to address questions about the services which libraries were able to continue online, and what factors acted as enablers or barriers. It also explores how public library staff were redeployed by councils to support the pandemic response, and what skills and experience were most valued by councils. Our research questions focused on:

- The extent of digital engagement and use of digital library services during the lockdown
- What lessons can be learned from gaps in provision, particularly among vulnerable groups
- How redeployed staff were used to deliver other services during the lockdown.

Structure of the report

Each section of the report follows a consistent structure:

- **Key findings** summarising our interpretation of the data
- **Detailed analysis** of the data from our survey, interviews and other datasets
- **Short 'postcards'** from heads of service, illustrating the key findings and the range of experience across the country and feedback from colleagues and users
- **Seven case studies** across the report telling a fuller picture of the major stories and successes which emerge from the research
- **Recommendations** for national and local governments, sector bodies, and library services.

⁶ *Making a Difference: Libraries, lockdown and looking ahead, Carnegie UK Trust, Oct 2020.*



2. Methodology

Research plan

In investigating how libraries were able to support their communities during lockdown we framed our approach through the following research questions:

- What particular benefits did libraries deliver and what public health risks did they help to mitigate?
- What lessons can be learned from gaps in provision, particularly among vulnerable groups?
- What does their contribution tell us about the potential role of libraries in lockdown and recovery?

We particularly asked:

- How did the lockdown audience compare to the usual audience?
- Who missed out or was left behind?
- What skills and assets enabled services to continue?
- What barriers did services meet in trying to deliver services?
- What partnerships were paused?
- What skills and capacities were valued in library staff?

We structured our research around three key areas:

- The extent of digital engagement and use of digital library services during the lockdown
- Libraries' efforts to continue delivering services to their users
- How redeployed staff were used to contribute to the local pandemic response.

Our research plan comprised a mixed methodology including a survey of all heads of service in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, interviews with a sample of heads of service and an analysis of available provider data about digital resource usage during lockdown.

Survey

Heads of library services were asked to complete a 30-minute online survey exploring the impact of libraries during the lockdown.

The response data generated has provided vital quantitative and qualitative evidence to help with future strategic planning. It is also intended to be used to help positively inform national stakeholders, and assist Libraries Connected in ensuring library services can access the best possible support and advice in the future.

The survey questions explored audience engagement, the services that were able to be provided during lockdown, staff redeployment and advice, and the perceptions of the support on offer to help heads of service manage library services during the lockdown.

A PDF copy of the survey is available from the Activist website: <https://www.activistgroup.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/LC.pdf>.

The survey attracted 132 responses (see Appendix i for a summary of the survey responses by region). Survey responses covered all governance models: local authority in-house services, commissioned services (both charitable and private sector), arms-length bodies and shared services. A summary of the survey responses, split by governance model, is shown in Appendix ii.



Interviews

Video interviews were conducted with 18 individual heads of service (or managers with libraries within a wider portfolio). We also gathered data from many other Heads of Services informally, who shared their thoughts and experiences in confidence. For the full list, please see Appendix iii.

Libraries Connected and Activist Group would like to thank all Heads of Service and library staff who offered us their valuable time, energy and thoughtful contributions towards the findings and recommendations made in this research report, while working at such a challenging time.

Provider data

RBdigital kindly supplied Libraries Connected with usage data for the lockdown period. While not fully reflecting the entire market's data, this data from one of the sector's main providers offers valuable insight into library users' behaviours and trends in usage during lockdown.

3. Library membership and usage during lockdown

Introduction

While library buildings were closed, people were only able to join online to access many library resources, although much of the guidance and information libraries provide online is available without needing to sign up. Library membership is counted in different ways, with 'active membership' being calculated on a rolling basis year-on-year, while digital memberships are registered separately to access licensed services like ebooks. In this section we focus on how libraries signed up new members for digital services.

Key findings

- Despite library buildings being closed for four months, library services managed to increase membership by up to 32%, while total library membership remained stable during this period
- Membership to access digital resources increased by 27% with some library services more than doubling the number of those signing up for these services
- Data collection about the demographic profile of new members is patchy and compounded by restrictions on collecting data from third-party platforms which libraries used to broadcast digital content
- Library services are most concerned about the impact of libraries being closed on those without internet access, people living alone and jobseekers.

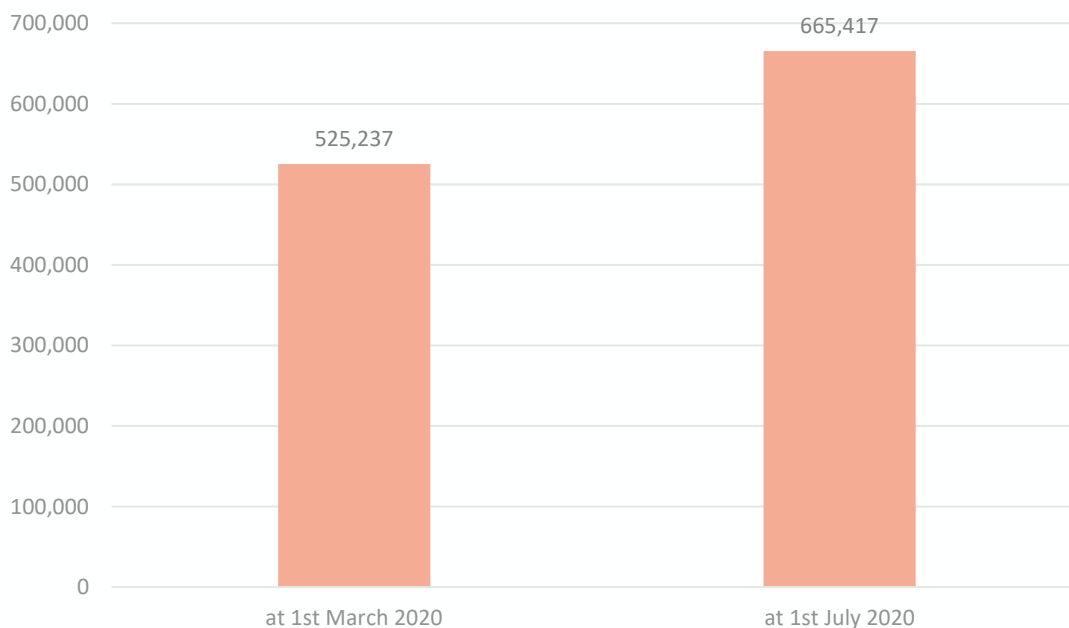
Library membership

Overall library membership held fairly steady during the lockdown, considering physical services were closed for four months. Of 92 services who provided figures, total membership declined by 1% between 1 March and 1 July. Across the country, this picture masks a significant range between those services whose membership increased significantly (by up to 32%), and those whose membership fell (by up to 24%). The decreases were often due to special factors, such as services taking the opportunity in the lockdown to cleanse their membership database. See appendix v for a summary of the differences in membership levels between authorities.



Library members signing up for digital resources

Figure 3.1: Increase in digital sign-ups after the national lockdown in 2020



User demographics and library data collection

Of 110 respondents, 70 (64%) said they collected no data about new members who signed up online during the lockdown. 40 (36%) said they did collect demographic data for these members.

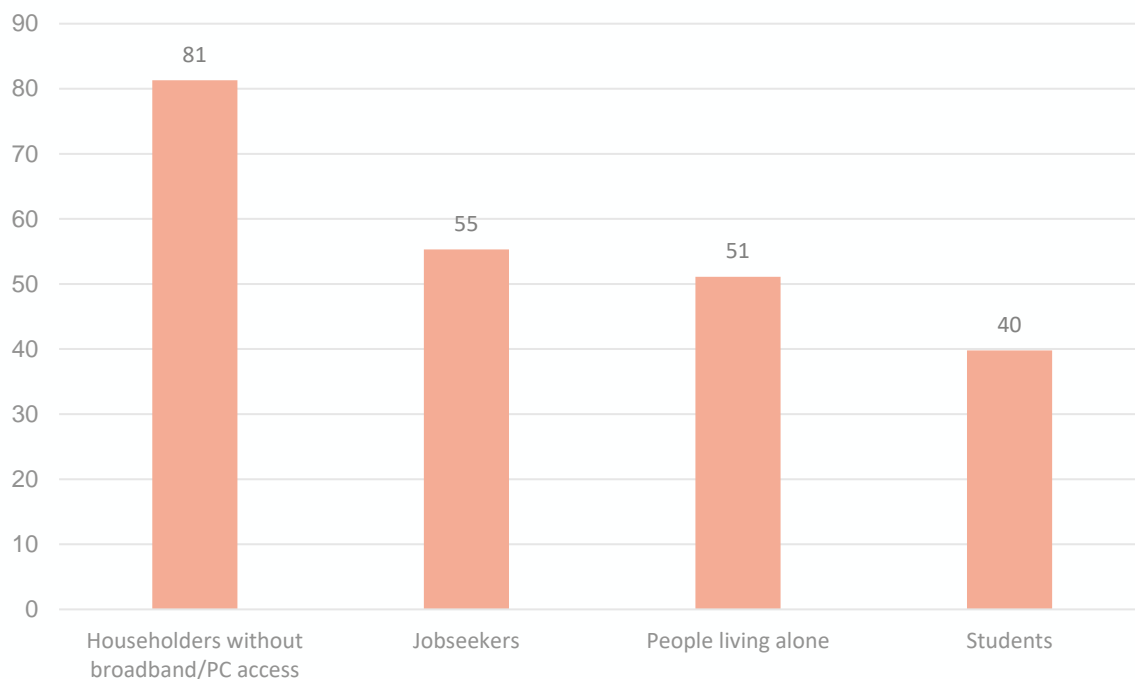
Of those who did collect demographic data only age and gender were being collected by most services. Ethnicity was being monitored by 35%, sexuality by 16% and employment status by 2%.

An even smaller number of services (24) were able to estimate the change in membership levels among different demographic groups, underlining a potential gap in data and intelligence about users.

Generally, respondents said that the impact on their ability to reach most groups was neither positive nor negative, with small minorities reporting both 'very positive' for some groups (e.g. older people (13%)) and very negative (older people (12%)).

In contrast, respondents were clear that the impact of a lack of physical library services on many groups was high (rated 5), particularly for people living alone (51%), jobseekers (55%) and households without internet/computer access (81%). Lowest impact (rated 1-2) were for local businesses (38%), freelance workers (28%) and rural communities (23%)

Figure 3.2: User groups experiencing most impact due to lack of access to services



These figures point to a significant challenge for library services. Many have taken the positive decision, either as general policy, or a response to the lockdown, to make sign-up as easy as possible, with as few barriers as possible. However, the absence of demographic data about users will impact on libraries' ability to target services according to need and monitor the impact of service changes on particular groups within the community. Clearly a balance needs to be struck between these two priorities, now that the immediate crisis is receding.

Furthermore, while data aggregators are providing increasingly useful local data on usage, third-party platforms which took off as part of the digital offer, such as Facebook and YouTube, present challenges in monitoring and analysing audiences in a way that would help library services tailor their offer.

4. #LibrariesfromHome – a dynamic response

Introduction

As in other areas of cultural consumption and community services during the lockdown, public libraries expanded their digital services to support users in a number of ways, which demonstrate the impact and potential of the digital offer, while also underlining how much physical services were missed by many people.

The market for online resources, particularly ebooks has developed significantly in recent years, although there the costs and licensing models for online publications are considerably higher.

Equally important to the library offer, many services moved physical events online, often exploring digital meeting and broadcasting platforms for the first time. In this section we explore evidence of the scale and impacts of these trends during the lockdown, and their implication for the future direction of library services.

Key findings

- Digital lending increased significantly during lockdown. Ebook use increased by 146%. These increases were largely sustained as libraries re-opened.
- Despite the significant increases in digital lending, its scale is still small compared to lending of physical material.
- The increased investment in digital lending by library services may double its costs in this calendar year, which is unlikely to be sustainable.
- Over 75% of library services delivered #librariesfromhome events. More than half 56% increased their audience for events during lockdown, despite 63% saying they had limited experience in delivering events online. Many staff developed new skills and confidence in delivering online events.
- The impact of this digital engagement was beneficial for families and individuals in lockdown but may have exacerbated existing digital divides.
- Some library services were restricted in their digital engagement, particularly in the first weeks of lockdown by corporate policies, IT systems and lack of equipment.
- Even services with the strongest online offer recognise that the usability and interactivity of the digital public library offer still requires significant improvement to match popular commercial retail and streaming services.

Digital lending patterns

Lockdown saw significant increases in digital lending by public libraries. This was evident very early in the lockdown and widely reported in the media.⁷ In England, ACE provided £150,000 to expand ebook collections. The Welsh Government provided an additional £250,000 for ebooks in Welsh library services. In March 2020, Libraries NI invested an additional £783,540 in ebooks. Many other services invested additional resources from their own budgets to increase availability of the most popular titles.⁸

Our survey asked public libraries to provide figures on checkouts of online resources in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period last year. The following section details the total percentage for each of these and the range across all library services who provided figures. Important factors influencing the performance of some library services include when they started offering new online resources.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-52368191>.

⁸ *In Wales a single consortium operates for ebook licences via Borrowbox.*

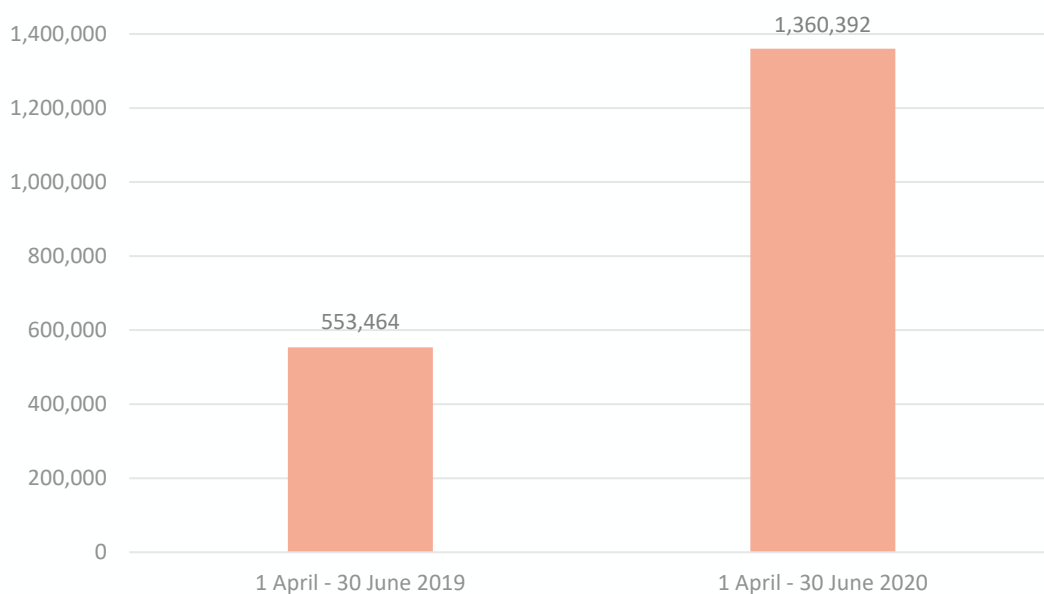


Many services are now investigating how they can tackle the evident problem of digital exclusion among residents who are most in need and isolated, providing equipment and training to help them access the digital offer.

Ebook checkouts

Based on our survey, among the 100 services which provided data, ebook usage increased by 146%. Increases in individual services ranged between 38% and 714% (see Appendix v for more on the variations between authorities).

Figure 4.1: Increase in ebook checkouts during lockdown



Bolinda (one of the UK market's main online resource providers) reported a 110% increase in total loans compared to the same period in 2019.⁹

Figures provided by RBdigital (with around 25% of the UK market) reveal the pattern of lending week by week during the lockdown. This shows that ebook and audiobook checkouts increased rapidly during the first weeks of lockdown until the week beginning 10 April when they reached a peak. These increases were sustained until early May, and have, since libraries started to re-open, seen only a modest decrease to stand at 10,791 active ebook users and 15,928 active audiobook users in the week commencing 14 August.

⁹ <https://gov.wales/libraries-introduce-click-and-collect-service>



Table 4.1: Snapshot of active users supplied by RBdigital¹⁰

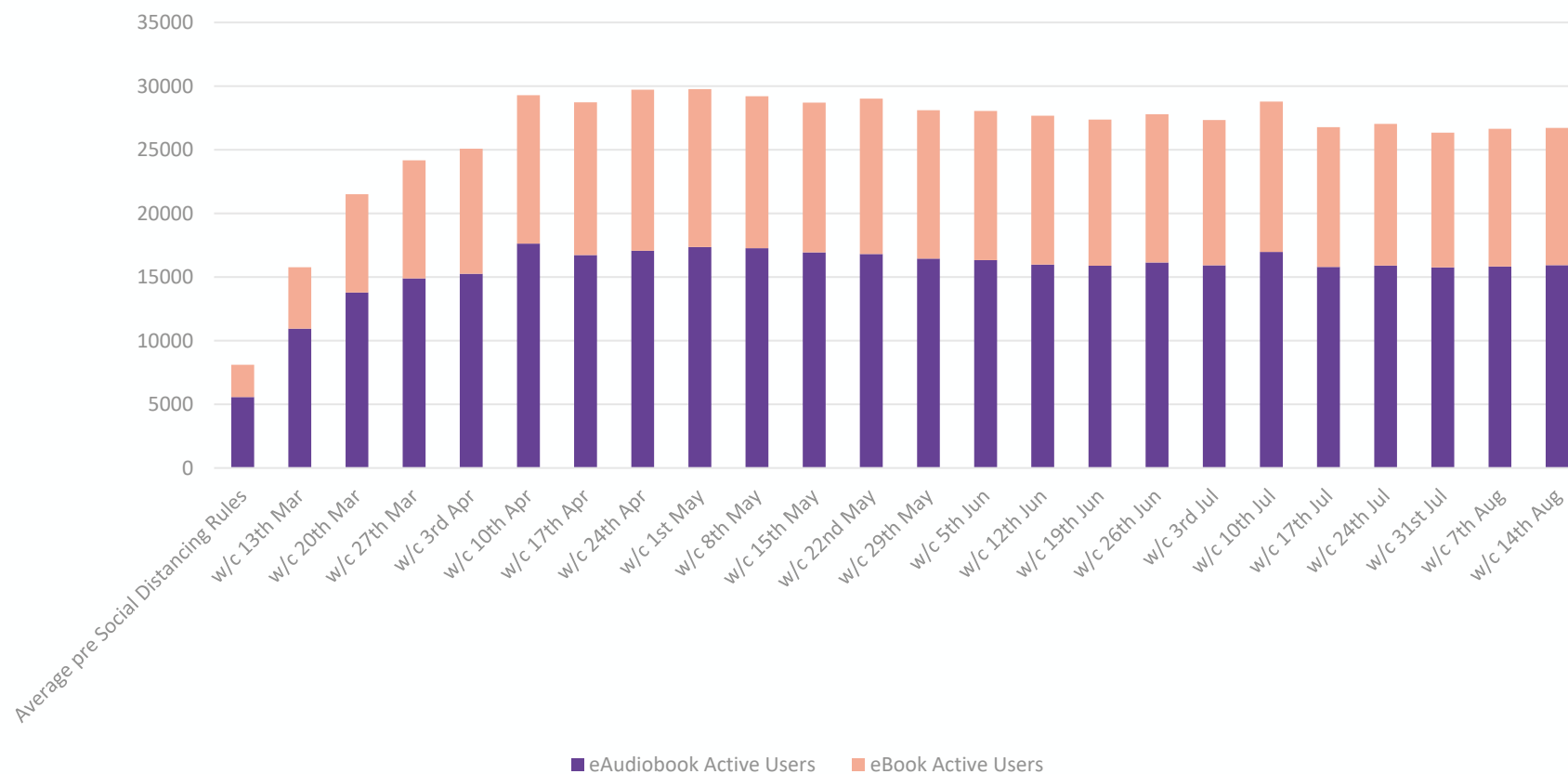
Product	Average pre social distancing rules	w/c 13 Mar	w/c 14 Aug	Increase ¹¹
Audiobook active users	5,566	10,942	15,928	+186%
Ebook active users	2,544	4,833	10,791	+324%
Magazine active users	66,857	68,790	85,243	+28%
Comic active users	247	324	647	+162%
Total	75,213	84,889	112,609	+50%

¹⁰ Source: 'RBdigital COVID-19 analysis 27.08.2020', shared with Libraries Connected.

¹¹ Percentage increase from pre-social distancing average to w/c 14 Aug.



Figure 4.2: RBdigital data on active book users from March to August 2020¹²

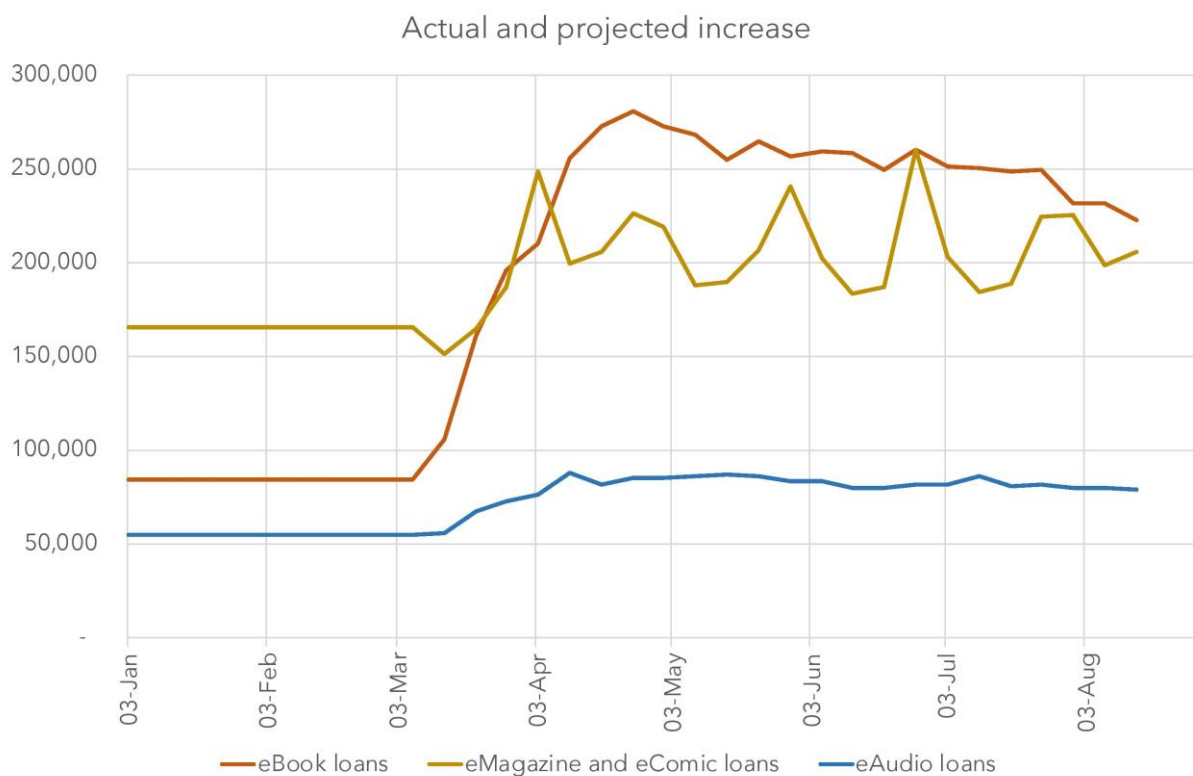


¹² Source: 'RBdigital COVID-19 analysis 27.08.2020', shared with Libraries Connected.



Using the available data, Libraries Connected estimated that levels of borrowing continued to remain at or above the levels of 10 April for ebooks and around the same level for audiobooks – see Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 4.3: Libraries Connected analysis of RBdigital data – August 2020



Libraries Connected's initial analysis identified and developed a model showing the projected need and use in lockdown, assuming a level plateau at 10 April. This continued until the start of July, before tapering back to the previous level, with additional increases of 25%-50% to factor in an expected permanent change in service users' reading habits.

This suggests that digital borrowing was not just a 'fad' at the start of lockdown. After experiencing an initial surge, the higher level of demand has been sustained.

These patterns are broadly consistent with other research on digital cultural consumption during lockdown, for example TV, film and performing arts streaming and purchasing (see for example CIPEC, Digital Culture: consumption in lockdown, August 2020).

Libraries Connected's analysis suggests the increased cost of providing this unprecedented access to online lending could exceed current annual spending of £4m on online resources. Heads of library services are therefore concerned that this additional investment may not be sustainable, particularly as budgets come under pressure. As the current licensing model continues to operate restrictively for public libraries, public expectation of availability increases may outstrip supply. This is particularly the case for children's ebooks where traditionally the demand for these has been lower than for adult titles.

Lending of other online resources also saw large increases in checkouts during lockdown. The survey revealed:

- Audiobook checkouts during lockdown increased by 113%
- Magazine checkouts increased by 80%

- Newspaper checkouts increased by 223%
- Comic checkouts increased by 497%.

Again there were substantial variations between authorities (see appendix v). While the increases were often from a low base, some other authorities already had a mature digital platform and user base from which they could expand rapidly.

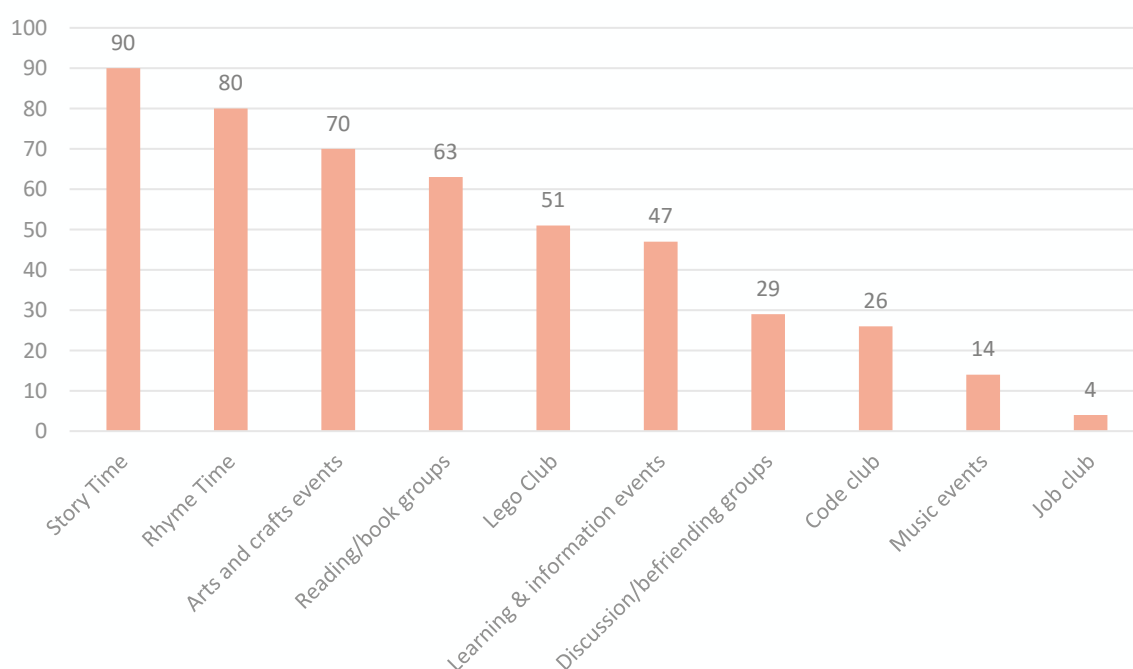
#LibrariesfromHome events online

Week-in and week-out, physical events in public libraries span an enormous range of activities, from book-based groups to arts, crafts, hacking and coding and support for health and wellbeing and employment. Delivering events online during lockdown enabled many library services to keep in touch with users and reach new audiences.

This was a major innovation for most services which revealed untapped staff skills and resourcefulness, but also presented many challenges, which we explore in this section. Some of these activities, for example online storytimes, were only possible because Libraries Connected and individual library services were able to negotiate relaxed copyright restrictions with publishers.

Over 75% of library services (104 of 132 respondents) were delivering #LibrariesfromHome events during lockdown. Storytimes, rhymetimes, arts and crafts, reading/book groups and Lego clubs were the activities programmed by the most library services (over 50% of 104 total respondents).

Figure 4.4: the number of authorities delivering #LibrariesfromHome events



Slightly more than half of library services (56%) managed to increase their event audience online compared to their physical programme while 44% reached fewer people.

A number of factors influenced the quantity and quality of online events that libraries were able to deliver. A good social media presence (80%), strong staff digital skills (77%) and strong senior management/political support (68%) were most important.

The survey asked for free text responses about the types of impacts they had seen from delivering #LibrariesfromHome events, some of which we quote below. Common examples were:

- Online events raised the profile and reputation of the library service with elected members and senior officers, specifically as an asset or exemplar service during the pandemic
- They raised the library service's profile within the community as a different channel of communication and support
- They brought staff together, helped them develop new skills, and supported their own wellbeing
- They highlighted gaps in digital capacity and skills, and low levels of online resources and licences in some places
- The audience for online events was often significantly different to physical events, for example more women participating, or engaging with people who might not usually have come to a library building
- Many services are now re-thinking options for digital provision in the future to build on the lockdown experience and address the reality of the digital divide.

'The new, expanded digital offer by the library service was seen by senior council officers and the Chief Executive as 'exemplar'. It was regularly referenced in internal communications as a good example of how the library service was pro-active in using digital as a means of interacting with citizens and providing much needed support and service delivery during these difficult times.'

'Staff gained a lot of digital skills and confidence. Some staff had never been on social media and loved the new world presented to them and accessed far beyond work. This helped combat social isolation of staff and we were able to get devices to staff to engage online if we felt they were particularly digitally isolated.'

Impacts for the community of #LibrariesfromHome events included the following:

- Strong positive feedback from users for online library services, and anecdotal evidence of profound benefits for individual and family wellbeing
- Clear and widespread reporting of concern about the impact of poor digital access, including connectivity, equipment, skills and motivation within the community, making digital library services 'niche' even if use has increased
- The potential for the public to become more involved in running library events.

'I think [online Code Club is] a great success. My two 10-year-olds thoroughly enjoyed the projects and on completion happily searched for more to do that were more complex once they had gained their confidence.'

'[Rhymetime online is] Great! My daughter grumbles every time we pass our library as she misses wriggles so much!'

'This is brilliant we will be watching every week'

'I introduced my elderly auntie to Borrowbox who, being registered blind and mostly housebound, is a real boon for her. Thanks everyone involved in this service that helps avoid mental health issues!'

'My life became even more difficult when I had a stroke which badly affected my eyesight. I couldn't read at all! Thanks to your audiobook service, I was able to distract myself from the worry and stress and keep myself on an even keel. So you can see how your wonderful Library Service helps one person to feel human in adversity!'

'Joining this [online reading] group is the best thing I have done for me for years. It has made the world of difference to me, even more so in the present circumstances. I just love it.'

Library services received particularly strong feedback from parents and families that online resources, #LibrariesfromHome events, and newsletters and other communication from library staff, made an enormous contribution to supporting learning and home schooling during the lockdown.

'Thank you for the amazing online library resources which you have built up at no additional costs to the user. It's so good to be able to offer this to the school community at a time when I think [they] will be appreciated possibly for the first time by many families.' [Feedback from a schoolteacher]

'Feedback tells us it helped parents home-schooling children, seeing staff provided a touch of normality, the activities and econtent gave people something productive to do'

'The service supported the delivery of laptops to a large number of vulnerable children to support online learning.'

'Parents posted that their children were learning new language and skills by watching and participating in Singing Bears, and that seeing familiar faces and hearing familiar rhymes gave a slice of 'normality' to the children who would usually visit the library.'

The #LibrariesfromHome experience required staff to adapt quickly and learn new skills. The first weeks of the lockdown were often challenging, with staff trying to overcome barriers to making content, getting it online and reaching audiences. A number of key barriers were cited by heads of service, 'limited experience in delivering events online' (66%), 'inflexible IT systems' (47%) and 'staff redeployment' (37%) were the most frequently cited.

'My council had a complete comms lockdown. We weren't allowed to do marketing or use social media unless it was signed off centrally. So we weren't able to communicate the digital offer for about three weeks. I learned that as long as you didn't mention COVID or a change of service you could do things. Gradually we found some work-arounds but it was frustrating when I saw what other library services were able to do to build an online audience.'

'People without means to digital have been impacted really negatively - They were not able to borrow books for nearly four months, they did not have access to our virtual services nor could they keep in touch with families or apply for jobs. Many children from low income families were unable to take part in the activities that we moved online or get support to participate in Summer Reading Challenge. We were also unable to run our fit, fed, read programme,



which would have ensured children from low income families would also be provided with food to support their health and well-being.'

Case study 1: Suffolk Libraries - lockdown as a platform for a digital revolution in libraries

Summary

Suffolk Libraries entered lockdown with a strong digital service and were able to deliver significant online content during lockdown which is now at the heart of a new recovery strategy for a layered approach to meeting local needs at a granular level.

Scope

Lockdown meant losing the most powerful part of what Suffolk Libraries provide beyond book lending - a programme of 15,000 physical events annually across 44 sites with over 200,000 attendances, meeting very specific local needs particularly in health and wellbeing. During lockdown they reached over 2,300 people through Facebook Live events every day for three months online.

They began by asking what staff could contribute in terms of online content, conducting a skills audit, deploying those who were ready and offering skills training to others. All libraries already had their own Facebook pages and could therefore create content to engage their local communities. They created a total of just over 2,500 live streamed sessions between March and June engaging nearly 100,000 people.

They also considered what they could do for those unable to access digital content, particularly vulnerable and elderly people. Between March and June they made over 6,700 targeted calls to those they knew would benefit most, recording call details using Google forms. They described it as 'the most impactful thing we did during lockdown'. The calls have continued and to date staff have made more than 8,000.

What's unique

Having invested in a strong digital offer as the first library spin-out Suffolk could take advantage of their independence from the Council's website. Following lockdown their own website was transformed in a matter of days to reflect the new digital offer. Yet Bruce Leeke is far from complacent. 'Our public facing site is good, but it's still not good enough or totally reflective of the breadth of our offer. In lockdown more than ever we were competing with Netflix and YouTube.'

Suffolk understands that data continues to be a huge challenge. Just one branch library, Southwold, reached an average of 500 people per event with users coming from as far as Australia. But getting valuable user data for marketing beyond this is difficult through third party platforms.

Results

Now this approach is at the heart of the service's new strategic plan, which is a 'layered' offer aiming to join up services to meet user needs rather than a reaction to an emergency situation. As Bruce says, 'If you're an older vulnerable person - what is your route into the library now? What tech do you need? Can we support that process from our IT team? In this uncertain new world what could we be doing to offer new services to local people?'

Key learning point

'We've got to make sure that we look at staff skills in a completely different way to deliver a layered service and be as adaptable and flexible as possible. Our aim is to continue to keep people happy, healthy and together.'

5. Remote library services – opportunity knocks

Introduction

In this section we look at responses from library services about the remote services they were still able to deliver during the lockdown, principally home library services (HLS), school library services (SLS), and keep-in-touch calls (KIT calls). Remote library services were important for maintaining contact with users, particularly vulnerable people during the lockdown. They also presented opportunities to support those without digital access.

Key findings

- Library staff demonstrated essential skills and capabilities, which were highly valued by councils in responding to the pandemic, particularly customer service and communication and for their flexible and collaborative approach to working with colleagues and partners
- 60% of services managed to continue delivering a Home Library Service, providing vital comfort and books to very vulnerable users
- Almost one in five library services operated an ‘enhanced’ Home Library Service open to more people, with additional support to help combat loneliness and improving digital skills
- The availability of older volunteers was a significant factor for many services in whether they could deliver a Home Library Service during lockdown
- Keep-in-touch (KIT) calls were a major intervention reaching 100,000s of people nationally, and showcasing library services and staff skills and knowledge to council colleagues
- Remote services will continue to be an important vehicle for creating a ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ service marrying the digital and physical offer to reach those who need library services most.

Keep-in-touch (KIT) or ‘befriending’ calls

KIT calls were widely used by councils and voluntary organisations to offer support and comfort to shielding, isolated and vulnerable citizens during the lockdown. Many library services delivered these calls either directly within the library service structure, or while redeployed to other council teams.

The impact for communities and staff was profound, with many instances of vital interventions to combat isolation and mental health problems, and ensure people were able to access essential services. These were often challenging situations for staff but enabled many to build on existing skills and see the contribution of the library service to the community in a new light.

From 72 survey respondents who were able to give figures for the number of KIT calls they made, a total of 131,425 calls were made in the period between 1 March and 30 June, reaching 83,427 individuals. Several services made over 10,000 calls.

The key skills and assets which libraries said helped them deliver KIT calls were ‘strong communication skills (84%), ‘availability of skilled staff’ (82%) and strong senior management/political support (55%). The main barriers they experienced were ‘staff redeployed to urgent COVID activity’ (40%), ‘staff absence’ (30%) and ‘restrictive corporate policies’ (13%).

‘One lady died and her quite elderly son who lived with her was bereft. We made daily calls to help him through his grief as he needed to talk to someone he knew but could not go out and had no one to speak to.’



‘People really appreciated that someone cared enough to ring and check on them. It lifted spirits and made vulnerable residents feel supported. Many made use of our digital offer and now want to meet those library staff who phoned them and will visit the library.’



Case study 2: Barnsley Libraries - the empathy and resilience of library staff

Summary

During lockdown the majority of library staff supported the pandemic response by taking on keep-in-touch calls. The experience was often emotional and stressful but staff are already bringing the learning back to their work now libraries have reopened.

Scope

Initially library staff made befriending calls to people identified as wanting support. Over three months they spoke to 70 people, sometimes daily, building up a relationship with them, often being the only person they would speak to. Calls were scheduled, and followed up if not answered, staff even visiting to check if residents were safe.

Library staff were then asked to take on a wider set of calls of vulnerable people on behalf of the council and NHS. Library staff treated each call as an individual offer of help and assisted many people to resolve their problems and access services. They provided links to other support networks including food banks and primary care. 20,000 calls were made to nearly 12,000 households, of which 8323 were reached, making 356 referrals to help access vital support. A further 816 people who they couldn't reach received a visit from other teams. Outcomes were automatically sent to GPs for shielding patients, and staff were able to flag those requiring further support from primary care. As library staff returned to normal duties, anyone who still needed support was referred to other services to continue with the befriending calls.

What's unique

Library staff were valued because of their customer contact skills. The experience gave staff more confidence but it was emotionally challenging, helping people who were feeling suicidal or in one case a lady entitled to food help who hadn't eaten for three days. One member of staff recalled: 'I've just been talking to an amazing lady - she's a care worker managing to juggle looking after her clients, but doing so from home as she cares for her dad who's dying of cancer. I'm taking a break after that.'

Positive feedback on the calls often left staff feeling overwhelmed. This work has done a lot for the profile of the library service in the Council and the team were put forward for a recognition award. It has brought staff closer together. They also learned more about technology having been thrown in at the deep-end working from home at the beginning of the lockdown. Kathryn Green, Head of Library Services, says 'We've never taken on such a big project with these partners, and it's shown what library service staff could achieve for the NHS and CCG.'

Results

Crucially, Barnsley now have an individual level picture of who has been contacted, when they were contacted, and what their outcomes were. Now that Barnsley libraries have reopened staff are bringing back this experience to enhance their customer service role having seen its impact in such close focus.

Key learning point

Kathryn says 'As we welcome people back gradually, we're caught between wanting to do more and doing things safely, starting with the foundations. When we start up more with events we can show we're ready to take things on as a partner who can deliver for health and social care.'

For further information

<https://www.barnsley.gov.uk/services/libraries/>

School library services

There are currently 69 school library services (SLS) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the majority of which are provided by public library services. For many library services these are seen as essential and operate as a paid-for offer to schools. With most schools operating online lessons only, except for



children of key workers and vulnerable pupils, opportunities to continue delivering an SLS during lockdown were limited. Of 28 survey respondents who are SLS providers, 19 offered a restricted or no service during lockdown, and nine provided a standard or enhanced service.

Among those who managed to offer a 'standard' or 'enhanced' service, examples were cited of increased use of their online resources, use of social media to contact school staff, and the importance of maintaining engagement with schools. Others offered book boxes to schools as an alternative.

Services which delivered an SLS during lockdown cited 'availability of skilled staff' (62%), 'strong commitment from schools' (41%) and 'strong senior management/political support' (35%) (34 responses). 'Lack of access to premises' (61%), 'corporate policies' (39%), and 'school commitment issues' (35%) were cited as key barriers by those trying to deliver an SLS during lockdown.

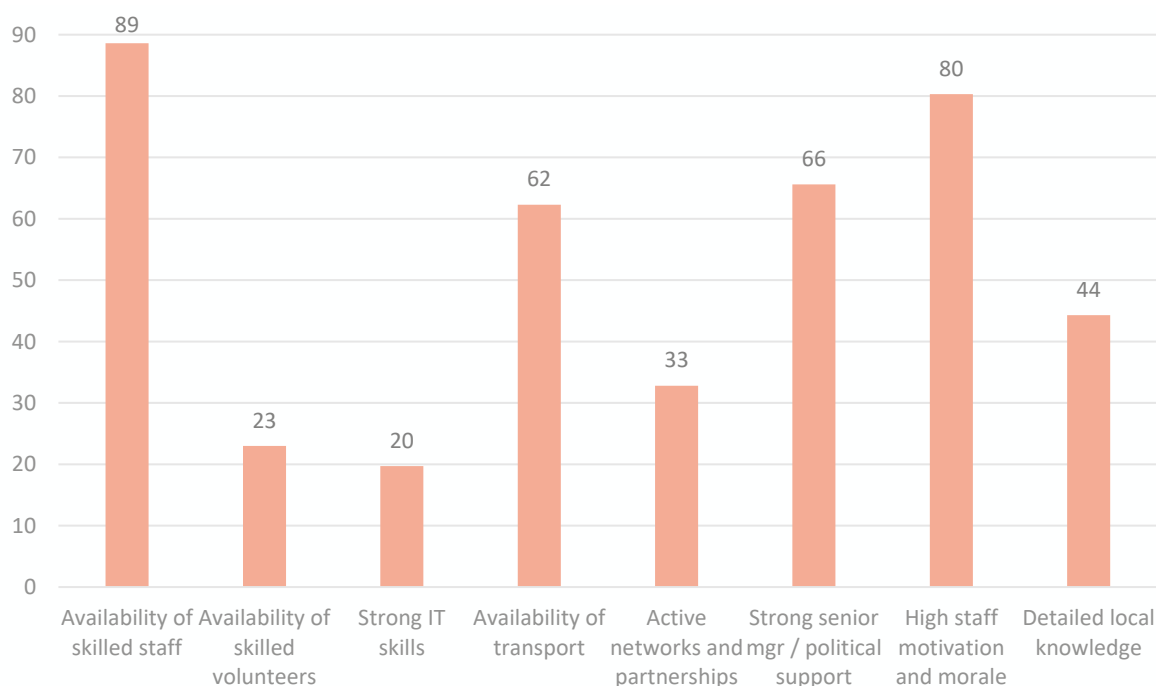
'We managed to post a huge increase in the usage of our SLS ebook/ eaudio offer, and our online news resources. We launched a new private Facebook page was to connect school staff and SLS staff, signposting online educational resources and author readings. Maintaining engagement with schools was so important for us.'

Home library services (HLS)

Home library services are normally run by most library services in the country but have a small client base of vulnerable users who cannot use in-person services. Some are delivered by volunteers, often in partnership with voluntary sector organisations. During lockdown, clearly the number of people self-isolating or shielding was many times greater and some library services widened their criteria for receiving home library services or relaxed them altogether so anyone could self-refer.

However, this was only possible for a minority of library services. Out of 107 responses, 20 said they provided an 'enhanced service' and 12 a 'standard service'. Only six services reported an increase in deliveries and eleven services reported an increase in users reached. Among respondents, the skills and resources most frequently cited as helping them deliver the HLS was the 'availability of skilled staff' (89%), 'high staff motivation and morale' (80%), 'strong senior management/political support' (66%), and 'availability of transport' (62%).

Figure 5.1: Skills and resources enabling provision of a home library service during lockdown



Thirty-two services provided a 'restricted service', and 41 'no service at all'. Key barriers cited were a lack of volunteers (51%), staff absence (sickness/shielding) (31%), staff redeployment (25%).

A major difference between the two groups was the ability to access volunteers as some voluntary sector provider volunteers were shielding.

Services which expanded targeted older library users to expand their existing HLS client base. Some services are now also looking to develop their HLS as a more integrated part of the library offer, or working with adult social care for example.

'One Home Library Service user told me that when I first phoned her on the 21 April (as part of library service calls to potentially vulnerable customers) she was so overwhelmed that the library service had made the effort to contact her that she just cried with relief after she had put the phone down.'

Case study 3: Bracknell Forest home library service: going above and beyond

Summary

From 23 March to 20 July, Bracknell Forest took the rare step of expanding their home library service (HLS) during lockdown, extending their offer to anyone who was self-isolating, aged over 70, or vulnerable and in need.

Scope

HLS normally operates with one dedicated full-time Supervisor / Driver, supported by a 0.15 fte of a full-time Senior Library Assistant's workload. During lockdown, they both worked full-time on the extended service, along with a number of branch staff. While expanding its offer, HLS had to contend with staff and volunteer absence (mostly due to sickness/shielding).

Stock was quarantined at Bracknell Central Library for 72 hours before being reissued, with all deliveries double-bagged up to 48 hours in advance by staff using PPE. The bagging enables residents to put the items to one side and leave sealed if they want to.

What's unique

Many library staff were moved across to HLS activities, helping customers, plus expanding the offer to the wider community and signing them up. 'Staff discussed with residents where to leave the deliveries (e.g. on doorsteps or in a designated area).

We also did a quick welfare check on the wellbeing of our residents - we didn't just dump and run like a courier!'. Conscious of the forthcoming demand, Bracknell Forest also purchased additional book licences – 'we invested in £10,000 of additional ebook titles for our residents'.

Results

HLS delivered significant increases, moving from 429 deliveries to 75 users in Apr-Jun 2019, to 1,964 deliveries to 1,044 users in Apr-Jun 2020 - 'we still have new people joining us now'.

Staff have been busy but are very positive about the work they are undertaking. 'We conducted check-in calls with the over-70s in Bracknell Forest, to see if they were OK during lockdown. Quite a few residents have joined this way - many of them do not use ICT, so they didn't know about HLS'.

HLS has received a lot of positive feedback. 'It has been a big success. Our most prolific readers can call to arrange a delivery. We offered an almost tailor-made service, free of charge, during lockdown, so residents were very happy - HLS is so well received!'.

Key learning points

'Our residents were very appreciative of the support they received throughout lockdown. We received so many positive comments and letters, saying that HLS had meant such a lot and, in some cases, saved people's lives just by seeing a friendly face and having a weekly chat'.

For further information

To find out more about Bracknell Forest library service's lockdown experiences, and how library staff adopted non-traditional roles, click here to watch a short video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAxPlxwa3Hk>



6. How library staff supported the local pandemic response

Introduction

Like other teams within local council services which were closed during lockdown, many library staff were redeployed to support the local pandemic response. From the 86 services which gave data, the equivalent of 1,718 full time staff were redeployed at some point during the lockdown, an average of 26% of the staff in these authorities. For some library services, this involved most or all staff being redeployed, while elsewhere very few were used in this way.

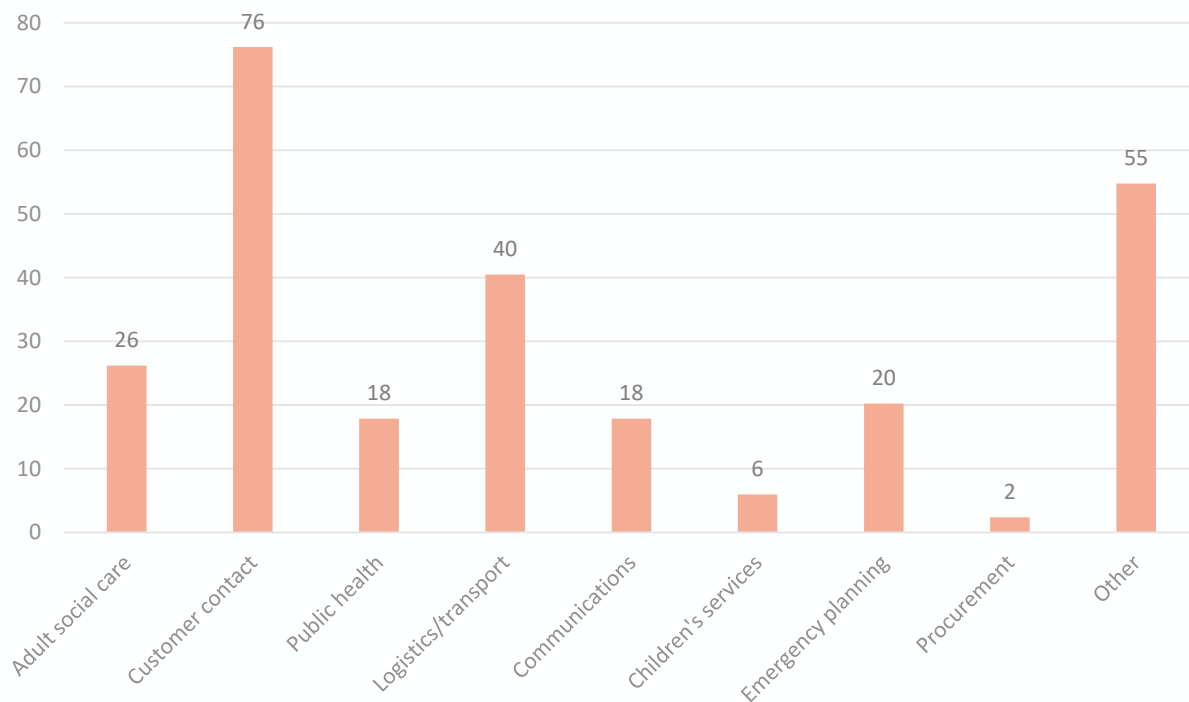
Key findings

- Redeployed library staff provided vital capacity to deliver the local pandemic response.
- Redeployment often generated a beneficial (two-way) integration of library staff with other council departments/services for supporting vulnerable people which will continue to produce value for councils in the future.
- Library staff were often singled out for praise by elected members and senior managers. Large volumes of calls and deliveries were made to residents although data collection is patchy.
- Opportunities were missed to use library staff skills more in some local authorities.

Redeployment

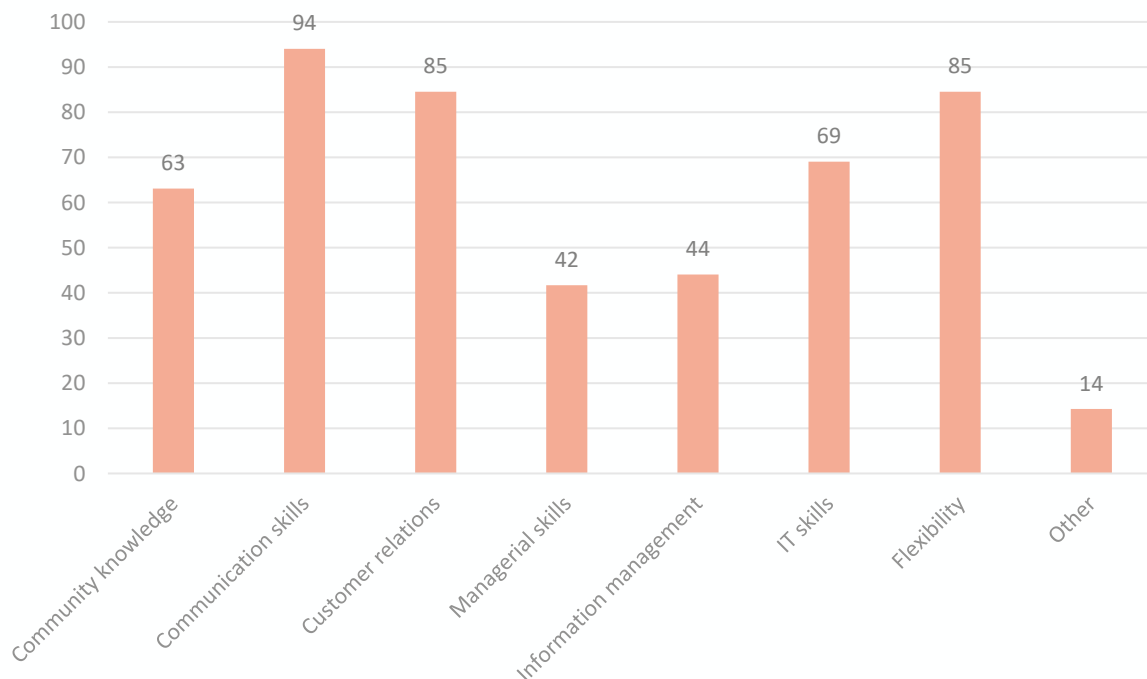
Library staff were redeployed into a wide range of roles during lockdown. Of the services responding to this question, 76% redeployed them into customer contact roles; 40% into logistics and transport; 26% into adult social care, and 20% into emergency planning.

Figure 6.1: Percentage of authorities that redeployed library staff into these roles during lockdown¹³



The skills most valued in these staff were communication skills (94%), customer relations (85%) and flexibility (85%).

Figure 6.2: Skills and capabilities required by redeployed library staff (%)



¹³ There were 84 respondents to this survey question.



The redeployment process did not allocate opportunities to all staff which they could have. Lack of IT equipment, particularly at the beginning of the lockdown restricted what staff could do, particularly working from home, though often some of these barriers were gradually overcome.

Many heads of service reported that library staff skills, particularly for digital communication, social media, and communication could have been better used by councils, particularly to support the digitally-excluded and isolated people.

‘One woman we helped was down to her last 50p, because of an error with her benefit payment and was reduced to walking into shops to ask for work, as she had no other way to find a job. Our staff were able to put her in contact with relevant charities quickly, so she could feed herself and get accommodation.’

Case study 4: Awen Cultural Trust (Bridgend BC) – re-opening safely in Wales

Summary

Awen's home delivery service was one of the first services it re-started in early June. The service is now exploring how Welsh Government grant funding (in the shape of the Culture Service Fund) can best be used to help reconfigure its future service offer.

Scope

Once lockdown came into effect, all of the trust's library staff were furloughed (except one managing the ICT systems). As lockdown eased, reopening the service was a considered and phased process. Helen Pridham, Head of Service, says 'We were going into buildings that hadn't been used for months. Following detailed risk assessments, the decision was made to unfurlough small teams, whose numbers would grow as the service expanded'.

Awen successfully reopened its first, most spacious, library with an order & collect service in early June, whilst also relaunching its housebound delivery service which had been paused during lockdown. 'We were able to do things at a safe pace. We agreed a phased reopening with our Partnership Manager at the Council, beginning work from mid-May. Our immediate priorities were staff and customer safety'.

What's unique

Every Welsh library service received £5K from the Welsh Government, with Awen focusing on PPE, developing its order & collect service and boxes for home deliveries. 'As a Trust, we had to source screens, gloves, sanitiser gel etc. We've spent about £10K on this so far. We can also bid for up to an extra £100K from Welsh Government, administered by Culture and Sport (prev. MALD). Several of our libraries have difficult access, so we'll be applying to reconfigure our reception areas, more self-service, hygienic chairs, and a website refresh'.

Results

Members have supported reopening, with all six main libraries now open. Two community libraries are also in the process but have shared usage: 'there have been hurdles for us all to work through first. We are gradually increasing our usual hours, and there has been no complaints or extra pressure. Next, we will try to open Saturdays to reach younger users'.

On return from furlough, staff contacted users to signpost them to the refreshed home delivery service - 'every user contacted wanted the service to return ASAP'. By introducing minor changes around drop-off and delivery, the service was extended - 'Users are delighted we are back! It's not quite the same service but we have been told that taking time to have a little chat on the doorstep with people is really being appreciated'.

Key learning points

'As a cultural trust, the loss of income from theatres and our trading arm will have a huge impact on us. We have a strong relationship with the Council and they've been part of our journey during lockdown. We've been very lucky so far but we know we will need to be extremely careful in the future. Working in staff bubbles has allowed us to isolate teams as required, but we do face resourcing challenges - our Council has had to enforce local lockdowns due to the rising number of COVID cases. Our staff have been incredible so far. We have a comprehensive employee support programme that has helped ensure everyone is in a good place mentally'.

For further information

To find out more about Awen Trust's library service, visit <http://www.awen-libraries.com/>



7. Re-opening and recovery – learning from lockdown

Introduction

Libraries' experience of planning for re-opening and recovery has varied enormously, due to many factors. These include how staff were deployed during the lockdown, their governance structure (whether in-house or independent), the decision-making structure and risk appetite of their local authority, and the scale and space limitations within their library estate.

Before the lockdown library services were focused on maximising visitor numbers, dwell times and space usage, so re-opening represents a wholesale re-think of their approach to managing risk, reassuring the public and protecting staff.

Key findings

- Regular users have welcomed re-opening and footfall is comparable to wider high-street patterns.
- Many library services have built up their offer gradually and are now offering browsing in addition to click-and-collect and PC access by appointment. However, there is a wide divergence between library service recovery strategies and what services are on offer, which may be confusing for the public.
- 'Blended' or 'hybrid' models of provision are emerging to meet the challenges of ongoing distancing conditions which offer exciting opportunities. However, these have resource implications which will entail planning and prioritisation to ensure value for money.
- The pandemic has inevitably increased the pressure on local authority funding and this poses a significant risk to library services.

Most library services initially prioritised reopening a limited number of sites and operating a click-and-collect style service. PC usage by appointment was the other major priority to address concerns about lack of digital access during the lockdown. By September, many had also added limited browsing, though sadly physical events were still out of scope across the country.

Re-opening library buildings to comply with government COVID guidelines inevitably limits capacity and absorbs more staff time than previously. This has a knock-on effect on budgets and the ability to reach those who are still shielding or who are wary of coming back to high streets.

Different assessments of risk and interpretation of government guidelines means there is a divergence between library services open in different authorities, often in neighbouring councils. This presents a potentially confusing offer for the public.

Many library services would like to continue elements of the additional support they offered to communities through lockdown, often on a 1-2-1 basis to help residents get online, use digital library resources or access other services. However, with the additional costs of restoring physical services, and increased expenditure on ebooks and other resources, it is clear that current capacity cannot support everything.

Creating a 'blended' or 'hybrid' offer will therefore require considerable creativity and planning by library services and sector bodies, as well as some hard choices for councils.

Case study 5: Buckinghamshire – re-opening strategy

Summary

Buckinghamshire's pragmatic and compassionate approach to reopening ensured they were one of the first services in England to do so, during a period of uncertainty about 'what the right thing to do' was within the sector.

Scope

During lockdown, Buckinghamshire strongly promoted their online offer, expanding their digital resources, supported by a refreshed marketing campaign. Staff returned to library buildings on 8 June. Ahead of this, David Jones, Head of Service, sensed 'the winds of change', with various new Council Boards convening. 'We pitched ASAP our plans for a phased reopening with appropriate safety measures. We carved our own path to get the green light – I'm so glad we did'.

What's unique

Individual staff induction meetings took place to explain the new arrangements, deliver training and discuss fears and concerns. 'We wanted to get them into the building; but also needed to understand their recent home life and support needs - what had their life been like during lockdown? We wanted to get people used to each other again'.

David's team engaged with their community library partners to share guidance and identify the support needed to restore services. 'The levels of staff fear were a challenge. We couldn't guarantee our decisions were 100% safe, but we couldn't tiptoe around. We had to take a risk-based approach based on the best possible advice available to us that day' - e.g. following WHO's 72 hours advice on quarantining items.

Results

Buckinghamshire has re-opened all of its 29 libraries but with reduced opening hours. 'It has been a massive test for our community library partnerships. We don't aim to control or manage them; we've built mutual trust up and use specific language in our shared approach together'. A lot of David's time has been spent addressing staff concerns. 'We didn't believe that library-specific conditions had been considered in the government's advice. The worst-case scenario is that I've spent money on safety equipment that wasn't officially deemed necessary in order to support and reassure my staff'.

Key learning points

David says: 'The single most important issue for me was ensuring that arrangements and supplies to reassure people were in place. The government's advice at times lacked clarity so a lot of time was spent reconciling guidance with anxieties to help us reopen safely and quickly. We've opened everything now, but the next steps will be in getting our opening hours up, restoring the full service, but we are up on our feet and working'.

Looking to the future, Buckinghamshire's vision for libraries is clear. 'We have to demonstrate and evidence our libraries' impact during calamity and crisis, as well as the opportunities our library services offer to our organisations. Given that the full financial consequences of the lockdown haven't even begun to be measured or felt yet, we must show how we are going to be an essential service contributing to the recovery'.

For further information

To find out more about Buckinghamshire library service's lockdown experiences, and how library staff adopted non-traditional roles, click here to watch a short video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wf-NhvCDGeo>



Case study 6: St Helens - opening a new library during pandemic recovery

Summary

During lockdown, St Helens Library Service delivered an expanded Home Delivery Library Service and #librariesfromhome online events. While re-opening existing libraries cautiously, they have now opened the new St Helens Library in the town centre.

Scope

With few exceptions, St Helens' library staff were not redeployed during lockdown. It took a couple of weeks to mobilise and some time to get IT equipment to all staff, but they realised that both the Schools Library Service and Home Delivery Library Service needed to continue, which were back up and running in mid-April. Having staff available also meant they could begin cleaning and preparing libraries for re-opening from 27 July.

Four existing libraries re-opened at the end of July and a new St Helens Library opened in September in the World of Glass building, a voluntary sector-run museum in the canal-side regeneration area. The building work associated with opening the new library was a complex process as World of Glass staff remain furloughed. While it was easier for contractors to work in an empty building, the library service needed all appropriate certification from the charity for opening in a COVID-safe way.

What's unique

The Home Delivery Library Service was opened to anyone shielding or vulnerable and tripled its users during lockdown. Recognising the compounded isolation for people that don't engage or communicate online, the Arts and Libraries teams decided to develop 'Our Correspondence' which involved sending hand-written letters in stamped addressed envelopes to residents registered with their Home Delivery Library Service.

Written by Library Assistant, Emma Graney, the letters were sent out to approximately 180 people. Recipients were invited to respond by reflecting on their own experiences, how their lives have changed, and hopes for the future. One 86-year-old correspondent replied:

'Thank you for giving me the chance to write a letter to someone. I used to love writing and receiving responses, especially from family. I love reading, I have been so pleased to have my books delivered to my door. I want to take this opportunity to thank those people involved in this service, I love books, I love covers, I love the feel of a book in my hands.'

Results

Re-opened libraries were initially offering only browsing and loans, with PC access beginning with the new library. Previously 30% of their business was PC usage, but they will be tracking demand to see how cautious people are feeling.

Social distancing requirements mean reduced capacity for PCs but a lot of demand is for good Wi-Fi. They are looking forward to returning to physical events in their libraries as soon as conditions allow.

Key learning points

Kathryn Boothroyd, Library Services Manager, says: 'It's been incredibly challenging, a steep learning curve. You have to be patient and understand the real concerns from public health partners, and giving the general public reassurance that libraries are COVID-safe spaces.'

For further information

<https://www.sthelens.gov.uk/libraries/>

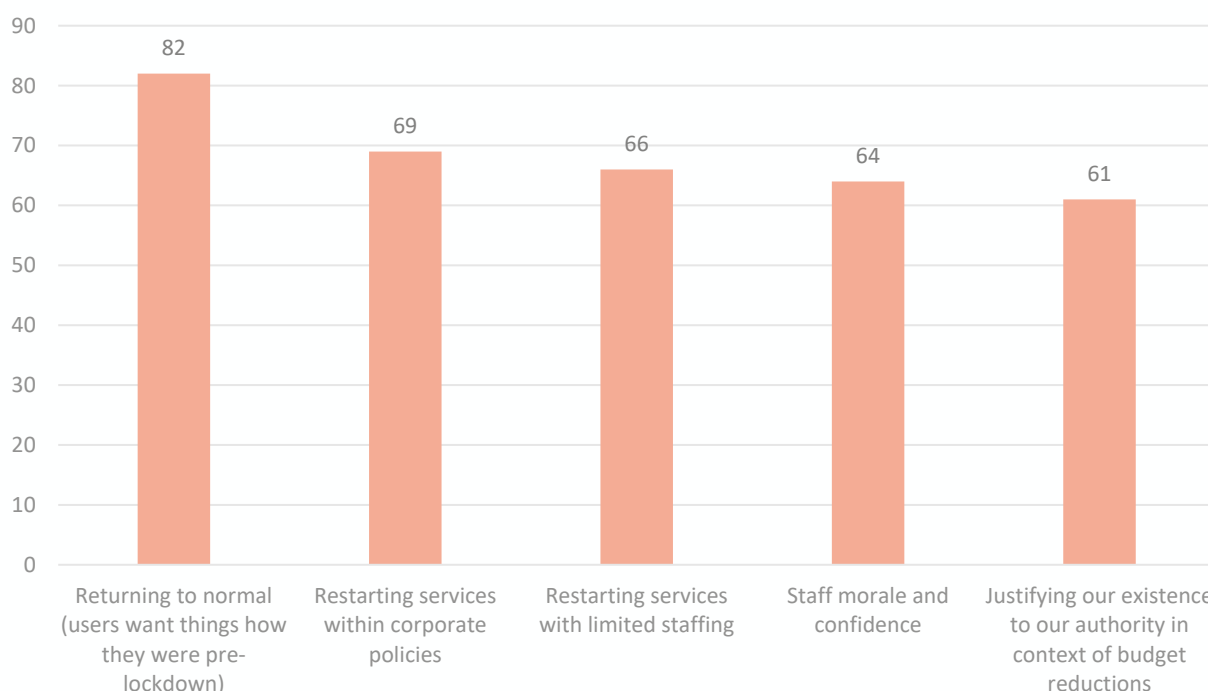
Of 100 responses received, the main challenges Heads of Service said they are now facing were:

- Returning to normal (our users want things exactly how they were pre-lockdown), with 82% identifying it as a severe or moderate challenge

- Restarting services within corporate policies for pandemic recovery (69%)
- Restarting services with limited staffing due to H&S and continued staff shielding (66%); staff morale and confidence (64%)
- Justifying our service's existence to our authority in the context of budget reductions (61%).

‘A very strong line from the directors to use the pandemic as an opportunity to significantly reduce the physical library estate.’

Figure 7.1: Percentage of authorities reporting challenges as services emerge from lockdown



Several heads of service articulated the nature of the funding threat. Success in delivering digital and remote services could be viewed, erroneously, as a substitute for a physical offer, or adequate as a definition of a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service under the Libraries Act.

‘Some of our directors may say we should shift entirely to ebooks, but so many of our residents do still want a physical book. Our success at running an expanded Home Library Service during lockdown is now haunting us. It is clearly being regarded by some as a possible way to replace static libraries’

‘This has been the most challenging period facing public libraries in living memory. Covid-19 affected the core role of the Library, a safe space for people to spend time and reflect. The subsequent shift to a digital offer raised concerns regarding senior directors’ [support for] a changed service that was not as focused on Library buildings. This has now impacted the next serious challenge - how to find savings for the next budget cycles when services have already consolidated for years due to austerity.’

Despite these concerns, many library services are using recovery to accelerate existing plans to put libraries at

the heart of local strategies. These approaches taken different forms including collaboration, commissioning, co-location and integration with other council services.

Based on the positive experience of library staff working more closely with colleagues in public health and other community services during the lockdown opportunities are presenting themselves for libraries to become a core delivery partner across the country.

‘Our CEO said that our agile experience of working with colleagues on community support during redeployment has furthered plans for a greater role for libraries in Council customer services’

Changes in footfall and working patterns are leading many library services to consider a more radical re-configuration of spaces and library locations, which up-end previous assumptions about how libraries target limited resources and earn income. For example, many services had growing income streams or targets based on room hire and events which are clearly no longer viable, but there may be an increased demand for work-hub space for homeworkers near local branch libraries.

‘We need to restart and recover services, but also create the space to rethink what we need to offer as we move into the next stage of the pandemic. Physical distancing, sitting restrictions and limitations on group sizes is a fundamental blow to the strategy of 'social librarianship' we were working towards, which was blending access to resources with active learning and cultural opportunities. I suspect we are at a hinge point where a fresh approach is required, rather than an attempt to reanimate where we were in March.’

Case study 7: Barking & Dagenham - resident conversations - saving lives in libraries

Summary

Barking and Dagenham Library staff were redeployed during lockdown to the Council's Homes and Money Hub and Adult Intake Team, making nearly 20,000 calls and interventions. The impact of this was profound for the council's ability to help people during the pandemic.

Now the library service is re-opening gradually, it is seizing the opportunity to re-configure its offer and give staff the opportunity to work in a new way that supports vulnerable people.

Scope

50 library staff were redeployed to the Council's Homes and Money Hub and Adult Intake Team during the lockdown. Meanwhile, the Home Library Service was opened up to anyone who needed it so library services could still be accessed. Redeployed staff have been recognised by the Council for their professionalism and efforts in helping vulnerable people.

The Homes and Money Hub Manager nominated Library Assistant, Heather Pope, as employee of the month. Heather managed to help an 85-year-old woman being displaced from her house to move into sheltered accommodation. Heather was initially unsure if this role would suit her, but now says 'it feels like I'm saving lives!'.

What's unique

The Council has recognised the benefits of this new way of working. Zoinul Abidin, Head of Library Service, is now developing a new Residents Conversation team, with roles shared across the library service and Homes and Money Hub and Adult Intake.

Better use of self-service will enable staff to spend more time supporting users' needs more intensively. Library space will need to be used in a better way, particularly with demand for study space so high and the challenges of social distancing.

Results

As Zoinul explains: 'We need solutions, otherwise only the people good at organising and booking online will be able to access services. It's against all my own instincts and what I've been preaching my whole career because we normally want to let everyone in. It's hard, but I know I'm doing the right thing, when we see how we're helping people with debt, isolation, employment and housing.'

Key learning points

'It's really put library staff up there. People don't normally talk about libraries corporately. Now they are and we're seeing how we can make library spaces work for communities in a new way.'

'There has been a myth that library buildings can offer something for everyone - sadly we don't have the resources for that. However, we can help get people online who need to, and support others with unique needs in a more tailored way.'

For further information

<https://www.lbbd.gov.uk/libraries-and-local-history>

Support and advice for library services

Support and advice for library services played an important part during the lockdown. Our survey asked Heads of Service what types of support they accessed and valued or were unable to find. Of the 99 responses received, the main sources cited were Libraries Connected resources, particularly Basecamp, the regional networks, and the service recovery toolkit, the Welsh government/MALD and SCL Cymru advice, and internal corporate communications, health and safety, public health and property teams.

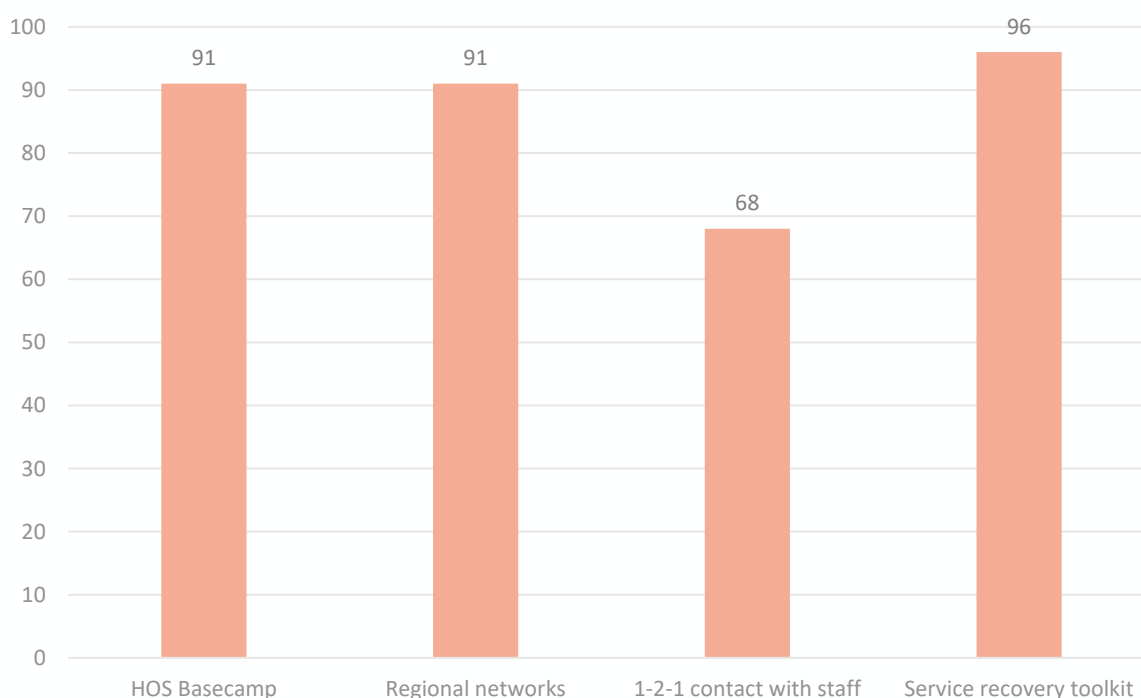
‘The support offered by Libraries Connected, and its members, was invaluable, and I can't praise it enough. I honestly don't know how we would have managed without Basecamp and associated resources.’

‘The Heads of service Basecamp was invaluable, being able to get a national picture of what was happening helped when briefing senior managers and Councillors about a way forward. It also was supportive when you were struggling with a particular aspect of mobilisation, providing a platform to gain answers but also share any learning you'd acquired.’

Libraries Connected resources were very highly rated with over 90% satisfaction for most channels of support. 1-2-1 contact with staff, with 68% satisfaction, may reflect limited capacity within the Libraries Connected team and suggests the collaborative forums were more productive. However, services that were struggling during the lockdown may benefit from more targeted 1-2-1 support in the future.

‘More support and advice is needed for library services facing cuts or closures following lockdown, as many councils will attempt to keep libraries closed by stealth.’

Figure 7.2: Satisfaction with the support provided by Libraries Connected (%)



The survey also asked what support or advice Heads of Service felt they were unable to access. The main responses included:

- Access to council decision-makers, and getting beyond a 'silo mentality'
- Delays and slowness in official advice at every level
- Lack of forward-thinking about library and cultural strategy for renewal rather than just re-opening
- Support to challenge the threat of keeping libraries closed by stealth.

'My line manager is the Director of Public Health. I was receiving detailed information first-hand and could test scenarios for recovery with this professional advice. It was sometimes noticeable when liaising with colleagues in other LAs that I had information long before they did.'

8. Libraries are saving lives and offering hope: recommendations

Local councils and government agencies should recognise that public libraries are an essential service during recovery from the pandemic, uniquely equipped to offer hope and enrichment to the broadest range of people. Libraries are not just partners but are core agencies that regularly provide direct services, preventing the escalation of issues such as deprivation and loneliness. Below we set out our high-level recommendations for local authorities and national governments, for library services, and for Libraries Connected working with the other sector governing bodies.

1. Valuing quality and value for money in staff and physical services

- Councils should recognise the evidence that digital and remote services provide mitigation for isolation and lack of social contact, but that communities also need and want social spaces with the values and reach of public libraries
- Library services should continue to embrace models of collaboration with other council services and partners which offer a personalised and holistic service, to prevent future cost burdens to welfare, education, health and social care
- Library services should absorb the potential implications of changes in footfall, working patterns and space requirements when thinking how library spaces could be best used and located in the future
- Councils and library services should build on the way staff have demonstrated and developed skills during lockdown to deliver a workforce ready to respond to future customer needs and to advocate for their services.

2. Digital must work for everyone, everywhere

- Councils should use the skills and expertise of library staff to ensure all residents have access to digital services, particularly young people and those facing isolation as social distancing continues
- Councils need to remove barriers which prevent libraries from delivering a high-quality digital offer including corporate limitations on web platforms and use of social media
- Library services should prioritise investment in digital capacity to offer an improved user experience online that meets consumer expectations of a modern digital service
- Library sector bodies and government should accelerate negotiations with publishers to improve the terms of digital lending and online broadcast licensing to increase availability and affordability for public libraries.

3. Recognising and facing the funding threat

- The sector governing bodies need to meet head-on any suggestion that digital and remote services could replace physical spaces as a comprehensive and efficient service, given the relatively limited reach of the current digital offer, and the risk of excluding those most in need.
- Councils should value and leverage their libraries' reach, assets and trusted brand to enhance their preventative strategies. They should consider libraries first when commissioning, rather than viewing libraries as a source of short-term savings.

- Libraries should take the opportunity to develop their funding and income generation strategies

to align them with the emerging needs of community resilience and regeneration and support their communities to respond to changing employment and working patterns.

- The library sector needs to improve their evidence gathering to create a standardised and comparable dataset so they can more clearly monitor and track their impact and present evidence which is compelling for councils and other funders.

Appendices

Appendix i: Summary of survey responses, split by region

Table i.1: summary of survey responses, split by region

Region	Proportion	Number
England – North West	13.64%	18
England – North East	7.58%	10
England – Yorkshire & Humberside	9.85%	13
England – East of England	6.82%	9
England – West Midlands	9.09%	12
England – East Midlands	5.30%	7
England – London	12.88%	17
England – South West	12.88%	17
England – South East	14.39%	19
Jersey	0.76%	1
Guernsey	0.00%	0
Wales	6.06%	8
Northern Ireland	0.76%	1
Total	100%	132



Appendix ii: Summary of survey responses, split by governance model

Table ii.1: summary of survey responses, split by governance model

Governance model type	Proportion	Number
Arms-length body	2.29%	3
Local authority (in-house service)	86.26%	113
Shared service	1.53%	2
Commissioned – charitable	9.16%	12
Commissioned - private	0.76%	1
Total	100%	131

Appendix iii: Summary of interviewees

Table iii.1: summary of interviewees

Library service	Interviewee
Awen Cultural Trust	Helen Pridham
Barking & Dagenham	Zoinul Abidin
Barnsley	Kathryn Green
Bolton	Samantha Elliott
Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole	Medi Bernard
Bracknell Forest	Fiona Atkinson
Buckinghamshire	David Jones
Hampshire	Emma Noyce
Libraries Northern Ireland	Helen Osborn
Libraries Unlimited	Martin Parkes
Merton	Anthony Hopkins
Newham	Caroline Rae
Newport	Alun Prescott
Rotherham	Zoe Oxley
Suffolk	Bruce Leeke
Peterborough	Pete Aldridge & Firzana Shaheen
Westminster / Kensington & Chelsea	Mike Clarke





INT2020/12843/DC
16 July 2020

Dear Leaders and Chief Executives,

COVID-19 Public Library Service Restoration in England

We both fully recognise that this has been and continues to be a challenging time for public library services. We are also aware and appreciative of their positive response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the Prime Minister's announcement on 23 March that physical library locations must close, library services have continued to deliver. They reacted quickly to the surge in demand for their online services and developed innovative and exciting digital ways to provide a number of their other services. The consummate skills, empathy and knowledge of local community needs that library staff possess has also been a huge asset where they have been redeployed to support wider council COVID response services, such as shielding services and other community support. Our thanks go out to them for all the brilliant work they have done, both within and beyond the library service.

With the opening of physical library buildings now permitted, councils need to continue to be creative as they look to reopen their doors and restore their library services. Public libraries are a local service and the overall process of restoration of public library services across England is likely to vary from council to council. It is also likely that this will take place through a phased approach, following your careful assessment of when it is safe to do so and in light of government and public health guidelines.

This is an unprecedented period for public libraries and delivery of the statutory service is currently challenging. That's why DCMS has posted the following message on the GOV.UK pages dealing with the guidance document, '[Libraries as a statutory service](#)':

- The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport will currently interpret compliance with this duty in light of the applicable [legislation](#) and the [government guidelines](#) published on 15 May (and subsequently updated) covering the reopening of other businesses and public places (including libraries). The Government announced that libraries may reopen their doors from 4 July, subject to following Covid-secure guidelines.



The Libraries Connected Service Recovery Toolkit published on 29 June provides a set of resources to support Heads of service and their teams in planning for service recovery as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. It is designed to be used alongside other government guidance in England. We recognise that restoration of services will take place in a phased way, varying according to local needs and circumstances. This interpretation will apply until such time as the government announces further relaxation of social distancing and other restrictions affecting access to library locations and library services.

While we recognise the exceptional circumstances and challenges of delivering library services during the COVID-19 pandemic, you will be aware that the Secretary of State has a statutory duty to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities in England, and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries conferred on them as library authorities by or under this Act. To assist the Secretary of State to carry out his statutory duty, DCMS is keen to understand the plans each library authority in England has for restoration of its services.

We would therefore both be grateful if you could share your plans on how you intend to go about this. For instance, it would be useful to have some early information where there is no immediate plan to reopen some branches in the short-term (e.g. where this is impossible within social distancing rules) or to restore certain elements of library services, and your planned mitigations where this is the case; or about when different service streams will be restored across the local network, such as events, computer access, printing and photocopying.

We both believe that libraries have the potential to play a key role in future recovery and renewal efforts across the country. DCMS officials will be looking for opportunities and examples of how this can happen locally to help make that case with colleagues across government; and LGA is planning to provide support for portfolio holders in understanding the contribution that public libraries can make to local renewal, and helping them to be better equipped to provide personal leadership during this period.

If you have not already done so you may wish to consider publishing the Council's plans for the restoration of the library service on the Council website.

It would be helpful if you could share your plans for restoration of your library services with the DCMS Libraries Team by 7 August 2020. Please send them by email to: libraries@dcms.go.uk.

Many thanks, and best wishes from both of us for a safe and smooth process of library service restoration.

Yours sincerely



Caroline Dinenage MP
Minister for Digital and Culture
Culture, Tourism and Sport Board



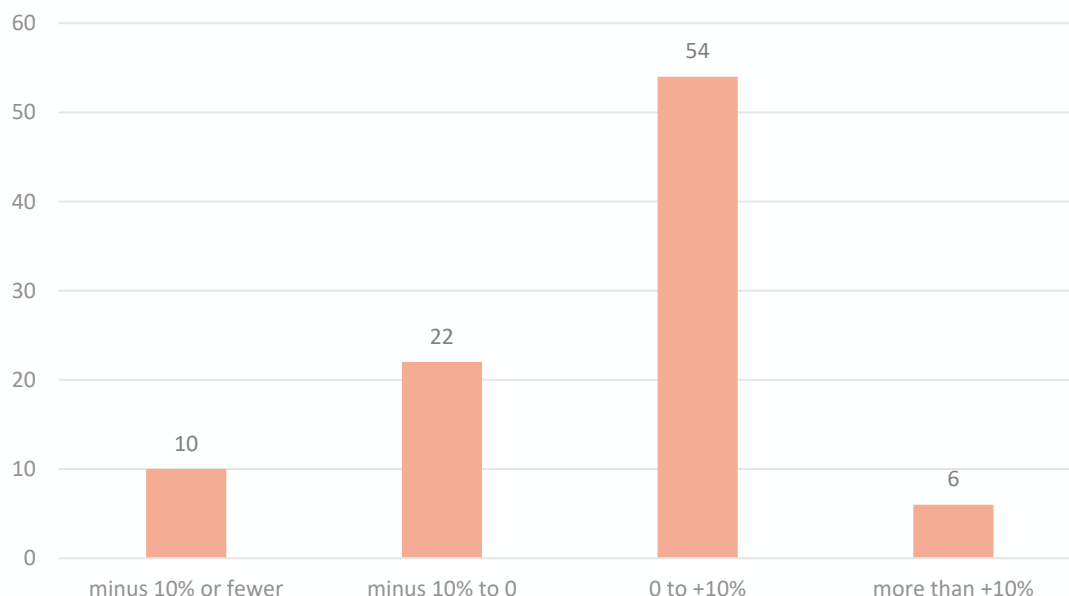
Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson
Chair of the Local Government Association

Appendix v: Detailed distribution of changes in library membership and use of online resources

In this appendix, we summarise the differences and variations between authorities in the changes described in sections three and four above.

Library membership

Figure v.1: Distribution of changes in services' membership levels from March to July 2020



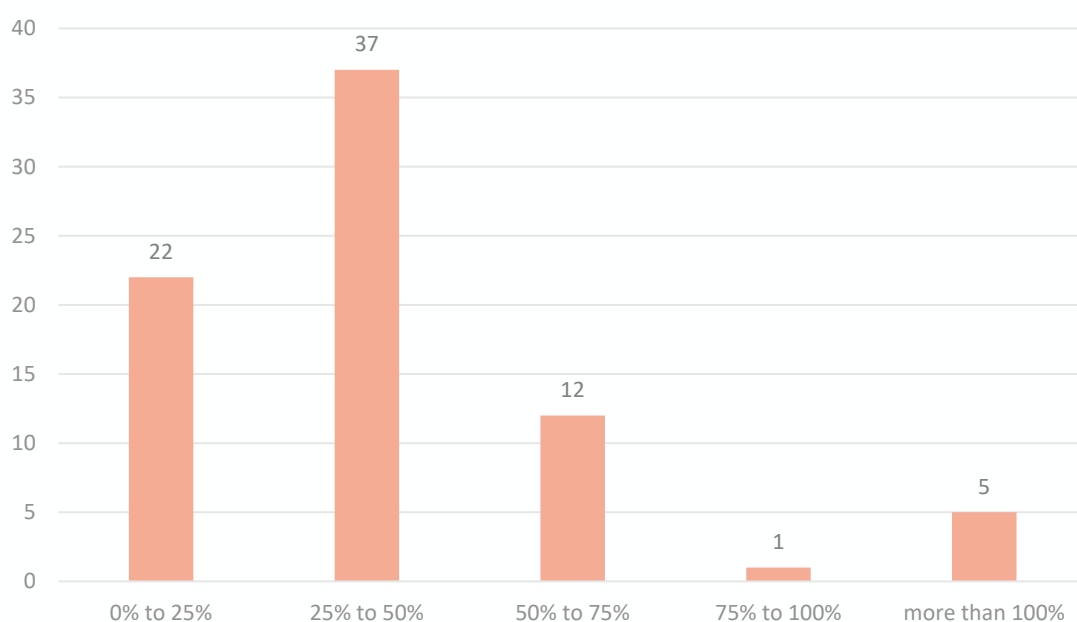
These changes were influenced by a number of factors, including the process of signing up online, the web presence of the library service and the offer available during lockdown.

A further significant factor was the quality of the membership data library services held at the beginning of lockdown. Some services took the opportunity to clean databases during the lockdown. Others had performed similar data cleaning before lockdown, for example when migrating to a new Library Management System.

Library members signing up for digital resources

Library services usually require members to sign-up separately to access digital resources and licensed material. Among the 77 services which provided figures, these memberships increased between 1 March and 1 July by 27%. Again, across the country the range of increases was significant, ranging from 1% to 253%. It should be noted that some of those recording the largest increases were starting from a low base.

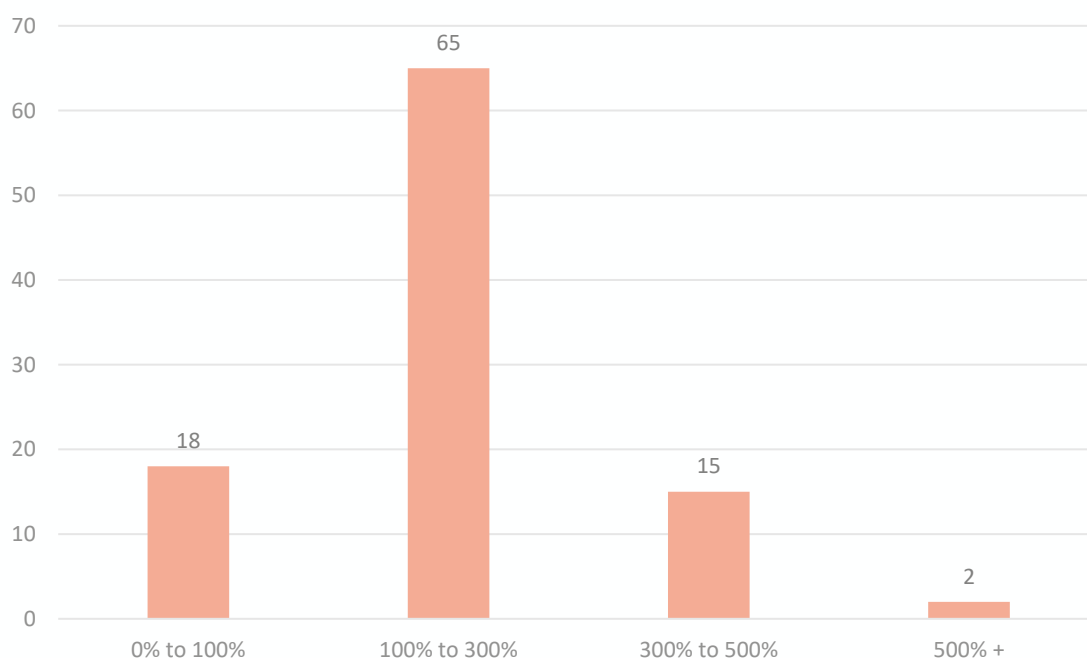
Figure v.2: Distribution of changes in services' digital sign-ups from March to July 2020



Ebook checkouts

Looking back at usage over the whole period of the lockdown we can trace distinct patterns. Based on our survey, among the 100 services which provided data, ebook usage increased by 146%. Increases in individual services ranged between 38% and 714%.

Figure v.3: Numbers of authorities reporting increases in ebook checkouts during lockdown¹⁴



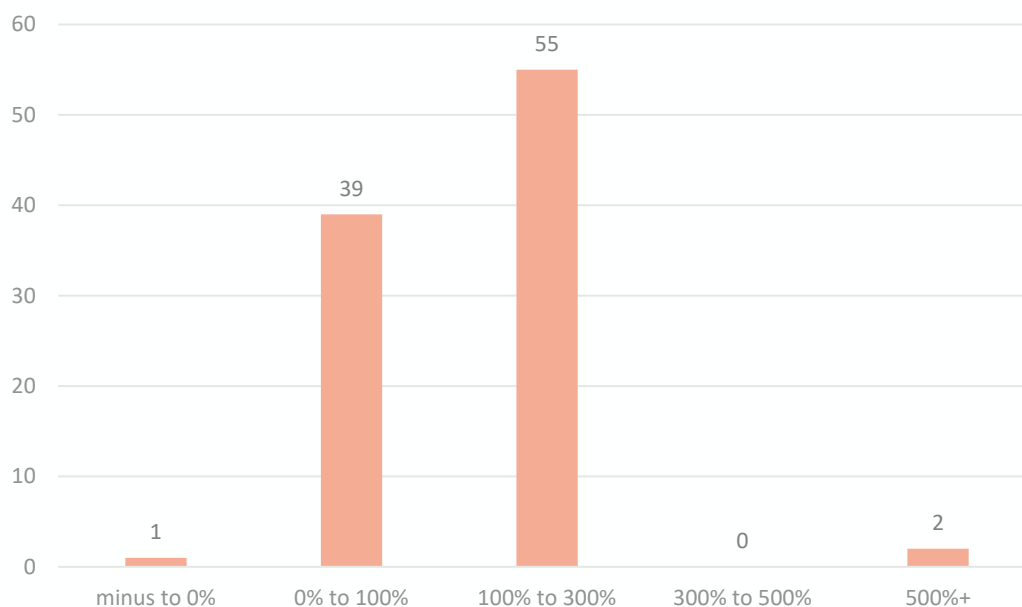
¹⁴ The percentage changes measure the increase in issues from the period Apr-Jun 2019 to Apr-Jun 2020



Audiobooks

Among the 97 services which provided data, total audiobook checkouts during lockdown saw a similar increase in our survey of 113%, with a range between -2.9% and +581%.

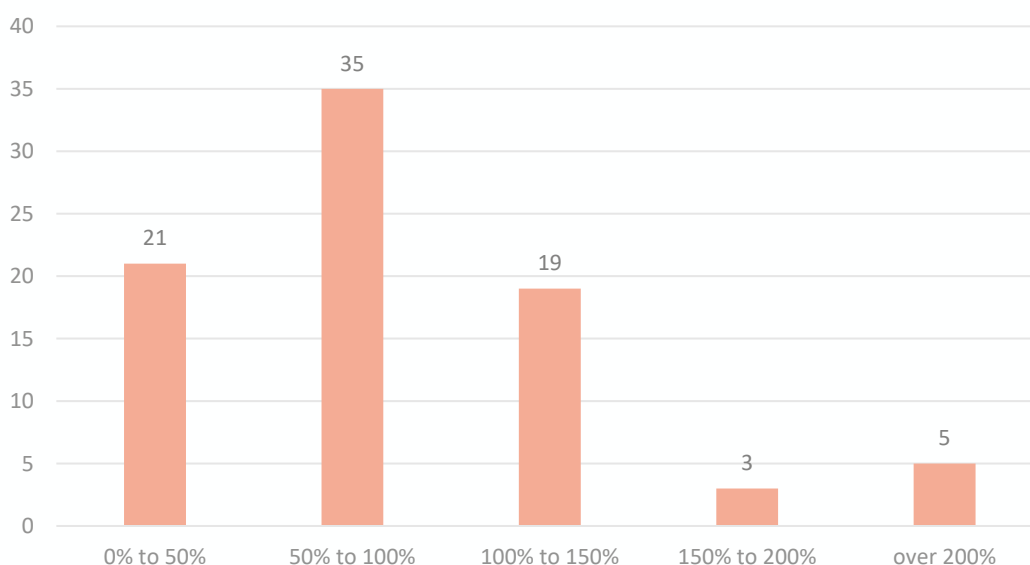
Figure v.4: Authorities reporting changes in audiobook checkouts during lockdown¹⁵



Magazines

Among the 83 services which provided data, total magazine checkouts increased by 80% among respondents, with a range between 0.5% and 745%.

Figure v.5: Authorities reporting increases in magazine checkouts during lockdown¹⁶



¹⁵ The percentage changes measure the change in issues from the period Apr-Jun 2019 to Apr-Jun 2020

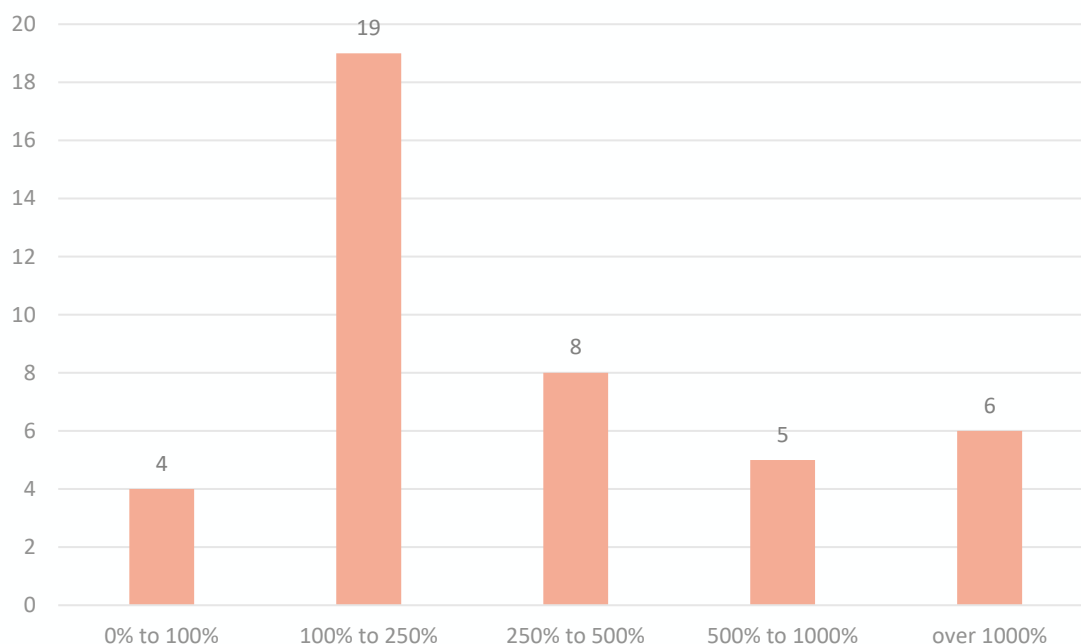
¹⁶ The percentage changes measure the increase in issues from the period Apr-Jun 2019 to Apr-Jun 2020



Newspapers

Total newspaper checkouts from the 42 services which provided data increased by 223% among our respondents, with a range between 53% and 3787%.

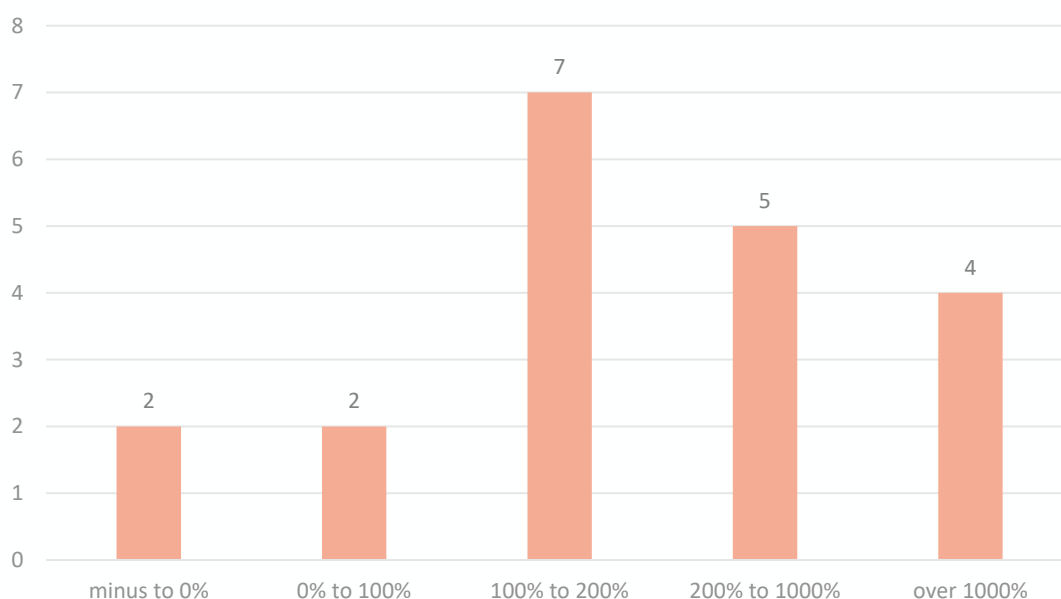
Figure v.6: Authorities reporting increases in newspaper checkouts during lockdown¹⁷



Comics

Among the 20 services which provided data, total comics checkouts increased by 497% with a range between -58% and +4900%.

Figure v.7: authorities reporting changes in comic checkouts during lockdown¹⁸



¹⁷ The percentage changes measure the increase in issues from the period Apr-Jun 2019 to Apr-Jun 2020

¹⁸ The percentage changes measure the change in issues from the period Apr-Jun 2019 to Apr-Jun 2020



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