

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping rounded rectangular shapes in yellow, teal, orange, and pink, set against a dark blue background.

**MAKING A
DIFFERENCE**

**LIBRARIES,
LOCKDOWN AND
LOOKING AHEAD**

Dr Jenny Peachey



CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

ABOUT THE CARNEGIE UK TRUST

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds by influencing and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic saw the vast majority of library buildings close their doors to the UK public during lockdown.¹ Yet whilst the building is a core part of the library service offer, it is not the whole of it. This research sought to capture the role that public library services and their staff played during lockdown; the barriers faced in delivering services during lockdown; the role public library services and their staff can play in supporting individuals and communities affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown; and what needs to change to enable public library services to continue to deliver at their full potential in service of their communities. To gather new data on these issues we conducted public polling of 2,196 UK adults, analysed 1,196 responses to a public library staff survey and carried out in-depth interviews with 22 Heads of Service.

Four key messages and eight action areas emerged from the research. They are outlined below in more detail.

KEY MESSAGES



Public library services had a positive impact on those who engaged with them during lockdown

Around three in ten people in the UK engaged with public library services during lockdown. Whilst the doors of library buildings were closed to the public, staff worked hard to provide digital as well as physical services in order to provide as full a service to their community as possible within the restricted context. Digital services included access to e-books, e-resources and a wider range of online activities. Physical services included welfare and keeping in touch calls, home delivery services, information provision and a handful of buildings-based services. Some library services also worked hard to tackle digital exclusion during lockdown through tablet lending or distribution schemes and providing support over the phone.

Over 60% of those who engaged with public library services pointed variously to a range of benefits they derived from their engagement with it: from being provided with useful information to experiencing a positive impact on their wellbeing, from feeling more connected to their community or feeling less alone, to being supported to develop an interest or hobby.

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



Public library staff made a valuable contribution to the Covid-19 response

The survey drew on the skills listed in CILIP the Library Association's Professional Skills and Knowledge Base (PKSB) framework to gauge which skills, if any, came to the fore during lockdown. The findings reveal that some of the specialist outreach services implemented by local authorities in lockdown required or mirrored the core skill set that library staff deployed day-to-day pre-Covid-19.

Staff that were redeployed to support the local authority response to Covid-19 drew heavily on: customer service skills, learning and support skills, information and knowledge management skills, and skills relating to adaptability and working in new teams. In this way, the transferability of the core public library service skill set enabled staff working outside of the library service to support communities across the UK during an intense and challenging time.

Adaptability and innovation were also key for staff working within the library service, enabling staff to respond to need as it arose in their communities. For example, some services provided PPE for local NHS and care home staff by utilising the 3D printers in their Makerspaces, or worked with local groups to deliver new services.



Public library services and their staff could have delivered much more – but faced barriers in doing so

Despite the positive impact that public library services had on those who engaged with them, and the important contribution that library staff made to the broader response to Covid-19, it was widely felt that there were significant gaps in how library staff were able to support their communities during lockdown. The root causes of these gaps fall into the following categories: the limitations of a digital mode of delivering services; factors external to the sector; and factors internal to the sector.

The limitations of digital delivery included: digital exclusion impacting upon reach; digital formats having a negative impact on services' ability to provide quality interaction and support; and services' inability to provide access to physical resources. Of particular note is how digital versions of in-person library activities were not like-for-like replacements and did not deliver the same outcomes as the in-person offer. The loss of a civic, agenda-free space that could be entered without payment or permission, providing the potential but not the obligation for interaction and encounters, was also felt. These limitations were problematic in that they curtailed library services' ability to deliver a curated social experience and wider range of benefits to their communities.

In terms of factors external to the sector, the following items had the potential to enable or inhibit service development and delivery: finances; differing attitudes to risk within local authorities; the extent of understanding within a local authority of what the library service does and how it can contribute; and the extent to which the library service has a voice in local authority structures.

Factors internal to the sector included: consistency and visibility of the library offer during lockdown; organisational culture; effective communication and engagement with the public; preparedness and contingency planning; partnerships; and digital skills.

The impact of these various barriers meant that public library services were unable to act as a service of first resort in the way they did before lockdown: a safety net for communities, the lonely or isolated, and 'borderline' or 'hidden' vulnerable people. In some cases, it also meant that staff were unable to draw on their valuable skill set to support communities and local authorities in the most effective way.



Public library services have huge potential to support individuals and communities as they navigate the short, medium and long-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

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. Looking ahead, public 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. The issues that public library services can help tackle include:



Strengthening communities



Employment and financial wellbeing



Education



Digital inclusion



Physical and Mental Health



Knowledge and information



Cultural engagement



Literacy



Equality, diversity and inclusion

It is clear that public library services have tremendous potential to support individuals and communities as the UK navigates the considerable challenges ahead. It is, however, equally clear that the sector needs to continue to adapt and innovate and requires adequate funding and support in order to fulfil its potential and deliver for individuals and communities across the UK.



Action areas: what the sector needs to fulfil its potential and deliver for the UK public

The action areas below draw on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that were identified by those who participated in the research directly, through analysis, or through the Trust's broader experience of working with the sector over the past eight years. Many of the action areas will feel familiar to the sector – albeit to lesser or greater degrees across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and across different local authorities. In many cases, work is being conducted across a range of the areas identified below. It is a matter of increasing urgency and importance that the barriers and issues highlighted in the action areas, long-standing or otherwise, are overcome in order to enable public library services to fulfil their potential and deliver for individuals and communities across the UK.

Given the differences in how governments and the library sector in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are progressing library-related agendas and the ever-shifting external environment, the items listed are broad areas and ideas that we believe should be taken into consideration by local and national governments, sector support bodies and the sector itself in developing public library services during the next period.

- Deliver a sustainable financial settlement.
- Strengthen status and voice in local authority structures.
- Value and invest in skilled and confident staff.
- Build a positive organisational culture that supports leadership at all levels.
- Recognise the digital future is here and deliver a high quality blended service.
- Resolve the longstanding, complex issues around e-books.
- Balance coherent and consistent national offers with the power of the regional and the appeal and benefits of the hyperlocal.
- Advocate effectively and powerfully.

Foreword



“Do real and permanent good in this world.”

ANDREW CARNEGIE

This report acknowledges success and offers a challenge.

It draws on a range of new evidence to make the case that public library services across the UK had a positive and supportive role to play during the Covid-19 lockdown, and illustrates the significant contribution these services can make in mitigating and overcoming the short, medium- and long-term impacts of the pandemic.

It also points to the fact that they could have done more. It challenges 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 enabling impact of the best public library services.

As a welcoming space at the heart of communities, free at the point of access and open to all, with a network of physical spaces and skilled staff, public library services have incredible potential as social infrastructure. Too often we refer to ‘libraries’ rather than ‘library services’, conjuring up images of buildings as static objects, rather than the dynamism, connection and potential that the combination of people, ethos and skill invokes.

Urgent conversations are happening all around us about how the state can empower individuals and communities to achieve positive change for themselves, to participate fully and to help each other. There is real potential to harness the potential of public library services as enablers in this context.

But for this potential to be realised, the sector requires a sustainable financial settlement; a stronger voice in local authority structures; an excellent blended physical and digital service – including, but not only, outstanding provision of both physical books and e-books; and investment in staff and organisational culture. To stand still is to fall behind, and there will always be a need to be constantly alert, to listen and adapt, to work with communities, and form partnerships with others in order to innovate and meet local needs. There will be further, unknown disruptive events ahead, and investment in staff and culture are as critical as funding and status in creating a resilient and flexible service to meet the demands of both today and tomorrow.

Many of the identified areas for action will feel familiar to those who know the public library sector. In light of the new ways of working that we have seen emerge during lockdown and the challenges that arise from it, this now feels a critical moment to address these issues once and for all. The context is already set by the multiple calls to action for a new settlement between central and local, for outcomes-based budget setting, and for holistic place-based approaches. It is vital that our public library network takes its place at the centre of this conversation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S Davidson".

Sarah Davidson
CEO, Carnegie UK Trust

Introduction

The Carnegie UK Trust has long recognised the significant and enduring contribution public library services make to improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Given that the Covid-19 pandemic saw the vast majority of library buildings close their doors to the UK public during lockdown,² we were keen to understand the impact this had on the library offer at this time. The rationale for the research was two-fold. First, whilst the building is a core part of the library service offer, it is not the whole of it. Second, lockdown appeared to trigger a growing need for the type of support that public library services and their staff can provide.





The research sought to capture: the role public library services and their staff played during lockdown; the barriers faced in delivering services during lockdown; the role public library services and their staff can play in supporting individuals and communities affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown; and what needs to change to enable public library services to deliver at their full potential to the benefit of their communities. To gather new data on these issues we conducted public polling of 2,196 UK adults,³ analysed 1,196 responses to a public library staff survey and carried out in-depth interviews with 22 Heads of Service.

Four key messages and eight action areas emerged from the research. The report is structured around these key messages with the action areas being detailed at the end of the report. It is perhaps worth noting that many of the action areas will feel familiar to the sector – albeit to lesser or greater degrees across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and across different local authorities.

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

3 This was carried out by Savanta ComRes on behalf of the Carnegie UK Trust.

KEY MESSAGES

-  Public library services had a positive impact on those who engaged with them during lockdown.
-  Public library staff made a valuable contribution to the Covid-19 response.
-  Public library services and their staff could have delivered much more - but faced barriers in doing so.
-  Public library services have huge potential to support individuals and communities as they navigate the short, medium and long-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

ACTION AREAS

Given the differences in how England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are progressing library-related agendas and the ever-shifting external environment, the items listed are broad areas and ideas that we believe should be taken into consideration by local and national governments, sector support bodies and the sector itself in developing public library services during the next period.

- Deliver a sustainable financial settlement.
- Strengthen status and voice in local authority structures.
- Value and invest in skilled and confident staff.
- Build a positive organisational culture that supports leadership at all levels.
- Recognise the digital future is here and deliver a high quality blended service.
- Resolve the longstanding, complex issues around e-books.
- Balance coherent and consistent national offers with the power of the regional and the appeal and benefits of the hyperlocal.
- Advocate effectively and powerfully.

This report, its findings and recommendations are based on new research that comes from the three methods outlined below.

1. Public poll

Savanta ComRes conducted a public poll of 2,196 UK adults aged 18+ across the UK on behalf of the Carnegie UK Trust. The poll looked at: the use of the public library service pre-lockdown and during lockdown; the level and type of interaction with the public library service during lockdown; the impact of engaging with the public library service during lockdown; and views on reopening and restarting services.

The survey was issued online between 31st July and 2nd August 2020.⁴ The sample size of the poll makes it possible to make inferences about the demographics at UK level. Data was weighted to be nationally representative of all UK adults by key demographics including gender, age, region and social grade. Research was conducted in line with British Polling Council rules.

2. Public library service staff survey

The Carnegie UK Trust issued a survey to public library staff across the UK asking questions about: the library services offered during lockdown; the potential role of public library services in the post-lockdown environment; the skills staff did (or did not) utilise during lockdown; and the experience of staff during this time.

The survey was made available on Survey Monkey for 14 days, from 19 June 2020 – 3 July 2020. It received 1,196 responses from staff across the UK. The staff survey was analysed by jurisdiction, role of respondent and whether they were redeployed, remained in the library service or were not working. Key differences in responses were pulled out against these characteristics.

An inductive, grounded-theory approach was taken to open-ended questions: responses were reviewed to derive and determine appropriate codes and then themes from these codes.

⁴ This breaks down into 103 respondents from Northern Ireland, 163 from Scotland, 129 from Wales and 1795 from England. A sample size of 100 is robust enough to make inferences from.

3. Heads of Service interviews

The Carnegie UK Trust conducted 22 in-depth interviews with Heads of Service or equivalent across the UK. One of these Heads of Service oversees two library services, meaning that 23 services were represented through the interviews.

Areas covered in interviews included: the current and anticipated impacts of Covid-19 on the library sector; how public library services contributed to individual and community wellbeing during the lockdown; what aspects of 'normal' library services have been impossible or challenging to translate successfully into the digital sphere; the success factors and inhibitors in continuing to contribute to individual/community wellbeing during lockdown; the role library services could play moving forwards; and what public library services need to enable them to fulfil this role.

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

You can read the in-depth research findings, including more on the methods, from these three strands of research [here](#).



Key Message 1: Public library services had a positive impact on those who engaged with them during lockdown



“[We] launched a new ‘Libraries Direct’ service providing home delivery of books and toys, friendship calls and digital support by phone to isolated and vulnerable individuals and families.”

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

Around one in two people in the UK are library users⁵ and three in ten engaged with public library services during lockdown. Those that used the service during this difficult period pointed to a range of benefits they derived from their engagement with it, from being provided with useful information to experiencing a positive impact on their wellbeing, from feeling more connected to their community or feeling less alone, to being supported to develop an interest or hobby.

Whilst the doors of library buildings were closed to the public during lockdown, staff worked hard to provide digital as well as physical services in order to offer as full a service to their community as possible, within

⁵ Library user is defined here as someone who engaged with or used a public library service at least once in the twelve months preceding lockdown.

the restricted context. A significant proportion of public library services adapted activities and events they would have delivered in their buildings to a digital format, to provide opportunities for learning and entertainment for children. Again, in keeping with their role at the heart of their communities, some conducted welfare or wellbeing calls to library members over 70, or supported their communities in ways they considered most appropriate such as working with a Friends Group to buy and deliver fruit and vegetable boxes to families in a deprived area. Most library services continued to provide support with accessing accurate information and some provided support with digital skills. And, of course, all public libraries provided access to reading materials – books, audio books, magazines, newspapers – through a greatly enhanced e-offer, or the delivery of physical books and audio books to people’s homes.

Here, we set out a range of offers provided by various public library services across the UK and the impact of these on those who accessed them.



“We have expanded e-Services, doubled our e-Book/e-Audio content, personally contacted all housebound and elderly customers, supplied tablets for people with no devices, set up a support for using IT, directly contacted schools and are now doing book deliveries and planning on opening our collection service from 29 June.”

SPECIALIST STAFF, SCOTLAND.

3 IN 10 engaged with public library services during lockdown



How the public library service was used during lockdown⁶

Access e-books, e-audio books or e-magazines	18%	32% used e-resources
Access resources other than e-books, e-audio books or e-magazines	16%	
Online activity for babies and toddlers aged 0-3	17%	39% engaged in online activities
Online activity for children aged 4+	15%	
Online activity for adults aged 18+	16%	
Contacted by staff	19%	30% contacted for information or support
Received books or resources ⁷	14%	
Contacted library service with a question/for information	11%	21% engaged with physical service
Contacted library service for support with digital skills	13%	
Other	1%	
Don't know	5%	

How the public library service helped people during lockdown⁸

Provided me with useful information	68%
Had a positive impact on my wellbeing in lockdown	64%
Helped me feel more connected to my community	63%
Helped me feel less alone	60%
Helped me follow/develop an interest or a hobby	64%
Helped me/my child(ren) avoid boredom	63%
Helped me in some other way	62%

The positive impact of engaging with library services was broadly consistent across all population groups, suggesting that public library services truly are for all.

⁶ Percentages relate to those who engaged with or used the service during lockdown (unweighted base 709).

⁷ Through home delivery service or indirectly via another charity or organisation.

⁸ Percentages relate to those who engaged with or used the service during lockdown (unweighted base 709).

DIGITAL OFFER: E-BOOKS, E-RESOURCES AND ACTIVITIES

Public library services offer the opportunity for people in their communities to engage in a range of reading-related resources and activities, with a view to educate and entertain, provide enjoyment and escape, and improve wellbeing. With many services being unable to offer physical reading materials during lockdown, public library services amplified their digital offer. All the services that engaged in this research increased availability of e-books, online newspapers, comics and magazines and e-audio books.⁹ In some cases, considerable effort was required behind the scenes to support people to access the wider digital offer. For example, work was required to enable multiple borrowing of a single e-book or to expand online services usually only available from within the library building to be offered from home. Many also provided online activities such as story and rhyme sessions, craft or Lego sessions and book groups. Support on accessing and making the most of e-resources was often provided over the phone or social media, or via video tutorials.

Almost 1/3 of people who engaged with public library services during lockdown used its digital resources. This is perhaps reflected in how lending of e-books widely increased by three figure percentages across the UK. For example, in one service, e-book loans increased by 242% and e-audio loans by 109%, in comparison with the equivalent time period in 2019.¹⁰ Again, many services also saw increases in the use of specific online offers: one library service saw use of PressReader – the software through which e-newspapers are accessed – go up by 350% whilst others reported increases in use of their online archive and family history resources as well as in their e-loans.¹¹ Whilst the usage of the e-resources by most demographic groups was broadly similar, those aged 18-24 were significantly more likely to use e-resources than others (40% versus 32%).

9 In England, Arts Council England provided £1,000 to every library service (£150,000 total) to purchase new e-resources as part of lockdown service delivery. In Wales, the Welsh Government invested £250,000 in the National Digital Library Service for Wales. In Northern Ireland, the government provided £800,000 of additional funding to invest in e-books and other digital stock and services at the start of the pandemic.

10 In the same time period, this service saw an increase of 197% in e-member registrations.

11 Despite these very positive figures, it is important to note that in some cases this growth was from a very low base and therefore even triple digit growth could amount to a relatively small proportion of the population accessing digital resources via the library website. This is discussed more fully under Key message 3.

Viewing or taking part in an online activity was also popular, with 2 in 5 (39%) of those who engaged with public library services during lockdown participating in online activities. This reflects the experience of some services, for example one library service reported having 12,000 social media interactions per day, with each video that it posted getting thousands of views during the height of lockdown. The uptake of online resources was broadly similar across most demographic groups, but those aged 24-35 and 35-44, those with children in the household and ethnic minorities groups were significantly more likely to engage.

YouTube Channel: Denbighshire



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

Denbighshire Library Service drew on its active YouTube channel during lockdown. The channel was originally used by library development staff to promote the use of the Welsh language and provide activities for pre-school children in this predominantly rural and sparsely populated local authority. During lockdown, they increased the frequency of their rhyme times and songs on the YouTube channel and took advantage of the fact that one of their staff lives on a farm to use key points in the rural calendar, such as lambing season, as hooks for their activities. They also began Facebook Live sessions the first week after library buildings closed, which gained wide interaction and engagement from the library service’s Facebook followers.

The service had had 30,000 Facebook interactions over the first four months of lockdown in a library service area with a total population of 90,000 people. The YouTube videos had 6,000 views and there were over 22,000 Facebook engagements with those YouTube videos embedded in the Facebook page. This included both new content and the back catalogue of videos that they had previously recorded.

In some cases, there were more activities being delivered digitally than would usually be offered in a face-to-face environment. For example, one library service ran five scheduled activities a day, each for a different age group (pre-school, school-age and adults) called 'What's on today'. Delivering digitally led to new services and groups emerging, including: new online language conversation groups which hadn't been offered previously; teatime and bedtime rhyme and storytime sessions; and new home learning resources for families and teachers to access. One library service that engaged with this research created information literacy curricula for local schools. The resulting lesson content was delivered via Google Classroom as part of remote schooling provision during lockdown.

Some library services offered specific health and wellbeing offers through their digital services. For example, one service issued specific content on mental health and wellbeing, developed in partnership with mental health charities at a service-wide level, whilst staff at local branch libraries would put out content like 'wellbeing thought of the day' or 'strategies for being well'. Others invested in more e-titles aimed at supporting mental health and wellbeing for the e-library or supporting national festivals and awareness events such as 'Empathy Day' or 'Mental Health Awareness Week' by drawing attention to online collections that could support people and/or delivering facilitated online events that people could participate in.¹²

The growth in take-up of e-resources and the large audiences for social media activities suggest that there was a need for these services among the general public during lockdown and that library services stepped up and responded to that need.


¹² Other digital activities offered during lockdown include: local history story-telling, craft and drawing, online Makerspace (collaborative and creative work space) sessions, wellbeing online workshops, digitising benefit and employment guides, curating Black Lives Matters reading lists, gathering stories from the community about their experience of Covid-19 and lockdown, support with home schooling (eg. interactive homework support, help for home tutoring parents and classes for children), creating reminiscence videos to be uploaded to YouTube for care homes, multi-lingual rhyme and story times, author talks, theatre groups, poetry readings, 'virtual wanderings' (encouraging people to post photos of walks undertaken individually to prompt online group discussion about the photos, with a view to visiting the places photographed together when lockdown eased), videos of landscapes for those unable to leave their home, e-language courses and virtual support for business start-up. Whilst some of these items were mentioned a number of times, others were mentioned just once. They are shared here to illustrate the range of offers library services were able to provide during lockdown.

Make Fest: Halton Libraries and Mako Create


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

PHYSICAL SERVICES

Telephone support: Welfare and keeping in touch calls

 **“I’ve been involved in the [library service’s] friendship calls and I know from feedback that this has made a big difference to people. On one call, a girl with several health issues mentioned she had no electricity. She lived alone with care workers visiting at different times. I was able to pass this information to the council hub ... When I spoke with her the next day she was like a different person. She hadn’t known who to contact so the fact of this problem being sorted for her lifted her mood.”**

FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND

 **“We know that many of our customers have appreciated being kept in touch with and can’t wait to come back into the library.”**

FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND


Public library services use the space their buildings provide to connect communities and individuals. Many provide services targeted at people that are older or perhaps living on a low income, shielding or lonely. During lockdown, with a very few exceptions, public library buildings closed. As such, to continue to connect with their communities and support wellbeing, a number of public library services sought to engage with their older, vulnerable or home delivery library users through phone calls.¹³ Around 1 in 5 people who engaged with library services during lockdown were contacted by staff.¹⁴

Staff called individuals for a range of purposes: to keep in touch, provide wellbeing support, provide a befriending service and/or to check if they required support of any kind. Calls also provided the opportunity for staff to inform members about the digital offer and support them to access it, or

to register them for the home library service (where it was running). In some cases, calling members required drawing on the service’s database of members, in others it leaned on staff knowledge of their communities to identify and contact individual vulnerable residents who would benefit from contact. Even where contact lists were generated from a general database, the hyperlocal nature of library services came to the fore. For example, in one service an effort was made to arrange calls so that users spoke with members of staff who knew them and with whom they had a pre-existing relationship.

In some services a small number of calls were undertaken, but in others, thousands of individuals were identified and contacted. Some calls were one-off points of contact while others developed into regular keep-in-touch conversations. In one service interviewed for the research, 80% of those who received a call asked to be contacted again. This led to regular phone calls with people who wanted to be contacted every few days or every week.

In other services, calls were undertaken less as welfare calls and more in order to inform members about changes to the library service during lockdown or to consult them about how they would like the service to be reinstated. Nevertheless, in the process of undertaking these calls, staff often identified additional needs and placed referrals to support services. For example, in Somerset, all 500 subscribers to the home library service were contacted. Through this, library staff identified a significant proportion of people who were experiencing loneliness and who requested another call back to hear from someone, and small numbers needed signposting to services such as food and medicine collection and delivery, or even more urgent help and support. In some cases, staff identified individuals experiencing elder abuse and referred them on for support.

 **“One resident in their 70s said, ‘Bless you, it’s so nice of you to call. It’s nice to speak to someone other than the TV with all the gloom and doom. I feel the call is bringing the world together.’”**

FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND

13 This is different from specific shielding calls or helplines that were set up as part of local authorities’ more general response to Covid-19.

14 Whilst there is little variation by demographic group in relation to the UK average as to whether people were contacted by staff, it is worth noting that those aged 18-24 were significantly more likely to say that they were contacted and those aged 55+ were significantly less likely to say that they were contacted. This is discussed under Key message 3.

Home delivery service

Pre-Covid-19, public library services offered a home delivery service for people who did not leave the house or found it hard to get to their nearest library due to illness, mobility issues or carer responsibilities. A few library services were able to continue their home delivery service, or resume it with very little interruption, during lockdown. Others found ways of distributing books via partners. 14% of people who engaged with the library service during lockdown received books in some form from the library service. Given that reading for pleasure has been linked to reductions in symptoms of stress, depression and dementia, improved wellbeing and improved relationships with others¹⁵ it is unsurprising that those who received books from library services reported this service as having a positive impact in some way.

15 Reading Agency (2015) Literature Review: The impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment [Online] Available at: <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/The%20Impact%20of%20Reading%20for%20Pleasure%20and%20Empowerment.pdf> [Accessed September 2020]

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. 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, per month. This number has since grown as people have continued to ask to be included in this service.

Where library services were unable to continue their regular home delivery service, some developed new temporary delivery services. For example, one service worked within an existing partnership with the council's Early Help team to improve life chances of disadvantaged families by supporting the development of home packs to support family wellbeing and informal learning during lockdown;¹⁶ Glasgow Life distributed packs of books and resources to disadvantaged families through partnerships with other agencies; and Libraries Unlimited partnered with a local community cycling charity to deliver books to a temporary homeless shelter.

16 This partnership was part of Small Steps Big Change (SSBC), a Big Lottery 10 year programme which the library service had been part of prior to Covid-19.

Book Bags to Target Families: Glasgow Life



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

HOME DELIVERY SERVICE USER

Glasgow Libraries worked with Education Services to deliver book bags to 3,000 target or priority families. They received funding from two major donors to provide gift books in the packs and they also provided library books on loan and activities for children. This was just a small proportion of the vulnerable families in Glasgow, but it was those who had been identified as not able to support their children’s learning from home. The service also distributed 600 Summer Reading Challenge book packs to vulnerable families.¹⁷

Ready Reads: Hampshire Library Service

Staff in Hampshire Library Service developed a book bag service called ‘Ready Reads’. They designed and built a system whereby people could request a bag of books over the phone or online and the contents of the book bags were curated for them by library staff. ‘Ready Reads’ was a hugely popular service, attracting over 4,000 subscribers in the first three weeks, with 41,500 books and other items being distributed in the first four weeks of the scheme.

Information provision

Public library services are a source of trusted information. Around 1 in 10 people who engaged with the public library service in lockdown turned to it for information. This was delivered in a variety of ways, through simply redirecting the library phone number to staff mobile numbers, or through signposting or providing an enquiry service such as the ‘Ask a Librarian’ service¹⁸ over the phone as well as virtually. Queries received from the public related to queries about the service, including how to access the digital offer and when physical services would be reintroduced, but also requests for signposting to other sources of information and support.

In terms of signposting, one library service in Wales used social media to promote information from their local authority and other trusted local partners to do a range of things from sharing information from employability partners about jobs and bridges into work schemes; citizens’ advice; drug and alcohol service; domestic abuse; and when recycling is reopening and so forth.

In some cases, these services were used by individuals seeking emergency help and support.



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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND.

¹⁷ Families were identified in one of two ways: Education Services data and data from the library management system. In this latter case, data was filtered by the Every Child is a Library Member category, identified ‘literacy hotspots’ and permission to contact individuals. Filtering by ‘literacy hotspot’ enabled the service to target those most in need first.

¹⁸ The Ask a Librarian service enables people to contact a librarian with any question – whether it pertains to research, homework, a library service or something else.

Building-based services

Buildings are a core part of the public library service. They provide a safe, welcoming space, open to all and free at the point of entry. As such, they act as a valuable civic resource and ‘third space’ – neither home, nor work. With a few notable exceptions, public library buildings were shut during lockdown and access to them was often difficult for library staff. However, in some cases library buildings were used in new ways to support the Covid-19 response. In one instance, the library provided a wellbeing space for care-at-home and care workers who were feeling pressured by the situation in which they were working. This use of the building made the most of public libraries as a safe ‘third’ space.

Health and Wellbeing Hubs: North Ayrshire

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

Some other library buildings were used as a call centre for information lines or shielding calls, as a community response hub where it was possible to get mental health support and order prescriptions, and where staff took calls from the community, a vulnerable families or children’s hub – providing access and support only to this limited group, an education hub for children of key workers.

DIGITAL ENABLEMENT AND TACKLING DIGITAL EXCLUSION



“Most of our customers are vulnerable and unable to access online offers so [we’re] missing a huge part of our client base.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, SCOTLAND

Many public library services work to tackle digital exclusion through supporting access to technology and skills development. Library staff were acutely aware of the impact of digital exclusion on their communities during lockdown and reported that the digital divide meant that the reach of their offers was curtailed.

Some services shifted the way in which they sought to overcome digital exclusion and worked with partners to continue to address this challenge during lockdown. Those that engaged in this area worked with partners to run tablet lending or distribution schemes to deprived and digitally excluded families or those who were shielding. For example, one service, working with colleagues in education, delivered 14,000 chrome books to vulnerable families. Another worked with health and social care partners to provide a lending library for devices, casting out WiFi to homeless accommodation and lending books to them.

Other services continued to provide digital skills support, but did so over the phone rather than in person. This enabled the service to continue to support those who had the technology, but lacked the skills to make the most of it.


Tackling Digital Exclusion: Powys Library Service

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

Two library services in England that engaged with this research managed to keep a few buildings open in order to provide access to public PCs in a safe environment for those who did not have tech at home. The impact of this cannot be underestimated; one Head of Service in Scotland noted that as their service began to reopen, they saw users coming in who were deeply stressed and anxious, having been unable to check their email for bills or important correspondence – or contact family members abroad – for a three-month period. Given that 7m people in the UK do not have access to the internet at home and 9m cannot use the internet without help,¹⁹ it is likely that many people across the UK were in a similar position.

19 Good Things Foundation (2020) Digital Nation [Online] Available at: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/research-publications/digital-nation-2020> [Accessed September 2020]

Access to PCs: Westminster and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Library Services

 “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.”

HEAD OF SERVICE

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 and so forth. During lockdown, just under 400 access sessions per week were taken up across Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea.



Key Message 2: Public library staff made a valuable contribution to the Covid-19 response



“We have loaned some staff to other council essential services ... and our staff have been commended for displaying ... excellent customer service and teamwork skills.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND

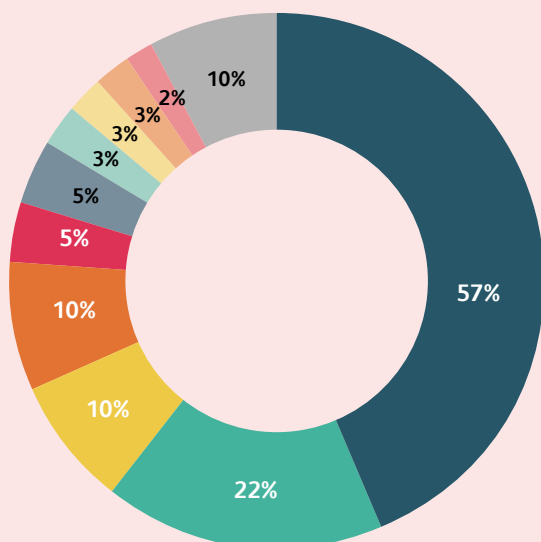
Some of the specialist outreach services implemented by local authorities in lockdown required or mirrored the core skill set that library staff utilised day-to-day pre-Covid-19. In particular, there was considerable overlap between the customer service skills, learning and support skills, information 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.

Almost 1 in 5 (18%) staff who responded to the staff survey were redeployed during lockdown. Those who were redeployed to roles co-ordinating or delivering phone lines to support vulnerable people; general customer service phone lines; food or other parcel distribution; care home support; or volunteer management and so forth, drew heavily on their existing skill set to contribute to wider efforts to support communities across the UK during an intense and challenging time.

Place of work during lockdown: redeployed staff

Redeployed staff worked across a wide range of service areas, with a particular focus on supporting vulnerable people and co-ordination of services.



- Phone lines supporting vulnerable individuals/shielding team
- Crematorium, mortuary, funeral and bereavement services
- Food or other parcel distribution
- Schools and Childrens Services
- General/other customer service phone lines
- Registrations
- Care homes support
- PPE distribution
- Volunteer management
- Other
- Co-ordination and monitoring of local authority Covid19 response

Q24: To which area of the council were you redeployed and what was your role?

Base: All redeployed (153)

CUSTOMER SERVICE AND LEARNING AND SUPPORT SKILLS

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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

Of those that were redeployed, over 90% of library staff drew on the core library skill sets of empathy and general customer service. Around 2/3 drew on core skills relating to identifying and supporting vulnerable people and community engagement. It came through strongly in the qualitative responses to the staff survey and interviews with Heads of Service that library staff were very well placed to handle calls on Covid-19, shielding or council support phone lines – asking sensitive questions about debt or health conditions – and often requiring little additional training for these roles.

“I spoke to one lady for one hour on the [council] COVID-19 line She thought I was a trained mental health nurse, which was really complimentary. Working in a library we are used to listening to vulnerable, lonely people.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

“Many library staff were redeployed to the Council’s shielding response team and helpline. Their skills in talking to people, gaining their confidence and offering help and support were highly valued.”

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

Similarly, around 7 in 10 redeployed staff drew on core library skills of supporting people to navigate services and supporting people to understand and use information, whilst almost 6 in 10 drew on the core skills of providing digital literacy support or helping people to find information.

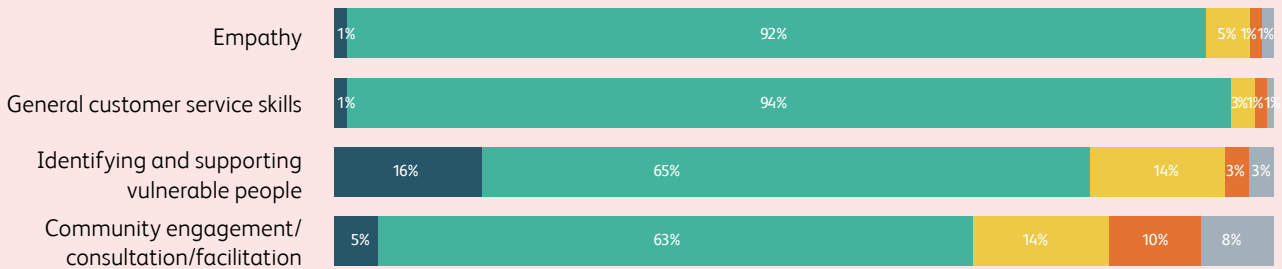
KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION SKILLS

“I think that the way that library colleagues have responded to lead, shape and deliver a new service ie. food delivery and contact centres has been great. It has demonstrated staff’s ability to be adaptable and that library work has key transferable skills.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, ENGLAND

The skillset pertaining to knowledge and information management is integral to the work of public library staff. 81% of redeployed staff drew on their prior skills of organising and managing knowledge and information in their new roles, whilst 61% drew on prior skills of information governance and compliance. Meanwhile, around half of redeployed staff drew on pre-Covid-19 skills of using knowledge and information; records management; and archiving during lockdown. This reflects the work that some staff did to set up response hubs and call centres – work that included setting up databases, organising teams and rewriting scripts for calls developed by the local authority. In this way, the findings show the transferability and importance of knowledge and information management skills and the importance of core library skills in organising responses to crises.

Customer service skills: redeployed staff

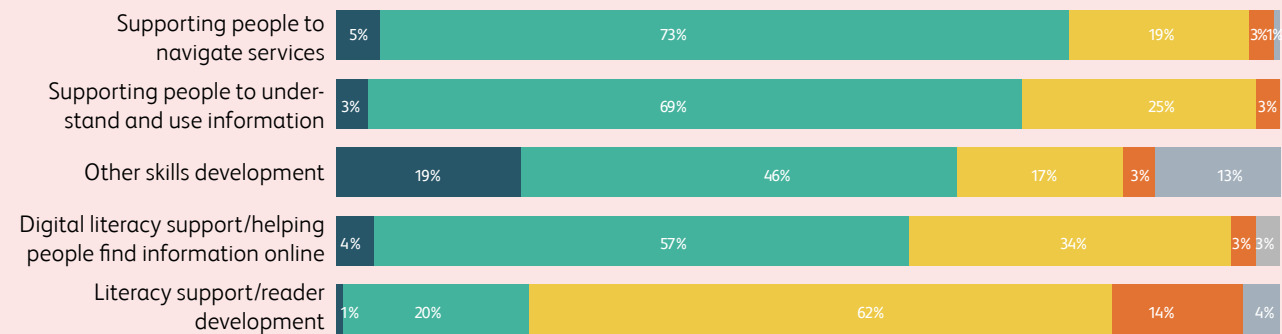


- This was a new skill that I needed to use in lockdown
- I used this skill during lockdown and I had been using it before lockdown
- I didn't need to use this skill during lockdown but I used it before lockdown
- I didn't need to use this skill during lockdown or before
- Don't know

Q26: Please tell us whether you used these skills or not during lockdown and whether you had used them in your role in libraries before lockdown or not. Community engagement and customer service skills

Base: All redeployed (153)

Learning and support skills: redeployed staff

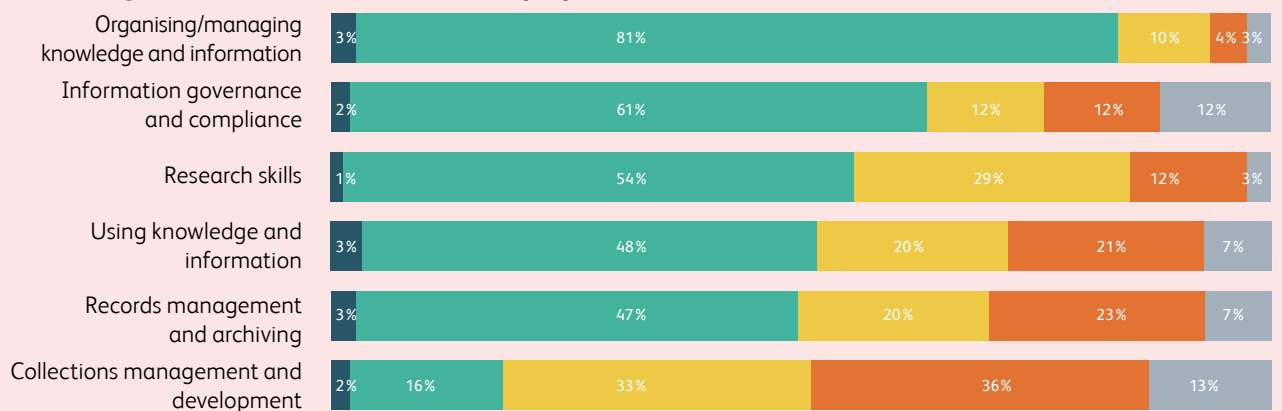


- This was a new skill that I needed to use in lockdown
- I used this skill during lockdown and I had been using it before lockdown
- I didn't need to use this skill during lockdown but I used it before lockdown
- I didn't need to use this skill during lockdown or before
- Don't know

Q28: Please tell us whether you used these skills or not during lockdown and whether you had used them in your role in libraries before lockdown or not: learning and support skills

Base: All redeployed (153)

Knowledge and information skills: redeployed staff



- This was a new skill that I needed to use in lockdown
- I used this skill during lockdown and I had been using it before lockdown
- I didn't need to use this skill during lockdown but I used it before lockdown
- I didn't need to use this skill during lockdown or before
- Don't know

Q32: Please tell us whether you used these skills or not during lockdown and whether you had used them in your role in libraries before lockdown or not: knowledge and information skills

Base: All redeployed (153)

Setting up the County Council Shielding Call Centre – Denbigshire



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

HEAD OF SERVICE, DENBIGSHIRE

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

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

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

Speaking of her staff team, the Head of Service at Denbigshire reflected that, “They were brilliant, they wanted to contribute to the Covid-19 response and support their community”.

Setting up Help Boro Hub – Middlesbrough



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

HEAD OF SERVICE, MIDDLESBROUGH

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.

ADAPTABILITY SKILLS

“Half the library service (myself included) have been working on the Covid-19 National Helpline part-time, plus I have been helping my colleague with Social Media. My line manager has been working with senior staff to co-ordinate ways in which we can help the community. This has included providing digital equipment to hubs that teach key workers’ children, supplying PPE via our 3D printer, delivering school meals and maintaining our online social media presence to advertise our services, stay in contact with customers, help customers with technical enquiries via email, social media.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

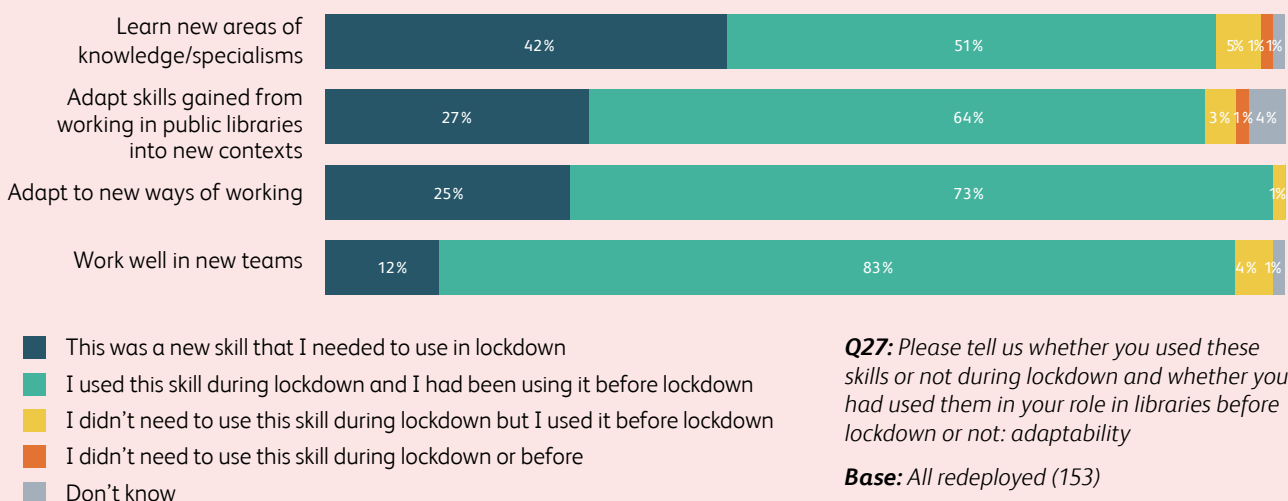
Lockdown was generally felt to be ‘unprecedented’ and ‘unfamiliar’, with decisions having to be taken at pace and in uncertain circumstances. This meant that Heads of Service and library staff were often devising a new service and delivery mode ‘on the hop’, without the ability to engage in planning and infrastructure development that would usually accompany such

significant changes both to the way the public engage with the service and the way that staff deliver it. Adaptability and flexibility were key skills for all those involved in responding to Covid-19, including library staff irrespective of whether or not those staff worked in the library service or were redeployed.

In terms of redeployed staff, working in new services and with new people was a core part of their work. It is worth noting that library staff were well suited to this with almost 3/4 of redeployed staff drawing on the core library skill of adapting to new ways of working (with the remaining 1/4 developing this skill during lockdown) and 83% drawing on their skill of working in new teams, with 12% developing this skill during lockdown.

Adaptability – and indeed innovation – were also key for staff working within the service, with some services responding to need as it arose in their communities. For example, some services provided PPE for local NHS and care home staff by utilising the 3D printers in their Makerspaces. Staff were also able to draw on their local knowledge to create new services. One example of this is how staff in a local branch library in Suffolk worked with its Friends Group to provide fruit and vegetable boxes to families in a deprived area.

Adaptability skills: redeployed staff



Producing PPE: Gateshead Library Service

Early on in lockdown, the Head of Gateshead Library Service received an email from his manager, a Director of Public Health, asking if the service could help overcome the critical shortage in PPE equipment. By the time the local authority received 1,000 visors from the UK Government, the library service had produced 5,000. The library service went on to deliver scuba mask valves to the local hospital and visors to paramedics, over 60 care homes, the Red Cross and undertakers. The library service has been depicted among the photographs selected for the Historic England national archive of ‘100 pictures representing lockdown’.

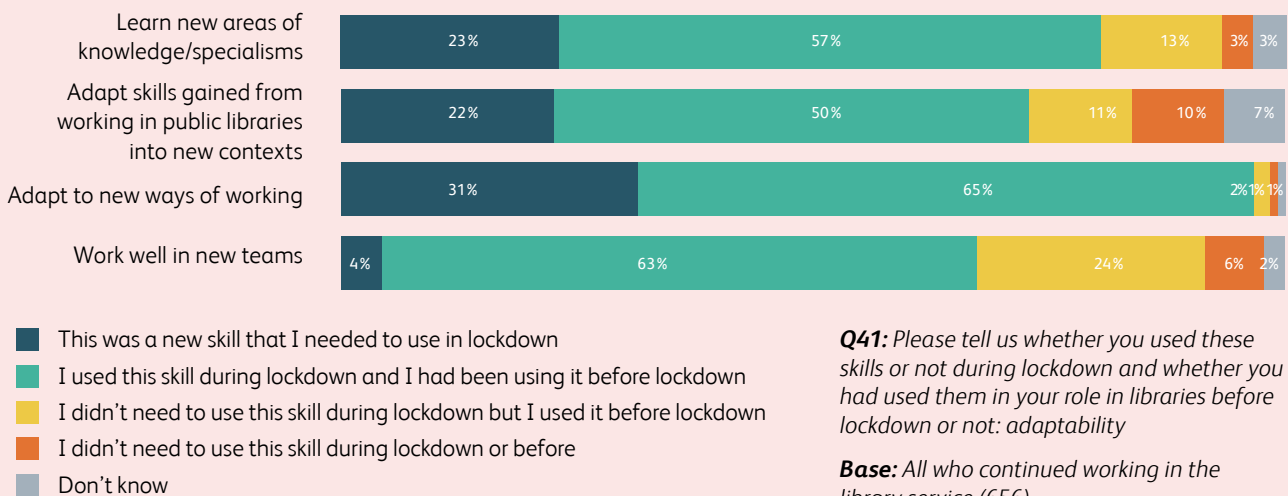
The flexibility, creativity and resilience of staff were often identified by Heads of Service in interviews as a key factor that enabled them to deliver library services during lockdown. These skills, combined with an attitude of ‘not fearing failure’ enabled services to adopt a ‘test and learn’ approach to developing services.



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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

Adaptability skills: staff in the library service





Key Message 3: Public library services and their staff could have delivered much more – but faced barriers in doing so

Despite the positive impact that public library services had on those who engaged with them and the important contribution that library staff made to the broader response to Covid-19, it was widely felt by library staff that there were significant gaps in their ability to support their communities during lockdown.

The root causes of these gaps fall into the following categories: the limitations of a digital mode of delivering services; factors external to the sector; and factors internal to the sector. Whilst some of these were new barriers, many were already well known and experienced within the sector – albeit to lesser or greater degrees across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Crucially, these barriers meant that public library services were unable to act as a service of first resort in the way they did before lockdown; as a safety net for communities, the lonely or isolated, and the ‘borderline’ or ‘hidden’ vulnerable. In some cases it also meant that staff were unable to draw on their valuable skill set to support their communities and local authorities in the most effective way.

THE LIMITATIONS OF DIGITAL IN DELIVERING LIBRARY SERVICES



“Ours is quite a deprived area and my contact with the community is [currently] through our Facebook page; I’m not convinced I’m seeing the same people ... I see in the library itself. Users of the library on a day-to-day basis are not simply coming for books...For those who are looking for reading material, online resources are great and we can guide people with online interaction. But this isn’t a direct equivalent to what we do in our library from day to day. I do feel overall that the readers are well

served and the online provision has been responsive and generous. However, our own community and probably others like it are unlikely to find the ‘safe space’, the human interaction and the help they often look for when they come into the branch.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

Although many library services worked hard to provide interactive services online similar to those offered in library buildings, the above quote encapsulates many of the limitations staff felt in delivering library services digitally during lockdown: reach, quality interaction and support, and access to physical resources. These limitations were felt to curtail library services’ ability to deliver a curated social experience and wider range of benefits to their communities. This was particularly felt in relation to opportunities for structured and unstructured forms of interaction and engagement. (Structured opportunities being offered through ‘doing’: providing activities, events and interest groups run by the service or its partners. In contrast, unstructured opportunities are offered through ‘being’: providing an agenda-free space that can be entered without payment or permission, that enables people to simply co-exist alongside others, providing the potential for meeting and speaking with others.)

Reach

Although 1/3 of the UK public made use of library services’ digital offer during lockdown, an overwhelming number of public library staff who responded to the staff survey expressed concern about whether they engaged a broad audience.

In particular, staff voiced concern about the effect of digital exclusion on the reach of their services. Staff were anxious that those who were poorer, more vulnerable or elderly were missing out on the digital

library offer. They described the various facets to exclusion including: those who could not access tech; those who did not have good internet/connectivity; those who lacked skills or confidence; those who simply didn't want to use, or were unfamiliar with, the social media platforms that the library service was relying on at this time (eg. Facebook or Twitter); and those who simply didn't want to use services or engage online.

It was clear from the research that some library services predominantly serve disadvantaged communities where digital exclusion is widespread. For example, in one area, the fact that there was a relatively high proportion of the population with no access to either fixed broadband or paid-for internet via their mobile phones, and a high proportion of Covid-19 cases, made it challenging for staff to develop a service with the hoped-for reach. One survey respondent from a different service lamented that the videos and resources they had created to support learning and school readiness were unlikely to reach the families who might get the most out of them.

 **“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.”**
FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND

 **“Many of our customers won't use digital resources so will be missing out on any kind of service we've been offering throughout lockdown. Some customers rely on our Active IT service, having no computer access at home and will potentially be very isolated.”**
FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

 **“We know we're not reaching a large part of our members and users – those who either don't use social media or aren't interested in following the library there.”**
MIDDLE MANAGER, ENGLAND

 **“I work in a community that may not connect so easily with the bulk of library output [at this time]. It's hard to know what the service could do to address this directly because it relies on being there 'in person'.”**
FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

 **“People here are not interested in a virtual world – it's an ageing population in a remote to very remote rural geography ... they want real physical contact and that's where the service can make a difference to people's lives.”**
FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

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

Some staff also expressed concern for those excluded from predominantly digital offers such as those with visual impairments, people with English as a second language or new arrivals who, pre-Covid-19, would be welcomed and supported in the library building. Before lockdown, these latter groups were supported with ESOL or conversation classes in the library building, but struggled to engage with these offers online.

Concerns relating to the reach of the library service during lockdown are perhaps reflected in the fact that, whilst e-loans of reading material increased substantially for all library services that participated in the interviews for this research, overall loans were much lower than like-for-like annual issues. For example, one library service recorded an average of 108% increase in e-book loans over the period April-July 2020 but an average reduction of 75% in terms of total volume of loans due to the fact that the service was not able to issue physical book stock during that time. A similar trend was observed for library service membership. For example, one service recorded an increase of 1,540% in online joiners over the same time period in the previous year. However due to the reduction in traditional library joiners, this still represents a 71% reduction in total new memberships.

The loss of the library building as a space led some staff and interviewees to express their concern about their ability to reach those that were ‘just’ coping but would have been ‘pushed over the edge’ into vulnerability by lockdown. For example, those who were lonely or isolated but not on any at-risk registers; homeless people who were not engaging with support networks; new arrivals; refugees and asylum seekers; and some vulnerable children and young people. Again, staff were also concerned about those with hidden vulnerabilities who used the library service for support or to access support groups in the library building run by partners. These were library users who were not on any official risk or vulnerability registers.

“Being vulnerable isn’t as clear cut as you think. I always explain it, like, 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.”

SENIOR MANAGER, WALES

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

HEAD OF SERVICE, SCOTLAND

“The really vulnerable people who would call into the library just for some company [are missing out].”

FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND

It is perhaps worth noting that whilst, overall, nearly 3 in 10 people in the UK engaged with public library services during lockdown, those aged 45-54, 55-64 and 65+; those in social grade grouping DE; and those that were not working were significantly less likely to do so. However, as these groups were also less likely than the UK average to be library users pre-lockdown, it is unclear how far the lack of engagement of these groups stems from the digital mode of delivery.

Structured Interactions: events and activities

“Communities have missed physical libraries, we have a place in supporting our communities that cannot be filled digitally.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, SCOTLAND

“You can deliver online events but nothing beats ‘live’ events.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

Survey respondents and Heads of Service interviewees alike reflected on the difference between the physical and digital provision of rhyme and story times for children. They noted that in a physical space, this activity would enable children to engage with one another and with physical objects and books – all of which are important for early years’ development. Again, parents or carers would be able to chat with each other during and after a session, something that was regarded as important for the mental health of parents and (in particular) first time parents’ ability to build relationships and social networks.

Whilst the benefits of the in-person activity are three-fold (learning and entertainment; parent/carer wellbeing; and social interaction for early years’ development), the digital offer was seen as delivering on the first of these benefits alone. In this way, whilst the digital and physical versions of this activity appeared to be ‘the same offer’, they were not, in fact, commensurate in what they were able to deliver.

“There’s nothing like a room of under 4s...”

SENIOR MANAGER, NORTHERN IRELAND

Despite the benefits of digital, there was therefore a sense that the richness of interaction and the additional benefits brought by social interaction in a given space were compromised by the digital format. It is perhaps worth noting that in some services, the average engagement with digital appeared to be much shorter than face-to-face activities.²⁰

²⁰ A collaborative group of Scottish library services conducted analysis that showed that the average engagement time for children’s activities online (such as story or rhyme times) is five minutes, while adult activities (such as author talks and readings) averaged 17 minutes of engagement. These are both substantially shorter engagement times than in face-to-face activities.

Unstructured Interactions: a welcoming space with skilled staff as an outreach service


 **“It’s about community, connection – how do you translate those things?”**

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

As a non-judgemental space, free at the point of entry and where all are welcome, public libraries can provide ‘bumping places’ in which it is comfortable to linger, strike up conversation and interact, or simply enjoy being with others. With the buildings closed, this opportunity was shut off for those who depended on it, curtailing public library services’ ability to tackle loneliness and act as a ‘service of first resort’. There were also some concerns about the digital spaces offered not being able to replicate the neutral, welcoming ethos of the public service.


Some staff reflected on how being a safe physical space offers the opportunity for encounters and conversations that enable staff to identify someone who needs support and to offer appropriate support or else signpost them to another service. This perhaps reflects the way in which the public library building is an outreach service in itself, where staff can approach and support those who are unsure, uncertain or unwilling to approach other services for help – and that this did not adequately translate across into the digital service provided during lockdown. The fact that one in four of respondents to the staff survey that continued to work for the library service during lockdown felt they were unable to draw on their general customer service skills, and almost 3 in 10 did not draw on their skills in identifying and supporting vulnerable people, community engagement or supporting people to navigate services, would support this view.

Likewise, some interviewees and survey respondents reflected that during normal times, the offer of physical resources such as newspapers, ‘give people the excuse’ to come in and chat, or have something to hold while they enjoyed being among other people, without having to say they are lonely or that they want help. As with the rhyme and story times, the digital and physical versions of the provision of newspapers and books are, to some extent, different services.


 **“In theory, offering newspapers online and physically are the same thing, but in practice you are reaching different audiences... They ...are meeting two different but important needs.”**

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

Linked to these observations are staff statements that combatting loneliness and social isolation, especially among older people, did not translate well to the online context. This is perhaps reflected in the fact that, of all the age groups, those aged 55+ were the least likely to say that engagement with the service over lockdown helped them feel more connected to their community (50% compared to the UK average of 63%) or that it helped them feel less alone (48% compared to the UK average of 60%).

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


SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

 **“[We usually help by] talking someone through something, helping them find the right resource for self-directed care or being able to encourage people to come to a group event or activity.”**

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

As mentioned, public library services also offer spaces which allow us to be ‘alongside’ one another. One senior manager, whose service works in partnership with their local NHS Foundation Trust, relies on the effectiveness of being with, and alongside, people in order to deliver an open space mental health model that encourages living positively. This simply wasn’t possible to translate into a digital context.

Access to physical space and resources

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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

The closure of library buildings was noted by many staff survey respondents as a key reason why they were unable to fulfil community need: the lack of a space where physical resources such as books or IT equipment and the lack of a safe civic space for all that is free at the point of entry was keenly felt.

The nature of the interactions a free civic space make possible have been outlined in the previous section. However, it is worth noting that by virtue of being this type of space, the public library service is an important equaliser, providing access to computers, printers, books and other resources to all, irrespective

of someone's background. The two library services that were able to keep their public PC access running during lockdown were very much the exception. Heads of Service that were interviewed for this research reported an increase in enquiries about ICT usage. This came after the DWP announcement that people claiming Jobseekers Allowance and Universal Credit were no longer exempt from demonstrating that they are actively seeking work.

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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

Interestingly, reading groups and Lego clubs were two activities that were mentioned a few times in the staff survey as not translating well in some library services. (Although this was not universal and they appeared to work very well in some services.) Some of the other reasons given for this include how regular attendees of book clubs don't have digital access, issues with tech and copyright permissions – and that it was hard to establish a new group during lockdown itself. There is perhaps also something particularly appealing about physical books and Lego, as the following quotes suggest:

“During my time manning the Covid-line, which is to get food to shielding and vulnerable people, I’ve had them ask, ‘Where can I get books? Books are what keep me young, and my mind awake.’ These are people who DO NOT want an e-Book.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

“Though we posted a weekly [Lego club] challenge, we got very little response – which leads me to think that it’s the access to actual Lego that makes this activity popular in our physical libraries.”

SPECIALIST ROLE, ENGLAND

“E-books are good but we need to give people access to books and literacy because some parents may not be literate themselves and cannot read to their children – those children need schools and libraries to access reading and books – this should be a human right and not just for those who have access to digital resources.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND

Again, some library services appeared to have struggled to engage children through e-loans and e-memberships. For example, one service noticed that fewer than 300 children were using the digital library offer in May. They improved the stock but then realised that e-books were less likely to engage children than physical books. This indicates that there is something of value in the physicality of a resource that cannot always be replicated in its digital counterpart.

It is clear that the public have missed the physical service and are looking forward to library buildings reopening. Staff reflected on how members of the public who initially embraced digital services are felt to be experiencing 'Zoom fatigue' and to be looking forward to the reintroduction of face-to-face services, whilst others are mindful of the impact of screen time on children.

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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

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

SENIOR MANAGER, WALES

“People get in touch to say they miss physically coming to the library – we are a small community and a big part of it.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

Some staff also reflected on the impossibility of replicating the neutral, welcoming space of the physical library building in an online context, with anxieties being expressed about the solutions that public library services have used to provide space for public interactions during Covid-19. Social media platforms are all owned by private, commercial companies whose business model runs on targeted advertising. The public library building offers a totally different kind of space. Given this fact, and the work public library services engage with around digital literacy and data privacy, one senior manager in England reflected, “I wonder what we're asking people to do by inviting them into that space.”

FACTORS EXTERNAL TO THE SECTOR



“It’s always easier to see things in hindsight and this is an unprecedented event and we also had to protect staff and public, so it [the nature of response] shouldn’t be seen as a failing – just a learning curve.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND.

The following items had the potential to be either enabling or inhibiting factors on service delivery during lockdown: finances; differing attitudes to risk within local authorities; the extent of understanding within a local authority of what the library service does; and the extent to which the library service has a voice in local authority structures.

Finances

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

In England, Arts Council England provided £1,000 to every library service (£150,000 total) to purchase new e-resources as part of lockdown service delivery. In Wales, the Welsh Government invested £250,000 in the National Digital Library Service for Wales. In Northern Ireland, the government provided £800,000 of additional funding to invest in e-books and other digital stock and services at the start of the pandemic.

Several individual library services described ways in which they secured adequate investment in addition to this support, including using private endowments/bequests or discretionary funds; using capital investment to purchase IT equipment and e-book stock; and bidding into local authority Covid-19 crisis funding.

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

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



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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

More broadly, public library services that relied on substantial earned income or subsidy through activities offered, felt the financial impact of Covid-19 during lockdown, with the need to furlough staff and reduce staff to a skeleton team because of being motivated by cash-flow crises. As one Head of Service put it, “financially, the charity ‘fell off a cliff’”. Those services that operated as trusts or outside local authority control and had made use of the furlough scheme often felt that it had made the difference that allowed their organisation to survive during lockdown.



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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

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

Meanwhile, interviewees working in library services within local authority control were anticipating local authorities having to make significant budget cuts to address the costs of Covid-19, with savings potentially being made through reducing library services. Where services were already planning for significant reductions in operating budgets, there was real concern about public library services’ ability to deliver a full complement of library offers moving forward.

Moreover, some Heads of Service who participated in the research noted the financial challenges associated with restarting services as lockdown eased. These costs related to reopening buildings that have been closed for a substantial period of time (eg. electrical and water checks) and additional costs of reconfiguring spaces to ensure they are Covid-19-secure.

Differing attitudes to risk within a local authority

Whilst library services, councils and devolved and national governments assess and handle risk day to day, the pandemic posed an unprecedented type of risk for many of those who were dealing with service delivery at this time. Throughout lockdown itself, narratives around what did or did not mitigate risk were sometimes confused or unclear. Given this context, it is important to recognise that library services were in very different places in terms of how risk was interpreted and handled. What they were able or enabled to deliver differed accordingly.

Local inconsistencies in attitudes to risk around health, IT and GDPR led to patchy delivery of library services across the UK. Some library services report having their access to buildings completely denied or very limited during lockdown. This has limited the ways in which the library service has been able to support responses to Covid-19 in their local authority. Again, attitudes around whether or not it was possible or desirable to run a non-contact home delivery service often rested on how comfortable councils were in allowing library services to manage risk by supporting staff to work safely in a building, quarantining stock and ensuring non-contact delivery. There was a tangible sense of frustration among many library staff who felt they were being denied the ability to offer this type of service – despite other library services delivering books and local volunteer groups doing book drops and book shares. Where a very risk-averse attitude was adopted, it has been difficult for library services to offer any physical service at all and has delayed reopening and reintroduction of physical services.

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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

Inconsistency in the appetite for risk in relation to the delivery of digital services across local authorities also affected library services’ ability to deliver interactive services. For example, some library services did not have permission to use interactive platforms such as Zoom and others were unable to secure permission to use free broadcasting software.

“We were hampered by the public favouring Zoom [in delivery of digital services] but our local authority did not permit us to use this.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, SCOTLAND

Yet Heads of Service also observed that some barriers to IT use came down rapidly during Covid-19, raising the question of whether the rules that were in place before were necessary.

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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

Different approaches to managing risk in relation to GDPR was also an area where differing attitudes made it either possible or impossible for a service to be able to identify and contact potentially vulnerable library users over the phone.

“We were not allowed to contact vulnerable members of the community for fear of breaching GDPR. We were not allowed to offer a home delivery service for fear of contamination. All we were allowed to do was post activities and information on our Facebook pages, mostly directed at children. No effort was made to provide services for people who do not engage with us online or have no online access.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, SCOTLAND

A palpable sense of frustration and a feeling of having been restricted in being able to deliver a library service during lockdown came through a number of staff responses to the survey conducted as part of this research. Consideration about what could have been better led to a few reflections about ‘next time’, such as,

“I would...like to see plans in place for real books to be distributed...and customers visited (from a safe distance) face-to-face.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND.

Extent of understanding within a local authority of what the library service does and how it can contribute

Whether or not library services were enabled to manage and navigate risk in order to deliver a variety of physical and digital services during lockdown often related to the extent to which the council apparently understood and appreciated what the service and its staff could offer at this – or indeed any other – time.

“I think the impact libraries have on our wider community has been largely ignored. Direction of library staff and resources into more varied community roles is an option that doesn’t seem to have been considered.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

“It would have been easier if they [the council] had said what they needed and libraries could nominate staff for it ... But all the council were looking for was people that were fulltime and had council owned laptops. This was a shame as all our staff could have done welfare calls as they are so involved in the community and giving a good service. They [the council] could have just given that service to the library service ... it’s a bit frustrating knowing ... they weren’t making the best use of or skills ... These are things library staff could do perfectly.”

SENIOR MANAGER, WALES

The level of recognition of the potential contribution of public library services also appeared to be reflected in the extent to which councils supported public library staff to access remote and homeworking IT infrastructure or the council intranet, or showcased the public library offer during lockdown.

“Our IT department have been very supportive in providing staff with the ability to work from home, so we have continued to provide a service digitally.”

SPECIALIST STAFF, SCOTLAND

“I wish our local council could have supported our efforts by promoting the service and our lockdown efforts – we even had a new section built up on the council’s website – but our services are not highlighted in updates and press releases.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, SCOTLAND

“The council doesn’t really support our efforts in terms of promoting what we offer and this does make things difficult at times and continues the difficulties that the community may experience accessing information.”

SPECIALIST STAFF, ENGLAND

Extent to which the library service has a voice in local authority structures

Where Heads of Service had a good relationship with local decision makers and a voice in wider council teams during lockdown, the potential of the library service or its staff was recognised and harnessed. This led to the library service’s assets being deployed to continue to support community wellbeing during lockdown. For example, services being trusted to get on and deliver for the public in the way they thought best; library buildings being identified as key community hubs; library staff being redeployed into appropriate services which were valued by the public and senior people in the local authority; or Heads of Service being able to scope out the way in which library services could contribute to emerging council services or multi-agency working to bring added value to these services.

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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND.

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

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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

Where Heads of Service were ‘locked out’ of decision-making, the skills and resources of the library service appeared not to be used in the response to Covid-19 and the library service itself was not enabled to support community wellbeing through delivering more services.

FACTORS INTERNAL TO THE SECTOR

A range of internal factors also inhibited library service provision during lockdown. These factors included: consistency and visibility of the library offer during lockdown; organisational culture; partnerships; effective communication and engagement with the public; digital skills; and preparedness and contingency planning.

Consistency and visibility of the library offer during lockdown

The activities and services offered by public library services during lockdown were developed or delivered on an ad-hoc basis and were not offered consistently across the UK. In terms of the digital offer, the highly localised nature of online activities raise questions about visibility and reach. In terms of welfare calls made to the over 70s, this leads to questions about the how far the library offer penetrated the UK population as a whole.

In terms of developing digital services, it appears that the majority of services had branch libraries generate their own digital content and promote these efforts. In contrast, only a few respondents mentioned that their library service reposted others’ digital content. Decisions to take the second approach included a lack of resource and capacity, or awareness that others were creating digital content, thereby freeing up time to focus on creating a few high-quality video tutorials on accessing e-resources.

Each approach had pros and cons. Some respondents felt that there was a ‘pull’ factor for library users who wanted to see a known and friendly face of the local library staff – the ‘hyperlocal’ face of the library, council or public service. Indeed, a few respondents who did not create their own content felt that reposted story and rhyme times had limited uptake because they lacked the community connection a familiar face could give.

However, others questioned the quality of the hyperlocal content produced. A few respondents observed that the poor discoverability of their digital services meant that the ability of library services to reach people was compromised. As one member of staff observed,

“The e-library was not marketed effectively – only if you happened to go onto Facebook or the council website page would you have known [it was there].”

FRONTLINE STAFF, WALES

Similarly, some pointed to the need to advertise and advocate for the service beyond their own social media channels. Another respondent noted that social media was ‘swamped’ over lockdown with a plethora of appealing content from a range of organisations, including storytimes with celebrities, and what the library produced got a little lost in this.

A few respondents noted that it was hard to benchmark what constituted ‘good uptake’ of electronic resources and activities and a few also noted that some video content didn’t have good uptake. As one survey respondent from Scotland put it, “feedback has been great but uptake disappointing in some areas.” Others noted that there had initially been a huge appetite for digital but that this had begun to wane.

In terms of staff experience of creating digital content, some appreciated the level of autonomy that they were given to create, whilst others would have liked more guidance on what was required and what 'good' looked like to ensure a more consistent and ordered approach.

In terms of moving ahead with the digital offer, one survey respondent summed up the situation as follows:

“There is balance to be had between efficiencies of scale and ensuring quality through national initiatives and maintaining the digital offer as a local offer.”

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

In terms of the welfare calls, just under half (46%) of survey respondents worked for a service that offered welfare calls to the over 70s and some services made in the region of 8,000 calls. However, only 1% of over 55s who engaged with the public library service over lockdown stated that they had been contacted by staff.²¹ As such, whilst the welfare calls may have had a high penetration rate in a given locality and had a beneficial impact on those who received them (remembering that local authority areas serve very different populations), as a UK offer it had limited reach.

Organisational culture

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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

Some public library services took a collaborative approach to designing services in order to adapt rapidly. In these environments, senior managers ensured staff at all levels had the opportunity and ability to shape the library service. Staff who worked in services which enabled 'leadership at all levels' felt that this had given them an advantage in terms of rapidly developing new services and supporting staff to adapt to the new scenario.

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

SENIOR MANAGER, NORTHERN IRELAND

“The idea of doing welfare calls to our older users came from a member of Frontline staff. We took it on and made around 8,000 calls.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, ENGLAND

One service created a short-term delivery strategy and small agile teams of frontline and development staff to test and learn across ten different projects. These included projects on reopening, staff wellbeing, extending the home library service and a social media project focused on how to teach/engage with the public via digital technology. This way of working encouraged cross-role team-working at a time when staff could otherwise have been isolated from one another, and it played a critical role in creating a culture of delivery and accountability.

In these types of services, senior management teams would also ensure staff were informed, engaged and connected with one another. For example, keeping staff informed about changes, such as furlough and the reopening processes, in particular explaining the reasons why decisions had been made; ensuring team-wide meetings and regular check-ins; and gauging how staff were feeling through conducting staff engagement surveys at key moments, such as when they were adapting to lockdown and prior to reopening, and responding to feedback.

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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

One library service reported that some redeployed staff recorded video diaries of their working day which were shared and celebrated with library teams both as a way of ensuring redeployed staff felt part of the wider team and for others to learn from their experience.

²¹ Between 17%-26% of other age groups said that they received such a service.

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

However, where this inclusive approach was absent, staff who responded to the survey saw working culture as impacting negatively on the quality and impact of the services delivered, as well as staff morale and wellbeing.

“I hoped that as everything changed [with lockdown] my ideas for adapting the service would be considered seriously and my managers would present many of their own ideas which I

could feed into. Unfortunately, lockdown just seemed to magnify the existing culture in my organisation of saying that we don’t have time to do anything and that we cannot [do things].”

SPECIALIST STAFF, ENGLAND

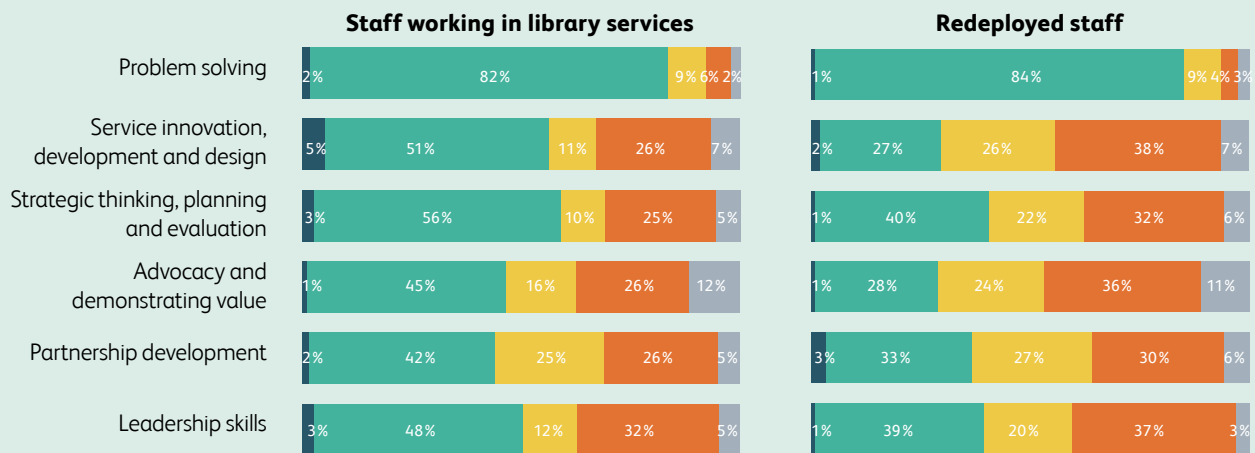
“Some frontline staff members contacted vulnerable customers off their own initiative. Not endorsed or recognised by management.”

FRONTLINE STAFF, ENGLAND

“I have felt limited by the library service I work for – there is little understanding or support for use of social media.”

SPECIALIST STAFF, ENGLAND

Strategic leadership and service development skills



- This was a new skill that I needed to use in lockdown
- I used this skill during lockdown and I had been using it before lockdown
- I didn't need to use this skill during lockdown but I used it before lockdown
- I didn't need to use this skill during lockdown or before
- Don't know

Q45: Please tell us whether you used these skills or not during lockdown and whether you had used them in your role in libraries before lockdown or not: strategic leadership and service development skills.

Base: All who continued working in the library service (656)

Q31: Please tell us whether you used these skills or not during lockdown and whether you had used them in your role in libraries before lockdown or not: strategic leadership and service development skills

Base: All redeployed (153)

Interestingly, at least a quarter of staff reported not using skills relating to strategic planning and thinking, advocacy and demonstrating value, partnership development and leadership either during lockdown or before it.

Whilst this does, of course, relate to role it perhaps also points to a working culture that doesn't enable leadership at all levels, or encourage a sense that advocacy, innovation or partnership development are collectively owned and jointly-held responsibilities – or it may reveal a workforce that lacks confidence in those areas.

Partnerships

Some library services reported that they were able to maintain and even extend their partnerships with external organisations during the Covid-19 lockdown. This enabled them to maintain contact with vulnerable groups of library users and find new ways to meet needs during lockdown. For example, one service in Scotland capitalised on an existing partnership with the Red Cross. This enabled the library service to deliver library books via the hot meals delivery service the Red Cross was providing for vulnerable older people. In another service in Scotland, pre-existing relationships with health and social care teams enabled library services to be 'on the map' when it came to establishing health and wellbeing hubs, of which there are only five and all of which are in library buildings.

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



“We were working together with others in ways we had never done before. The situation reduced the bureaucracy and hurdles that had been in our way in the past and the level of co-operation was unprecedented... It was a remarkable period for inter-organisational co-operation and I hope it has laid the foundation for future working.”

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

However, some library services found it difficult to reach and work with partners during lockdown. They noted that without buildings as venues for local groups to meet, it had been difficult to deliver and maintain partnership relationships. This meant that services and support they had previously offered to residents were not available.

Effective communication and engagement with the public

Overall, staff who responded to the survey felt their service had sought to understand what their community needed during lockdown. They gave an average score for effort made of 7.2/10 (0 being poor effort and 10 being substantial effort).

Staff who responded to the survey pointed to how their service worked with the community or with community partners, volunteer and community groups or the council to understand what was needed in their communities. Others mentioned how the service was guided by the uptake of offers, customer requests, or from feedback gained from phone calls. A couple of responses pointed to senior management working hard to understand need or having an intuitive sense of what communities want, having worked with and for them for so long. Heads of Service who were interviewed pointed to the importance of effective communication channels with the general public so that they were informed about what services are available.

Those that were less sure that their library service had worked to understand need fed back that there had been limited or no engagement with communities about what services they would like or want during lockdown. Some reflected that it was hard to get a sense of what people really want over the phone; whilst others noted that uptake of services at this time was not properly measured, making it hard to know where appetite and need was. Others, understandably, reflected that it was difficult to communicate with customers during lockdown; that the speed of change made it hard to gauge what was needed; and that gathering views from a representative sample of the local population would have been very challenging. Heads of Service reflected that the development of services on an ad-hoc basis rather than in response to established need or consultation with the general public led to some concern about how far the digital service was able to respond to the needs of the broad range of the public who use libraries.

It emerged from interviews conducted that library services that adopted a multi-channel approach to engaging with the public felt most confident that they have been able to keep their population informed. Again, those services that consulted with the public prior to reopening had greater confidence that their service was meeting public needs than those who did not.

Digital skills

The use of ICT skills among those who continued to work in library services during lockdown was high, with 93% of survey respondents reporting that they had used this skill prior to lockdown and during lockdown.

However, it is worth noting that in terms of online communication and facilitation skills, 60% of staff working in the service did not have prior experience of drawing on this skill, with only 31% developing this skill in lockdown. Some of the qualitative responses reflected that the lack of staff capacity or staff skills in relation to digital was an issue during lockdown,

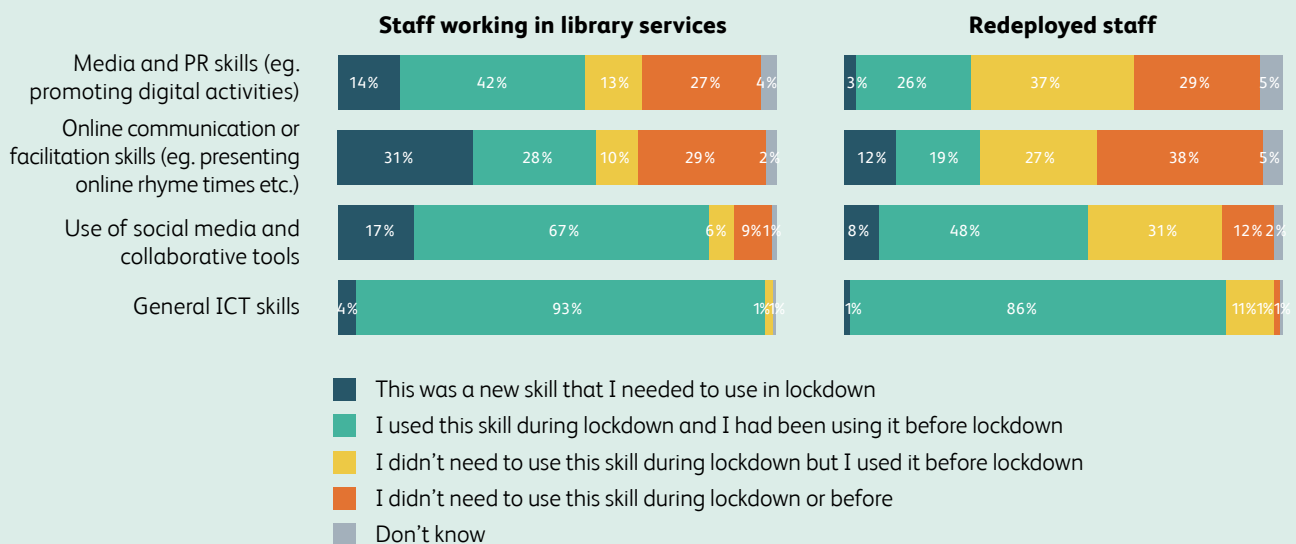
having a negative impact on the speed at which some services could pivot and on the range and quality of what could be offered digitally. For example, some survey respondents noted that engagement was often broadcast rather than two-way in its nature.

Preparedness and contingency planning

Whilst experts had been warning us of a pandemic for some time, the outbreak of Covid-19 and lockdown were nevertheless ‘unexpected’ events for most concerned. The pre-Covid-19 environment, quality of business continuity plans, and time spent planning at the start of the pandemic were identified by Heads of Service as impacting library services’ ability to adapt during lockdown or in relation to reopening.

In terms of the pre-Covid-19 environment, one Head of Service who was interviewed for the research led a library service that was operating in an area that was already facing significant recession and hardship. Here, local services were already on a crisis footing

Digital communication and ICT skills



Q42: Please tell us whether you used these skills or not during lockdown and whether you had used them in your role in libraries before lockdown or not: digital communication and ICT skills

Base: All who continued working in the library service (656)

Q28: Please tell us whether you used these skills or not during lockdown and whether you had used them in your role in libraries before lockdown or not: digital communication and ICT skills

Base: All redeployed (153)

and support systems such as food banks were already up and running. As a result, they felt the service was actually better placed to respond to Covid-19 as they were already connected to established and relevant agencies and partners.

In terms of business continuity, one interviewee noted that their plans enabled a smooth closure but did not envisage a prolonged closure. The lack of planning for prolonged closure impacted on preparedness, both in terms of outward facing provision and support and planning in relation to significant and prolonged home working for frontline staff.

Two services that engaged with this research spent considerable time at the outset in intensive planning to enable public PC access. This involved considering the physical layout of the environment, PPE and a plan for how to use the space safely. This planning

not only made it possible to open the building and offer PC access during lockdown, but made reopening reasonably quick as much of the thinking around safety and staff consultation had been completed.

In terms of preparedness in a more general sense, there may be something here that relates to the relatively low use of strategic thinking, planning and innovation, and service design skills by staff at different levels across the library service before and during lockdown. This finding perhaps reflects a wider organisational culture that does not value horizon scanning. Given the uncertain and shifting territory ahead – not to mention the anticipation of further, extreme events including the climate crisis, horizon scanning and being prepared to adapt services and be more resilient will be key for the service moving forward.



Key Message 4: Public library services have huge potential to support individuals and communities as they navigate the short, medium and long-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic



“It would be great if the message can be put forward more strongly with governments and public bodies about how central a role libraries can and do play in mental and economic health.”

SPECIALIST STAFF, SCOTLAND

The best public library services and their staff enable, empower and equalise. They enable citizens to fulfil their potential and live fuller lives, empower them to make informed decisions, and equalise, through supporting citizens, irrespective of their background. Meanwhile, the space that library buildings provide mean that the service can operate as ‘preventative’ service; a ‘service of first resort’ and safety net for communities. As such, good public library services are anchor institutions: a vital part of the social infrastructure that support communities and enable local authorities to deliver on their priorities and policy goals. It is worth noting that 7 in 10 people think it is important that library buildings reopen.

Covid-19 will continue to impact on family and social relationships, health and mental health, education, employment and the economy, and continue to deepen the existing fault lines in our society. It has also placed primary services under considerable strain. Given what public library services do, it is unsurprising that staff at all levels in the library service saw their service as having an increasingly important role in supporting communities – and the need for the service to continue to adapt and develop in order to deliver at its best.

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 their communities. The table below outlines: the most commonly mentioned areas that staff saw themselves and their service contributing to their communities moving forward; the challenges the UK is facing in relation to this area, especially in relation to the impact of Covid-19; and the way in which public library services were already supporting – and can continue to support – people in relation to that area.



Strengthening communities

The challenge	How public library services can contribute
<p>Loneliness and isolation are real challenges for the UK. Around 46% of adults in England experience loneliness;²² in Scotland one in five adults (21%) felt lonely some or most of the time the week before being surveyed,²³ 66% of people in Wales feel lonely at least sometimes;²⁴ 35.2% of people in Northern Ireland feel ‘more often lonely’ than not.²⁵ It is worth noting that loneliness affects people of all ages, with 40% of younger people (age 16-24) saying they feel lonely often or very often – more than any other adult age group.²⁶</p> <p>During lockdown, almost half of adults across Great Britain (48.4%) said they felt lonely at least sometimes or occasionally.²⁷</p>	<p>Many library services offer a range of activities to engage and connect individuals and communities. These include community groups such as reading, knit and natter, early years or reminiscence groups; coffee mornings; outreach services to disadvantaged families, linguistic minorities, or care homes; activities and services for those with special or additional needs. It is worth noting that 84% of those who engaged in reading groups said they felt more connected to others as a result of the activity.²⁸</p> <p>As a non-judgemental space, free at the point of entry and where all are welcome, public library buildings also provide ‘bumping places’ in which it is comfortable to linger, strike up conversation and interact, or simply enjoy being present with others.</p> <p>The public library building is an outreach service in itself, enabling staff to approach and support those who are unsure, uncertain or unwilling to approach staff or other services for help.</p> <p>Public library services’ capacity to know and engage with their communities at a hyperlocal level, their role in hosting local collections and facilitating connections, and the role both historic and new buildings can play as icons or in revitalising areas also mean they play a part in strengthening communities through place-making.</p>

- 22 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2019) Community life survey 2018-19 [Online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820610/Community_Life_Survey_2018-19_report.pdf [Accessed August 2020]
- 23 Scottish Government (2019) Scottish Household Survey 2018 [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-people-annual-report-results-2018-scottish-household-survey/> [Accessed August 2020]
- 24 Welsh Government (2020) National Survey for Wales [Online] Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales-results-viewer> [Accessed August 2020]
- 25 NISRA (2020) Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey 2018/19 [Online] Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Loneliness%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%202018-19%20report%20PDF.pdf> [Accessed August 2020]
- 26 BBC Media Centre (2018) ‘16-24 year olds are the loneliest age group according to new BBC Radio 4 Survey’ [Online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2018/loneliest-age-group-radio-4> [Accessed August 2020]
- 27 ONS (2020) Coronavirus and Loneliness [Online] Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandloneliness> [Accessed August 2020] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandloneliness>
- 28 Reading Agency (2020) New survey reveals reading groups offer insight into different cultures [Online] Available at: <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/new-survey-reveals-reading-groups-offer-insight-into-different-cultures.html> [Accessed August 2020]



Employment and financial wellbeing

The challenge	How public library services can contribute
<p>Unemployment is expected to rise significantly by the end of 2020 due to the economic crisis triggered by Covid-19, with the Office for Budgetary Responsibility predicting that unemployment will have risen to around 12% by the end of 2020.²⁹ Those most at risk of serious financial difficulty are households with earned income from part-time work, self-employment or the gig economy. People with disabilities that limit their daily activities were at high risk, as were families with dependent children.³⁰</p> <p>In terms of small businesses, 41% of small business owners fear their business is at risk of permanently closing due to the pandemic, and 4% said they had already closed permanently because of the pandemic – an estimated 234,400 closures across the UK.³¹</p> <p>The number of those claiming benefits has already risen due to a combination of factors³², but this is partly seen as an indication of levels of employment and household incomes already dropping. People with disabilities that limit their daily activities will also be at high risk, as will families with dependent children.³³</p>	<p>Public library services can help jobseekers find opportunities and prepare themselves for interview. For example, many provide support in job-searching online, CV writing, basic adult and community courses and training, job clubs, access to computers and resources to aid the drafting of tailored job applications.³⁴ One service that engaged in the research is part of a wider heritage employability scheme where working in the library service is part of a path for young people seeking work in the heritage sector.</p> <p>Some public library services provide advice and support for the development of small businesses, including support around protecting intellectual property. Between 2016 and 2018, the British Library Business and IP Centre National Network supported the creation of 12,288 businesses: 22% in the most deprived areas and 47% in the Northern Powerhouse area. The Network also created an estimated 7,843 net additional FTE jobs.³⁵</p> <p>Public library services also provide essential support to people applying for welfare benefits. 87% of frontline library staff report providing digital assistance on an ad-hoc basis (for example, setting up an email account or logging into the Universal Credit website).³⁶</p>

29 Office for Budgetary Responsibility (2020) Coronavirus Analysis [Online] Available at: <https://obr.uk/coronavirus-analysis/> [Accessed August 2020]

30 Standard Life Foundation (2020) Coronavirus Financial Impact Tracker [Online] Available at: https://www.standardlifefoundation.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/61120/SLF-JUNE-2020-COVID-19-Tracker.pdf [Accessed August 2020]

31 Simply Business (2020) Article *New Survey: the impact of coronavirus on UK small business is set to exceed £69 billion* <https://www.simplybusiness.co.uk/knowledge/articles/2020/05/new-coronavirus-survey-69-billion-cost-for-small-businesses/> [Accessed August 2020]

32 Resolution Foundation (2020) *The Truth Will Out* [Online] Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-truth-will-out/> [Accessed August 2020]

33 Standard Life Foundation (2020) Coronavirus Financial Impact Tracker [Online] Available at: https://www.standardlifefoundation.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/61120/SLF-JUNE-2020-COVID-19-Tracker.pdf [Accessed August 2020]

34 For example, in Battersea, 3 in 10 used the PCs for job seeking and over 50% of library users are from less well-off postcodes. See ACE (2020) *Libraries: Helping local communities find work* <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-libraries/libraries-helping-local-communities-find-work> [Accessed September 2020]

35 ACE (2019) *Democratising Entrepreneurship* [Online] Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/democratising-entrepreneurship> [Accessed September 2020]

36 Research conducted by CILIP in partnership with CPAG, referenced in article ACE (2020) *Libraries: Helping local communities find work* <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-libraries/libraries-helping-local-communities-find-work> [Accessed September 2020]

 Education

The challenge

School provision varied significantly during lockdown, with children’s opportunity to learn being unequally impacted. 1 in 5 pupils did no schoolwork or managed less than an hour during lockdown³⁷ and children in private schools were twice as likely than those in state schools to be taking part in online lessons every day.³⁸ 15% of teachers in the most deprived schools reported that over a third of their pupils did not have adequate access to an electronic device for learning and 12% said over a third did not have internet access.³⁹ Meanwhile, while some children and parents will be affected by ongoing ‘vulnerabilities’ without access to their usual support; others will have had new challenges such as the requirement to work from home with no childcare. There has been speculation that the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their ‘better-off’ peers could widen by 75%.⁴⁰

How public library services can contribute

Public library services provide access to a range of IT and information resources and learning activities. They can also provide a supportive environment for children after school. Through class visits the service works with schools to offer learning beyond the classroom.

Some examples of some relevant library offers include: homework clubs, STEM and code clubs, and Makerspaces.

Public library services also engage children in national learning events such as National Numeracy Day, British Science Week, Summer Reading Challenge and World Book Day. It is worth noting that almost 2 in 5 library users on free school meals said they used their library because it was a friendly space and supported them to do better at school.⁴¹

Library services also provide life-long learning opportunities for adults. As a socially inclusive service, the library service fills a gap in formal educational structures. Courses provided can range from digital and employability skills to flower arranging, from ESOL to visual arts.

- 37 Green, F. (2020) Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty [Online] Available at: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/526190> [Accessed August 2020]
- 38 The Sutton Trust (2020) Covid-19 Impacts: School Shutdown [Online] Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/> [Accessed August 2020]
- 39 Bailey, G. (2020) *Out of sight: how do we protect children in lockdown?* [Online] Available at: <https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/out-of-sight-how-do-you-protect-children-in-a-crisis> [Accessed August 2020]
- 40 Whittaker, F. and S. Booth (2020) *Coronavirus: attainment gap could widen by 75%, DfE official warns* [Online] Available at: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/coronavirus-attainment-gap-could-widen-by-75-dfe-official-warns/> [Accessed August 2020]
- 41 Research by National Literacy Trust, referenced in Libraries Connected (2020) Libraries: An essential part of local recovery [Online] Available at: <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-essential-part-local-recovery> [Accessed September 2020]



Digital inclusion

The challenge	How public library services can contribute
<p>Lockdown has brought into sharp focus the fact that 7m people in the UK do not have access to the internet at home and 9m cannot use the internet without help.⁴² There are up to 559,000 children who do not have internet access at home; up to 913,000 children who have smartphone only access; and up to 1,777,000 children who do not have home access to a laptop or a desktop or a tablet.⁴³ There is also the challenge of ongoing affordability of connectivity – particularly as the economic crisis deepens. Yet 2 in 3 occupations in the UK require digital skills.⁴⁴</p>	<p>Public library services support digital inclusion through providing: access to tech, support with skills development and by building motivation and confidence to engage online. In terms of access to tech, public library services provide around 26 million hours of supported internet access each year⁴⁵ and access to free wifi. For example, many services provide courses and support for all in relation to a range of devices and software. Public library staff can be adept at finding the ‘hook’ that motivates someone to get online.</p>



Physical and mental health

The challenge	How public library services can contribute
<p>In terms of mental health, in any given week pre-lockdown, 1 in 6 adults in England experienced a ‘common mental disorder’;⁴⁶ 1 in 3 adults in Scotland are affected by mental illness in any one year;⁴⁷ 1 in 4 adults in Wales experience mental health problems or illness at some point during their lifetime;⁴⁸ and 1 in 5 in Northern Ireland show signs of possible mental health problems.⁴⁹</p> <p>The Mental Health Foundation Coronavirus Study involving adults across the UK found that as lockdown eased: almost 1 in 5 felt hopeless; over ¼ of unemployed felt hopeless; almost 1/3 of 18-24 year olds felt hopeless; and almost 1/3 of people with pre-existing mental health conditions felt hopeless.⁵⁰</p>	<p>People’s health and wellbeing is determined by a range of factors. Public library services provide a range of activities and groups that are part of social prescribing, supporting those with long-term conditions or who are lonely or isolated, or have complex social needs.</p> <p>Many public library services work in partnership with organisations such as Macmillan, Alzheimer’s Society and Dementia UK to provide support for health conditions.</p> <p>Reading is a key way to support health: bibliotherapy is a therapeutic approach to use literature to support good mental health; books on prescription provides self-help reading for several common mental and physical health problems; and reading for pleasure can reduce symptoms of depression and improve wellbeing throughout life.⁵¹</p> <p>It is worth noting that public library services, through the building and the services they offer, also provide the potential for escape and entertainment. This can have a positive impact on wellbeing.</p>

42 Good Things Foundation (2020) Digital Nation [Online] Available at: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/research-publications/digital-nation-2020> [Accessed September 2020]

43 Digital Access for All (2020) *Ofcom Technology Tracker 2020* [Online] Available at: <https://digitalaccessforall.co.uk/the-numbers> [Accessed August 2020]

44 DCMS (2019) No Longer Optional: Employer demand for digital skills [Online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807830/No_Longer_Optional_Employer_Demand_for_Digital_Skills.pdf [Accessed August 2020]

45 Libraries Connected (2020) Libraries: An essential part of local recovery [Online] Available at: <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-essential-part-local-recovery> [Accessed September 2020]

46 House of Commons Library (2020) Mental Health Statistics for England: prevalence, services and funding [Online] Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06988/SN06988.pdf> [Accessed August 2020] Please note figure quoted is from 2014. A survey of adult mental health in England has been carried out every seven years. The most recent Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey was carried out in 2014.


47 Scottish Government (2020) Mental Health <https://www.gov.scot/policies/mental-health/> [Accessed August 2020]


48 Welsh Government (2012) Together for Mental Health: A strategy for mental health and wellbeing in Wales [Online] Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/together-for-mental-health-a-strategy-for-mental-health-and-wellbeing-in-wales.pdf> [Accessed August 2020]

49 Information Analysis Directorate (2020) Health Survey NI First Results 2018/19 [Online] Available at: https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hsni-first-results-18-19_1.pdf [Accessed August 2020]

50 Mental Health Foundation (2020) Millions still feeling hopeless as lockdown eases: new briefing from the mental health foundation [Online] Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/coronavirus-mental-health-pandemic> [Accessed August 2020]

51 Reading Agency (2015) Literature Review: The Impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment [Online] Available at: <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/The%20Impact%20of%20Reading%20for%20Pleasure%20and%20Empowerment.pdf> [Accessed September 2020]

 Knowledge and information	
The challenge	How public library services can contribute
<p>Fake news, fake images and fake numbers have proliferated during Covid-19.⁵² This has shone a light on the extent to which people are unable to critically assess information and its sources, and to differentiate between misinformation and disinformation⁵³ and the potentially harmful consequences of this.</p>	<p>Public library services are for many people the trusted starting point for finding general information and information about local services. Library services provide access to resources and information as well as information about local and national issues and services. In this way, library services enable people to make informed decisions to improve their lives – to support people to find the answers to their own questions rather than provide them with the answer.</p> <p>Public library buildings can also be spaces for creating and sharing information and exploring ideas more widely. In relation to this, it is worth noting that the pandemic has also created space for people across the UK to reflect on what matters to us personally, to our communities and to society. There is widespread appetite for change, with only 12% of people wanting life to be ‘exactly as it was before’⁵⁴ and 6 out of 10 of us wanting to prioritise health and wellbeing above economic growth when/if the pandemic subsides.⁵⁵</p> <p>As such, there is a potential role for the public library service, as a neutral civic space for all, to be a space in which to hold debates and discussions for what communities want for themselves and what they would like the UK to look like. Here, there is the potential for the public library service to build bridges and encourage participation, enabling citizens to engage and discuss ideas with a view to support understanding, empathy and tolerance.</p>

 Cultural engagement	
The challenge	How public library services can contribute
<p>Creative industries are likely to be significantly impacted by Covid-19 with a £77bn turnover loss in 2020 compared to 2019 and job losses of up to 409,000.⁵⁶ But these industries are important as culture, creativity and the arts help us understand ourselves, others and the human world around us.⁵⁷</p>	<p>Public library services enrich the lives of individuals and communities through providing local access points to art and culture. Some services provide creative writing and support for self-publishing, access to music and can act as a venue for live music, film clubs, exhibitions, art, theatre and dance. Public library services also provide access to local history and heritage resources.</p>

52 WHO (2020) Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) advice for the public: mythbusters [Online] Available at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters> [Accessed September 2020]

53 Greenhough, J. (2020) Covid-19: searching for truth in post truth times [Online] Available at <https://jconlineresources.org/blog/covid-19-searching-for-truth-in-post-truth-times/> [Accessed September 2020]

54 Britain Thinks (2020) Coronavirus Diaries: 10 insights from lockdown [Online] Available at: https://britainthinks.com/pdfs/Coronavirus-Diaries_Summary-report_weeks-1-to-12.pdf [Accessed August 2020]

55 Research conducted by YouGov on behalf of Positive Money Dewhirst, H. A (2020) A Majority Agree: public health before economic growth [online] Available at: <https://positivemoney.org/2020/05/a-majority-agree-public-health-before-economic-growth/> [Accessed August 2020]

56 Oxford Economics (2020) The Projected Economic Impact of Covid-19 on the UK Creative Industries [Online] Available at: https://www.creativeindustriesfederation.com/sites/default/files/inline-images/20200716_OE_Slides_new%20ACE%20data%20-%20Clean%20-%20with%20NEMO%20caveat.pdf [Accessed September 2020]

57 SHAPE (2020) What is Shape? Available at: <https://thisishape.org.uk/> [Accessed September 2020] and ACE (2020) Let’s Create [Online] Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/introduction> [Accessed September 2020]



Literacy

The challenge	How public library services can contribute
<p>1 in 6 adults in England have very poor literacy skills; 1 in 4 adults in Scotland experience challenges due to lack of literacy skills; 1 in 8 adults in Wales lack basic literacy skills; and 1 in 5 adults in Northern Ireland have very poor literacy skills.⁵⁸ Literacy is essential for being able to read a food nutritional label, bank statement or medicine label; fill out a loan or job application; analyse messages in the media and advertising; and communicate with others. Poor literacy levels can lead to being locked out of the job market or being unable to support a child's learning. Literacy is the building block of all other learning.</p> <p>Research conducted in 2015 found that around 1 in 5 15 year olds across the UK do not have a minimum level of literacy proficiency and that insufficient reading skills by the middle of primary school impacts on pupil's ability to learn other curricula.⁵⁹</p> <p>The cost of functional illiteracy in the UK has been estimated as £24.8bn in relation to welfare, unemployment and social programs. The social costs of functional illiteracy include welfare dependency, poor health outcomes, higher levels of crime and a lack of self-worth.⁶⁰</p>	<p>Through providing access to books and a range of book-related activities, public library services provide a non-threatening environment through which to tackle illiteracy and encourage reading for pleasure.</p>



Equality, diversity and inclusion

The challenge	How public library services can contribute
<p>Covid-19 and lockdown has had a disproportionate impact on those in poverty, women and ethnic minorities. Those whose livelihoods look most at risk during the COVID-19 crisis already tended to have relatively low incomes, and were relatively likely to be in poverty, prior to the onset of the crisis.⁶¹ Again, it is clear from the preceding sections on learning in schools that the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged is growing.</p>	<p>As a non-judgemental welcoming space that is free at the point of access, public library services truly are a service for all. Through offering the range of services outlined in the preceding sections in relation to stronger communities, economic wellbeing, learning, digital inclusion, information and decision making and cultural engagement, public library services both create opportunities and seek to make opportunity more equal, meaning they are well positioned to tackle disadvantage.</p>

58 National Literacy Trust, Adult Literacy [Online] Available at: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/> [Accessed September 2020]

59 Reading Agency, Reading Facts [Online] Available at: <https://readingagency.org.uk/about/impact/002-reading-facts-1/#:-:~:text=Statistics%20from%202014%20show%20that,by%20the%20age%20of%2011.&text=Further%20research%2C%20conducted%20in%202015,Ireland%20and%2021%25%20in%20Wales> [Accessed September 2020]

60 World Literacy Foundation (2019) The Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy [Online] Available at: <https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TheEconomicSocialCostofIlliteracy-2.pdf> [Accessed September 2020]

61 IFS (2020) Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2020 [Online] Available at: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14901> [Accessed August 2020]



Action Areas: What the sector needs to fulfil its potential and deliver for the UK public



“Do you run a smaller, poorer version of what you have – or change?”

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND



“It’s [our] job to problem solve, so let’s ... think about the value of the service for communities rather than just ‘riding out a storm’ that doesn’t really have an end date; you could be riding out a storm forever and end up back in it ... It’s about how we work creatively to constantly be thinking about contingency ... and spark[ing] a bit of joy.”

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND



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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND

It is clear that public library services have tremendous potential to support individuals and communities as the UK navigates the considerable challenges ahead. The vast majority of staff, irrespective of role, expressed ambition both for what the service can deliver and for their own development in order to help create responsive offers that better serve their communities over the years ahead.

It is equally clear that library service offers, as conceived and delivered during lockdown, did not deliver the full range of benefits seen pre-Covid-19. Moreover, the context for service delivery will continue

to change due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic, how the impact of the pandemic on the UK will continue to unfold and the fact that there will be future disruptive events such as Brexit and the climate crisis. It is clear that the service needs to continue to adapt and innovate in how it delivers, and requires adequate funding and support if it seeks to deliver similar benefits as before.

The action areas below draw on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that were identified by those who participated in the research directly, through analysis, or through the Trust’s broader experience of working with the sector over the past eight years. Many of the action areas will feel familiar to the sector – albeit to lesser or greater degrees across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and across different local authorities. In many cases, work is being conducted across a range of the areas identified below. It is a matter of increasing urgency and importance that the barriers and issues highlighted in the action areas, long standing or otherwise, are overcome in order to enable public library services to fulfil their potential and deliver for individuals and communities across the UK.

Given the differences in how governments and the library sector in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are progressing library-related agendas and the ever-shifting external environment, the following section sets out broad areas and ideas that we believe should be taken into consideration in developing public library services during the next period.



1. Deliver a sustainable financial settlement



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

SENIOR MANAGER, WALES



“We only have the capacity to do the basics and support pre-existing digital offers. All our recent changes and reductions will make coming out of lockdown or developing new approaches harder.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, ENGLAND

Good public library services are anchor institutions: a vital part of the social infrastructure that supports communities and enables local authorities to deliver on their priorities and policy goals. They strengthen communities and support individuals and communities in terms of employment and financial wellbeing; education; digital inclusion; physical and mental health; knowledge and information; cultural engagement; literacy; and equality, diversity and inclusion. Given the way in which Covid-19 and lockdown have exacerbated existing fault lines and inequalities in society, there is arguably a greater need for these types of services.

Yet public library services have been experiencing increasing financial pressure for over a decade. This has been compounded by lockdown. Many services were already planning for significant reductions in operating budgets pre-Covid-19. The costs of reopening and staffing the service as lockdown has eased have exacerbated their financial challenges.

With local authorities facing what one Head of Service described as a ‘financial black hole’ following the Covid-19 response, public library services clearly face very significant risks, given

that the vast majority of services in the UK (with the particular exception of Northern Ireland) are funded almost entirely through local authority budgets. It is now essential for the UK, devolved and local governments to give serious consideration to a sustainable long-term funding model for public libraries. A continued chipping away at library services is unsustainable and a financial model for this service that relies on a single stream of public funding feels increasingly untenable.

One option could be for sector bodies to explore ways of diversifying funding for public library services from a range of public bodies. Library services contribute to the outcomes being pursued by many government departments and agencies – including health, education, culture and employment. There is an argument that this cross-policy delivery should be matched by cross-policy funding, with public libraries being provided with funds from a range of government departments or public bodies, alongside local government investment.⁶²

Clearly, any change in funding model would present complex issues around governance, transparency and accountability; and serious and thoughtful consideration is required to explore the benefits, drawbacks and potential unintended consequences. But it is increasingly clear that, unless there is a significant rise in local authority budgets in the coming years, the current arrangements do not offer a secure future for library services, and action is needed now before further irreversible retrenchment occurs.

⁶² There is a broader point here in relation to the need for a more fundamental shift in how we think about budgeting: an approach that focuses on outcomes sought rather than categories of services.



2. Strengthen status and voice in local authority structures



“Most of the time very senior council staff do not see the potential for libraries to help deliver their agenda at a reduced cost, which will help the communities we all serve.”

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND

Strong relationships with local decision makers and a voice within wider council teams during lockdown led to the potential of some library services and their staff to be recognised and harnessed. This maximized the outcomes for citizens, with library services being able to contribute to emerging council services or multi-agency working to bring added value to these services, or library staff being redeployed into appropriate services which were valued by the public and senior people in the local authority.

The experience of lockdown has also shone a light on the ways in which public library services can be restricted and inhibited in their delivery of a full and impactful service by a lack of recognition or prioritisation within their local authority.

Whilst local authorities were under immense pressure over lockdown, for a number of library

services it appears that the barriers they experienced during that period, relating to understanding, trust, autonomy and IT predate the Covid-19 crisis. It is essential that levels of status, priority, trust and permission are recalibrated to enable public library services to deliver a high quality offer that meets the needs and wants of its communities, and helps local authorities to meet their wider agenda for local outcomes.

The challenge for council leaders and officers is to engage with Heads of Service to assess how public library services contribute across the aims and priorities of the local authority and how public library services could work more closely with other services to deliver maximum benefit to communities in a cost-effective way. A related challenge is to reassess where Heads of Service are positioned within council and decision making structures; the level of autonomy Heads of Service have to make decisions and balance risk (including in relation to the type of services to be delivered during future lockdowns); the quality of IT, tech and access to systems to which library staff have access; and the comms support that public library services have from core council teams.



3. Value and invest in skilled and confident staff



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

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND



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

SENIOR MANAGER, SCOTLAND



“We need the equivalent of the ‘Use your head, teach’ adverts that we had in the nineties to attract high quality candidates to the sector ...”

SENIOR MANAGER, ENGLAND.

Public library staff are an integral part of library services and arguably its most vital asset. They embody the values and ethos of the service. The development and delivery of the library service depends on their skills, values and attitude. The research identified both key strengths and areas of weakness in relation to staff skills. Investment in building on or growing certain skills is required in order to ensure future-fit services that are vibrant and relevant to their communities.

Areas for focus include:

- adaptability, flexibility and resilience;
- digital skills, including online facilitation skills;
- strategic thinking, planning and evaluation;
- service innovation, development and design;
- partnership development;
- community engagement; and
- advocacy and demonstrating value.

There is a real opportunity to capitalise on the appetite for skills development among staff⁶³ and the learning from redeployed staff in relation to the levels of need and vulnerability in the community.

Ensuring staff have the right skills for services can be addressed in relation to formal librarianship courses at universities, on-the-job training for those working in services and recruitment criteria and practices.

Some possible ways forward for sector support organisations could include: developing nationally co-ordinated workforce development programmes to ensure a future-ready workforce; working with HE departments to ensure trainees entering the sector have the appropriate skill set; working with HE, free-lancers and other organisations to support appropriate skills development opportunities for those working in the sector at present; and supporting Heads of Service to share best practice and learning in relation to recruitment and ways of working.

⁶³ 2/5 of staff respondents who answered questions about skill sets were keen to develop skill sets in relation to adapting to new ways of working (42%) and service innovation, development and design (39%) and just under 2/5 were keen to develop skills in relation to working with vulnerable people (38%) and community engagement and consultation skills (37%). See Staff Survey Background Report for more detail.



4. Build positive organisational culture that supports leadership at all levels

Public library services with an enabling and collaborative working culture were at an advantage during lockdown. An inclusive and positive culture that valued the insight and contribution of staff at all levels and sought to communicate with and inform staff appeared to result in stronger relationships, better morale and a more resilient service, in which new offers were developed and staff were supported to adapt to lockdown. Yet this type of working culture was not an experience that was shared universally across the sector.

More broadly, the research suggests that recognising and supporting the responsibilities listed below as shared or collective responsibilities was particularly important for supporting stronger relationships and creating an enabling organisational culture, ultimately contributing to a higher quality of service for citizens:

- leadership;
- strategic thinking, planning and evaluation;
- innovative thinking;
- advocacy and demonstrating value; and
- partnership development.

The challenge for Heads of Service is to review and assess the working culture in their organisation and develop plans to continually nurture and improve it. For sector support organisations, the challenge is perhaps to assess whether developing guidelines and frameworks to support this process of review and renewal would be welcome and to actively think about how to provide advice and support to public library services across the skills areas listed above.



5. Recognise the digital future is here and deliver a high quality blended service

Lockdown stimulated innovation and skills development and heightened awareness within public library services of the type of offers they could provide their communities online. A plethora of engaging activities were developed. Lockdown also revealed how some of these offers, in their current formulation, fall short.

Much more can be done in terms of both the quality and quantity of the digital offer, and there is a real need to consider digital platforms that better enable the two-way engagement that staff seek to have in their physical buildings. The Single Digital Presence seeks to improve every library's digital presence and grow the profile of public library services in the process. The experience of lockdown has illuminated the urgency and importance of this work in terms of its ability to unify the offer and enhance digital presence.

But digital cannot be the only solution. Lockdown also showed the limitations of digital provision in meeting the needs of library users. It has also highlighted what those library services, who had the requisite permission, were able to deliver differently in the physical realm – be that access to PCs, home delivery book services, outreach services or request and collect type services. These services were essential in enabling people to enhance their wellbeing through reading and there is also potential to utilise these mechanisms to provide wider services in partnership with others.

Developing a high quality blended digital and physical service will mean recognising the strengths and weaknesses of both modes of delivery – and developing standards – for a hybrid model of delivery, where the two modes complement and enhance each other.

This may feel challenging in a context where at present, many services feel they have been reduced

to transactional services in light of social distancing and minimal time allowed in the physical building. However, there is the opportunity to harness learning from digital offers and different types of physical services such as request and collect services. Likewise, there is the opportunity for branch libraries to learn from other services and community organisations delivering at a hyperlocal level in terms of how they engaged with communities and responded to need during this time. There is also the possibility of harnessing the relationships built with others during lockdown (community organisations or council departments) to develop more aligned or integrated services to enhance what is delivered and the most effective way of doing so. Finally, the way in which library services are being delivered require staff to think creatively about how to make their service available to people and it might be that new or better ways of doing things could be uncovered as a result of this (eg. Ready Reads). In this way, there is the potential to keep learning from good practice that has emerged, what is different about new initiatives or processes and what makes them work, with a view to building a better service overall.

The challenges for sector support organisations and Heads of Service include setting out a framework or standard for blended delivery; supporting best practice and learning around innovation in service delivery; and supporting the work conducted on the single digital presence to capitalise on the learning evolved during lockdown.

Given the challenging times ahead, the expectation, demand and need for a rich service that empowers, enables and acts as an equaliser will only increase, so it is important to acknowledge that there is no 'going back' to the way things were pre-Covid-19 and that work is required now to envisage and develop the models of delivery that will work most effectively for library users in the future.



6. Resolve the longstanding, complex issues around e-books

Investment made in the e-lending offer during lockdown enabled public library services to expand their reading offer and provide escape, entertainment and educational content that met people where they were: at home. However, it came with the recognition that delivering a more comprehensive e-lending offer that comes closer to the physical lending offer and meets public expectation and demand will require substantial work.

The current e-lending eco-system poses considerable challenges to library services in relation to choice, cost and licensing conditions. There is a real role for UK Government to support sector bodies to navigate the deeply complex set of issues that is likely to require considerable cross-sector and international collaboration.



7. Balance coherent and consistent national offers with the power of the regional and the appeal and benefits of the hyperlocal

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown have revealed the appeal and benefits of a hyperlocal service: a familiar, friendly face, in-depth knowledge of communities, a 'safe' entry point to wider systems of support and an ability to respond to localised need. However, the crisis has also pointed to a need for stronger national co-ordination of public library services: the need for members of the public to have equal access to services and a consistent library offer, and the need for library services' digital and physical offers to be more visible and maybe a more coherent brand. Whilst it did not emerge from the research, it may also prove valuable to consider what a regional perspective can bring and how it can bridge national and local or hyperlocal.⁶⁴

The challenge for sector support organisations and the sector is how to strike the balance between the hyperlocal, local, regional and national. Specifically, how to balance the various strategic, operational and delivery functions that are required in order

to enable library services to offer a consistently excellent and recognisable service across the UK whilst retaining flexibility to respond to the shape of local need. An additional challenge for sector support bodies and local authorities is to agree how best to optimise the marketing and advocacy of library services in a way that is clear, simple and consistent across any given jurisdiction, but which also reflects the hyperlocal, community-based nature of the service.

Areas to consider could include supporting the development of nationally organised and funded infrastructure and creative programmes; revising nationally co-ordinated monitoring and evaluation in relation to a hybrid service; sharing guidelines and best practice on the delivery of new or emerging services; exploring the potential of the regional; setting out the pros and cons of certain functions sitting at national, regional, local and hyperlocal levels; and exploring the potential of a national body to co-ordinate e-book licensing and lending.

⁶⁴ The rise in the number of consortia seeking to address issues in relation to purchasing power and advocacy and the effectiveness of regional approaches is starting to be recognised and is perhaps an area for constructive exploitation.



8. Advocate effectively and powerfully



“It would be great if the message can be put forward more strongly with governments and public bodies about how central a role libraries can and do play in mental and economic health.”

SPECIALIST STAFF, SCOTLAND



“We still need to promote our services more than ever – but we need to focus on why and not what we do.”

MIDDLE MANAGER, SCOTLAND

The research has evidenced what public library services and their staff offered during lockdown (Key Messages 1 and 2) and identified areas that they have capacity to deliver on moving forward (Key Message 3). It is worth noting that these are areas that public library services were already delivering on pre-lockdown. Yet not all members of the public or decision makers are aware of the breadth and depth of library services' offer.

There is a real need for effective advocacy to shift outdated perceptions of what public library services are, and to promote understanding among decision makers of the multiple contributions public library services make and the outcomes against which they deliver. A key challenge for the government departments that oversee public library services, sector support organisations and Heads of Service is to identify the levers for change and build relationships with the change makers that are not currently within their purview. Ensuing challenges may include demonstrating the way in which public library services are key anchor institutions⁶⁵ and ensuring public library services are represented on

⁶⁵ For example, the role of the library building as well as digital services in meeting community needs, tackling joblessness, poor mental health and isolation, ensuring fewer acute cases further down the line.

a range of policy agendas and relevant working groups. A core part of this will involve engaging effectively with national and local elected representatives and government and council officers to help them better understand the outcomes public library services deliver for communities and the UK.

Whilst there may be a distinct role for sector support bodies and senior managers in relation to particular audiences, staff at all levels have the capacity to advocate effectively for their service in their communities. For example, ensuring what their service does and offers people is clearly visible inside or outside the physical building; through communicating with the community and their library users; through seeking opportunities to market what they do; and through embodying the values and attitudes of the service in their interactions with partners and members of the community alike.

In terms of shifting wider public mindset, the challenge for sector bodies is to support marketing campaigns aimed at changing popular perception of what public library services do and the outcomes they seek; and to attract fresh talent to the sector.

It is worth noting that advocacy is not limited to 'doing' (describing, explaining or campaigning) but by 'being' a relevant service to local authority staff and decision makers themselves. Heads of Service should consider the type of health, wellbeing or other support they can provide local authority staff as a way of advocating for their service and bringing it to the awareness of council officers. The wellbeing hubs for care and care-at-home workers described under Key Message 1 is one example of this approach.

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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