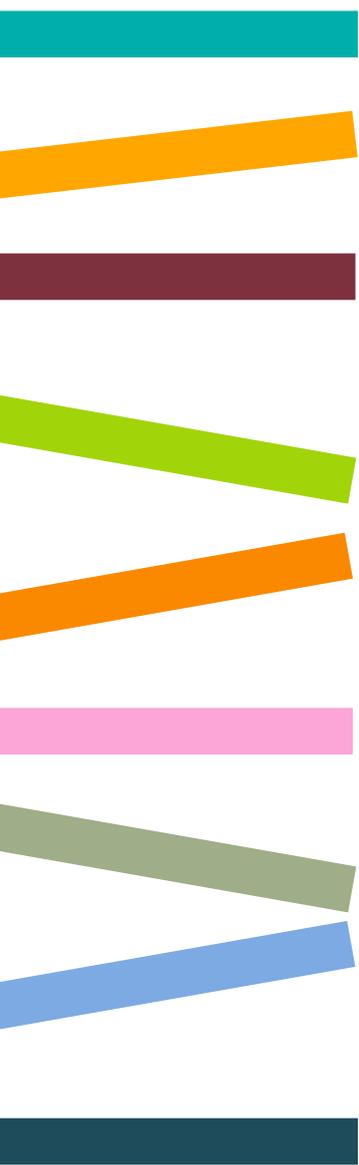


# Annual Report

Financial year

1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021





## Introduction

Our vision is for an inclusive, modern, sustainable and high quality public library service at the heart of every community in West Berkshire. This is our fourth annual report and it is intended to give you an idea of what libraries do, who uses them, our staff and volunteers, what the service costs and how much town and parishes contributed to them in the previous financial year, April 2020 to March 2021.

In line with government requirements for a nationwide lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all West Berkshire libraries were closed from 23 March until 13 July 2020. From then on, libraries were permitted to deliver a reduced service under the UK Government roadmap for England. In November 2020 and in January 2021 our library buildings were closed again for the second and third national lockdowns, when library services were delivered online and through book collections only. As a result, our data for 2020/21 is not directly comparable with the previous year.

For this reason we have provided summary data for the whole service rather than breaking it down under the individual library branches. We have included comparative data for the previous financial year 2019/20 as this is a useful way to identify the main trends in library usage and will inform our service recovery planning.

We are always happy to share general data about library usage - we do not share any customer, staff or volunteer details - but please be mindful that requests take up staff time and their priority is to help customers use our services.

Looking back at the last year it was clearly very challenging for everyone. Covid restrictions required library buildings to close to the public or provide a reduced service for much of the year. However, the libraries service stepped up to the challenge and provided as much service as possible within those restrictions. The new Order and Collect service had a strong take up, and this contributed to almost 2,000 new customers joining West Berkshire libraries. The online e-library usage increased by 87% and the staff launched a series of family events and activities online which received positive feedback and were well attended. All in all the experience has made the service stronger and more flexible and I wish to thank our staff and volunteers for rising to the challenge - and to thank the many customers who gave such positive feedback during a difficult period. Looking ahead, we are keen to ensure that the service continues to innovate to meet community needs. Thank you for all your support and if you are not already a member of the library – do join, it's free to all residents of all ages.

**Councillor Howard Woollaston.**

## Have you got a suggestion or query?

Email **Paul James**, Culture & Libraries Manager, West Berkshire Council  
[paul.james@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:paul.james@westberks.gov.uk)

# Summary of the year

23 March 2020



**National lockdown:**  
All English public libraries  
required to close

April 2020



Creation of online book  
group, online weekly  
storytimes and activities  
for children

May 2020



At Home library  
service restored

July 2020



English libraries permitted to  
re-open under the UK Government  
roadmap

Order & Collect service started (book  
collections only), national Summer  
Reading Challenge moved online



September 2020



All West Berkshire  
Libraries re-open for  
browsing and public  
computer use



Mobile Library  
service re-starts  
with Order &  
Collect service



Creation of  
online Code  
Club

November 2020



**Second national lockdown:**  
Library buildings closed  
again, first public online  
talks

December 2020



All West Berkshire  
Libraries re-open  
again for browsing  
and public  
computer use

January 2021



**Third national lockdown:**  
Library buildings closed  
again

March 2021



Preparations to open  
again for browsing  
and public computer  
use on the 12 April

Our priority during the year was always to restore and provide an appropriate adaptation of library services for West Berkshire residents to the best of our ability. We responded to the crisis by innovating online, upskilling staff and reaching out to our communities in ways which had a profound impact for many people.

Even during the period of closure our libraries did not stop supporting their communities. Online lending surged, and staff and volunteers were involved in making calls and delivering books to vulnerable residents through our At Home service. The experience of lockdown really highlighted the role of our libraries and our staff in keeping communities connected and supporting the most vulnerable in society.

After the initial lockdown period, the eight West Berkshire libraries and one Mobile Library were able to provide a limited service for the rest of the year in line with government guidelines. Sometimes this was for book collections only and at other times, when permitted, we were able to offer a limited browsing service and access to our public use computers. Re-opening our buildings to visitors signalled to many the beginning of a return to normal which was important for the West Berkshire community. Meticulous planning in line with Government advice was vital to keep our staff, volunteers and customers safe, and we had to review and revise our risk assessments in line with every step change. Perspex screens and sanitising units were installed in our buildings and we introduced a 72 hour quarantine period before any books could be returned to the open shelves to help prevent the transference of infection.

Our 46 staff (25.06 full-time equivalent posts), along with our 187 library volunteers, delivered library services to 49,132 visitors during this time. We also gained 1,797 new library users.

We added 16,263 items of new library stock to our collection during the year which was an increase of 6.73% on the previous year. Much of this was in e-book and e-audiobook format to meet the high demand during the lockdown period. We were able to benefit from a grant from Arts Council England specifically for e-library stock in order to fund this.

In terms of investment in our library buildings, we installed CCTV in Newbury Library and Theale Library and we made some improvements to the interior at Theale Library in December 2020.



Perspex screens were installed at library counters

West Berkshire Library Service	2019/2020	2020/2021	% Var
Loans or renewals of library stock	571,352	318,756	-44.21%
Active borrowers	15,648	5,207	-66.72%
New borrowers	4,388	1,797	-59.05%
Reservations placed	45,419	63,579	39.98%
Visits to the library	346,895	49,132	-85.84%
Items added to stock	15,237	16,263	6.73%
Number of public computers	57	*27	-52.63%
Public computer usage (hours)	23,026	694	-96.99%
Number of public computer users	3,517	447	-87.29%
Number of visits to public computers	31,212	1,605	-94.86%
Number of staff (total)	46	46	0.00%
Number of staff (full time equivalent)	24.93	25.06	0.53%
Number of volunteers	354	187	-47.18%
Volunteer hours	12,935	3,407	-73.66%
Weekly opening hours	219.8	219.8	0.00%
Annual opening hours	11,428	11,428	0.00%
Total closure hours (planned and unplanned)	587.6	6,588.0	1021.27%
Summer Reading Challenge participants	3,317	634	19.11%

## Challenges and plans for 2021/22

This year will be a transformative one for our libraries where we hope to fully restore our services. We will also retain some of the new innovations introduced during the pandemic which have enhanced our offer to the West Berkshire community.

We are continuously looking for ways to improve our library service. These are just some of our current plans for 2021/22:

- Complete a Libraries Review by January 2022.
- Offer regular events in libraries when it is safe to do so again.
- Increase engagement with West Berkshire schools.
  - Offer primary school class visits (including virtual class visits where appropriate).
  - Complete a pilot project to investigate the feasibility of pupils automatically becoming West Berkshire library members when they join a school.
- Work with the BookTrust to deliver their Storytime pilot project, including targeted additional work at Burghfield Common and Thatcham Libraries.
- Launch enhanced functionality for our Libraries app including:
  - Self-checkout functionality so that customers will be able to check out books using their own mobile devices.
  - A separate Children's Library app 'Planet Library' to encourage reading and library visits.
- Update the lighting at Newbury Library with a new lighting design, and the installation of energy efficient LEDs, including creating some discrete areas with autism friendly adjustable colour lighting.

- Essential refurbishment of Thatcham Library, including re-locating the current entrance and installing an accessible toilet.
- Complete our project with the West Berkshire Central Family Hub in Thatcham so that they can lend toys from their Toy Library in the same way as we lend books using our library management system.
- Recruit more volunteers and review the volunteer roles we offer to make them more flexible for the future.
- Set up more library working groups for each library. Library working groups have already proved their worth by directly involving local people who give feedback from their community which helps us to increase library usage. To find out more, please email [paul.james@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:paul.james@westberks.gov.uk)

## About the service

 <p><i>"All went very smoothly. So great to have library books again!"</i></p>	<p><i>"I enjoyed the book that was given to me the last time I ordered books from the library and would like to read the next book in the trilogy if possible."</i></p>
<p><i>"Thanks for reopening. I collected mine today and had a great experience, as always."</i></p>	<p><i>"Thank you very much to the hard-working staff... Your efforts to interpret my vague request for various general types of books, then find things I would like, are very much appreciated. I have really missed the library during lockdown, and am so grateful for all you have done to get reopened. Keep up the good work."</i></p>

Order and Collect feedback

As well as providing free access to 103,864 books to borrow, last year we provided:

- Free computer use and wi-fi.
- Self-service printing, photocopying and scanning to email.
- Online events, including talks on popular topics such as local history and archaeology.
- Free access to e-books, e-magazines and e-newspapers.
- Audiobooks and e-audiobooks to listen to on the go.
- Large print books.
- Children's services, including regular, well attended children's events online (Storytimes, Code Club, craft activities and more).
- Online resources to use in the library and at home:
  - **Access to Research** – 1.5 million academic and research journals.
  - **Britannica Online** – three different, age appropriate editions of this encyclopedia.
  - **British Newspaper Archive** - millions of pages of historical newspapers from the British Library collection.

- **GoCitizen** - online resource for candidates preparing for the Life in the UK test (British citizenship).
- **Oxford Dictionary of National Biography** – 60,000 biographies of significant, influential or notorious figures who shaped British history.
- **Oxford English Dictionary (OED) online** – we listened to your feedback and reinstated our subscription to this definitive record of the English language.
- **Theory Test Pro** - online simulation of the UK driving theory test and online hazard perception tests.
- **Who's Who** – Biographical information on the most influential people of today as well as entries back to 1897.
- Book groups: hundreds of titles available in book group sets of 10 copies (annual fee applies).
- Family History
  - Local and family history resources
  - Free access to Ancestry online database, which can now be accessed through our library catalogue at home as well as in the library.
- At Home services – our volunteers delivered books to 118 housebound readers.



Preparing an Order & Collect request

## How much did it cost / how much income did we generate?

People sometimes ask how much a certain library branch costs. Some costs are specific to a branch – for example, staff, energy, rates and maintenance – while others are shared with the whole service – professional librarian and back office staff, emergency staff cover, book stock, ICT support, etc. All the parts of the service are inter-dependent, so all branch libraries benefit from being part of the wider service and the library service as a whole benefits from being part of West Berkshire Council – for example, corporate support for ICT, finance, maintenance, health and safety, HR, energy and phone contracts.

Our costs include staff, buying books and digital library stock, ICT, building maintenance, energy costs, business rates and marketing. Our income includes voluntary contributions from town and parish councils, library item charges and fines, income from rent, events, book sales and grants.

In the information below we have also included information about capital investment in the library service.

<b>Revenue Expenditure (Running costs)</b>	<b>£ 2019/20</b>	<b>£ 2020/21</b>
Staff	843,454	863,915
Premises - energy, rates, maintenance costs	292,991	273,402
Supplies and services - ICT, marketing, transport, e-resources	184,494	176,698
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,320,939</b>	<b>1,314,015</b>
<b>Income</b>		
*Fees and charges/fines, rent, venue hire, events, sales	-90,782	-89,825
Voluntary contributions from town and parish councils	-93,918	-70,572
Other income including donations	-8,607	-2,515
<b>Total</b>	<b>-193,307</b>	<b>-162,912</b>
<b>Net cost of the library service</b>	<b>1,127,632</b>	<b>1,151,103</b>
*Figures for 2020/21 include £52,961 Government loss of income contribution		
<b>Capital Investment (Fixed Assets)</b>		
Building improvements	14,633	16,106
Book stock and associated costs (*Section 106 funding)	123,876	127,076
Libraries app development costs and improvements to self-service computer booking system (** CIL funding)	N/A	6,025
Other costs during 2019/20 included here for comparison. Please see details in Annual Report 2019/20.	114,138	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>252,647</b>	<b>149,207</b>

\*\*The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a charge which can be levied by local authorities on new development in their area. It is an important tool for local authorities to use to help them deliver the infrastructure needed to support development in their area.

## Support from town and parish councils

We always appreciate the help and support we get from town and parish councils in helping us to promote the library service, for example by publicising libraries to their communities and helping us to recruit local volunteers.

We would like to thank those who made a voluntary financial contribution to the library service. In 2020/21 we received a total of £70,572 from town and parish councils, and this vital contribution enabled us to run the current level of library service. We are conscious that the total amount received was significantly less than the previous year, and if these contributions are further reduced it may impact the level of library service we are able to deliver in future.

We will continue to invite voluntary contributions for the financial year 2021/22, and also to invite town and parish councils to participate in library working groups so that we get local feedback about the service and how we can improve it for residents. Many thanks to all those who have already chosen to do so.

Please note the following:

- The council is a local authority responsible for delivering the statutory library service in West Berkshire. We are not delegating or transferring the responsibility to town and parish councils, nor are we levying a charge on the parish councils.
- We are asking town and parish councils to support the service at a local level to help residents benefit from the library service and from the library buildings as community hubs for a range of local activities.
- Contributions are voluntary and ring-fenced within a specific budget, for example for a specific library branch or for the mobile library service only, so that they directly benefit parish residents.
- We will request a contribution each year rather than request a commitment for a number of years at a time.

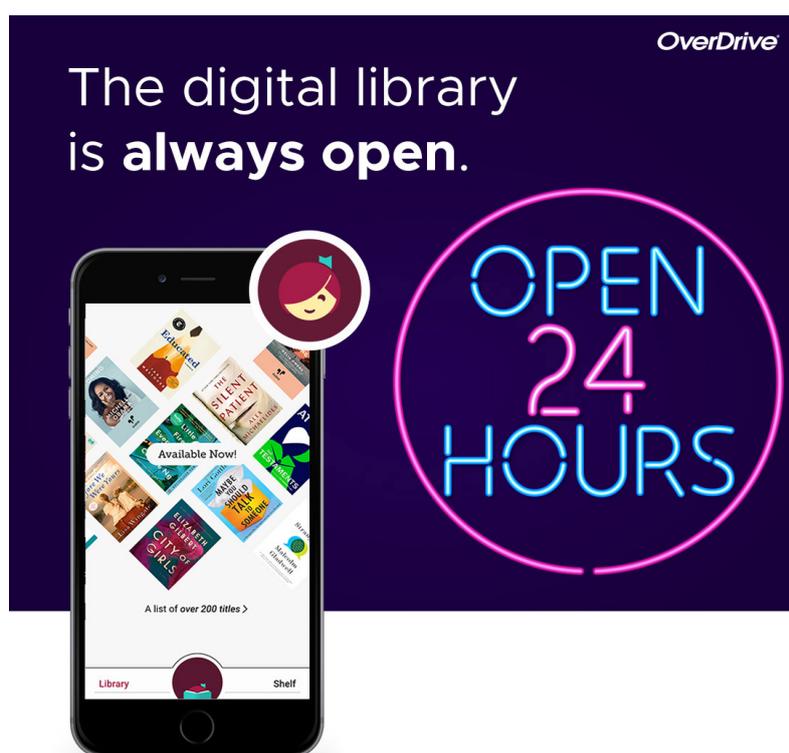
We are always happy to attend town and parish council meetings to talk about the library service and what we can offer to the West Berkshire community.

Our priorities during the pandemic were concentrated in three main areas:

- Promoting reading during the pandemic
- Working with children and families
- Supporting vulnerable groups

## Promoting reading during the pandemic

### West Berkshire e-Library



During the first lockdown, our e-library books were in great demand and this continued throughout the year with over 168,000 items being borrowed. This was an increase of 87.44% on the previous year.

West Berkshire e-Library	2019-2020	2020-2021	% Var
Loans or renewals of library stock	89,634	168,008	87.44%
Reservations placed	9,742	17,696	81.65%
Items added to stock	3,747	4,399	17.40%

With a grant from the Arts Council we were able to increase spending in the area to meet demand. Through BorrowBox, one of our e-library providers, we also introduced a range of titles in both e-book and e-audiobook format for which we had purchased the digital rights for large numbers of copies. So instead of our usual 'one user / one copy' agreement with publishers for this type of item, we had on average 500 copies for a set time period.

## West Berks Reads



At the end of March 2020, as soon as the first lockdown was announced, we set up a Facebook group to connect library members with one another and to encourage them to keep reading. West Berks Reads was created as a place for people to share their thoughts about the books they are reading and to discover ideas for what to read next from the recommendations of others.

We were also able to post information about literary festivals, book awards and other related events when many of these moved online. The group quickly gained members, totalling 299 by the end of the year, during which time members posted over 100 book reviews of their own.

## Order & Collect

It was so important to maintain access to reading throughout the pandemic and this was a lifeline for some during the lockdowns. From July onwards we were able to offer a book collection service even when our library buildings were closed. Customers were able to reserve specific titles through our online library catalogue and by telephone as usual. This was hugely popular, with 63,579 reservations being placed, an increase of nearly 40% on the previous year.

We also wanted to be able to offer a bespoke selection service to those customers who did not have digital access or who did not have a specific title in mind, and our thinking around this led to the launch of the Order & Collect service in July 2020.



Volunteer helping with Order & Collect customer pick-ups at Mortimer Library

 <p><b>"Thank you very much for this service!"</b></p>	<p><i>"This is such a brilliant service. My 11 year old reads so quickly so we have been struggling to find new books for him to read over the last few weeks. He was really pleased with the selection of books made for him."</i></p>
<p><i>"... so impressed with the system you have in place ... really well organised, it felt safe and the books ready in the little brown bag such a nice touch too ... thank you for making it so easy. Thank you!"</i></p>	<p><b>"Very happy with my audiobooks – better than I would have chosen myself, thank you so much."</b></p>

More Order & Collect feedback

Library members who were not sure which books they would like to read, or were looking for a bit of inspiration, were able to request that our library staff select up to five books for them to suit their preferences.

Our knowledgeable library staff were also able to introduce many customers to a new author or genre if they thought that might be of interest! We adapted our online catalogue so that customers could tell us about the sort of books they liked to read or could ask for a selection of books on a particular subject. Order & Collect proved to be very popular for customers of all ages, who enjoyed a new way of discovering books and reading during lockdown. Library staff completed 2,486 Order & Collect requests and we were inundated with positive feedback from our customers.



Theale Library user Jo used our Order & Collect service to ask for books about quilting, and as a result learnt a new skill and made this wonderful quilt during lockdown.

## West Berkshire Libraries app

We went live with the first stage of our new West Berkshire Libraries app in March 2021 to allow our staff to become familiar with using it, before a more formal launch in April 2021. The free app is a quick and easy way for library users to search the catalogue, renew and reserve books and keep up to date with news from the library service without the need for additional hardware or website logins.

Once downloaded to a smartphone or other mobile device, users have instant access to the extensive collection of free e-books, e-audiobooks, e-magazines and e-newspapers.

Customers who regularly enjoy the e-books and e-audiobooks, which are available through West Berkshire Libraries from suppliers BorrowBox and Libby by OverDrive, will benefit from having all of the extra functionality in one app! You can even manage multiple accounts, which may be useful for those with children or relatives who need some additional help.

# Working with children and families

## Reading Well



As the effects of the pandemic on mental health became apparent, we were active in promoting the Reading Well (Books on Prescription) booklists relating to mental health and wellbeing.

To supplement the list for adults with mild to moderate mental health conditions and that for young people/older children, a new list developed for children aged 7-11 years was published by The Reading Agency shortly before the first lockdown. This includes 33 books which have been selected by leading health professionals to help children to understand their worries and talk about their feelings and emotions.

In addition to the stock we had already purchased, The Reading Agency supplied all public libraries with extra copies of all of these titles for all branches, at no cost to us. These books are now in circulation.

In addition to our promotions for Reading Well on social media, we ran 'Read for Health and Wellbeing' as our message of the month in November and a 'Mood Boosting Books Week' on Instagram.

## Online activities for children

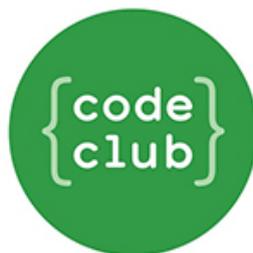
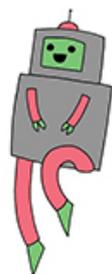
While we were unable to hold events in library buildings, many of our activities moved online. We provided a comprehensive and varied programme of online events and activities for children throughout the year, which included digital Storytimes on Fridays and weekly book-related craft activities each weekend.



## Online Code Club

We have been running a very successful Code Club for 9-11 year olds at Newbury Library for some years, offering children the opportunity to learn to code and make their own games, animations and websites. As we were unable to provide group activities in libraries during the pandemic, we investigated ways to offer this online.

For September 2020, we developed a 12 week online course, which proved to be a great success. 69 children took part during the remainder of the year, which is far more than we could have accommodated in a library. This allowed children from across West Berkshire to join, rather than just those who could easily get to a library building after school. Also they could complete the course work whenever convenient for them during the week, so families were not tied to an hour-long slot on a particular day. Given these advantages, we are planning to continue to offer the course in the online format. However, we know that not all children have the opportunity or the equipment to enable them to take part from home. We therefore intend to offer individual Code Club 'help sessions' in libraries as well next year, staff time and volunteers permitting.



## West Berkshire Libraries Online Code Club for 9-11 year olds

Weekly projects every Thursday during term time.

Email for more information and to sign up: [library@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:library@westberks.gov.uk)

Here are some comments that were emailed by one of the parents:

*'[He] loved last week's dodgeball project. It's great to watch his confidence increase week by week.'*

*'For the first few projects he wanted his dad to sit down and do them with him, then he just wanted him there in the background, and now is very happy to sit down with his headphones and do it by himself. He's so proud to show me the results when he's finished!'*

*'[He] loves your videos as they are so clear and concise, and would much prefer to use the video to the written instructions.'*

### Bookstart

Bookstart is a universal book gifting programme in the UK, provided through BookTrust to support and encourage children's reading. In West Berkshire, the Bookstart programme is administered by the library service.

During the pandemic it proved particularly difficult to deliver Bookstart Baby packs to families of new-borns, as Health Visitors were forced to suspend face-to-face visits and couldn't assist us in the usual way. Nevertheless we delivered 647 Baby packs during 2020/21. We also worked with colleagues in Education to deliver 48 SEND (special needs) packs and 2,037 Treasure packs to children aged 3-4, including 160 requests for dual language titles to accompany these.

In June, BookTrust offered special 'care packages' of books suitable for 0-5 year olds in two age groups. We took sufficient quantities to allow us to distribute two books to every child in care in West Berkshire in the appropriate age groups, with further distributions in the autumn to children on the edge of care and to targeted families at Victoria Park Nursery

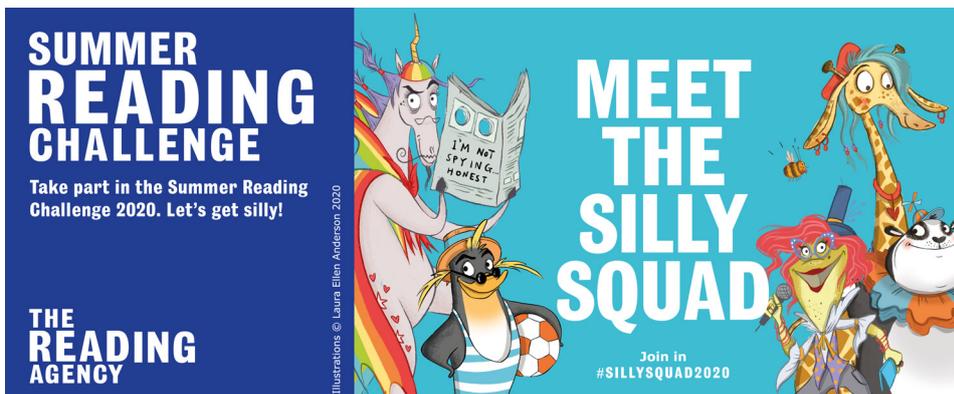


BookTrust also set up 'HomeTime', an online hub providing activities, videos and other resources to help families at home. We promoted this to West Berkshire residents through our social media, alongside our own weekly storytimes and book-related craft activities.

## Summer Reading Challenge 2020

The Summer Reading Challenge is usually our biggest promotion of the year, which is enjoyed by thousands of primary school aged children. Under the exceptional circumstances we experienced during the summer of 2020, The Reading Agency which runs the challenge throughout the UK, made the decision to move it online. West Berkshire Libraries were keen to support this. At a time when reading was more important than ever, we wanted to encourage as many children as possible to take part.

The Reading Agency experienced a number of technical challenges in developing this online offer under pressure, but we were delighted that 453 children took part in the online challenge in West Berkshire. We also offered an in-house challenge with The Reading Agency resources, which allowed a further 181 children to take part when they were able to visit our libraries.



## Supporting vulnerable groups

### West Berkshire Mobile Library



*'Too far to walk to the library in Newbury. Large print books are excellent and the van calling makes it possible to order them'.*

*'I very much appreciate the library bus service and the helpfulness of library staff. It has been a godsend during Covid'.*

We were able to resume our Mobile Library service from 1 September 2020 but, due to Government guidelines regarding social distancing, we were unable to allow customers on board the vehicle to choose their own books. Instead, our staff fulfilled customers' reading requirements using our Order & Collect service. After contacting all of our regular readers, staff selected books according to individual preference for quantity, genre and format. This was repeated for every visit until 19 June 2021. A huge thank you to the staff who went the extra mile to provide this service and to our customers who always supported us with gratitude, a cheery wave and a chat from the bottom of the steps!

### West Berkshire At Home Service

West Berkshire LIBRARIES

**Stay safe at home.  
We'll come to you!**

If you are currently self-isolating or if you use our At Home service because of age, disability or other special circumstance, we may be able to deliver to you. Contact our At Home service to find out.

T: 01635 519827 library@westberks.gov.uk www.westberks.gov.uk/libraries

West Berkshire COUNCIL

Our At Home library service is specifically for those customers who find it difficult to visit their local library because of age or disability. Library items are chosen for each customer by our DBS-checked volunteers after an initial discussion about tastes and requirements. The volunteers then deliver books or spoken word CDs directly to the customer every three weeks.

During the pandemic we extended the reach of the At Home service to include anyone who was self-isolating, and we worked with the West Berkshire Community Hub to publicise this. Regular deliveries of books were left as doorstep drops for 118 customers during the year, and we are very grateful to our volunteers who helped with this when permitted.



At Home feedback

## Visually Impaired Book Group

Loneliness is recognised as one of the greatest public health challenges of our time and the social isolation caused by the pandemic has exacerbated this.

Under normal circumstances, our VIP (visually impaired) Book Group meets each month at Newbury Library to share their thoughts about a chosen audiobook. As we were unable to provide group activities during the pandemic, the group was not able to do this during 2020/21. From the start of the first lockdown, our staff worked hard to keep in contact with VIP group members on a one to one basis via regular telephone calls, and this was greatly appreciated.

Most of our members are elderly, live alone and are not digitally connected. They were therefore not able to access video conferencing software to facilitate group meetings. We were keen to find a solution that would enable the group to keep in contact, and we managed to secure some funding for this from The Reading Agency through their 'Reading Friends' programme which aims to tackle loneliness by bringing people together to read, chat and share stories. Thanks to the charity Calibre, which supplies us with books on CDs and memory sticks, we were able to post the book recordings to our VIP members' homes and this will continue until we can restart the group meetings in the library.

These were our three priority areas for an extraordinary year but our commitment to providing services for research and information was not excluded.

Some of our e-resources were previously licensed for use on library computers only. During the first lockdown we worked with our suppliers to extend access to remote use wherever possible, resulting in a significant increase in uptake.

For example, Britannica Online was used on 183 occasions in May 2020, compared to 27 times during the same period in 2019.

The biggest increase came from Ancestry, where 4,718 searches were made in May 2020, compared to 1,966 in May 2019, as many people used their time at home to research their family history.

An award-winning online resource that everyone can use

Britannica contains comprehensive and interactive content for all ages



## Online talks

In early autumn, we were approached by the Berkshire Record Office who were keen to work with us to inform members of the public about the services they were able to offer whilst their building was closed. This became our first Zoom talk and proved very successful, which led us to commission other talks which we could offer to the public.

During the remainder of the year, we were able to provide three history talks and another to cover the work of our local Archaeology service, with preparations made for further online talks on a wider range of subjects in April-June 2021.

Where speakers permitted, we made the talks available on YouTube after the initial event in order to reach as wide an audience as possible.

## Customer e-newsletter

It was more important than ever to be able to communicate with our customers throughout the year to let them know about the changes in our levels of service.

We launched our new format e-newsletter in August 2020 and we have been sending out monthly newsletters since then.

E-newsletters are sent by email to anyone who has opted to receive direct news from us. Library users can change their preferences and email address online via the library catalogue: <https://westberks.spydus.co.uk>.



## Social Media

Our social media channels also became incredibly important last year as a means of providing immediate news, and it was a priority for us to increase engagement. At the end of March 2021 we had 2,134 followers on Twitter and 2,264 on Facebook. Our Instagram account, which is our newest social media channel, had 1,024 followers.

Library users can find us [@WBerksLibraries](#) on any of these channels.

# Volunteers

At some points during the year volunteering was paused to keep everyone safe in line with Government restrictions.

When the restrictions were eased, we were able to invite volunteers back into the libraries. We had to make sure that appropriate safety measures were put in place before volunteers came back, as in many cases their roles involved direct contact with library customers. It was important that the volunteers were made aware of our risk assessments and that they felt comfortable with all the new procedures before coming back. Some volunteers couldn't wait to return, some took a more cautious approach and some are still uncertain and hope to return in the future. The availability of older volunteers was understandably a significant factor which we had to take into consideration as many were in the vulnerable category.

Each library welcomed back volunteers at their own pace and any concerns about returning were discussed with individuals, taking their personal circumstances into account.



Volunteer shelving books at Thatcham Library

During the year, 187 volunteers played a critical role in supporting our libraries and the West Berkshire community. Between them they spent 3,407 hours helping us by:

- Supporting our staff to run a book collection service from all libraries.
- Supporting our staff to keep our branch libraries open when we were permitted to do so.
- Meeting and greeting customers to explain our new procedures to keep everyone safe. This included collecting Test and Trace details from customers.
- Recording Storytime videos.
- Organising craft activities for customers to take away and making up craft packs.
- Delivering books through our At Home service to housebound readers.

- Writing articles for the local newspaper to highlight the range of activities which volunteers can get involved with to help the library service.

We always take the time to thank our volunteers for their efforts and give feedback about the difference they are making. We communicate with volunteers regularly and have been honest about the challenges ahead. We have tried to be transparent about timeframes, what the service can offer at present and the support we need.

The numbers of volunteers involved with the library service decreased significantly by 47.18% this year because of the pandemic, and this has put some of our libraries at risk of unplanned closures when we don't have enough support. We are aware that we need to recruit more volunteers and we will be reviewing the volunteer roles we offer to make them more flexible in future.

We are immensely grateful to all our volunteers and we simply can't run the service without them. If you would like to join them, please have a look at our volunteering opportunities online: [www.westberks.gov.uk/volunteer](http://www.westberks.gov.uk/volunteer)



General library feedback