

Equalities Monitoring – Services

Appendix I - Libraries

Annual Report - 2020-21



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1. Introduction

The library service has nine libraries located throughout the Borough. They provide a wide range of resources to their local communities and visitors to the area. These resources include books, e-books and e-magazines, spoken word CDs, DVDs, newspapers, free internet access via public computers, digital resources, photocopying, printing and scanning, plus a wide range of activities and events.

Residents and visitors to the area can apply for an e+ smartcard that acts as a membership card to access the resources. Each time the card is used a transaction is recorded to enable usage to be monitored.

The purpose of equalities monitoring is to ensure the Council is providing a fair and equitable service to all its residents.

To ensure the service is fair and equitable, monitoring has been undertaken in terms of:

- Access to the service
- Changes in service provision

It has been analysed by the following equality groups:

- Age
- Race
- Sex
- Religion
- Disability

A satisfaction survey of the library service has been deferred due to the pandemic and the fact that all Libraries were closed from 21st March to 5th July 2020, after which Bracknell, Crowthorne, Binfield and Great Hollands Libraries were open for "Select and Collect" and restricted use of ICT facilities according to Central Government safety guidelines.

All Libraries closed again from 5th November to 2nd December 2020 for a second national lockdown, although "Select and Collect" was permitted with the proviso that requests were collected from the entrances of Bracknell, Binfield, Whitegrove, Crowthorne and Sandhurst Libraries only.

All Libraries re-opened briefly in December, but were closed again the week of 21st December, when the region was placed in Tier 4. "Select and Collect" only was permitted at Bracknell, Binfield, Whitegrove, Crowthorne and Sandhurst Libraries from 29th December 2020 until the end of the year, but all libraries were fully closed from January 2021 until April 2021 following a further national lockdown.

During the national lockdowns, the Home Library Service was expanded to deliver books and other resources to anyone over the age of seventy who was resident in the borough. Eligible residents were referenced through the Electoral Register and contacted directly to offer them this service free of charge. For all other library members, lending services and events shifted online, with many new members joining to download e-books and e-newspapers etc.

When sufficient data for analysis is available for the other protected groups in the Equality Act 2010, these will also be included, although physical use of Libraries has been severely hampered due to the number of library closures during the pandemic.

The data below has been taken from:

e+ smartcard database – enrolments and transactions for libraries (1/04/20 to 31/03/21).

Office for National Statistics (ONS) population estimates unit published tables. Crown copyright.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) - Census 2011.

2. Access to the service

Access to the library service can be measured by enrolments and transactions using the e+ smartcard at the nine libraries. Although people who do not use the e+ card may also use the service, the e+ card numbers are sufficiently high to make this a viable measurement of access to the library services.

As people may enrol for the e+ card but not use it, transactions have also been analysed. The tables below show the age, gender, ethnicity and religious belief of those who are using the library facilities.

All data is for residents of Bracknell Forest only. Enrolments for access to library facilities by non-residents were 5,821 in the year; transactions were 494 in the year, due to the length of time that Libraries were closed during the pandemic.

The data below pertains only to enrolments undertaken within the Library Service and does not include enrolments that include library membership undertaken at other council venues.

Table 1 – Enrolments by age

Enrolments in e+ card - Libraries 01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Age Range	Enrolments in e+ card	E+ card %	Bracknell Forest population Mid-2020	Bracknell Forest population Mid-2020 %	Variance
Under 18	10,375	22%	28834	23%	-1%
18 to 34	6,437	13%	24754	20%	-7%
35 to 49	10,521	22%	27512	22%	0%
50 to 64	7,111	15%	24449	20%	-5%
65 to 79	9,996	21%	13768	11%	10%
over 80	3,698	7%	4848	4%	3%
Total	48,138	100%	124,165	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Table 2 – Transactions by age

Transactions - Libraries 01/04/2020- 31/03/2021 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Age Range	Library transactions	Library transactions %	Bracknell Forest population Mid-2020	Bracknell Forest population Mid-2020 %	Variance
Under 18	468	22%	28834	23%	-1%

18 to 34	177	8%	24754	20%	-12%
35 to 49	371	17%	27512	22%	-5%
50 to 64	251	12%	24449	20%	-8%
65 to 79	700	32%	13768	11%	21%
over 80	208	9%	4848	4%	5%
Total	2,175	100%	124,165	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Comments

The number of enrolments within a majority of the age ranges is very slightly below the Bracknell Forest population, with the major exception being the '65-79' and the 'over 80' age groups where there is a positive variation of 10% and 3% respectively. This is a significant reversal of trends from previous years and reflects the fact that the focus of Library Services during the pandemic was the home delivery to the 70+ age group.

However, the number of enrolments for all ages is significantly higher than in previous years and may be due to the fact that Time Square has remained closed to the public, and leisure facilities were also closed longer than the Library Service, which meant that the Library Service completed the bulk of E+ enrolments and bus pass renewals.

The number of transactions is abnormally low and reflects the library closures and the fact that the focus of lending services during the national lockdowns was to the over 65 age groups, as previously stated. This explains the large positive variance amongst the '65-79' age group. The transactions are, therefore, not truly representative of normal patterns of usage.

Table 3 – Enrolments by Race

Enrolments in e+ card for Libraries - Race 01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021 (Residents of Bracknell Forest only)					
	Resident	% (exc. 'unknown')	BF pop. Census 2011	BF pop. Census 2011 %	Variance
White	19,887	88%	102,554	91%	-3%
Mixed	220	10%	2303	2%	8%
Dual Heritage	80	0.5%	0	0%	0.5%
Asian	1662	7%	5664	5%	2%
Black	611	3%	2189	2%	1%
Other	80	0.5%	495	1%	-0.5%
Not known	25,599	53%			
Total (exc. not known)	22,540	100%	113,205	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Non-specific data included under not known

Table 4 – Transactions by Race

Transactions for Libraries using e+ card - Race 01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021 (Residents of Bracknell Forest only)					
	Library transactions	Library transactions % (exc. unknown)	BF pop. Census 2011	BF pop. Census 2011 %	Variance
White	807	91%	102,554	91%	0%
Mixed	11	1%	2303	2%	-1%
Dual Heritage	0	0%	0	0%	0%
Asian	58	7%	5664	5%	2%
Black	12	1%	2189	2%	-1%
Other	0	0%	495	1%	-1%
Not known	1288	59%			
Total (exc. not known)	888	100%	113,205	100%	

*N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding
Non-specific data included under not known*

Comments

Race enrolments and transactions using the e+ card are broadly in line with most of the population. However, given the number of enrolments and transactions where people have opted not to provide their ethnicity, the results are rather skewed. The reality is that the majority of Library users actually reflect the Bracknell Forest Census data.

Table 5 – Enrolments by Sex

Total enrolments by Gender for Library Service 01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021 (Bracknell Forest Residents only)					
Gender	Resident	Library transactions % (exc. unknown)	Bracknell Forest population Mid-2020	Bracknell Forest %	Variance
Female	26,510	60%	62,705	50.5%	9.5%
Male	17,800	40%	61,460	49.5%	-9.5%
Unknown	3,815				
Transgender	13	0.02%			
Total	48,138	100%	124,165	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Table 6 – Transactions by Sex

Transactions - Libraries 01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Gender	Library transactions	Library transactions % (exc. unknown)	Bracknell Forest population Mid-2020	Bracknell Forest %	Variance
Female	1,352	65%	62,705	50.5%	14.5%
Male	714	35%	61,460	49.5%	-14.5%
Unknown	109				
Transgender	1				
Total	2,176	100%	122,549	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Comments

Enrolments show more women than men are enrolling for the e+ card. Females are also shown to have completed more transactions during the year with a variance of 14.5%.

It is a national trend that women are the majority of users of all public library services. Bracknell Forest is clearly reflecting this. This has also been corroborated by previous user surveys.

The low transaction rate is indicative of the library closures and the fact that most borrowing by the general population during closure was by downloading e-books, which are unfortunately not recorded by the Smart Connect database. Physical issues made to Home Library Service clients during the pandemic were also not recorded by the Smart Connect database as these were issues performed on the Library Management system without the users' E+ cards.

Table 7 – Enrolments by Religion

Enrolments in e+ card - Libraries 01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Religion	Enrolments in e+ card	E+ card %	Bracknell Forest population Census 2011	Bracknell Forest population Census 2011 %	Variance
Christian	3,612	8%	68,524	65%	-57%
Buddhist	56	0%	825	1%	-1%
Hindu	1	0%	1,824	2%	-2%
Jewish	41	0%	176	0%	0%
Muslim	123	0%	1276	1%	-1%
Sikh	45	0%	455	0%	0%
Other religion	31	0%	490	0%	0%
No religion	2,756	6%	32184	30%	-24%
Prefer not to say	41,242	86%	7451	7%	79%

Total	47,907	100%	105,754	100%	0%
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*N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding
Non-specific data included under prefer not to say*

Table 8 – Transactions by Religion

Transactions - Libraries 01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Religion	Library transactions	E+ card %	Bracknell Forest population Census 2011	Bracknell Forest population Census 2011 %	Variance
Christian	161	7%	68,524	65%	-58%
Buddhist	0	0%	825	1%	-0.9%
Hindu	14	1%	1,824	2%	-1%
Jewish	41	2%	176	0%	2%
Muslim	2	0%	1276	1%	-1%
Sikh	1	0%	455	0%	0%
Other religion	0	0%	490	0%	0%
No religion	205	9%	32184	30%	-21%
Prefer not to say	1,793	81%	7451	7%	74%
Total	2,217	100%	105,754	100%	0%

*N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding
Non-specific data included under prefer not to say*

Comments

Religious group enrolments and transactions using the e+ card are broadly in line with the population, with the only exception being the negative variance with regards to Christian enrolments. However, as over 80% prefer not to say, the results may not accurately represent the religious profile of the Borough's population.

The low transaction rate reflects the Library closures and the fact the e-book transactions are not recorded through the Smart Connect database. The Library Management System and supplier databases do not record ethnicity data nor religion either.

3. Actions from last year's equalities monitoring

By March 2020, prior to the pandemic, Open+ technology was successfully implemented in five Libraries - Binfield, Sandhurst, Whitegrove, Ascot Heath and Harmans Water Libraries extended opening hours by an additional 244.5 hours per week. This made services at all five libraries more accessible to everyone, but especially for people who work.

Unfortunately, due to the national lockdowns and the inability to control numbers entering the buildings and monitoring public safety measures during unstaffed hours,

Open + was disabled at the end of March 2020 and remained unavailable for the whole of the financial year April 2020 to March 2021.

During the pandemic, the focus of the Library Service shifted, delivering a digital service in the form of e-books, e-magazines and newspapers and a programme of virtual events via Zoom, in addition to supporting residents over the age of seventy by providing free deliveries of books and audio-visual materials through the Home Library Service, or to anyone who was shielding.

Funding was also received from the Arts Council and the Reading Agency from January to March 2021 as part of a "Reading Friends" campaign which enabled Bracknell Forest Libraries to offer a programme of virtual events via Zoom to combat loneliness and social isolation for all sectors of the community. In total, 70 virtual events were held from January to March as part of this project.

Overall, the Library Service has made considerable investment in purchasing additional licences to enable simultaneous borrowing of e-Book titles, in addition to increasing the range of e-Books, e-Audio, e-Newspapers and e-Magazines available during the pandemic, with an emphasis on self-help resources and titles that support mental health and well-being.

4. Equality objectives and service planning

Although data from the E+ enrolments and transactions should ideally be used for service planning, the available data is very limited due to the large number of people who refuse to answer questions relating to equalities monitoring when joining the Library Service. Feedback about usage is obtained from frontline staff, along with consultation with community groups, public feedback forms and stock suggestions.

4a. Feedback from community groups

Outside of the lockdowns, the Library Service runs a large programme of events and activities for people of all ages and are socially inclusive. These include reminiscence sessions for the older people, coffee mornings for carers with experts on hand to provide advice on benefits, chess clubs to improve memory, knitting and craft activities, sensory story times for children with special needs, and a range of activities to promote health and well-being, such as yoga, mindfulness and Tai Chi.

The Library Service has been working in partnership with the Social Prescribing Team, who refer clients with depression to the Library Service to take part in the activity programme. Feedback received has indicated the positive impact that joining the library has had on people's health and well-being and some have stated that the Library Service has been a lifeline for them and enabled them to meet new people and make friends.

Bracknell Library held a series of multicultural story times in different languages led by volunteers, including Italian, French, Polish, Russian and Hindi, and a wide range of children's books were purchased in dual languages.

The Library Service also subscribes to Press Reader, enabling library members to access thousands of newspapers and magazines in every language.

Although LGBT fiction is purchased, it is not identified as a separate genre within the Borough's Libraries. This is a result of feedback from this community, some of whom

completed customer comment forms, who did not wish LGBT stock to “stand out” and requested that it be interfiled with general fiction.

One of the challenges during the national lockdowns, with library services pivoting online for the majority of users, was that it did not reach the digitally excluded. The selection and availability of e-Books and e-Audio is much more limited than the physical offer due to the complexities of e-Licenses and the physical library supports a much richer exploration process, with browsing, displays, recommendations, events, reference and study facilities.

A significant number of customers were unable to access digital library services, due to a lack of access to IT and / or their inability to use these services, which, in turn, increased the digital divide and social isolation. Jobseekers and Universal Credit claimants, who relied on the Library Service’s ICT facilities, were unable to complete applications thus hindering economic well-being and recovery. During the first period of lockdown, there was a significant rise in the number of people in the borough claiming Universal Credit. By May 2020, figures had doubled from the previous six months with more than 5,500 households claiming this support, and by February 2021, 12% of households received this support.

It was estimated in 2019 that 2.4% of the Bracknell Forest adult population had never used the Internet and, therefore, increasing the risk of isolation.

Furthermore, the many children who were being home schooled urgently required access to a wider range of titles than those available in e-Book format.

As far as possible, the Library Service attempted to combat this by offering one-to-one tuition over the telephone and talking people through how to download e-resources, application forms or even how to get online.

A “Select and Collect” free request service was offered from July to the end of December 2020, to enable access to a greater range of resources for customers.

However, in order to help the digitally excluded, and those who rely on coming to libraries to combat social isolation, the focus was on re-opening libraries as quickly and as safely as possible.

4b. Services to the older people, those with disabilities and special needs

Visually impaired users can borrow up to 6 spoken word items at a time, free of charge.

Members who are registered hearing impaired can borrow up to 2 subtitled DVDs per week, free of charge.

Adults and children with special needs can borrow up to 6 spoken word items at a time, free of charge.

The accessibility of buildings has been of paramount importance when considering the rollout of Open+ technology to extend opening times, and consultation was held with the Bracknell Forest Access Group. A full Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out. All libraries, apart from Bracknell, are fully accessible to wheelchair and motorised vehicle users when staffed and unstaffed. Bracknell Library has lift access

to all floors but the Access Group felt it was acceptable to put the lifts out of action in Open+ mode, to avoid anyone being trapped in the event of a fire.

Older people and users with a disability who have difficulty physically visiting a library can sign up for the Home Library Service. A selection of stock will be chosen for them, according to their preferences, and will be delivered to their homes free of charge either by a volunteer, or by a member of the Home Library Service staff. Volunteers also play a befriending role, as many of our housebound clients are socially isolated.

On 21st March 2020, all libraries were required to close as part of a national lockdown. In order to assist with the mental health and well-being of the borough's older population and to combat loneliness and social isolation, the Library Service began a process of telephoning all residents aged over 70, offering them the opportunity to join the Home Library Service free of charge, and receive free deliveries of books of their choice to their door. 5,011 older residents were contacted and a considerable amount of telephone consultation took place, discussing with residents eligible for the Home Library Service what they would like to borrow and checking on clients' welfare. Positive feedback received from these customers at the end of each lockdown was quite overwhelming, with many clients saying that the staff's telephone calls and regular visits, albeit remaining outside and socially distanced, the friendly chats on their doorsteps and support received from the Library Service in general had quite literally been a lifeline to them and had kept them going at a time when many felt socially isolated, afraid and depressed. One lady wrote to thank the Library Service for saving her life.

The Librarians also worked on training materials and an instructional video to support vulnerable customers with dementia and their carers in using loanable Galaxy tablets, purchased by the Library Service, to enable them to get online, download e-books, and connect with other people through Zoom activities.

4c. Volunteers

Prior to the pandemic, the Library Service had 86 active volunteers. Unfortunately, due to the library closures, and the age profile of the volunteers, most of whom were retired, approximately half chose not to return once libraries re-opened, as they did not want to place themselves in a situation where, working with the public, they increased the risk of catching Covid.

Forty-five volunteers returned. Of these, 13% are from ethnically diverse backgrounds, 4% have special needs and 1% are registered disabled. This has enabled us to foster good relationships with people from protected characteristics' groups. All have reported that they enjoy the positive contribution that they are making not only to the Library Service, but to the local community as a whole.

5. Conclusion

Plans for the coming year include extending opening time at all libraries with Open+, which will increase accessibility for everyone in all areas of the borough, and to conduct a satisfaction survey using the Objective tool. This will provide useful feedback on the demographics of service users, and their satisfaction with stock, opening times and the level of service received, which will, in turn, inform further decision making.

There is also plans underway to increase cultural activities for a diverse range of audiences.