

Forward Plan reference number: Not applicable

Report title: Coronavirus Outbreak – Phased Reopening of Libraries	
Report to: Councillor Susan Barker – Cabinet Member for Customer, Corporate, Culture and Communities	
Report author: Suzanna Shaw, Director of Customer Services	
Date:	For: Decision
Enquiries to Juliet Pirez, Head of Libraries – juliet.pirez@essex.gov.uk	
County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 Following the Coronavirus outbreak, and in line with Government advice, all Essex Libraries have been closed since 21 March 2020.
- 1.2 Step 3 of the Government’s “Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government’s COVID-19 recovery strategy”, allows some of the remaining businesses and premises that have been required to close during the crisis, to reopen from 4 July 2020. This includes public libraries.

In order to be able to fully prepare and plan for the reopening of libraries, the service is, therefore, planning to reopen libraries from the week beginning Monday 6th July.

- 1.3 This report asks the Cabinet Member to consider a phased reopening of Essex Library service, spanning from Monday 6th July to 3rd August 2020 so that the service can take a careful and considered approach to the reopening of libraries and;
 - ensure that social distancing measures are in place and continue to be appropriately managed. All staff will need to follow the PHE guidance, in line with other ECC departments, and ensure they are practising good hand hygiene and social distancing to minimising the risk of infection.
 - ensure the service stays in line with Corporate and Government guidance, and supports key public health messages
 - is ready to support the registration service by prioritising the opening of the 16 libraries that have registration offices within them
 - is adaptable and flexible as the situation may continue to change,
 - support our customers by communicating facts to them clearly and effectively
 - ensure that the appropriate Health and safety measures are in place to protect the health of staff and the wider population.
 - work with HR and trade unions to ensure that appropriate actions are taken to address any concerns about staff safety and wellbeing, and
 - enable as many staff as possible to work partly from home, eg if they are in a role where this is possible, subject to a requirement to provide visible leadership

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Director of Customer Services be authorised to reopen 60 libraries controlled by Essex County Council in phased tranches 1-2 on Monday 6th July and Monday 20th July 2020 in accordance with the table below.

Tranche 1	Tranche 2	Tranche 3a	Tranche 3b
w/c 6 July	w/c 20 July	w/c 3 August (subject to review)	To be reviewed
16 libraries	44 libraries	6 libraries	8 libraries

- 2.2 That the 16 libraries (**appendix one**) that house the registration offices are the first tranche of libraries to reopen on 6 July 2020.
- 2.3 That a further 44 libraries (tranche 2) open week beginning 20 July 2020 (**appendix two**)
- 2.4 That the final remaining 14 libraries (tranches 3a and 3b) are regularly reviewed, in line with Government guidance, in order to assess the feasibility of reopening them if social distancing measures are relaxed or we can find a way considered safe to reopen them after considering government guidance and taking necessary advice.
- 2.5 That the Director, Customer be authorised to reopen libraries in tranche 3a during the week beginning 3 August 2020 or so soon thereafter as this may be possible, given that these sites are more than three miles from other libraries (**appendix three**).
- 2.6 That the Director, Customer be authorised to reopen libraries in tranche 3b as soon as possible (**appendix three**).
- 2.7 That all libraries will close no later than 5pm.
- 2.8 Authorise the Director, Customer to, at any time during the next six months, take any action to:
- Extend opening hours of any library where this is considered safe to do so.
 - Temporarily close some or all libraries where it is considered necessary to do so in order to avoid a risk of spread of coronavirus or comply with government advice.
 - Re-open any library which has been temporarily closed.
- 2.9 Agree that the principles in the Recovering Libraries Plan (**appendix five**) be approved as an initial guidance, recognising that the situation is likely to change frequently and rapidly, meaning that it is likely to become out of date very soon.

3. Summary of issue

- 3.1 In March 2020 the Coronavirus Act 2020 was enacted. That included extensive powers to enforce to ban events and gatherings and close premises. In addition, on 23 March 2020 the Government advised that all libraries should close. In Essex the Cabinet Member decided to close all libraries from Friday 20 March 2020.
- 3.2 The Council is under a statutory duty to provide a library service. Closing libraries during the Coronavirus Pandemic has meant that communities have been temporarily deprived of a valuable local resource, and, whilst online resources have proven to be extremely popular, and demand for electronic publications has outstripped supply in some cases, it is important that we move to reopening our libraries as soon as possible. Reopening our libraries in a safe and controlled way will be welcomed by many residents of Essex.

3.3 Nationally, public libraries are working together using support and advice co-ordinated through Libraries Connected (**appendix six**) Most authorities are now planning to re-open libraries, taking a phased approach to opening sites and the services that will be on offer. For example:

- Newcastle are opening their fourteen community libraries and hubs in July
- Oxfordshire is likely to reopen between thirteen and forty-four libraries in their first tranche.
- Surrey are also opening libraries in tranches and have created a priority list of reopening branches.
- Kent County Council, which has ninety-nine libraries is also taking a phased approach to libraries with a limited number reopening at first, potentially one library per district
- Hertfordshire are currently scoping offering a limited service only and risk assessing other services provided by their libraries

3.7 A plan has been produced (**appendix six**) which gives the currently recommended approach for reopening libraries. It should be recognised that the position is subject to change.

4. Reopening Libraries Recovery Plan

4.1 Accordingly, the Cabinet member is asked to consider reopening Essex libraries according to the Libraries Recovery Plan. (**appendix six**). Please also see summary below.



4.2 The Libraries Recovery plan recommends that 60 libraries are opened over a phased reopening period between the week beginning 6 July 2020 and the week beginning 20th July 2020. This will ensure that the service can adequately prepare libraries and resolve any issues that become apparent, such as social distancing measures, extra precautions or working processes. The following approach has been taken:

Tranche 1 – key sites from which registration services are delivered. (**appendix one**)

Tranche 2 – all libraries apart from the 14 smallest/where difficulties have been identified. (**appendix two**)

Tranche 3a – all other libraries which are more than 3 miles from any other library (**appendix three**)

Tranche 3b – all other libraries (**appendix three**)

- 4.3 The planned phased reopening assumes that minimum staffing availability will be available. This should improve as redeployed staff return to the service, social distancing measures relax, children return to school, etc.
- 4.4 A phased reopening will ensure both staff and customers are aware of the level of service restrictions that will need to be implemented in each library until social distancing measures set by the government can be relaxed.
- 4.5 The level of service that can be offered in line with social distancing measures will mean only a very limited level of service will be provided i.e. returns, borrowing, limited browsing, and the registration services which will be available in the 16 libraries when face to face appointments are allowed again.
- Fundamental parts of what would normally be considered part of the 'core offer' for the service will not be available, i.e. a place to meet, sit, study and read, group events and activities, access to public computers.
 - E resources, such as ebooks, and e audio books will continue to be available for customers to borrow whilst physical visits to libraries are restricted
 - Other services provided will also not be possible – eg recycling bags, booksales
 - The service offer will be proportionate to the number of staff who can safely be on duty to provide that service as well as the number of customers who can be present in the library at any one time
 - There will be a higher dependency on the self-service facilities – for items that are borrowed and returned, cash transactions, etc.
- 4.6 It is proposed that all libraries close no later than 5pm in order to:
- protect core opening hours between 9 to 5pm
 - maintain adequate staffing levels at each library that is open; and
 - avoid the need for staff to use public transport late at night
- 4.7 Other services, such as the mobile library service and the home library service will be regularly reviewed in order to assess how soon we can reopen them, in accordance with government guidance and after taking necessary advice.

5. Other Options

- 5.1 **Leave libraries closed.** If we do this then, the community will continue to be deprived of a resource and there may be an increase in social isolation. We are also paying staff 100% of their salaries, the majority of whom can work, but are at home.
- 5.2 **Open as many libraries as possible from week beginning 6 July** - this is possible but may be a slightly more risky approach than a phased reopening, mainly due to uncertain staffing levels at the beginning of July when we plan to reopen libraries (eg staff who may still have childcare issues, who have underlying health issues, booked annual leave, sickness, etc). It would also reduce the ability to learn from our experiences with the initial openings.

6. Issues for consideration

- 53 FTE members of staff have been redeployed to other areas such as Community Shielding, the Registration service, and Essex Welfare Service, and they will need to be recalled
- 54 FTE members of staff are currently unable to work due to childcare issues underlying health conditions, living with a vulnerable person, etc
- Most libraries in tranches 3a and 3b are quite small which makes social distancing measures difficult to comply with. Two of the fourteen libraries are based in shared locations, eg a school and a college, which makes opening the library separately difficult to manage. All libraries in these tranches all generally have less usage than other libraries nearby, and some are in areas where staffing shortages are currently particularly acute due to the number of staff unavailable to return to work due to self-isolating restrictions. It is, however, likely that staffing issues will improve over the next few weeks.
- We need to liaise with our partners and organisations who lease space in our libraries to inform them that we are reopening and to assess their plans to return to their libraries.

7 Financial implications

- 7.1 Seven library staff have been furloughed since 20 March whilst libraries have been closed, however they have been brought back off furlough on 5 June. Therefore the reopening of libraries will not have an impact on any government funding related to the furlough scheme.
- 7.2 Should all the staff who have been re-deployed to other critical areas be required back to support libraries there may be an impact on those services, who may need to identify alternative staff if the work is still required.
- 7.3 As a result of the amended service offer it is not anticipated that the reopening of libraries will result in income generating activities re-commencing for some time. The impact of this will be a pressure on the budget of approximately £80,000 per month (due to no adhoc room hire, fines amnesty continuing, no refreshments etc). This pressure will be funded from the emergency funding issued to local authorities to support the response to the Coronavirus pandemic if there is sufficient available, if not other mitigations will have to be sought.

8 Legal implications

- 8.1 The Council also has a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. However, that does not amount to an overriding duty to keep all libraries open at all time and we need to ensure that the service is restarted in a safe way.
- 8.2 At present a visit the library is not a lawful reason for leaving the home and the Council would be well advised not to reopen any libraries unless this changes. It is noted that this may well change by 4 July, but the situation will need to be kept under review, and it may not be possible to re-open libraries in accordance with the proposal.

9. Equality and Diversity implications

- 9.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
- a. Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
 - b. Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - c. Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.
- 9.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).
- 9.3 Closure of libraries would ordinarily have a disproportionate impact on women, young people and old people, so a phased reopening of libraries across the county will ensure that library service is available to these groups again.

10 List of appendices

Appendix one – list of 16 libraries with registration services
 Appendix two - full list of libraries in tranches
 Appendix three - 14 libraries in tranche 3a and 3b
 Appendix four - list of libraries and their opening hours
 Appendix five – Libraries recovery plan
 Appendix six - Libraries Connected's 9 Principles for reopening libraries

11 List of Background papers

[working-safely-during-covid-19-shops-branches-v1.1-250520.pdf](https://www.southgloucester.gov.uk/media/250520/working-safely-during-covid-19-shops-branches-v1.1-250520.pdf)

I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.	Date
Councillor Susan Barker, Cabinet Member for Customer, Corporate, Culture and Communities	

In consultation with:

Role	Date
Margaret Lee, Executive Director for Corporate and Customer Services	
Executive Director for Finance and Technology (S151 Officer)	
Stephanie Mitchener on behalf of Nicole Wood	
Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer)	
Paul Turner	