

**To: all parish and town councils**

I am writing to all town and parish councils to give an update on restoring library services as the COVID-19 lockdown eases and to ask, if you have not already done so, whether you intend to make a financial contribution to the library service this year.

As you will have seen from the most recent annual library service report ( [LINK](#) ) we have made good progress in improving the service since the council's review in 2017. We are very grateful for all the support parishes have given in the last 3 years – through financial contributions, by publicising libraries to your residents and encouraging volunteering. Nationally library usage has been in slow decline for many years, but by working together we have turned that around in West Berkshire. Usage is increasing and the service is more responsive to local needs. In the next week we will send each parish the relevant data we have on library usage by your residents. The next annual report - for the financial year 2019-20 – will be sent to you in September.

**COVID-19 pandemic / restoring library services**

West Berkshire Council has announced plans for restoring the library service to the public in phases to keep everyone safe.

The first stage from the 13th July will be to open Newbury, Hungerford and Thatcham Libraries for book collections during limited opening hours. We aim to open our other libraries on the same basis the following week. In order to ensure that it is safe for customers to return, customers can expect changes which are in line with government guidance on managing the risk of COVID-19; all buildings have been thoroughly deep-cleaned, and have reception screens in place. We are asking all our customers to use hand sanitiser which is provided as you enter the library, and also to observe social distancing requirements.

Customers will be able to use the normal reservation service for specific titles, or our new **Order & Collect service**. This will allow you to specify the sort of books you like to read. Library staff will then hand-pick a selection of books (maximum 5) according to your requirements, and perhaps introduce you to some new authors. You will then be notified when the books are ready for collection. You will be given a time to collect your books and you may need to queue. Books can then be returned after the usual three weeks. When you drop your books back, library staff will make sure they are safe and ready for the next person to borrow.

No overdue fines are currently being charged.

You can place your book orders online at <https://westberks.spydus.co.uk> or telephone your local library.

Customers should be aware that there will be no access to any areas of the library apart from a collections desk and that enquiries should continue to be sent by email or telephone. There will be no toilets, baby changing facilities, seating areas or public PCs available at this stage.

West Berkshire Libraries have already resumed their **At Home service**, which delivers books to housebound users. This service is a vital link for customers who aren't able to visit libraries due to age, disability or other special circumstance, and the library team are now planning to expand the service to those who are vulnerable and self-isolating due to COVID-19. If you would like to find out more about the At Home service, please telephone 01635 519827 or email [library@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:library@westberks.gov.uk).

The **Mobile Library service** remains suspended. We plan to restore it in a further phase of service recovery when it is safe to do so.

Howard Woollaston Portfolio Holder for Public Health, Community Wellbeing, Sports and Culture said *"I am delighted that after three months of lockdown we are beginning to get back to a degree of normality. I know how important the Library Service is to so many people in the community of all ages so it is a huge relief."*

Please follow **WBerksLibraries** on social media for all of our latest news, including details of opening hours as our other libraries resume services too.

## Volunteering

We have a plan to welcome volunteers back if they want to return. We will do that in phases guided by risk assessments to ensure the safety of those who are potentially vulnerable. There will be more and new ways for people to volunteer while minimising contact with the public for the time being.

## Request for financial contributions in financial year 2020-21

As you know, following the library service review (early 2017) we made the following proposal to town and parish councils:

- The library service has an annual budget shortfall of £150k to deliver the service – 8 libraries, Mobile and At Home service, e-library.
- To meet this we proposed a contribution based on £1 per parish resident or whatever parishes wished to do.
- It is a voluntary donation/contribution, not a grant and is compliant with *Section 137 of the Local Government Act*. We provided legal advice to clarify that. The council is not delegating any part of its statutory duty to provide library services or levying a charge on parishes.
- Contributions are ring-fenced for the aspects of the service that the data shows are most used by your residents – for example, a particular branch library. Each year we provide each parish with data about library usage by their residents.
- We welcome participation in library working groups to increase community engagement and feedback.

I have attached the latest parish population data. The most recent annual library service report ( [LINK](#) ) lists the parishes and town councils who contributed.

We said that we would ask for a contribution each year for 3 years initially, as it wasn't possible to see further ahead than that. In the last 3 financial years contributions totalled about £90k a year and we have worked hard to cover off the shortfall though that is not sustainable and the pressure is still very much there.

The need for support continues and we are asking that if you are considering making a contribution and have not already done so, to please let us know. As we have said before, a lack of contributions will result in the service being reduced accordingly to balance the budget.

## **Reviewing the Service**

In 2017 we said that we would revisit the review of library services after 3 years. This year we will be updating the needs assessment carried out in 2016, consulting with customers, parishes, staff and volunteers and proposing options to make sure the service is as robust and sustainable as possible from April 2021 onwards.

## **Library data and technology**

Library services nationally gather a lot of data but, as we have previously stated, we don't or can't collect everything you may wish to know. A good example is that we measure usage of the public computers but can't measure the use of the public wi-fi by the increasing numbers of people who use their own device in a library. The cost of doing so would outweigh the benefit. But we know - from the data about how many people come into a library each day and the number of items that are borrowed in each library and by each customer - that people use libraries for all kinds of reasons without, or rarely, borrowing anything. That is an important part of their community role as friendly, safe and trusted places.

This year we completed the replacement of all library public computers with new hardware and software and all libraries now have contactless payment on the self-service kiosks. Kiosks are well used by people who want to wizz in and out to drop items back and borrow new ones, and this gives staff and volunteers more time to help customers with enquiries.

## **Get in touch**

Please let us know if you have any queries. We are always delighted to attend parish and town council meetings to talk about library services and answer questions. We have all become proficient at using Zoom during lockdown! If a face to face meeting isn't possible then that remains a good way to have a conversation while minimising the climate impacts of travel and the time spent travelling.

With our best wishes and thanks for all the support we have received. It is such appreciated.

Paul

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## West Berkshire Council Library Service Thattham

### Library Items Borrowed By Residents In The Parish

Financial Year	Yearly Issue Total	Number Of Items Borrowed And Where The Items Were Borrowed From											
		Burghfield Common Library	Hungerford Library	Lambourn Library	Mortimer Library	Newbury Library	Pangbourne Library	Thattham Library	Theale Library	Mobile Library Service	At Home Service	Renewals via the Website	Renewals via the Contact Centre
1/4/17 - 31/3/18	70,164	67	105	2	1	15,626	56	34,673	356	1,074	1,167	16,529	508
1/4/18 - 31/3/19	72,020	66	104	1	51	14,888	130	35,489	600	780	1,424	18,106	381
1/4/19 - 31/3/20	68,536	197	56	3	1	13,272	86	34,495	218	1,038	1,399	17,471	300

### Residents In The Parish Borrowing Library Items

Financial Year	Yearly Individual Borrower Total	Number of Residents Borrowing Items And Where From (borrowers may have borrowed from more than one location)											
		Burghfield Common Library	Hungerford Library	Lambourn Library	Mortimer Library	Newbury Library	Pangbourne Library	Thattham Library	Theale Library	Mobile Library Service	At Home Service	Renewals via the Website	Renewals via the Contact Centre
1/4/17 - 31/3/18	2,384	16	12	1	1	1,080	11	1,818	33	55	14	884	110
1/4/18 - 31/3/19	2,355	9	12	1	3	1,039	10	1,796	28	43	14	933	81
1/4/19 - 31/3/20	2,329	13	15	1	1	984	7	1,770	25	58	12	965	67