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‘Bloody amazing really’: voices from Scotland’s public libraries in lockdown

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Abstract

The research examined Scottish Public Libraries and their response to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21. It focused particularly around the way that they helped to support community resilience and cohesion during periods of lockdown. The study considered issues around the closure of services in March 2020, digital services, the loss of physical library spaces, and governance models. It presents the voice of service managers rather than being a user study. The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UKRI as part of their scheme to provide response to the pandemic of 2020.

This was an exploratory study examining how Scottish public library services responded to the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Three methods were deployed in the investigation. Firstly, the gathering social media and other web-based content from library services over the months March-September 2020 (amounting to over four thousands snips of content). These were then analysed thematically. Secondly, 19 semi-structured interviews with service managers across Scotland were conducted. These were recorded, transcribed and analysed. These elements formed the cornerstone of the research but were supported by a short survey distributed to all public library services in Scotland focused on e-lending during lockdown. Findings are presented in respect of the lessons to be learned from the closure of physical services and the migration to digital only provision, the contribution made to supporting communities, health and wellbeing, the importance of the balance of physical and digital library services, around governance models for library services, as well as around the process of reopening services. This research explores how staff responded to this unparalleled situation, how they maintained their close relationship

with the communities they serve, what services themselves learned through lockdown, and how their management practices adapted. It presents voices from Scottish libraries during 2020.

The research presents a snapshot of activities during a period of fast-moving change. It therefore presents a snapshot of March-December 2020. It is, however, an extremely important snapshot. The first lockdown was perhaps most interesting to study from a research perspective because we witnessed, real-time, how they responded and reacted (with lessons learned and applied in subsequent regional or national lockdowns later in 2020 and in the 2021). The second lockdown and subsequent periods were outside the scope of this research.

Recommendations are offered around the need for a national conversation about digital content provision in public libraries and the exploration of possibilities of a national approach, the role libraries have as digital enablers (in supporting effort to overcome the digital divide in society), the crucial nature of continued strong advocacy for public libraries, the importance of the library as a physical space, and on how to maintain the flexibility, agility and autonomy which emerged during lockdown. The research presents strong testimony about the social value of public libraries as free, safe, public spaces within communities. It also highlights the continued digital divide which exists in many places and the important role that public libraries have in being digital enablers for many members of the public. The closeness of library service staff to users is strongly evidenced in the testimony from managers as is the need for parent organisation (local authorities or in culture or leisure trusts) to recognise more fully the breadth of services the public library provides and how these are ‘essential’ for many users.

The value and distinctiveness of this research lies in the fact that it captured the voices, thoughts, perceptions of Scotland’s public libraries during the period of lockdown in 2020. The evidence gathered suggests important conversations are required around equity of e-lending provision, the role of libraries as digital enablers, the balance between physical and digital provision and around the ways libraries are managed (directly by local authorities or in culture trusts). The research affords lessons for public library provision beyond Scotland with many issues being transferable to other contexts.

Introduction

Scotland’s public libraries are one of the most visible and accessible parts of the nation’s cultural landscape. They are to be found across the country, in cities, towns and villages, close to the people who use them and are often among the most visible piece of cultural infrastructure within a community. They represent a free, trusted civic space providing access to reading materials and so much else. In March 2020, Scotland’s 541 libraries had to shut their doors, as the COVID-19 lockdown came into place. Although the buildings closed, librarians across Scotland came up with new ways to reach their communities. This closure represented the biggest upheaval and greatest challenge for public libraries in their one hundred and seventy years of existence; greater than either of the World Wars, when they remained open.

This article reports on research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) examining how Scotland’s libraries adapted to lockdown in 2020. The

research explored how, through their digital offering, they helped to support community resilience, as well as the issues that library services themselves had to contend with during lockdown. It considered how they responded to this unparalleled situation, and how they maintained their relationship with the communities they serve, what difference they made, how they supported wellbeing, as well as what they learned. It presents voices from Scottish librarians during 2020.

This paper reports on the following objectives of the AHRC-funded project: (i) how libraries evolved in terms of providing digital and remote only services; (ii) how Scottish public libraries, through their remote, online provision, helped foster and support community resilience (including in, *inter alia*, socially, culturally and in respect of wellbeing); and (iii) evaluating the opinions and perceptions of the library services about their activities, both digital and physical. The research also considered how differing governance models (culture and leisure trusts versus direct local authority control) affected service delivery and how policy- and decision-makers could be informed by the study. These latter elements are touched on this paper but not covered extensively.

Background and literature review

The core principle of the Public Libraries (Scotland) Act 1853 was the provision of libraries ‘for the Instruction and Recreation of the People’. Scotland’s public libraries remain a statutory service under the terms of the Local Government Act 1994 which incorporates and consolidates the existing legislation, and which states ‘a local authority shall have a duty to secure the provision of adequate library facilities for all persons resident in their area’. The word ‘adequate’ has been the source of some debate but attempts to pin it down are undesirable because of the nature of different services, communities and geographical locations. When the *How good is our public library service* framework was developed in 2013 it sought to support and inform what adequate provision of universal public libraries services throughout Scotland might look like without providing prescriptive definitions¹.

Since the inception of the modern public library movement in the 1850s, evaluating their impact has been part of the landscape (Shirley, 1947 p.327). Toyne and Usherwood (2001 p.149) highlighted the necessity ‘to consider the impact [of libraries] on individuals or groups in the community’ and not just to ‘measure what is measurable and consequently often miss what is important’. Goulding, (2006, p.4). noted, despite the public being generally predisposed to and broadly positive about libraries, many commentators, socially, politically and economically, portray them as either being at crisis point or of lacking relevance to contemporary society because of a jaundiced and out-dated perception of what it is they do. The lockdown period presents an opportunity to look at the relevance of libraries to contemporary society during a time of challenge.

¹ Summarise as providing universal access to resources; enabling access for reading, information and learning; encouraging community involvement; minimising social and digital exclusion; supporting learning and information needs; promoting cultural and creative activities; encouraging the pursuit of individual interests;) promoting social justice, civic engagement and democracy; working with other organisations to offer added services; strategic network provision.

In 2017, *Shining a light*, Carnegie found that both library usage and the value attached by the public to libraries in their communities was highest in Scotland and Ireland. (Carnegie UK Trust, 2017). More recent Carnegie UK Trust research found that around three in ten people in the UK engaged with public library services during lockdown for a range of services including digital resources (Carnegie, 2020). Additionally, 60% of those who engaged with library services highlighted a range of benefits beyond digital offerings, aided by the libraries efforts to tackle digital exclusion through access to devices, and saw positive impacts on wellbeing generally, feeling connected to community and dealing with loneliness. However, they found that 49% of Scottish people who took part in their study used the public library in the 12 months prior to lockdown, versus 23% during lockdown (the UK equivalent percentages are 52% use prior to lockdown, and 29% during), suggesting that there may have been a sharper drop in use of Public Library services in Scotland during lockdown in the sample population of the study.

During the first lockdown, Scottish Book Trust recruited people living in Scotland to a panel to record their experiences of reading. *Reading in Scotland: reading over lockdown* (2020) emphasised the strong connections which exist between reading and wellbeing, how reading can help overcome isolation. It found that 98% of their panellists agreed (85% strongly) that reading supported their wellbeing and there was equally strong evidence from their participants that reading had been important in times of stress or anxiety.

Libraries can play a role in times of emergency. Featherstone, Lyon, and Ruffin (2008) interviewed library professionals who had direct experience with disaster response (Hurricane Katrina and the SARS pandemic). They identified emergent roles that these library professionals served including institutional support (serving as a 'command center' for activities), supporting the service, and communities. Malizia et al. (2012), noted that libraries often serve important collaborative roles with community emergency responses. These elements are found in the research reported here. Zach (2011), however, criticised libraries for providing information only about the library itself, rather than information about the crisis, and encouraged further collaboration to provide relevant and timely information to users. Although there are several studies into the use of social media in emergency situations, there is a more limited canon around its use by libraries in such instances. Chiochios (2016) explored the social media of Ferguson Municipal Library in Missouri after civil unrest in 2014. Han (2019) examined libraries in New York City after Hurricane Sandy. Alajmi and Albudaiwi (2020) examined this within the COVID context in New York while Wang and Lund (2020) looked at information dissemination by libraries more broadly. The results of these studies echoed some of Zach's findings, highlighting that posts tended to reflect normal core library activities.

Much of the literature to date around public libraries' response to COVID has been synthesised reviews of literature (Tamarro 2020; Kostagiolas and Katsani, 2021), philosophical thought pieces (Smith, 2020) or editorials (Matthews, 2020). The journal *International Information and Library Review* used 'Global Postcard' to report concisely on the response of libraries around the world to the pandemic. Corble and van Melik (2021) compare the UK and Holland both prior to and during COVID-19. Although highlighting the significance of the withdrawal of vital social spaces, their sample is small (three interviews in a London Borough and one with member of the (English) Cultural Renewal Taskforce) and does not take account of the different

cultural, administrative and legislative contexts in Scotland. Our research presents a broader, in-depth overview of the situation in Scotland.

Methodology

This study was primarily an exploratory one. Exploratory studies have been widely deployed in library science and is useful in ensuring library science academics (not working as library practitioners) are open-minded to the things that they observe in professional practice. The research was approached with open-mindedness, and with no preconceived ideas about the role that public libraries played, other than the knowledge that they *had* played a role in their communities and that this supported community resilience and cohesion. Beyond this, there was no hypothesis.

The first stage in the methodology was the gathering of content from websites and social media platforms. All 32 local authority areas in Scotland were examined, taking in those library services in direct council control and those in arm's length trusts. While it was beyond the scope of this project to gather and analyse every social media post and online interaction on every platform by every authority area over the period, every effort was made to gather a wide representative sample. The online presence for each service was snipped and analysed. Over 4,000 snips of content were harvested for the period March-September 2020. Online content was examined in respect of lending, eBooks and audio books, newspapers or magazines, closures and reopening of services. The social media analysis then informed the selection of interviewees to give a cross-section of coverage (urban, rural, large, small, local authority run or in cultural and / or leisure trusts).

Subsequently, 19 interviews were carried out with heads of library services in local authorities and trusts. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were conducted by both authors. Detailed notes were taken, and all the interviews were recorded and transcribed and analysed thematically. After the fifteenth interview it was apparent that the interviewing was reaching saturation point; the substantive answers to the main questions about the challenges of lockdown were becoming largely similar. It was therefore decided to draw the interviews to end after the nineteenth.

The ethical aspects associated with the research were considered at all stages. These considerations included particularly issues of confidentiality and anonymity in the interviews, equality and diversity (an impact assessment was carried out), ethical considerations when gathering data from social media accounts including the techniques used (automated scraping is in breach of Facebook and Instagram Terms of Service so manual 'scroll-and-snip' methods were deployed). The typical and widely accepted approach in research of this type is to aim to 'do no harm' and consider the implications for library services when featuring snips of their social media posts or interview quotes (Nao (2012) and Laestadius (2018) are helpful in this regard). The authors have erred on the side of caution and consulted library services where social media snips have been used wherever there was concern about the impact of their inclusion.

Results and discussion

On 18 March 2020, the First Minister of Scotland announced that all nurseries and schools would close from the end of the day on the following Friday (20 March). On

the following Monday, the UK Prime Minister announced the implementation of a full national lockdown across the whole UK.

Going into lockdown

The events of the week prior to lockdown were particularly interesting. All services were very clear about the tough conversations they were having. Despite the desire to stay open as long possible, services recognised the reality of the situation. The head of a largely urban library service summed this up:

Towards the end of the week before lockdown, we were having very serious discussions about where we were going. These were hard discussions. What we do is valuable, but were we going to be more of a health risk? We have an impact on people's lives but we're not a life-saving organisation².

Following the announcement that schools across Scotland would shut, library services took decisions about closure. For at least one service, the closure of schools became the catalyst which led to them to shut all their libraries:

They [the council] asked us to close libraries before lockdown, mainly because four are located in schools and they knew they would be closed. We couldn't have mixed messages that some had closed and some not.

Services generally went out of their way to assist users:

We were inundated. We had nothing left, the shelves were cleared. We let people borrow what they wanted, 20 books, whatever they could get their hands on.

Like most organisation, Scotland's public libraries found themselves in unknown territory. Disbelief and shock were short-lived with the majority of public library services, being able to move swiftly. There was, inevitably, a very mixed and variable response in those early days. Some had implemented remote working platforms previously, others had not. One manager said:

There was a quick shift to communicating with people at home, of course frontline library staff aren't tooled up with working-at-home kit, but we were fortunate that we had invested in Basecamp accessed by people using own email address and so they didn't need their council address. It gave us a platform to communicate.

However, a number of service managers highlighted a different picture:

This authority was not set up for working from home, they didn't have laptops, or VPN and it took a long time to get equipment to get it going.

Another noted:

² All quotes from interviews are given anonymously and without codes, as agreed with participants.

At that point we didn't even have access to our emails or anything. It was pretty much two or three weeks of nothing.

A sense of frustration did emerge from those interviewees who felt their organisations lacked preparedness, with a number commenting about how aware they were of other places that seemed to have been better organised and were more able to 'hit the ground running'. One manager found there were almost insurmountable challenges in keeping the service going in the early weeks because of issues with remote access to IT systems. This manager came up with their own solution:

The thing I'm most proud of is being a little wily rat, sneaking into the building to do things like processing memberships when I was out for my 'hour of exercise'.

Services moved quickly to be online only:

We refreshed online services. It was fortunate that March is year end and we had a fund sitting there. We were fortunate we could do that.

Another service manager commented:

We already had a strong virtual presence. We took away all restrictions around online joining. We have always had relatively high digital issues and we have a big collection.

The flexibility and responsiveness of staff was repeatedly praised by heads of service in those early days:

For me it's one of the things with the public library staff is how amazingly flexible and adaptable they were. They moved out of their normal roles, say managing stock selection or young people's services, or reader development, and were suddenly dealing with mental health, loneliness, food requirements, and prescriptions.

Several heads of service spoke about the initial issues associated with having all of their staff at home.

We were under-prepared in terms of emergency actions. We had frontline staff at home who didn't have meaningful work to do at that point.

Public library staff across many authorities were redeployed to communication centres, call handling and community hubs. Many were engaged in what can be described, in the words of one head of services as 'kindness projects', delivering people's medicine, sorting out money problems, delivering shopping, walking dogs and many other activities. This head of service observed:

Library staff were the ideal people to have a chat [to try to] deal with social isolation, we're already so good at getting to the bottom of what people's problems when they are in need.

The situation was sometimes materially different for those services in culture or leisure trusts. A manager in a trust, where staff were furloughed, highlighted:

Until everyone was furloughed, they were still doing things like recording BookBug, but once furloughed this couldn't continue. We had a bank of content but we burned through that quickly. Some were furloughed at the end of March, some at the end of April. I didn't have staff who were sitting at home working, they were sitting at home being paid *not* to work.

A manager in another trust explained:

We were one of the first trusts to go down the route of furlough. Ninety-five percent of staff went to furlough. Five percent of staff left looking at how to sustain services and engage [with the] community. The biggest challenge was losing a lot of staff at that point. We had [x] staff still employed, and we prioritised how to sustain and develop online offer.

The decision to close was hard for services and most sought to reassure the public that, although the buildings themselves were shut, a service would still be available in a digital form. Many explicitly stated that they were aware of inequality issues raised through closure of the library service and that it had factored into the decision-making. A number acknowledged that some parts of the service simply could not be moved online, and there was desire to get services back running as soon as was possible (e.g. through home deliveries). Closure was a profound culture shock for staff and managers alike: it was keenly felt and seemed like the 'last hurrah'.

Going digital

The move to a digital-only service was sudden and swift for all public libraries. The significance of this was not lost on the library service managers and the consequences of library closures and migration online for those digitally excluded and disadvantaged communities were uppermost in all of their minds during lockdown. The *Learning from Lockdown* report highlighted that 'since the outbreak of COVID-19, the scale of digital exclusion in the UK has been exposed and exacerbated beyond previous understanding'. (Carnegie, 2020, p.2) One manager captured this clearly:

People would sit outside the library for the WiFi. Around one in five households in this area have no internet. People were worried, and felt isolated because everybody moved services and communication online, and yet those people didn't have smartphones or access. We were thinking what more can we do to support those people; we had to be digital enablers.

This comment was replicated by others. Collecting data around digital connectivity can be difficult. Some studies suggest that the rate of home internet access in Scotland is around 88%. The Ofcom Technology Tracker (2020), looking at the period immediately prior to lockdown, suggested that as many as 17% of Scottish households do not have home internet access and 28% of Scottish households did not have PC, laptop or tablet equipment. This figure rises to 58% of households in the lowest income brackets (below £15,590 per annum).

Social media was the most widely-used tool by public libraries during lockdown as it facilitated immediate communication, both of which were important in the early days when some libraries struggled to get remote access to other organisational or library-specific software. Facebook and Twitter were very significant. Two issues did emerge in this regard. Firstly, many library services have relatively low numbers of followers of their social media presence (there are notable exceptions) and therefore rely on the sharing of content for wider reach. Secondly, in some organisations there is still a tension about ‘corporate control’ of social media, a point evident in some interviewees’ responses to questions.

There was a wide range of activity online during the period analysed, with some accounts featuring dozens of posts per day, but as expected, there was a degree of similarity in the content developed and shared posts, with some notable exceptions where more innovative video content or podcast was shared. One head of service noted:

The social media side of things was important. Our guy is really good, and kept our profile high. He was given almost *carte blanche*. He organised the haikus, jigsaws, Lego challenges, as well as delving into the archives. He had to come in to access the website and did that off his own back.

For many, the website remained largely unchanged, some with old and out-of-date information. It should also be noted, given the importance of digital during the research period, how difficult it was sometimes to locate the webpages of a library service (from the council homepage). Sometimes, the library webpages were buried under countless menu headers on a council website, or appeared to be very sparsely used or updated. It required further searching to find the social media channels of the services, as many did not provide links to these from their webpages. This does beg questions about how easy it would be for the average user to find and navigate these online spaces, and indeed, how easy it would be for those who perhaps were forced to look for their library online for the first time during lockdown.

Although many library services were well-prepared and had invested significantly in their digital provision in recent years, the background context of digital participation cannot be forgotten. Library services such as Aberdeenshire (over 17,800 eBooks), Glasgow (around 13,000), or Edinburgh (around 11,300) were in a good position from the very start of lockdown; however, most services were within the range of 3,000-7,000.

Inevitably, however, as services moved to a digital sphere, there were major increases in borrowing of eBooks and eAudio across the sector. The increases reported by library services speak for themselves with, for example, North Ayrshire up 144%, South Lanarkshire 118%, Orkney 202%, Renfrewshire 83%, and Stirling 200%. Comparison across services about increases in e-borrowing is difficult because of the different ways in which this has been measured, what time period in previous years it has been compared to, and because of differing online platforms. That said, all services reported increases, in many cases considerable ones. One manager remarked:

The uptake of eBook and digital magazines was substantial. Demand was far outstripping supply especially for eBooks. We didn't have enough copies and waiting lists were running into months. We were able to augment the collection. We could have spent thousands and still not satisfied the demand.

Others found that the appetite waned as lockdown began to ease and as digital fatigue began to set in:

The peak for eBooks and eAudio was in April. Then in May everyone got sick of it. Too much digital.

Some, however, were in a weaker position; one service had a downbeat assessment:

The budget is still so tiny, and we never got any extra budget for eBooks, so [after lockdown] we had to sacrifice physical budget.

In a number of library services, there was evidence of a 'chicken-and-egg' situation in that they had not had resources to invest in digital, and therefore had relatively small collections which they then struggled to promote and consequently witnessed lower levels of uptake. Another service noted how successful PressReader had been with their users, noting:

People couldn't believe, in spite of our past marketing, that they could get the papers online through the library.

Even in library services where there was a strong digital offering, challenges existed:

Online is expensive for libraries. It will be a struggle to get to even 50% digital. A national platform for public libraries is maybe the answer; a national consortium for eBooks perhaps, but government must have a role in setting that up.

Another commented:

It would be great if we could make our buck go further. We need a purchasing model to get a more a comprehensive offer, so that you don't need to live in a certain area to get a title. That would be a huge step forward; it would be fantastic, 50,000 titles instead of 5,000.

Several interviewees spoke about the desirability of exploring the potential for better digital solutions for the provision of e-content across the country and whether a single national offering would be advantageous. They did all acknowledge the issues that such a move would present. Nonetheless, there was strong feeling that having the discussion would be worthwhile even if proved to be difficult to implement in terms of budgeting, purchasing and platforms.

Wider, societal issues about the switch to digital were also explored in discussions around e-content. One head of service in an urban service explained:

What's been driven home is the digital divide and inequality in [place mentioned] is even more profound in the last 6 months, the digital cost to

families of being connected. A lot of families have a phone but filling in forms on a phone doesn't work.

Online BookBug sessions were one very visible way which library services could attempt to maintain a personal connection during lockdown and they have received much attention. **Bookbug is the universal book-gifting scheme in Scotland. It is run by the Scottish Book Trust and is accompanied by free sessions for children aged 0-5 years and their mums, dads and carers in Scottish public libraries. These sessions last around 30 minutes and include songs, rhymes and a story.** Several heads of service highlighted that online BookBug had been useful for staff to develop their skills and that they had stepped outside their natural comfort zones:

Staff were sometimes nervous in the earlier videos, but then you saw them growing and blossoming.

Although virtually every service highlighted that BookBug online worked well, many heads of service noted that, no matter how good a virtual offering it was, it was a poor substitute for real BookBug sessions in a physical library:

The digital side of things is crucial but it is also the activities and events that happen in the library space. Stuff for children, like BookBug, or author events, they have more of a learning and educational slant. Online stuff is not suitable for everyone.

Libraries also sought to move other activities and content online. Many services also attempted to adapt their existing book groups or reading clubs to enable members to chat about books while the physical premises were closed. Some tried Zoom to replace the in-person group meetings; others tried to stimulate discussion on their social media pages directly, encouraging followers to comment and discuss a book in the comments section. Services sought reach out to groups which were perhaps more disadvantaged by the lockdown restrictions and which, they felt, may respond well to moving online, such as teenagers or secondary school pupils.

Other popular content was for activities or crafts, often couched as activity to keep children (and adults) entertained while in lockdown, or to assist with home-schooling while schools were closed or when they had restricted attendance. These were laudable efforts but the reach and impact of them does require further investigation. Skills training and learning opportunities was also another area where libraries attempted to adapt to a digital mode of delivery. Some made use of video conferencing technology to run sessions, while others ran a video series or produced guides on IT skills. Most shared external resources for learning new skills or training and some directed the public to online learning opportunities that the library already ran pre-pandemic. **Perhaps one of the most significant innovations was the introduction – by many services – of an online ‘Click and Collect’ service whereby users could, when restrictions permitted, reserve material online and then collect the materials. This was an important step for public libraries although a number of service managers were keen to point out that, although the mechanics of the service were novel, it was largely an adaptation of pre-existing online reservation facilities.**

Supporting communities

Library staff were often redeployed to support other essential services. Interviewees noted that the skills library staff have in communicating with people, their empathy³, and the knowledge they have of their communities, were valuable in redeployment. This also came through in the Carnegie UK Trust which found 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. Carnegie also noted an issue raised by our interviewees about recognition of the role of the library service in supporting communities in emergency situations, and the lack of understanding around the role of libraries in supporting members of the community. One manager in a mixed urban-rural service highlighted the contribution of library staff redeployed to other services:

Some staff went to help organise the foodbank – they needed help with ordering systems to manage the tons of food. So library staff moved out of normal role doing stock selection or young people services, or reader development, and were dealing with food requirements, mental health, loneliness, or prescriptions.

One rural library service well-known for its closeness to its community initiated their own direct telephoning. The service manager explained:

Phone calls were important and were good, rewarding work for staff at home. We knew lots of people who weren't on anyone else's radar, so we tried to contact them. We phoned our mobile customers, our talking newspapers customers, the people who used learning centre frequently, and got staff to check they were ok. One man said we were the first people who'd rung him in three weeks. We said to staff 'chat to them and ask them how they're doing, gauge how they're getting on'. Some people had a really hard time, some people chatted for a long time. It wasn't just about getting books, it was a more about 'how are you getting on?'

The importance of the library service in one community was brought home when:

A home delivery service user passed away during lockdown, and we were one of the only contacts that they had.

The extent to which library services and their staff understood their communities and demonstrated to closeness to individual people has been evident throughout the research and is shown in the quotes above. It was often affecting to hear of the closeness of these relationships. There is nothing to say library services must do these things but the reality is that they function so well in communities precisely because they have that close and empathetic understanding of the people they serve. This is a universal but perhaps unspoken and under-acknowledged part of the work of the library.

³ The Scots word *couthy* (comfortable/friendly) was mentioned by several.

Library staff were deployed to assist in health and social care services, some in sheltered housing schemes, others worked in foodbanks, supporting prescription collection and delivery, helping in childcare centres for keyworkers, working with education colleagues to support children's mental health and wellbeing. Service managers were well-networked into other parts of their organisations and were well aware of the community challenges which face them. Mental health, social isolation, digital divide and the economic consequences were all mentioned frequently by interviewees, and this was evenly represented across the whole of Scotland in large and small services, urban and rural as well as those in both affluent and more disadvantaged communities. Two managers, both from relatively affluent areas spoke of this:

We are a relatively well-off area really and often don't face the same hardships as other people. But there are clearly inequalities. People don't all have WiFi or devices, and often there is a pretty basic misunderstanding that everyone has everything.

Another said:

We are seeing increasing unemployment and benefits applications. There have been rises in areas of deprivation but also in areas we wouldn't normally expect, more affluent ones, for example. It is a different kind of hardship in some of these communities because they are not used to unemployment and benefits, they've never had to go to a foodbank before.

Interviewees highlighted the variety of groups they were attempting to reach. Managers gave many examples of these different constituencies right across society. One head of service highlighted their service's work to try to alleviate the social isolation which new mothers could feel during lockdown:

For many first-time mothers lockdown has been a horrific experience. Many of them make social network as a parent by engaging with early-years library activities. We worked with Home-Start to deliver laptops to parents, to encourage them to access activities online and to build social bubbles online. They had no health visitors, no playgroups, and no parent groups. There was a small group where people were being excluded. They didn't know how to recreate the support networks digitally. People don't exclude deliberately but the response to lockdown has excluded many people.

Some services were very conscious that the digital push was only ever going to reach a proportion of users and important though their social media campaigns were that other and more personal approaches were also needed:

We had alternatives to social media; a couple of staff members phoning the home library people just to check in, just keeping in touch and making sure they were ok until we got the service up and running again.

Managers and their teams had a strong sense public libraries as a universal service, free at the point of use of this universal nature of their provision, and the importance of trying to reach out to as many parts of society as they could was very evident.

However, they acknowledged the challenge of this. One service manager spoke of the concerns such as getting people back to the library:

Some people necessarily found solutions to things they would have come to the library for, and I don't think we're going to get them back. But people in the most vulnerable groups couldn't fill in those gaps themselves and they didn't have the library to turn to. People sat outside the library for WiFi. We knew there were groups who felt worried and isolated because everybody else [had] moved online. Those people didn't have devices. We need to be digital enablers.

Libraries and wellbeing

The positive impacts that reading for pleasure can have on health and wellbeing are well-documented and libraries have long been aware of this with much of their work being focused around these areas. The impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of the communities that they serve was uppermost in the minds of virtually everyone interviewed in this research:

There are major mental health concerns; much more visible poverty including food poverty which is a big issue and impacts on mental health, and of course digital poverty with people who aren't able to engage in online environment.

There was evidence of how aware services were about the mental health and wellbeing issues posed by lockdown and what they could do in order to alleviate them. Mental Health Awareness Week and Health Information week were both strongly pushed on social media by virtually every library. Support for mental wellbeing transcended one week in May 2020 and was a constant theme across library posts during lockdown with services highlighting the benefits of reading for wellbeing. The points made by interviewees in this respect echo the findings of Scottish Book Trust (2020) research that showed 98% agreed reading supported their wellbeing; 97% agreed reading helps them to relax, and 92% agreed reading has been important to them in times of anxiety throughout their lives.

Service managers gave a clear sense of how high a priority this was and about their concerns. Two stood out in particular; firstly, the head of large urban service:

We're very conscious that we are in every community and are part of the infrastructure that supports peoples' mental health. A lot of people out there [are] not getting the level of support they were getting, and their life challenges during lockdown will have almost certainly increased. We've targeted the re-opening of libraries in places that need the most support, the ones with the biggest social need.

Secondly, a manager in medium-sized rural authority:

No one beyond the library was identifying the potential for libraries to overcome the social isolation. Not being seen as service that has a place in an emergency like that was frustrating. We deal with human beings on a daily basis. The things we do are important for mental health, stimulating people

creatively and intellectually, especially when people are locked in houses. But people [senior managers] just didn't see that potential.

Several managers expressed similar frustrations. This contrasted with comments of a panellist reported by Scottish Book Trust: 'the library was one of my essential life services. After lockdown I will be delighted to get back'. (Scottish Book Trust, 2020). There was a sense of disappointment, perhaps irritation, shown by some interviewees that the positive impacts libraries can have on individuals were not recognised. One said:

There was some apathy [organisationally]; a lack of understanding of the impacts the library have on communities; there was little understanding of role of libraries in supporting mental health and wellbeing issues.

Physical health and wellbeing were also heavily promoted by all library services. A number of library services promoted work with Macmillan. Others promoted information about their own local cancer support groups within their area. Fitness and physical health were promoted across virtually every service. This was not simply passively promoting collections but included videos, podcasts and self-help. Some trusts were able to draw on their leisure side to support these activities with, for example, online workouts. Healthy eating, recipes, cooking on budgets were all pushed across the sector.

Gardening became important during lockdown for those fortunate enough to access to their own open space and a number of authorities promoted their gardening resources as well as highlighting their positive contribution to wellbeing. It is also perhaps not widely known outside the library sector or those for whom the service is vital, that many Scottish public libraries are pick-up points for hearing aid batteries. Libraries inability to continue this service was a disruption and a complication for many people. This is a small but important point because it is a vital service performed by public libraries that is, perhaps, largely unknown more widely. One interviewee said:

It was only when it wasn't there and that the council realised we did it.

The physical space

The loss of the physical library spaces and the services they offered was keenly felt. As heads of service talked about this it was apparent there was a profound sense of disappointment at having to abandon physical services because of the loss that represented to the communities that they serve. The paramount concern uppermost in the minds of managers was the impact on communities rather than the impact on the library service. Some of the evidence given by the interviewees in response to questions around the balance of physical and digital were amongst the most thoughtful and considered as following commentary outlines. There was a unanimous belief in the importance of libraries as physical community spaces:

It is nonsense to say that libraries aren't about the space. For so long we've positioned ourselves in the community, as safe spaces. It would be wrong thing to say we can just be virtual. What we need to be doing is developing

the physical and digital to make it more accessible to people. Virtual has its place, but not at the expense of the physical space.

Another said:

I respond with horror to anyone suggesting we lose the physical space. We've noticed that people are sick and tired with online everything. It's good and necessary but enthusiasm is waning. Value libraries for being free, safe public spaces.

This consistent belief in the enduring value of the library as a physical space within communities, articulated by many of the interviewees, in no way sought to diminish the importance of digital. The notion of the library as a trusted or safe physical space was mentioned by virtually everyone:

We will never be able to go into a fully virtual environment. Libraries are about connecting with people, about ideas and opportunities. The environment *in* a library is very important. It is one of the few welcome public open spaces that you can go to, and you're unlikely [elsewhere] to meet such a diverse range of people.

Another observed:

You know me, I'm a techie, but I don't believe the digital side is more important than the physical side. We can't become people that live in silos and have everything delivered to us [digitally]. Society is doomed if that happens.

A third manager, this time in a large trust, describe a scenario that they believed represented the epitome of the public library service:

People wanted to go in to get books but they wanted to speak to someone. Our philosophy is 'come on in, we're a welcoming space, come in anytime'. We have one guy who comes in two or three times a week and uses the books but will also fall asleep in a chair and that's because we are his safe space. That's actually the epitome of what we are about, we are a safe, communal space. I've no idea what happened to that guy. I worry about him, and that can't be replicated digitally, of course it can't.

The head of large rural library services emphasised this in the context of the services libraries provide to their communities, saying:

The digital side is great in so far as it goes, but it just doesn't touch on [many] elements. In many of our rural communities, the library is the only place now where they have that community space, it is the one place they can go for community involvement.

Two service managers, independently, made a remarkably similar points. Both were discussing the (normal) use of their library services:

No browsing and no PC access – they're deep wounds for me.

The fact no one could use our PCs from March.....that's an open sore.

Some expressed concerns that the absence of physical libraries might have other damaging consequences for the libraries themselves:

Every day we remained shut was a gift to those who want to close libraries. No physical offer from March to July; what did you do during the pandemic? Just not enough.

One head of service summed up the concerns: 'I *am* concerned because people can withdraw quite quickly and are difficult to get back'. There was a strong sense that the digital and online audiences were only a part of the wider library constituency and that it was not reaching everyone. There was also a clear message from service managers about the inability to do things that require physical space. A number of managers spoke very positively about the digital innovations but were concerned that the full impact on the service would only be seen when full reopening was achieved, and that level of people lost to the service could be ascertained more clearly. Many managers were concerned about this and about the strategies that would be required to reach out to people. One noted that 'if we don't learn how to reach out to them again, then our figures are going to be low and that will be interpreted as a reason to shut us down'.

The nature of future spaces

In all of the interviews there was a significant discussion about the nature of library future spaces. The role which libraries play as digital enablers for their communities was also touched upon by most interviewees and there was a sense that this function has not been fully appreciated up to now. There were equally strong opinions that libraries' role as digital enablers must be emphasised and that this is territory which the sector can play a key part in and not just for communities which are perhaps victims of the digital divide. Phrases such as digital 'enabler', 'facilitators' or 'champions' were mentioned by many. One head of service encapsulated this by saying:

We are actually in a good place to balance physical and digital. We need to think in terms of community hubs that include library space as part of it. Libraries fit into that vision easily. There will be far more co-delivery. Getting balance between digital and physical is crucial. We need innovation and new things online, but not to detriment of traditional services.

This was echoed by another who reflected more generally on the public's ability to access services and what part the library may have to play in this:

Sometimes I look at other services and think it's the wrong way round. It is about hard-to-access services, not hard-to-reach people. I think we understand that in libraries.

There were a number of interviewees who spoke about specific digital innovations that they were considering:

We are thinking about author events for example which we could charge for in the library and whether we can also have them streamed online. We are thinking about whether we can charge for them and how much and whether we can make that into something that public will buy into.

A number of heads of services reflected on what lockdown and the closure of physical libraries might mean in the medium term:

Physical space is critical but maybe we won't have as many of them; but will be delivering a lot more from the spaces we do have. People talk about libraries as the community's living room; it's a space you can walk into, with no obligation and it's free. If you get customer service right, you can do almost anything.

Lockdown and subsequent reopening with all the issues associated with social distancing, often in small spaces, afforded many services an opportunity to reflect on their estate. The challenges of older buildings sometimes not in the right location, local authorities often having too many properties in their portfolios, and the nature of the service needed in the future were all mentioned by a number of interviewees. Some considered what this might mean for libraries:

To be very truthful, no, we don't need all the physical spaces, I say that with reluctance, but some spaces have been saved beyond their useful life. The need from the community has changed and opening hours may have been cut so that the service has, in reality, made itself redundant.

Reflections

One of the things that really stood out, particularly in the interviews, was the closeness to, and understanding of, the communities served by Scotland's public libraries. This should be no surprise because that closeness and understanding is central to their approach to the delivery of services. There was, undeniably, variability in the response of public library services across Scotland during lockdown. This relates to everything from the response to moving online, the way in which services approached reopening, and the services that have been provided. All 32 services responded well, despite the challenges, and some have responded very well, with real imagination and creativity. The challenges which services encountered in lockdown reflected many of the issues that they face in 'normal' times, finance, organisational commitment, community demographics, and staffing levels.

A fundamental strength of the public library is the fact that they are close to, and understanding of, their respective communities and this research has shown this in many ways. Three observations by managers in this regard particularly stand out. One spoke about the fact that libraries 'deal with human beings every day'. This showed an important point; libraries must, of course, think about user groups and community profiles and service demographics, but fundamentally they know that they are offering an important service to individual human beings, for whom it can make a huge difference. This point should not be underestimated. Secondly,

another manager spoke of their concern about one individual user he knew about: 'we have one guy who comes in two or three times a week and uses the books but will also fall asleep in a chair and that's because we are his safe space'. That's the epitome of what we are about, we are a safe, communal space. I've no idea what happened to that guy. I worry about him'. This is indeed the epitome of the safe public space that the library is. The third came from the manager of a service known for its close connection with its community. They spoke of the importance of the library knowing about people who were not on 'anyone else's radar' and the social function that the library had in checking on these people.

Another aspect which stands out most strongly was the commitment and dedication of the staff across public libraries. Whether they remained working for the library service itself or were redeployed to other essential services, they pulled together and made the best of it. At the end of the interviews, we asked each interviewee what they were most proud about. The answer, in every case, was their staff. This was perhaps typified by the library manager who, finding it impossible to process everything remotely from home, became 'a little wily rat', sneaking into the building to do things he was unable to from home. Services exist only because people make them happen.

Across Scotland, there was robust evidence of the upskilling of library staff associated with the creation, development and promotion of new forms of digital content. Service managers spoke of how they had observed their staff started off nervously, perhaps unwilling to appear on camera, but soon developed confidence and expertise. This, in turn, led to the emergence of other creative ideas from staff. These are important points both for the skills base of library staff going forward and for services as they continue to consider methods of outreach and engagement. Overall, the approach of services can be characterised by managers showing a real willingness to allow their teams to be as creative and imaginative in producing content as they could be. The autonomy staff gained and the agility created by breaking down organisation barriers are lessons to be taken forward.

Libraries have had digital services in their offering for the best part of 20 years but the advent of meaningful e-lending has afforded the opportunity for a step-change. Library services were acutely aware of the digital divide before lockdown because they are often the first port-of-call for those who cannot afford the devices or the access. The idea that everyone is online and everyone has a tablet is a myth and libraries see this first-hand every day. One interviewee spoke about users being unable to access library PCs as 'an open sore' for them and this reflects the fact that those who need the library to access digital often have no other means of doing so. The absence of physical libraries during lockdown was a grievous loss for them.

Just as physical libraries vary across the country in terms of their offering, so too does the e-lending offering. Variability is a natural consequence of running services which are tailored to the needs of individual communities across 32 local authorities. However, variability is also a consequence of budgeting, finance, and service priorities over many years. It is not necessarily bad. The data gathered in this research pointed to variable levels of e-content (particularly eBooks and eAudio). Virtually every library service was able to report significant increases in the lending of e-content, and in some cases, the increases were remarkable. The differences in levels of provision from service to service were acknowledged by

interviewees and many spoke of the need to have a national conversation about this in the future.

One of the most important findings about going digital was, ironically, the reverse; the importance of the physical space emerges perhaps as strongly as any finding. Lockdown and the closure of all libraries brought sharply into focus the importance and value of the physical space; gone were all community events, activities, groups and gatherings that libraries are normally able to offer. Although this placed focus on the digital, it also highlighted the crucial nature of the communal civic space that is the public library. There was eloquent testimony from library services managers about the balance that must be struck, post-pandemic, between physical and digital, and how any hybrid 'phygital' model might develop. However, the strongest testimony of all is about the absolute, irrevocable centrality of the physical space of the public library within communities.

While many services have been doing excellent work online for many years, the move into a blended delivery means services will be *more* reliant on *all* its digital spaces. Just as physical space is carefully managed in order to support the needs of the community, the digital space must also be considered carefully and we have perhaps passed the point where blaming constraints on the 'council's website template' are acceptable. As services produce more digital content, online spaces will need to evolve to support those activities. It is recognised that while some services have dedicated digital staff for online content management, others are reliant on the skills of staff with a myriad of other responsibilities. Staff skill-sets and allocation of resource must reflect the importance of online, and as much attention must be paid to the management (and appeal) of digital spaces as physical ones.

Interviewees noted that, despite the constantly shifting environment and the inevitable cautious bureaucracy, it gave them considerable freedom to try new things. One manager said 'I never said no when people suggested trying something new'. Another observed that things which might, ordinarily, have taken two years to get approved became much easier to get agreement on and to implement. This degree of agility and autonomy was welcomed by managers and staff. Organisations have often looked critically at themselves and at their process, streamlining them or seeking to remove administrative obstacles and this has been apparent in the library services examined in this research. 'Click and Collect' has been one such innovation of the lockdown (although many were keen to say that it was really an extension of the reservation facility under a new guise). It is instructive that a number of managers said that had they been implementing such a scheme in 'normal circumstance' it would undoubtedly have taken longer and been more bureaucratic.

Those other activities included, for example, promoting the benefits of reading for wellbeing and supporting good mental health. Services made a concerted effort in those respects and the volume of material posted on social media (and its reach through shares) coupled with borrowing statistics for e-content are important indicators. Similarly, libraries developed ways to support physical health with activities and resources (both their own and content drawn from elsewhere) and much imaginative and inclusive content was created and delivered. It is important to balance this with the observation that a significant number of managers felt that

the role libraries could play in an emergency situation such as the pandemic was not fully appreciated by the organisation of which they are a part.

It is often said that the most important asset of any organisation is its staff. This was very evident in this research and the contribution which library staff made more widely to the pandemic response should not be overlooked. They delivered medicines, helped manage stock in foodbanks, assisted in care homes, reached out to the isolated and lonely, staffed childcare hubs for the children of keyworkers, and worked on telephone helplines. Library staff, with their strong background in individual customer care, excellent communication and organisational skills and, their *couthy* style, were prized and valued across parent organisations.

Conclusions

This research was not conceived as a user study but rather as a piece of reflective professional learning about contemporary public library management. This shaped the approaches taken towards both data collection and data analysis. It was, therefore, hoped that undertaking the research would provide an opportunity for practitioners to reflect usefully, and be able to learn from it as they continue to shape and evolve their services for the future.

Some of our interviewees have speculated to us since about the extent to which there *was* learning between the first lockdown to the second (from December 2020). That is difficult to assess as we did not look at the second lockdown. What is clear, however, is that library services collectively and their leaders have learned a great deal about what can and cannot be done in the digital sphere. They have also learned about overcoming challenges, cutting through ‘red-tape’, and how to deploy technology to reach out to different parts of the community. They have reinforced strongly how ‘bloody amazing’ (as one manager put it) their staff is and how, with engaged autonomy, they can come up with ingenious and imaginative ways to keep a public library service running and relevant.

The research was a snapshot of events during 2020. Events moved swiftly and regulations changed regularly. A number of people said to us that the interview was the first real opportunity that they had to reflect back on what had been done and to try to make sense of it as a whole. It was pleasing to hear this and to sense that they had found the process of talking about what had been done beneficial.

When the idea behind this research was first conceived in the spring of 2020 Scotland had been in lockdown for a matter of weeks. There was a high level of anxiety about all aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the new way of working which everyone found themselves in. It was not fully understood or, indeed, anticipated that further lockdowns would be necessary and that things had would not have ‘returned to normal’. There have been difficulties and complexities but there has also been much to commend and during this period Scotland’s public libraries have played an important role in sustaining the communities that they serve.

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