

Written evidence submitted by CILIP

Submission of Evidence – DCMS Select Committee

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SECTOR

April 2020

1. Representation

- 1.1 The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) is the UK professional association for people working in libraries, information and knowledge management. We represent a professional workforce of approximately 86,000 people in information-related roles across 20 industry sectors.
- 1.2 COVID-19 and coronavirus are having a transformative impact on every aspect of British society and our economy. We welcome this call for evidence from the DCMS Select Committee and are pleased to provide the following submission relating to the impact on the library community.
- 1.3 For the sake of simplicity, our response focuses on publicly-funded libraries that fall within the DCMS remit – predominantly public libraries, school library services where these are overseen by a Library Authority and prison libraries (ditto). The impacts of COVID-19 have obviously had a significant impact on all other libraries, including particularly those in the Healthcare and 3rd sectors, and further information can be provided about these on request.
- 1.4 We note the following specific questions raised by the Committee and have used them as the basis of this submission:
 - What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?
 - How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?
 - What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?
 - What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?
 - How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?
- 1.5 We would be glad to provide any supplementary information or further evidence in support of the Committee's reflections.

2. Immediate impact of COVID-19 on the sector

- 2.1 We will differentiate the impact of COVID-19 on the sector across three categories:

- Workforce
- Services
- Library users

Workforce-related impacts

- 2.2 COVID-19 has had a significant and immediate impact on the workforce of professional librarians and library workers. In the period pre-lockdown, there were significant concerns that the health, safety and welfare of library staff were being exposed to undue risk as a result of continued exposure to the public and contact with potentially contaminated lending materials.
- 2.3 In the period immediately following lockdown, library staff were asked to transition rapidly to virtual and remote working, and to transform face-to-face services into digital ones. The profession rose to this challenge admirably, with a focus on maintaining access for the public to reliable information and a wide range of reading and educational materials.
- 2.4 However, the workforce then found itself required to adjust again through the process of redeployment by Local Authorities into non-library COVID-19-related roles (such as food distribution, supporting local health services or manning information lines).
- 2.5 Precise figures are not available, but we estimate that more than half of the professional workforce in public libraries have been transitioned into non-library roles. This raises a significant concern, since these support roles will continue to be required once restrictions are lifted, that library staff will not return to library work.
- 2.6 In the medium-term, we believe there is a very real risk that the library workforce, once fragmented, will not return to its pre-COVID-19 level. This risks further exacerbating the ad-hoc transition of library services to volunteers that was already having adverse consequences pre-crisis.

Service-related impacts

- 2.7 The implementation of restrictions on non-essential movement has created both significant challenges and opportunities for library services.
- 2.8 As noted above, most Library Authorities responded rapidly in the immediate aftermath of the Prime Minister's announcement by finding creative ways to replace their face-to-face services with digital surrogates. As an example, Kingston Libraries advertised a 'digital rhyme-time' session via social media in the fortnight following the lockdown which saw participating increase tenfold.
- 2.9 Libraries Connected have launched a helpful initiative called #LibrariesFromHome (<https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/librariesfromhome>) which provides listings of digital activities offered by library services across the UK.
- 2.10 The replacement of face-to-face services with virtual ones works well for those services that are largely content-based, such as reading, rhyme time and other activities. It does not work for added-value services such as Universal Credit Support, where the library user depends on direct support from library staff.
- 2.11 There is a significant concern that the closure of public libraries has denied access to Wifi and broadband to precisely those people who need it most – those who do not own a smartphone and don't have Internet

access at home. This concern resulted in a reluctance on the part of some Local Councils to close their library services until formally instructed to do so.

Impacts on library users

- 2.12 The impacts on the general population of social distancing, self-isolation and shielding are obviously very significant and likely to be ongoing long after restrictions are lifted. Anecdotally, the situation appears to be exacerbating fault lines which existed pre-crisis, notably the risks of social isolation and loneliness, limited access to health information and inequality of access to technology and information.
- 2.13 Most immediately, the situation has resulted in an immediate increase in new registrations. As the BBC noted in an article on the 21st April, “Libraries across England have reported a surge in online borrowing during the coronavirus lockdown as the nation seeks escapism and comfort in e-books.”¹
- 2.14 According to figures shared by Libraries Connected (<http://www.librariesconnected.org.uk>), “Loans of online e-books, e-magazines and audiobooks were up an average of 63% in March compared with last year and 120,000 people joined libraries in the three weeks after lockdown began.”
- 2.15 Responding to this surge in interest in e-reading, the Arts Council England has announced emergency funding of £151,000 to Library Authorities to enable them to increase their ‘stock’ of electronic materials (e-books, audiobooks and e-magazines) for lending.
- 2.16 Also in response, CILIP launched the National Shelf Service (<http://www.cilip.org.uk/nationalshefervice>) – a YouTube channel featuring daily book recommendations by professional librarians for children, young people and families. Since launch, the channel has received more than 10,000 views.
- 2.17 On a related matter, we note that it is not clear how the transition to e-reading will impact on the PLR payments made to authors and content creators. CILIP is committed to a balanced ecosystem in which authors receive fair pay for the works they create and would not wish to see them disadvantaged by differential provision between e-reading and book lending. We would welcome further clarification on the operation of PLR to avoid disadvantaging authors.
- 2.18 In the medium-term, we will need to consider how this investment in e-reading can be sustained post-lockdown in order to continue to support a newly-engaged digital audience.

3. Support from DCMS, other Government Departments & ALB

- 3.1 Pre-lockdown, there is a concern that the situation relating to the closure of libraries was unclear and that as a result both staff and members of the public were exposed to unnecessary risk. No clear decision on closure was forthcoming and the initial advice (focused on hand-hygiene) was insufficient.
- 3.2 As a result, Libraries Connected were forced to write to the DCMS Ministerial Team requesting immediate clarification on the closure of public library services. It is worth noting that the situation was similarly unclear in schools, with many school librarians being required to remain at work despite teaching staff being sent home.
- 3.3 However, once a clear decision to close libraries was made, support from DCMS, through the DCMS Libraries Team, has been made readily available and has been a welcome source of information, coordination and leadership.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-52368191>

- 3.4 The DCMS Libraries Team rapidly convened a daily briefing call in the immediate aftermath of the announcement, which has been useful as an information-sharing platform and as a mechanism by which to secure additional cross-Departmental information and advice.
- 3.5 A practical example is the liaison by the team with Public Health England in order to secure additional advice on quarantining of books and lending materials by libraries, which directly informed policies and practice in library services across the UK.
- 3.6 Furthermore, the Libraries Minister has convened a series of briefing calls with sector leadership organisations which have provided an important opportunity both to receive updates from the Minister and to share the different actions the sector has taken in response to the emerging crisis. These calls have been welcome and we believe ought to be continued in some form as a platform to ensure that Ministerial decisions are informed by insight from the leaders of front-line services.
- 3.7 Support from other Government Departments has been less forthcoming – we have requested information and advice on behalf of members in schools, colleges and HE (particularly concerning staff required to continue providing face-to-face services after the general prohibition on movement) but have not been successful in eliciting a response. This may, however, be because we are not as well plugged-in to the support networks and channels of other Departments.

4. Long-term impacts & support

- 4.1 We believe that it is essentially too early to make an informed judgement about the long-term impact of COVID-19 and coronavirus on British society, the economy, our way of life or the institutions that exist to serve the public.
- 4.2 However, we do believe that the initial trends are sufficiently clear to be able to draw some broad assumptions:
- Coronavirus may result in a global recession, with significant impacts for the UK economy. This impact is likely to include increased public borrowing and taxation, reduced public expenditure, a slow-down in lending, wage stagnation and inflation;
 - Economic pressure on all types of enterprise – many of which are already operating under significant pension debt – will increase and the value of investments is likely to decrease, meaning slow growth and either stagnant or declining employment;
 - Public services, already labouring under the impact of 10 years of cuts through public-sector austerity, are likely to be hit with a fresh wave of budget cuts to pay down the protective measures introduced in response to COVID-19;
 - Without specific fiscal protection, these impacts are likely to cause serious issues for Local Authorities – a number of which were already in a precarious financial position pre-COVID-19;
 - This adverse economic climate is likely to trigger a fresh wave of deprofessionalisation in libraries, further service reductions, the selling-off of estate to offset declining investment revenues and the handing-off of public services either to volunteers, Trusts or other independent agents;
 - The net effect, therefore, of COVID-19 is likely to be a further shrinkage of the UK's public library services over and above the estimated 10% reduction in service points between 2010 and 2019;

- Further shrinkage will trigger reductions in the overall quality and accessibility of the services that libraries are able to provide and, of significant concern, the loss of the positive social, economic, health, educational and other secondary benefits that hinge on access to quality library services.

5. Lessons learnt

- 5.1 The primary lesson which we believe can be drawn from the current situation is that there was no protocol in place through which to achieve a rapid sector-wide decision about the closure of services. The lack of this protocol may have cost lives.
- 5.2 We believe that this insight ought to inform two primary responses:
- The immediate agreement of a coordinated approach to the partial or full re-opening of library services, including a protocol to be implemented in the event that the 'end' of the crisis involves a series of relaxations and re-impositions of restrictions on movement, and;
 - The longer-term agreement of a Pandemic Response Protocol, enabling us to implement rapid and effective decisions about the closure of services in order to protect the health of both the public and library workers.

6. Possible futures

- 6.1 While the personal, social and economic impact of COVID-19 has been by turns tragic and hugely disruptive, there are also opportunities to think creatively about a new 'future normal' for our sector.
- 6.2 Face-to-face services and trusted locations are likely to continue to form an essential part of public service delivery in the future. At the same time, we have now proven that libraries can be digitally-agile, creative and participatory – in the process helping to attract a new audience.
- 6.3 Our ambition is to restore the best of what we had pre-pandemic, but to blend it with the insights, experiences and lessons of COVID-19 to create a new offer that is both physical and digital, fresh, relevant and compelling for today's audiences.
- 6.4 In seeking to rebuild the sector, therefore, we are determined not to lose the opportunity to learn and to do things differently in future. We hope that economic policy will be put in place to mitigate the worst financial impacts in order to avoid choking off this time of innovation and adaptation for want of personnel, capacity, resources or optimism.
- 6.5 We are grateful to the DCMS Select Committee for this opportunity to respond, and we are looking forward to reading the findings of this inquiry as they relate to all DCMS sectors.

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