

REPORT TO: Employment, Learning and Skills, and
Community Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 31st January 2022

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Enterprise, Community
and Resources

PORTFOLIO: Employment, Learning and Skills and
Community

SUBJECT: Library Service

WARDS: Borough wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the library service.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION that the report be noted.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Library Services during the pandemic (2020/21)

In line with government advice, all library buildings closed to the public and library teams on 23rd March 2020. Library teams worked quickly to shift activity to digital platforms. Budgets were reallocated to increase resources and support new demand. An intensive social media campaign was used to engage audiences and highlight digital resources to new and existing customers.

There was a 350% increase in new members during those first lockdowns.

Home Library Service:

During lockdown library staff continued to deliver books to more than 100 Vulnerable and isolated residents, as well as increasing provision to include new customers who were shielding. The library outreach team contacted all Home Library Service customers by phone a number of times to provide updates on the service and offer support and triage to other agencies. The Home Library Service continued to be a valuable and increasingly popular service.

Choose & Collect:

In June 2020, a contactless collection service was introduced for customers. The majority of frontline library staff were now redeployed but a core team rolled out this new initiative to support the value of reading for mental health and wellbeing that has been heightened during this time. Customers could request books via telephone, email or social platforms, library staff choose an appropriate selection of titles, and these bundles were then collected from outside the buildings.

Since July 2020 Halton's library buildings have been open to the public with restrictions lessening and activities being added in line with government guidance.

3.2 Halton – November 2021

This is a snapshot review of Halton's library service in November 2021, using data from November 2019 as a comparison to benchmark against.

All library buildings are fully open to the public and, since May 2021, there has been a return to the delivery of an in-person events programme, with focus on the Borough of Culture festival programme.

Overall physical visits to library buildings continue to fluctuate and remain well below 2019 levels at approximately 20% percent, while physical book issues have recovered well and are at approximately 80% of what they were in 2019. This is in line with data collected nationally.

The issues of ebooks and eaudio titles have now levelled out at around double what they were in 2019. Not as high as they were earlier in 2021 but an increase in use that will continue to have a significant impact on stock budgets over the coming year.

There continue to be substantial increases in the use of the online newspapers and magazines platform, 200% vs 2019, and the online images library which has more than doubled site visits vs 2019.

There has also been an eager return by families and schools. The reintroduction of Rhymetimes, story sessions for 0-4 year olds, at all libraries has seen numbers return to what they were pre-pandemic. More than 600 school children took part in class visits to libraries in November 2021.

3.3 Challenges and constraints.

At this time, it remains difficult to establish an understanding of recovery trends across the sector due to the inconsistency of delivering in a Covid society; evolving guidance and fluctuating pandemic cases continue to have an impact even since the data was produced for this report.

Like many frontline services, the offer from library buildings is restricted by not wanting or being able to fully market to get all the users back, or attract new users to buildings.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

None

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

Library Services support children and young people to develop

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

Library Services provide space and resources for learning

6.3 A Healthy Halton

Library Services support the health and wellbeing of communities across Halton

6.4 A Safer Halton

Not Applicable

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

Not Applicable

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

There are no risks associated with the report.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

None

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.