



**Libraries
Connected**

LIBRARIES IN THE PANDEMIC: EVOLVING SERVICES TO MEET LOCAL NEED



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'Libraries are important cultural institutions in their own right and have a pivotal role to play in supporting the regeneration and rebuilding of communities and their cultural activity.'

Sue Williamson, Director, Libraries, Arts
Council England

Unless otherwise stated, all figures, quotes and case studies in this summary are from Libraries in Lockdown: Connecting communities in crisis, Libraries Connected, 2020. Those marked with an * are from Making a Difference: Libraries, lockdown and looking ahead by Dr Jenny Peachey, Carnegie UK Trust, 2020

CAROL STUMP

PRESIDENT

LIBRARIES CONNECTED

INTRODUCTION



Public libraries are an essential service for recovery from the pandemic, uniquely equipped to offer human contact and support to the broadest range of people. Libraries are not just partners but core agencies that regularly provide direct services and prevent the escalation of issues such as deprivation and loneliness.

During lockdown, libraries and their staff kept communities connected and supported the most vulnerable. They also demonstrated their skills, empathy and flexibility during the crisis to respond to the rapidly evolving situation, for example:

- ◆ Growth in digital offering. These include rhymetimes 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 20,000.
- ◆ Ongoing engagement with people at risk of isolation. Kirklees Libraries alone made around 12,000 phone calls to vulnerable library users when their buildings closed.
- ◆ Redeployment of library buildings and staff. 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 to support the local response to the pandemic. Gateshead Libraries used their 3D printers to create visors and other PPE for local care homes and health centres.
- ◆ Going the extra mile. Librarians in Ipswich made a recording of Portrait of Clare by Francis Brett Young for 102-year-old Doris, who recalled the novel from her childhood when chatting to staff on the phone.

Library teams around the country have risen to meet the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. However, this new evidence shows that the leaders who were given the freedom to shape and adapt their services were better able to respond to meet the specific needs of their communities.

We will continue to work closely with library services and decision makers to highlight the new demand for a hybrid library service that meets our communities' evolving needs online and in person. We will also continue our work to demonstrate how essential libraries are to delivering an effective recovery from the pandemic.

SUPPORTING LITERACY AND LEARNING

'Libraries are innovation hubs on the high street and will play a vital role in supporting our national recovery'

Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson, Chair of the Local Government Association's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

Key findings

- ◆ Online lending surged, with 3.5 million more ebooks loaned by mid-August
- ◆ Around three in ten adults in the UK engaged with public library services during lockdown – that's 15 million people*
- ◆ Over 75% of libraries delivered online events during lockdown
- ◆ Despite library buildings being closed for four months, library services managed to increase membership by up to 32%
- ◆ Almost one in five library users specifically sought out online activities for babies and toddlers.*

Overview

Before closing their doors, events in public libraries spanned a wide range of activities, from book-based groups to crafts, performing arts, author events, coding clubs and support for health and wellbeing and employment. Delivering events online during lockdown allowed many library services to keep in touch with their users and reach new audiences.

1. Supporting early years development, STEM learning and literacy

'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.'

This was a major innovation for most services which revealed untapped staff skills and resourcefulness, but also presented new challenges. 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.

'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.'

2. Helping schools and parents educating at home

Libraries played an important role in helping parents who were educating their children at home. While Ofsted reports¹ that younger children have regressed during lockdown and older children have lost reading and writing skills, many libraries doubled the volume of e-resources they loaned out and delivered learning activities including interactive homework support and new resources for local schools.

Among those who managed to offer some form of school library 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.

'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.'
[Schoolteacher]

3. Providing services to the digitally excluded

Some services changed their offer to overcome digital exclusion by working with partners to run tablet lending schemes to deprived and digitally excluded families or those who were shielding.

One service, working with colleagues in education, delivered 14,000 Chromebooks to vulnerable families. Another worked with health and social care partners to provide a lending library for devices, sharing wi-fi with homeless shelters and lending them books.

Digital services in Suffolk

'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.'

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. After their buildings closed, their website was transformed in a matter of days to reflect the new digital offer.

During lockdown they reached over 2,300 people through Facebook Live events every day for three months online. 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.

¹<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-covid-19-series#october-briefing-notes>

FIGHTING ISOLATION AND PROMOTING WELLBEING

'During lockdown, libraries provided vital services to people with a range of needs, with a view to ensuring they feel connected and cared for, as well as offering e-resources and activities that provided education, entertainment, and escape.'

Sarah Davidson, Chief Executive, The Carnegie UK Trust

'Being vulnerable isn't as clear cut as you think...there's a routine that keeps people going, contact that improves wellbeing and mental health. Libraries are part of that routine and contact for many people. Libraries are a safety net that catches people before they really begin to struggle.'*

Overview

Libraries have stepped up in lockdown to tackle loneliness and isolation. Keep in touch calls were widely used to offer support and comfort to shielding, isolated and vulnerable residents during the lockdown. Around one in five people who engaged with library services during lockdown were contacted by staff.*

1. Fighting loneliness and supporting mental health

The impact for communities and staff was profound, with many instances of vital interventions to combat isolation, mental health problems and ensure people were able to access essential services. These were often challenging situations for staff but enabled many to build valued relationships with their users.

'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 had no one to speak to.'

2. Bringing books and reading experiences to the vulnerable

The library services that continued to deliver a home delivery service often expanded their service during lockdown, offering it to people who were shielding or identified as vulnerable as part of the local response to the pandemic.

'My life became even more difficult when I had a stroke which badly affected my eyesight. Thanks to your audiobook service, I was able to distract myself from the worry and stress and keep myself on an even keel.'

For example, during lockdown in Halton, thousands of books were delivered by staff and the service was extended to those that were shielding or anxious about entering public spaces. In April 2020, staff were delivering 20 books per person, to more than 100 people a month. This number has since grown as people continue to request service.*

3. Identifying and contacting isolated people

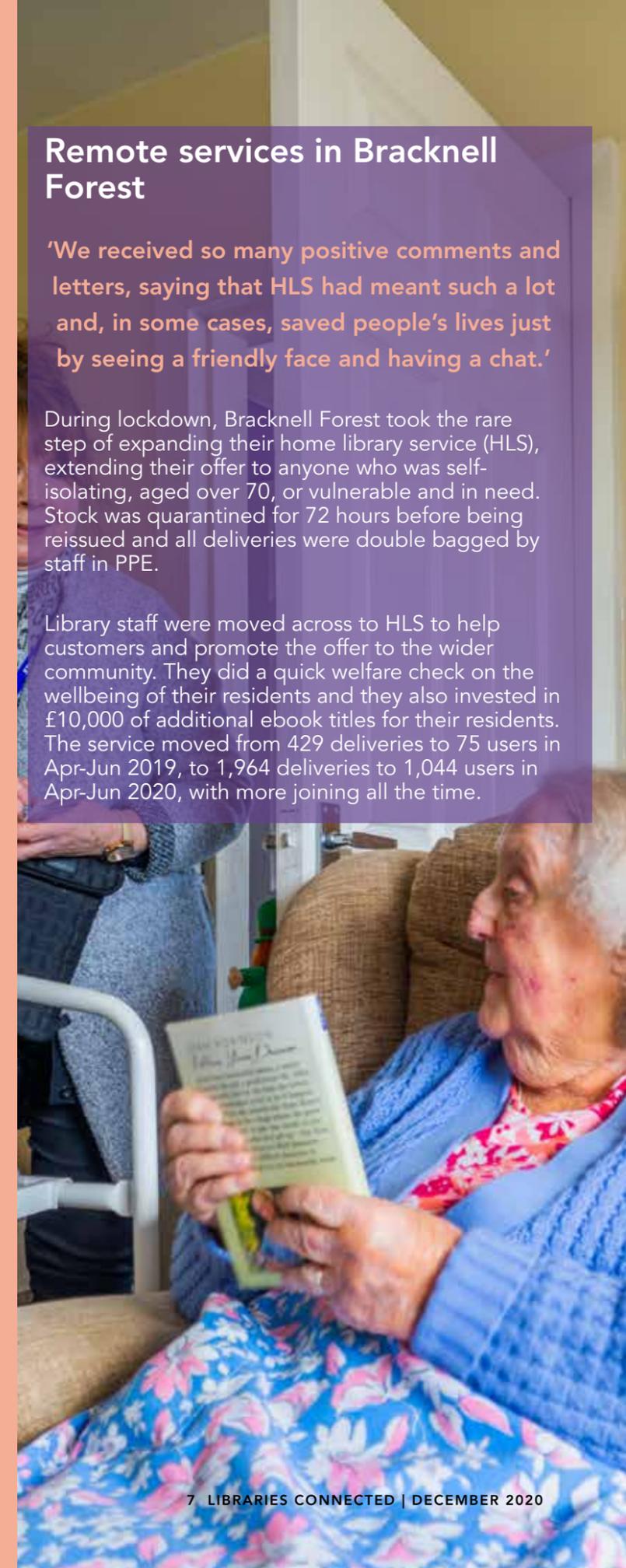
In Somerset, all 500 home library service users were contacted. Through this, library staff identified a significant proportion of people who were experiencing loneliness, others who needed signposting to services such as food and medicine delivery, or even more urgent help and support. Staff even identified some who were experiencing elder abuse and referred them to support.*

Remote services in Bracknell Forest

'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 chat.'

During lockdown, Bracknell Forest took the rare step of expanding their home library service (HLS), extending their offer to anyone who was self-isolating, aged over 70, or vulnerable and in need. Stock was quarantined for 72 hours before being reissued and all deliveries were double bagged by staff in PPE.

Library staff were moved across to HLS to help customers and promote the offer to the wider community. They did a quick welfare check on the wellbeing of their residents and they also invested in £10,000 of additional ebook titles for their residents. The service moved from 429 deliveries to 75 users in Apr-Jun 2019, to 1,964 deliveries to 1,044 users in Apr-Jun 2020, with more joining all the time.



Key findings

- ◆ 2.9m people were proactively contacted by libraries* and over 130,000 phone calls were made by 130 library services across England, Northern Ireland and Wales
- ◆ 60% of services continued their Home Library Service, providing vital comfort and books to very vulnerable users
- ◆ Almost one in five library services operated an enhanced Home Library Service to more people to help combat loneliness and improve digital skills
- ◆ 63% of people surveyed said that the library service helped them to feel more connected to their community*
- ◆ 64% of those who had used the service during lockdown said that the library service had improved their wellbeing.*

LOCKDOWN: CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

'This new evidence shows that the leaders who were given the freedom to shape and adapt their services were better able to respond to meet the specific needs of their communities.'

Isobel Hunter, Chief Executive, Libraries Connected

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.'

Overview

Public libraries are a vital part of local communities, and they demonstrated their value during lockdown. However, with the right support, library services have the potential to do even more. The sector needs a sustainable financial model, and it needs decision-makers nationally and locally to give it the status that it deserves, recognising the unique contribution that libraries make to so many important issues.

1. Reaching the digitally excluded

It was widely felt that there were significant gaps in how library staff were able to support their communities during lockdown. These gaps mainly arose from the limitations of delivering services online and the exclusion of those without digital access.

'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.'

2. Variations in available support and resources

The Carnegie UK Trust report highlighted that the factors limiting service delivery and development included finances; differing attitudes to risk within local authorities; the extent of understanding within a local authority of what the library service does, effective communication and engagement with public; organisational culture; partnerships; and digital skills. In some cases this meant that staff were unable to effectively support communities and local authorities.*

'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.'

3. Digital licensing restrictions

Delivering a more comprehensive e-lending offer that meets users' expectations and demand will require substantial work. Lockdown has accelerated the need to improve the terms of digital lending and

online broadcast licensing to increase the availability and affordability for public libraries.

The impact of these various barriers meant that public library services were unable to act as a safety net for the disadvantaged, isolated and vulnerable people within their communities as they did before lockdown.

Setting up Help Boro Hub in Middlesbrough*

'Libraries were an obvious service to redeploy because they have detailed knowledge of communities.'

Middlesbrough library service was responsible for running the 'Help Boro Hub'. This included setting up a call centre in the Central Library (and later organising working from home) and working alongside public health, and health and safety teams to manage the volume of calls.

The Help Boro Hub offered delivery of shopping and prescriptions and referred residents to services such as dog walking available in their local areas. Staff both fielded calls and fulfilled requests for support. They received hundreds of calls a day, often from people with complex needs. The Hub delivered 1,900 food parcels and collected over 500 prescriptions.

Key findings

- ◆ The availability of older volunteers was a significant factor for many services in whether they could deliver a Home Library Service during lockdown
- ◆ The increase in digital lending by library services may double its costs in this calendar year, which is not sustainable.
- ◆ Some library services were restricted in their digital engagement, particularly in early lockdown by corporate policies, IT systems and a lack of equipment.
- ◆ Even services with the strongest online offer recognise that the digital public library offer still requires huge improvement to match the most popular commercial retail and streaming services.
- ◆ The pandemic has inevitably increased the pressure on local authority funding and this poses a significant risk to libraries.

LIBRARIES' ESSENTIAL ROLE IN LOCAL RECOVERY

'Whether it is helping businesses go online, providing access to reliable information or keeping kids engaged and learning, libraries play a vital role in getting communities back on their feet.'

Nick Poole, CEO, CILIP

Key findings

- ◆ A quarter of library staff were redeployed within their local authority delivering vital capacity to the local pandemic response.
- ◆ Of those that were redeployed, over 90% drew on core library skills of empathy and customer service. Around 2/3 drew on their skills to identify and support the vulnerable and community engagement.*
- ◆ Over 70% of UK library services were providing PC access by September.²
- ◆ 70% of libraries view PC access as an essential service for their communities and jobseeking is one of the main reasons why people are now using PCs in libraries.²
- ◆ 'Blended' service models are emerging to meet the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. These offer exciting opportunities but also require extra planning and resourcing.

²Public Library Reopening Poll, Lorensburgs, 2020

Overview

Libraries are integral to the social fabric of the UK. They deliver against some of our most pressing agendas, including health and wellbeing, education, inequality, community cohesion and economic development. 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.

1. A local, expert response team

Public library services are a vital part of social infrastructure. The best of them enable, empower and equalise. Covid-19 has not changed the strategic priorities of library services so much as sharpened their focus. It has also made staff acutely aware of the levels of need and vulnerability in communities.

'Some of our customers have no machines or phones of their own and use ours a great deal. They have been distressed at no contact with friends and family in other countries'*

2. A knowledgeable, skilled and flexible workforce

Library staff have also demonstrated their skills. In particular, there was considerable overlap between the customer service skills, learning and support skills, information and knowledge management skills and adaptability skills that staff previously relied upon to support their communities, and the key skills required in new hubs and centres set up during lockdown.

Library services have tremendous potential to support individuals and communities across a range of local authority and government priority areas, made evermore pressing by the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown.

3. Physical spaces to tackle digital exclusion, inequality and isolation

For services to be able to deliver to their fullest potential, there is a challenge for local and national governments, sector support bodies and the sector itself to go further to ensure that everyone in the UK has an equal opportunity to experience the impact that the best library services can offer.

'...despite the impressive things we have achieved remotely, nothing replaces the person-to-person connection found in a library.'

Krystal Vittles, Suffolk Libraries³

³<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/26/lockdown-plot-twist-libraries-needed-ebooks>

Access to PCs in Westminster and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea*

'The PC offer has been invaluable – the heavy take-up has also underlined the need for digital inclusion resources in the borough especially at a time when voluntary and community services offering public access computers are closed.'

The library service offered PC access in closed buildings with strict health and safety measures in place. It was an emergency, basic offer for people with no internet access at home. Members of the public could use the PC for 45 minutes for a restricted range of services, including making contact with family and friends, banking, etc. During lockdown, just under 400 access sessions per week were taken up across Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea.



LIBRARIES: THE NEED

A recent IPPR report⁴ suggests over a million people, including 200,000 children, face poverty this year because of the economic fallout from the pandemic. Libraries are a vital prevention and support service yet cost an average of just 0.6% of council spending. To help them to continue this service however, libraries need:

- ◆ **Sector governing bodies to reject any suggestion that digital or remote services could replace physical spaces; communities need and want local, social spaces**
- ◆ **Councils to think 'libraries first' when commissioning and help libraries to work with local services to reduce future costs in welfare, education, health and social care**
- ◆ **Sector governing bodies to accelerate negotiations with publishers to improve the terms of digital lending and online broadcast licensing**
- ◆ **Councils and library services to build on the skills staff have demonstrated during lockdown to ensure they are ready to respond to future local need**
- ◆ **Councils to make it easier for libraries to deliver a high-quality online offer and use the expertise of library staff to help all their residents to access digital services.**

⁴<https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/a-family-stimulus>

info@librariesconnected.org.uk

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