

Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission Meeting 11th February 2021

Impact on Library services during Covid-19 pandemic

Initial service change

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on library services. During the first lockdown in March 2020, all libraries had to close. The service moved as much of its provision as possible online and ran book groups, storytelling sessions, quizzes and numerous craft activities for children. The e-book and e-audio service was widely promoted and issues went up by 150%. To help promote this service, a wide range of book reviews were also posted. The digital offer also includes access to a wide range of newspapers and magazines. During the summer the library service ran even more online craft activities for children, and ran a series of very popular events during Black History Season starting in October 2020. This included a session on tracing your ancestry with Paul Crooks, who had pioneered research into African-Caribbean genealogy.

The service was able to recommence the home visit service in early summer, delivering library stock to residents who are housebound.

A major impact of the first lockdown was that as the libraries were fully closed, the service could not offer the public computer use which the service knows provides a great benefit for residents who are unable to access any IT provision in their own homes to help with, for example, benefit claims and applying for employment.

A further impact is that the service has received no fees or fines during this time as well as no income from letting out meeting rooms.

Phased reopening strategy

As the lockdown progressed, the library service developed a 4 phased approach to reopening. The service has a robust set of operating procedures and appropriate risk assessments which have been approved by both the Council's Health and Safety team and Public Health.

Phase 1 which commenced in July 2020 allowed the service to offer an order and collect service whereby there would be no public access but customers were able to order stock online or by phone and then pick up the stock from library sites. Reduced opening hours were introduced from Tuesday to Saturday from 11-4 at 6 out of 7 library sites (Hackney Central remains closed due to building management issues).

Phase 2 allows the service to continue with its order and collect service and added controlled public access to the libraries for browsing and borrowing stock and for computer use. The reduced opening hours were extended to 11-6 and this commenced in September 2020.

Then new government restrictions were imposed in December 2020 and browsing had to cease from 21/12/20.

Phase 3 of the reopening strategy includes providing all services detailed in phase 2 but also includes the service providing limited activities in the library for adults and children plus a return to normal public opening hours

Phase 4 would be operating a normal service that was provided pre pandemic but with all appropriate additional measures in place. It would be hoped the service would be in this position by the end of 2021.

It was always envisaged that the service may have to move in and out of various stages due to Government restrictions.

The current lockdown regulations allow libraries to be open for order and collect and for public PC use. Due to the severity of the current infection rates, but recognising the need to keep providing a basic service to those residents most in need, the service is currently operating in a very limited capacity. Only two libraries are open (those with the highest recent usage), Dalston CLR James and Stamford Hill, for order and collect and limited essential computer use. These two libraries are open on reduced hours of 11-4 and for two days a week each.

Some staff have been concerned about coming to work in the current infection situation, especially those with longer journeys or who feel more vulnerable. There are also staff who are keen to come into the libraries. The service has undertaken two anonymous surveys to gauge staff opinion and managers have worked closely with staff to ensure that those coming into the buildings feel safe and comfortable doing so. Clearly the current service offer does not require a full complement of staff, and we have been successful in redeploying library staff into a range of priority roles, including telephone contact tracing, business grants administration, cyber attack recovery, and electoral services.

Addressing the digital divide to ensure residents who are digitally excluded can get access to support and services

At present the service has two libraries open - Dalston CLR James and Stamford Hill - for two days a week each and they are both providing computers for residents to access. This service has proved very popular and indicates the need there is in the community for it. Library staff are doing all they can to help customers using the computers but due to social distancing rules, they are unable at present to provide the 1:1 help they would normally be able to. That said they can still make sure customers are able to log on to the equipment and there are printed guidelines provided on how to access various websites. Staff are always available to give customers any information they may need to access particular sites. Once the service can offer its 1:1 computer coaching provision again staff will be able to provide the excellent service it had previously.

The service provides the customers with all the cleaning materials they need to clean the keyboards and mice between use as well as plastic covers over the keyboards which ensures they are even safer to use.

Future of the library service

Councils have a statutory duty to provide a library service as set out in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 which states that libraries are 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons'. The main requirement is that the service encourages both adults and children to make full use of the library service and lend books and other printed materials free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area. Other than this there is no definition in the act as to what constitutes 'a comprehensive and efficient service'. The general view is that it is a service which meets local needs and provides equal access in the context of available resources.

It is important that the service learns from what has happened during the pandemic and it is vital that the service continues with its digital presence which has proved so popular. During the pandemic the service has managed to update its computer hardware which has future proofed this service as well as refurbishing two libraries - Clapton and Shoreditch - to make them more appealing to customers.

The Council is set to embark on a full service review of the library service at the beginning of the new financial year. A 12 month project, this will lead to the production of a Library Strategy to ensure that the service is meeting the needs of residents, is maximising the use of its assets, and is fit for purpose for the next decade. The project will include a full review of existing service usage data, both pre pandemic and during the last year, a staff engagement exercise to hear ideas from across service, a major public and stakeholder engagement programme, and best practice learning from other authorities. The strategy will also include a timetable for planned capital investment in the libraries.