ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY ON PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES’ DIGITAL REINVENTION DURING THE 2020 COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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This report was written during August 2020, towards completion of the ‘Digital Libraries’ module in City, University of London’s Library Science MSc. Upon completion of my report, it was brought to my attention that Greenwich Libraries had by then just begun to implement more of the ‘dynamic’ social opportunities that I recommend in this report, such as hosting social events on Whatsapp. Therefore, it should be noted that the evaluation of their efforts in this report failed to reflect the events that they put in place around the time of its original completion. Further, this report does not take into account the second ‘lockdown’, which was put in place during November 2020, and for which libraries have been classed as ‘essential’.
Analysis and Commentary on Public Library Services’ Digital Reinvention During the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic

1. Introduction
The advent of digital technologies has caused significant disruption to the operations of public libraries. The Internet-connected user can access information and e-books instantly online, throwing the role of the public library into question. Libraries have responded in different ways: some have focused on expanding digital collections and remote access (Stack, 2019); others have attempted to rebrand libraries as leading implementers of the digital shift through Internet provision and digital literacy (Howard, 2019); and lastly, yet others have focused on the analogue social infrastructure that public libraries can offer, akin to spaces such as community centres (Calhoun, 2014, p. 146). Yet whether a public library system has chosen one of these
directions or a blend, by 2020 most seem to have concluded that at least some physical instantiation of the service is still key.

On the 23rd March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered all public libraries in England to close their doors in an effort to control the Covid-19 pandemic (Chandler, 2020). But most of these libraries did continue to provide services, just online (Anstic, 2020). The existing trends in library digitisation are now subject to new pressures: an increased urgency and acceleration around digital infrastructure, e.g. the “Single Digital Presence” of one website and e-resource platform for all UK public libraries (Fredrickson, 2020); an increased need for digital and information literacy to combat the “infodemic” of misinformation co-morbid with COVID-19 (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2020); and an expanded emphasis on the unique benefits of physical and community services highlighted by these programmes’ abrupt cessation.

In this essay, we consider how these factors have coalesced in two South London public library services that have offered considerable but differing digital content during the pandemic (despite being partially managed by the same social enterprise). The first is Lambeth Libraries, which has ten council-staffed and -run branches, one of which shares a building with a leisure centre run by Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) (also known as “Better”). The second is Greenwich Libraries, which are run and staffed by GLL (Anstic, 2012). Between them, they present a snapshot of a mix of privately and council-run public library services during this period. As well as discussing these library services, we examine the literature to see
what else has been done both nationally and internationally, and consider strengths
and weaknesses before considering a path forward for the next 24 months.

2. Case Studies: Lambeth Libraries and Greenwich Libraries

2.1 Summary of COVID-19 Actions

Greenwich closed all its physical library services by 5:30pm on 20\textsuperscript{th} March
(Greenwich Libraries, 2020a). A fortnight later, some of Greenwich’s in-person
services were still running (e.g. home delivery of books and DVDs) and some staff
were “seconded to the Councils’ community support services”. The majority of
library services had moved online, both through promoting existing digital products
(which had been “recently reviewed”) and staff “developing their own online content”
such as videos of craft activities (Emonds, 2020a). As of August 2020, Greenwich
Libraries’ website promotes “online resources” in three categories: “Read”
(subscriptions to digital newspapers, e-books, etc.), “Listen” (multiple digital
audiobook providers and music streaming) and “Watch” (where viewers are directed
to Greenwich Libraries’ Facebook and Twitter accounts to view staff-made videos)
(“Online Resources,” n.d.).

Despite the appearance of high staff output, the majority of GLL employees
had been furloughed by the end of April so were neither working on physical nor
digital provision; nevertheless, digital services had “dramatically accelerated”, with
videos of librarian Tony’s bilingual English / Japanese Rhyme Time proving
particularly popular (Emonds, 2020b). According to Better, by 29\textsuperscript{th} April Greenwich
had added 96 new videos since the lockdown began (more than any other GLL-run
service), with 46,443 combined total views (Better, 2020a). Meanwhile, by May the
council had used surplus physical stock from GLL Greenwich to provide three volunteer-run “community libraries” at supermarkets in the borough, where residents could still borrow new books.

It was noted this was a result of careful consideration on how to “continue to provide a library service”, despite the success of GLL’s digital provision, “[for] those without access to online facilities” (Royal Borough of Greenwich, 2020). Pandemic measures were eased to allow public libraries to re-open physical spaces from the 4th of July (Dudman, 2020), and Greenwich reopened their sites from Monday 6th July. All their libraries were open in some capacity by 8th August. Despite physically reopening, “our social media programmes will continue” (Better, 2020b). This includes participating in The Reading Agency’s Summer Reading Challenge with a suite of virtual story times, crafts and author talks (Greenwich Libraries, 2020b).

Lambeth Libraries also closed on March 20th, but only after a walkout over unsafe conditions, with workers saying they had not been given hand sanitizer and that social distancing was not enforced (Flood, 2020). However, soon Lambeth Libraries had begun their digital shift. They created an Instagram account and made their first post on 8th April, assuring library users that staff working from home were still reachable through the normal channels (Lambeth Libraries, 2020a). On the same day, the libraries’ monthly e-bulletin told users that they were “working hard to get as much as possible into an online format” (“Lambeth Libraries are moving online,” 2020). At the first instance, this work took three routes: promotion of existing e-resources (e.g. RBDigital e-books), digitisation of existing programming (e.g.
switching regular Reading Groups to Zoom) and introducing new born-digital events (e.g. the “Literary Lockdown Quiz” on Zoom).

Over time, more born-digital programming continued to be added, such as a new “Wriggle and Rhyme Grown Ups Natter Time” group for carers of children, to replace the important socialisation opportunities at in-person children’s events (“Keeping entertained and involved with Lambeth Libraries,” 2020). Much of the new programming similarly addressed participatory needs of the library audience, rather than offering merely passive viewing, e.g. through a “Tweet-along” “Lambeth Libraries Watch Party”, utilising Kanopy film streaming to create a shared viewing and discussion experience (Lambeth Libraries, 2020b). They expanded existing e-resources in June, adding new subscriptions such as Encyclopaedia Britannica and Oxford University Press’s “Very Short Introduction” online series (“Lambeth Libraries events June 2020,” 2020). They also observed one-off and seasonal events and responded to current news, e.g. using the site “ListChallenges” to create an LGBTQ+ reading list for Pride Month (in collaboration with Sheffield Libraries) (“LGBTQ+ Writers Challenge,” 2020) and an anti-racism reading list in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (Urban, 2020a).

Their digital offer soon gained a fourth and fifth dimension. Firstly, they introduced regular curation of external digital resources, as “all the publishers are producing e-book and e-audio content as well as getting their authors to do extra video pieces” (Urban, 2020b). Library users were encouraged to submit interesting finds via social media. This evolved into a monthly “From our Friends” section in the e-bulletin, which signposted users to offerings such as Libraries Connected’s
“#librariesfromhome promotion”, CILIP’s “National Shelf Service” and the government’s “Digital Skills” toolkit ("Lambeth Libraries events June 2020," 2020). Secondly, they began social media campaigns, such as asking library users to submit pictures of their “to read” pile to the library Instagram. Their blog to which Lambeth library users contribute book reviews was promoted ("Keeping entertained and involved with Lambeth Libraries," 2020). The physical libraries began to re-open from July 20th (Urban, 2020c), although as of August 2020 digital programming is still prominently promoted: on 30th July a new webpage curating online services was created, with sections such as “Education, learning, skills and advice” and “Festival calendar” (Lambeth Council, 2020). The latest e-bulletin is mostly dedicated to ongoing digital programming, including the introduction of new events such as CV workshops for 14-18-year-olds ("Lambeth Libraries events August 2020," 2020).

2.2 Analysis of Digital Reinvention

In some ways, the response of the library services looks similar: both have added digital events and promoted existing e-resource subscriptions; both have had responsive audiences, with high numbers of views, participation and positive coverage by local news outlets (e.g. Quinn, 2020). These boroughs have followed a pattern noted in US public library services that digitised events for the pandemic: after “beginning with staples translated to the online environment”, they tried more adventurous born-digital programming (Freudenberger, 2020, p. 14). Digital services may have reached new users who cannot access physical services, e.g. who live far from the library, or who were not previously aware of their offer (Freudenberger, 2020, p. 16). An employee of Lambeth Libraries highlighted that people who were...
continuing to “shield” from COVID-19 could still only access online services (private correspondence). Similarly, Greenwich emphasised that more people could view a session online than could fit in a library, and “the power of social media is enabling people to attend their favourite library activities at a time which suits them” (Emonds, 2020b). Because of these positive changes, both services plan to continue their social media programming for now. This reflects Marshall Breeding’s assertion that “the hard work to enhance digital services … will have a lasting impact” (2020, p. 11).

Nevertheless, Lambeth’s programme is the more comprehensive. For example, whereas Greenwich are limited to text-heavy Facebook and Twitter, now Lambeth Libraries also have an Instagram account to reach “Image-Focused” communities of library users (Bunker, 2017, p. 9). Greenwich has focused on broadcasts that users passively consume, whereas Lambeth has more participatory campaigns, challenges and “Tweet-along” events. They have celebrated a wider variety of seasonal festivities, even adding extra dates to their popular Windrush and Pride programmes (Urban, 2020d). Beyond events, Lambeth now have their regular Internet recommendations column and increased community content through their review blog. They have also continued to add new born-digital programming even as physical services reopen. Arguably, Greenwich has failed to move beyond the “staples translated to online environment” phase as successfully as Lambeth, who have used their digital reinvention to create a dynamic, participatory community online.

Alongside online programming, the other part of libraries’ digital offer is access to e-resources. Libraries Connected cited an average 63% increase in the
borrowing of resources like e-magazines and e-books from UK libraries in March alone (BBC News, 2020a). Yet compared to similar economies such as Australia and the US, digital lending infrastructure in UK public libraries has historically been poor (Coates, 2019) and even suffered from “digital stagnation” (Society of Chief Librarians and The Reading Agency, 2015, p. 147). These statistics might merely represent a rise in usage “from very low previously, to not quite so low during lockdown” (Rowe, 2020). The proper balance of collections versus programming in a ‘digital library service’ has been subject to perennial debate even as such services have developed (Calhoun, 2014). With the pandemic challenging us to “maintain the delivery of core services” (Green, 2020, p. 9), we must ask what that means: books, community, or both? The history of poor digital lending systems in UK public libraries might mean that services rely more on the success of a digital community to keep patrons engaged online.

Yet for those for whom books are the main draw, Lambeth’s offer is more diverse, expanding, and avoids redundancy of platforms. One Lambeth Libraries employee mentioned that existing collections budgets for the period of physical closure were simply redeployed to add new e-books and e-audio to the collection (private correspondence). The library service has added access to several new digital subscriptions, whereas Greenwich have not added any and in fact removed one (NewsBank) from their “Online Resources” page sometime after June 2nd (compare Better, 2020c; “Online Resources,” n.d.). In addition, Greenwich offer three different platforms for digital audiobooks alone, which risks confusion and the need for multiple accounts (Rowe, 2020). Overall, Lambeth stands out by having an economic but diverse set of digital media subscriptions and engaging, dynamic community
options over passive media delivery. This reflects Lankes’ ‘New Normal’ statement: “to … only be a source of ebooks in a pandemic is hypocrisy … our fellow citizens needs ebooks, but they need compassion, connection, and community” (Lankes, 2020).

On the other hand, it is easier to see how Greenwich has responded to the need for offline delivery with efforts such as pop-up library points. As of mid-August, library spaces are being used for necessarily in-person free meals over the school holidays in their “read and feed” programme (Greenwich Libraries, 2020c). Even those who advocate for the increase of digital tools say they should “activate and complement [library branches and staff]” rather than replace them (Society of Chief Librarians and The Reading Agency, 2015, p. 8). The British Library’s Single Digital Presence project uses a “people, content and space” model for library best practice, wherein the digital offer connects people online, expands collection accessibility and signposts people into the physical space (Fredrickson, 2020). Thus the provision of offline services is not separate from digital reinvention, but rather the two should complement each other.

There is also the issue of the digital divide, one that both library services have left somewhat unaddressed. Greenwich’s in-person services may go some way to reaching digitally excluded users, and Lambeth have continued to offer telephone assistance, including help with IT and getting online, according to one worker (private correspondence). They have also signposted people to online digital skills resources. However, these services’ programmes have been split between digital events or riskier onsite ones after reopening while the pandemic continues. Neither have explored low-
risk analogue projects seen in other places. For example, one Arizona library service helped create writing and drawing prompts that were posted weekly to children as part of their “QuaranZine” project, reaching those who are digitally excluded without bringing them out of quarantine.

Lankes notes the closure of libraries has revealed that “being internet points of connection with WiFi in our facilities is an insufficient way of ensuring universal digital access in an emergency” (2020), so other public libraries have directly addressed the problem by distributing WiFi hotspots, partnering with organisations that address digital exclusion and much more (LaPierre, 2020). Lankes suggests public libraries should be prioritising advocacy for a universal broadband offer (2020). Yet neither library service appears to have prominently addressed the digital divide in their reinvention. Those most likely to be at risk of COVID-19 may also be those most likely to be digitally excluded, e.g. people living in poverty (HEAR Network, 2020), which should have made ensuring their access to information and community a priority during this period.

Even when people can connect to digital information, this does not mean that they use reliable sources. Since the post-Internet information explosion, advocates for UK public libraries have been emphasising their ability to promote “quality information” and information literacy (Coates, 2019, p. 15). It would be logical to conclude then that “all librarians … have a responsibility to share evidence based information about this pandemic” (Ali and Gatiti, 2020, p. 159) in the face of “an unprecedented overabundance of misinformation … that prevents people from accessing authoritative, reliable guidance about the virus” (Digital, Culture, Media
and Sport Committee, 2020). Indeed, the tools are there to do so: Libraries Connected promotes specific resources that libraries can use in fulfilling their “Information and Digital” offer for users at home (Libraries Connected, n.d.). In the US, staff have held seminars and Q&As over sites like Instagram Live to discuss reliable information and dispel common misconceptions about the pandemic. Some services even teamed up with others in the local authority to create “one-stop information shop” websites, adapted to their local communities (Shoenberger, 2020).

But despite the prevalence and potentially life-threatening nature of COVID-19 misinformation, neither Greenwich nor Lambeth appear to have promoted reliable sources and dispelled misinformation as a key part of their digital reinvention. Lambeth came closest by adding and promoting access to reliable digital databases, like Encyclopaedia Britannica (although this was not framed in relation to misinformation). When they removed the NewsBank subscription from their Digital Resources page, Greenwich Libraries simultaneously removed the entirety of their “Reliable Research” section. This seems to be a particularly ill-timed move (although its removal from the website does not necessarily mean it is no longer available and there may be plans to replace it). Overall, addressing the digital divide and providing information literacy services are two areas in which both services performed poorly in their reinvention; in the rest of their digital provision, Lambeth excelled in both their online collections and community programming, but may have provided fewer physical services to complement this.
2.3 Commentary on Moving Forward

Libraries must balance much uncertainty as they reopen services while the pandemic continues. For some, such as Greenwich, this may also mean a majority-furloughed staff must now be put to work again or trimmed. Simultaneously, local authorities are facing unprecedented budget pressure alongside increased pandemic spending (Butler, 2020), so that many may be forced to make further cuts to library services. Under these circumstances, it may be tempting for councils to be shy away from new library projects in favour of paring down existing services. The cheaper operations cost of new digital programming might even lead some to justify cuts to physical services, thus further alienating the digitally excluded. On the other hand, as more staff are able to return to the physical workplace, staff time and budget allocations may be drawn away from digital services again. Yet despite these conditions, it should be an immediate priority for both library services to begin robust campaigns for addressing the digital divide and information literacy.

In fact, this may be an optimal time for what is arguably a long-overdue reckoning with UK public libraries’ roles. Lewin’s change process model has been used successfully in innovating library services, and has three key stages:

“Unfreezing” (becoming open to change), “Changing” (implementing change) and “Freezing” (integrating change into normal services) (Evans and Alire, 2013, p. 213). The first stage means creating a readiness to learn and a recognition that change needs to happen. The shock of unexpectedly having to close and shift online, coupled with the subsequent success of new online services, means that many staff will be in this “Unfreezing” stage and open to new directions. Simultaneously, there are pressures
that make tackling the digital divide and information literacy a sensible investment for local authorities. The government policy of controlling the pandemic through “local lockdowns” means local authorities are highly incentivised to keep their areas’ infection rates low, or face devastating economic and social consequences (BBC News, 2020b). In controlling the disease, making sure everyone has correct information on how best to manage disease risk and access to resources is essential (Ali and Gatiti, 2020).

Public libraries are well-positioned to help with this. For example, people Black Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, who make up the majority of regular library users in England (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2019), have a higher risk of dying from COVID-19 than their white counterparts (Public Health England, 2020); and may include groups with specific vulnerabilities to misinformation, such as a distrust of mainstream media based on their historical persecution on these platforms (Walcott, 2020). Therefore it would make sense for local authorities to fund library services in putting together an immediate taskforce on tackling these two issues, looking at solutions others have promoted such as sharing reliable news sources, programming events about COVID-19 misinformation, loaning hotspots, and advocating for universal broadband. This may be a significant investment, yet the chance to avert the most severe economic consequences of COVID-19 by creating a local population with constant access to quality health information could also result in significant savings.

With so many services going through a similar “Unfreezing”, Greenwich and Lambeth can capitalise on national resources and conversations around increasing UK
public libraries’ overall digital offer. For Greenwich, this means bringing their offer in line with Lambeth’s. For Lambeth, this means looking for ways to sustain and expand the positive changes they have already made. There are many resources to choose from: Libraries Connected now provide training and information on how to navigate issues such as copyright for broadcasting story times, or where to find free re-training courses for staff (Libraries Connected, n.d.); the British Library are increasing their campaign for a Single Digital Presence for British libraries; and still others are campaigning to maintain more favourable e-resource licensing arrangements introduced in the pandemic (Machovec, 2020). To balance these agendas alongside re-opening, I suggest that both services follow a timeline that allows them to urgently address digital exclusion and information literacy and build more sustainable long-term models that allow staff to run both digital and analogue services. See Appendix I for a suggested template for digital reinvention.

3. Conclusion

Overall, both libraries responded quickly to the closure of their sites with increased provision and promotion of digital library services. Neither service had significant existing online programming, and both plan to retain what they have built, at least for now, owing to positive reception and benefits in accessibility and reach. Lambeth surpassed Greenwich in standards of online services in both programming and digital resources access; but failed to address some of the physical services as prominently at Greenwich, which are an important complement to digital provision. Neither service significantly addressed either digital exclusion or information literacy, both of which should be immediate priorities moving forward. This is especially important
considering the life-saving possibilities of regular access to high-quality information during a pandemic that has seen increased misinformation circulating. In addition to this, both services might shore up their digital offer to make it sustainable even as physical services resume, and join broader campaigns to increase the digital offer of libraries across the UK.

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Appendix 1: Proposed 24 Month Target Timeline for Greenwich and Lambeth Libraries’ Digital Reinvention

2020 Q4 (1 October 2020 – 31 December 2020):

• Bring Greenwich up to Lambeth’s standard by diversifying programming and streamlining digital resources
• Start an emergency Digital Exclusion and Information Literacy taskforce between both local authorities and their library services, with a focus on what libraries can deliver
• Start promoting existing information literacy resources curated by groups such as Libraries Connected on social media and onsite
• Join and promote national campaigns for the digital advancement of UK public libraries, such as Single Digital Presence
• Begin planning on a long-term organisational model for staffing both digital and analogue programmes, including resiliency plans for further pandemic shutdowns

2021 Q1 (1 January 2021 – 31 March 2021)

• Begin identifying and planning long-term interventions for Digital Exclusion and Information Literacy
• Identify digital skills re-training or recruitment needed for new organisational model
• Begin formal evaluation of digital resources initiated in response to pandemic
2021 Q2-Q3 (1 April 2021 – 30 September 2021)

• Decide on a long-term strategy for Digital Exclusion and Information Literacy Interventions
• Deploy new digital / analogue organisational model
• Look for learnings to implement from evaluation

2021 Q4 – 2022 Q3 (1 October 2021 – 30 September 2022)

• Begin deploying long-term interventions for Digital Exclusion and Information Literacy
• Implement learning from evaluation of digital offer
• Continuously evaluate and update digital services