

Equality Impact Assessment



Hampshire
County Council

Library Service – COVID19 Libraries

National Lockdown Jan 2021 - Service User Impact

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Department: Culture, Communities and Business
Services

Date of
assessment: 25/01/2021

Description of current service/policy

This EIA considers the provision of public library services during the National Lockdown, which began on 5 January 2021 and takes account of new guidance and learning as it is available. Normally the Library Service operates 40 Libraries, with a range of face-to-face provision including browsing and lending of books, events, activities, learning and access to online services.

Geographical impact: All
Hampshire

Description of proposed change

COVID risk assessments were updated at the beginning of Lockdown. The risks of opening libraries have been balanced against the needs to provide support for the most vulnerable in Hampshire, with consideration being given to the wider mental health impacts that are emerging as a result of successive lockdowns.

Hampshire Libraries are now closed for browsing. Customers borrow or reserve physical items by using the Ready Reads service (once a month) or reserving specific titles online. Fines are frozen so customers do not have to return items by their due date. Access to Go Online public computers is only available for essential use, by referral from HantsHelp4Vulnerable or partner agencies.

Impacts of the proposed change

This impact assessment covers Service users

Engagement and consultation

Has engagement or consultation been carried out? No

HCC has followed government guidelines to best deliver library services in an emergency response situation, whilst balancing the need to provide support to the most isolated and vulnerable individuals in the community. Risk assessments have been carried out in each library to ensure that all library buildings are COVID secure and as safe as possible for all customers and staff.

Statutory considerations	Impact	Mitigation
	<p>Library services are traditionally accessed more by older people, and by children and families. As such these groups were affected more by the closure of branches during lockdown, and there are potential age-related impacts for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">i) Older people are less likely to be digitally connected or may have additional needs in accessing digital contentii) Children may have been adversely affected by a lack of access to reading materialiii) Older people and families with young children may feel increasingly isolated without their normal support networks in place. <p>In accordance with guidelines and risk assessments, a decision was taken to close all branches for browsing as of 5 January 2021, this means that until the National Lockdown is eased the public are unable to visit a physical branch.</p> <p>All customers have been encouraged to use digital and online content which has been enhanced to include a broader range of titles with increased children's stock. However, for those who are without access to the internet,</p>	

Age:

Low

the Ready Reads Service remains available to customers, particularly in the case of the continuation of reading for pleasure for home-schooled children, and for supporting people with feelings of isolation or loneliness. The regularity of Ready Reads collection has been reduced from fortnightly to monthly to limit the number of journeys people are taking to visit their library, in line with the Government's National Lockdown – Stay at Home guidance. People who do not have the means to reserve their books or access the Ready Reads request form online are able to call 01962 454747 to access this click and collect service from their local branch. Staff duties now include meeting and greeting customers using the Ready Reads service, in a socially distanced manner, usually from the entrance to the library building. Where possible, a physical barrier such as a table will be between staff and the customer, to maintain social distancing.

For the duration of the National Lockdown public access computers will be available only to people with an emergency need and bookings will only be taken by referral via HantsHelp4Vulnerable (for contact details see additional information) or other partner agencies. Customers who do not have access to a phone, the ability to make the call, or are unaware of the requirements for booking a PC can ask for assistance at a library. Staff are advised to assist with these booking situations and where appropriate direct the customer of the call centre route for future bookings. Each computer will be wiped down with anti-viral spray or wipes after each use. The cleaning is recorded in a cleaning log that is available on request for customers to review.

The Home Library Services will continue to accept new members, enabling vulnerable and isolated residents, including older people, to borrow physical stock, particularly where they are unable or unwilling to visit a physical branch. Existing members have been welcomed back and people shielding, self-isolating long term or unable to travel safely to a branch have been encouraged to become new members of the Home Library Service. A telephone befriending service by Reading Friends is provided to Home Library Service customers to ensure that they are safe and well during the lockdown period.

The School Library Service supports the majority of Hampshire schools with high quality stock and has maintained support for schools throughout the lockdown period.

It has not yet been possible to resume groups and/or activities. However, a comprehensive digital offer has been developed and is evolving.

Much of what has been written under the 'Age' protected characteristic also applies to people with disabilities. It is recognised that in some cases closing the libraries for public browsing may have an adverse impact on those with disabilities as follows:

- i) Face coverings became mandatory for staff (from 24/09/20) in public areas of the library and for all library customers (from 08/08/20) unless exemptions apply. This guidance applies to customers using the Ready Reads service and any customer using the public access computers due to an emergency need.
- ii) Customers with mental health challenges or those who are neurodiverse may struggle with the

<p>Disability: Low</p>	<p>changing processes and practices in their local library.</p> <p>iii) It has not yet been possible to resume groups and/or activities. This may have had a significant impact on the wellbeing of vulnerable individuals, particularly those that are socially isolated or lonely.</p> <p>It is recognised that face coverings can compromise effective communication and cause disadvantage to people with certain disabilities. Advice on exemptions and guidance on printing exemption 'badges' was introduced shortly after the requirements were introduced. Staff duties now include meeting and greeting customers using the Ready Reads service, in a socially distanced manner, usually from the entrance to the library building. Where possible, a physical barrier such as a table will be between staff and the customer, to maintain social distancing. It is permissible for staff to remove face coverings for a limited time to assist with communication, e.g. lip reading. Customers who are exempt from wearing a face covering can do so without being challenged or questioned by members of staff. Staff are encouraged to act with tolerance and understanding to ensure that measures are fully explained – there may be a need for reasonable adjustments to be made on a case-by-case basis. A comprehensive digital offer has been developed. This includes online learning and support for health and wellbeing, including supporting good mental health.</p>	
<p>Sexual orientation: Neutral</p>		

<p>Race: Low</p>	<p>The Service acknowledges that government research has shown that BAME citizens are more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others. The Library Service is adhering to government guidance on maintaining clean and safe areas alongside social distancing policies to try to minimise the impact on this group and will continue to implement further measures and mitigations where they exist. All the mitigations described above for people impacted by being unable to visit physical branches apply.</p>	
<p>Religion and belief: Neutral</p>		
<p>Gender reassignment: Neutral</p>		
<p>Gender: Neutral</p>		
<p>Marriage and civil partnership: Neutral</p>		
<p>Pregnancy and maternity: Neutral</p>		
<p>Other policy considerations</p>	<p>Impact</p>	<p>Mitigation</p>

<p>Poverty: Low</p>	<p>It is recognised that people in poverty are more likely to be digitally excluded and have poorer access to online services. For the duration of the National Lockdown public access computers will be available only to people with an emergency need and bookings will only be taken by referral via HantsHelp4Vulnerable (please find contact details in additional information) or other partner agencies. Each computer will be wiped down with anti-viral spray or wipes after each use. The cleaning is recorded in a cleaning log that is available on request for customers to review.</p>	
<p>Rurality: Low</p>	<p>Vulnerable and isolated residents, including older people, who are unable to travel to an alternative library could choose to use digital services, apply for the Home Library Service or the Good Neighbours Scheme. This group also includes individuals who would normally use public transport.</p>	

Neutrality statement (if all considerations have a neutral impact)

Any other information

The County Council's emergency response groups, the Corporate Leadership team and Hampshire Libraries Senior Management Team (SMT) regularly review the position on libraries and, every week or when there is a key announcement, consideration is given to how The Service will respond to any changes in circumstances that may require a change of approach.

Government's National Lockdown – Stay at Home guidance was published on 4 January and enforced on 5 January 2021. This emphasised the need for people to stay at home and led to an immediate review of the position for Libraries.

In discussion with Public Health colleagues, The Service has considered the risks of opening libraries balanced with the important role of libraries in supporting the most vulnerable in our communities, in addressing the wider mental health crisis that is emerging following successive lockdowns. The current offer provided by libraries remains a key part of the County Council's wider emergency response and should, therefore, continue. However, the following amendments have been made:

- We will be operating our branches and venues with minimum staffing for the current period, only requiring those people who are absolutely essential to keep the customer-support and building safety functions going to be present in branches. All other staff will be working from home.
- Ready Reads is an important service for our customers, particularly in the case of the continuation of reading for pleasure for home-schooled children and for supporting people to manage their wellbeing. However, there will be a reduction in the regularity of Ready Reads collections from fortnightly to monthly, to aid in reducing the number of repeat visitors to the buildings.
- Public access computers will move from a universal service to a referral only service. This means that referrals will be taken from HantsHelp4Vulnerable and other partner agencies, rather than taking bookings directly from customers, in an effort to ensure that these services are for people with emergency needs only.

The HantsHelp4Vulnerable (Hampshire Coronavirus Support and Helpline) can be contacted on 0333 370 4000 (calls charged at local rate). Or a call-back can be requested from the helpline by completing the call-back request form at <https://www.hants.gov.uk/en/socialcareandhealth/coronavirus/volunteer-welfare>. The helpline is open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday. During the current period of national restrictions, it will also be open on Saturdays and Sundays from 10am to 3pm.