

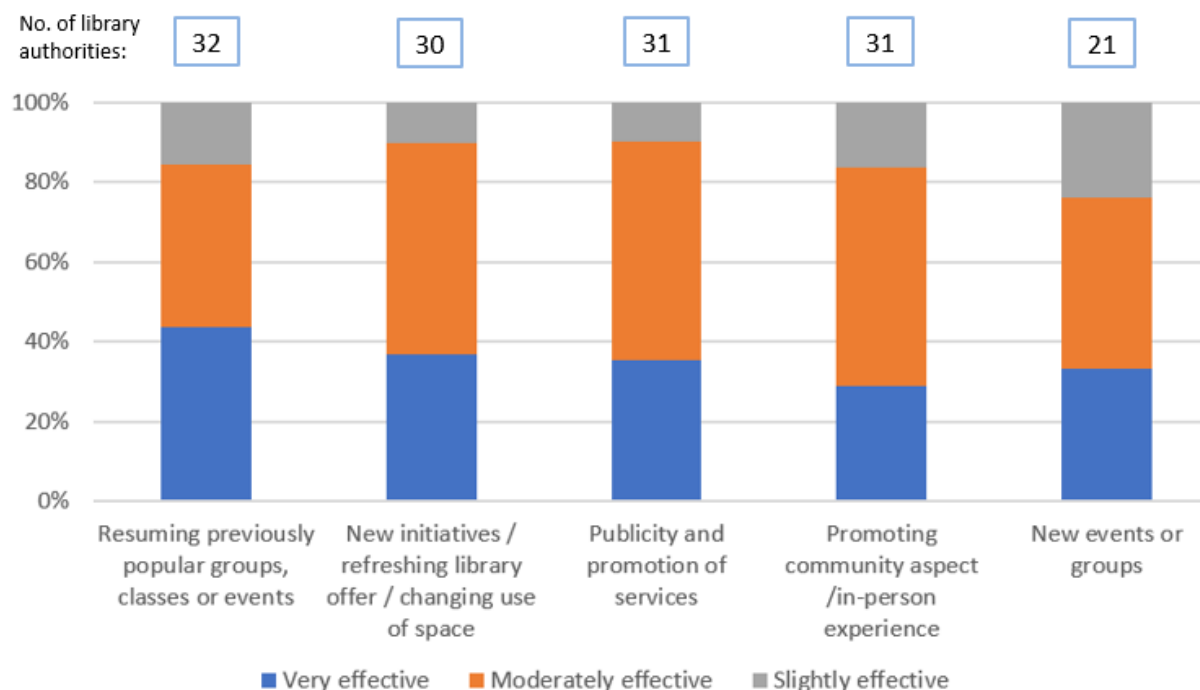
Regaining Footfall Update – November 2022

Introduction

In late November 2022, over 20 library authorities attended discussion groups hosted by Lorensbergs to explore what's helping to increase their footfall levels. The sessions were part of the netloan user group programme.

Library users are gradually returning to use services, with the netloan customer survey results indicating around 60% average footfall compared to pre-Covid levels. This is across all sites, with authorities tending to experience a faster return to normal levels in bigger, more central branches. Some authorities were already finding it possible to reach 80% or more of former levels and the netloan customer community provided an important opportunity to learn from each other.

At this time, the survey showed that the following approaches were being the most effective in supporting footfall increases:



The discussion groups explored and compared experiences and effectiveness of these and other approaches.

Preparation by Lorensbergs for the discussion groups involved conversations with five library authorities: Aberdeen City Libraries (with experience shared also from Aberdeenshire Libraries), Barnsley Libraries, North Yorkshire Libraries, Staffordshire Libraries and Torfaen Libraries. From this

initial research we produced a briefing paper to participants in advance of the groups which enabled us to categorise tactics and initiatives under some key categories as follows:

- Re-find and reconnect with your audience
- Explore new avenues and try new things
- Run events and services that offer clear, attractive outcomes
- Provide a modern experience with support from latest IT
- Partnerships bring new reach and make more possible

The key points from these initial discussions are included with the rest of our findings on these Regaining Footfall topics.

General experiences

We began by asking what was working best for libraries to re-connect with their audience, or to find new users. With all participants customers of netloan PC booking, we developed the discussion by considering the role of library PCs in raising footfall.

Responses indicated that although lockdowns finished in early 2022, it is still early days returning to normal services for many libraries. Staffing levels and user behaviour are both very different still compared to before the pandemic. New staff or those in new roles are still finding their feet, while many users are only just starting to venture back. These are just two of many challenges.

Footfall recovery is lagging other statistics. Book issues and PC hours are increasing but this is driven more by users borrowing more books or staying longer.

Libraries are trying a range of approaches from bringing back previously popular or important services, to trying new initiatives. Some instances have brought large numbers of users in. However, these circumstances might be difficult to repeat, as they have tended to be beyond the libraries' control or influence. For example, helping with Council Tax rebates or refugee influxes.

There are two things that have clearly helped libraries succeed in these situations. Firstly, close working with the council or other parties (e.g. charities) ensures users are signposted to libraries while staff are better able to recognise and meet their needs. Secondly, libraries that aim to build on what might be a user's one-off interaction with them can encourage them to use their other services. One-time users are very welcome, but it's return visits that help build better footfall levels and social capital over time.

In general, participants described a lot of work and communications taking place across a range of initiatives. However, understanding what is making the most difference isn't easy. Libraries are still experimenting and many have exciting new plans that are yet to be carried out. It's too soon to say with confidence what's been a success in every case. So libraries continue to persevere, making sure they've covered enough bases with the necessary investment to reach a return to former footfall levels.

In the meantime, it's very important to share ideas and experiences between authorities for inspiration, morale and to help weigh up what might be effective.

Re-find and reconnect with your audience

In order to both encourage back former users and find new ones, libraries are resuming previously popular events and activities. At the same time, they are experimenting with new ones.

Here are the services that libraries report bringing back as quickly as possible:

- Summer Reading Challenge
- Story time
- Rhyme time
- IT support
- Employability support
- Code clubs (typical age range 7-13)
- Knit and natter clubs
- Poetry clubs
- Job clubs
- Children's activities
- Book clubs
- Bookbug (Scotland national scheme)
- Slipper issue
- Coffee mornings
- Family history groups

The latter increased especially in popularity following the *Ancestry.com* free usage period during lockdown. Also, *Find my past* recently released a new 100 year old census driving further interest.

Pre teen visits for homework clubs and for playing games on computers after school is also picking up in some authorities.

Help needed for benefit applications is rising and libraries are there to help.

Related challenges

Some important services given to the most needy are difficult to scale up, and staffing issues appear to be a universal problem at present. For example, coaching or advice sessions that are usually delivered one to one, e.g. IT support. So libraries are working hard providing critical support but this doesn't always translate into much greater footfall. Here we see the importance of improving staffing levels, increasing volunteer recruitment and retention, and building new partnerships that support the library's work.

At present, some libraries are committing to a certain number of hours of delivered sessions and working hard to fulfil these as far as possible. It often isn't sufficient though to meet demand, and not all users are prepared to wait for the help required. They want their IT questions answered right away. One authority reported that help with bus pass and blue badge applications had a waiting list of 2-3 weeks.

Reliance on volunteers for some services e.g. code clubs leads to other problems with recruitment and retention – although see an initiative from North Yorkshire below on what's helped here.

New initiatives

Here's a record of the new initiatives that libraries are using to either find new users or encourage former users back into the library. They recognise that their younger users have developed new interests while growing up over the pandemic years and need to 're-find' the library. Many of the activities tend to be aimed at these age groups:

- Teen reading groups
- Warhammer and Lego clubs
- Children's days, e.g. morning for 5yr-12yr olds: beatbox, scratch coding and micro bit sessions. Afternoon for 12-15yr olds: TinkerCAD for 3D printing and vlogging sessions
- Activities for school groups
- Teen gaming nights with consoles
- Board game nights
- Ping pong tables
- Book binding activity
- Pottery
- Movie nights
- Craft activities
- Library stand at universities' and colleges' fresher fairs

Posting on social media is helping to raise awareness of these new or reinstated services. Libraries are aiming to post more regularly with one mentioning the use of Canva to enhance their Facebook posts. More are now using Instagram. They hope that the combination of better communications and new exciting events will help to reconnect with younger users.

Emailing contacts with information regarding upcoming events has proved effective. Permission is asked when users join the library and stored in LMS (experience from Aberdeenshire Libraries). However, it won't reach those who are yet to join the library or sign up to receive library communications. Also, both email and social media are less likely to reach those with restricted digital skills. A variety of communication channels are required to help counteract these issues.

- *"Maintaining a strong multi-platform social media presence has proven to be important - not only from online engagement during the pandemic but as a tool to maintain a presence with customers as we returned to 'normal' service and also to keep the new users we gained during the pandemic engaged and to bridge over to a physical service"* (survey respondent)

Libraries are working with schools to help reconnect with their schoolchildren users. Barnsley Libraries report that their website booking facility is encouraging school class visits – they can see online what's available and book a slot.

Other ways that have helped libraries reach their users are as follows:

- If an activity or group has worked well online, it could excel in-person: this is the experience from Aberdeenshire Libraries following [Philosophy Cafe](#) success which returned to libraries in-person after going online
- Volunteer recruitment promotion via media and social media, involving volunteers telling their stories (North Yorkshire Libraries). The campaign was council-wide but mostly related to libraries. It supported both recruitment and retention as it was successful in highlighting how highly valued volunteers are. Facebook is now being used to advertise timeslots

available with their IT buddies

- Experiment by taking library events outside the library
 - Torfaen Libraries' events at new locations are helping to connect with new families, e.g. animal themed storytelling at local farm, wizard themed storytelling at [local hilltop shell folly](#)
 - The philosophy cafe (from experience of working for Aberdeenshire Libraries) drew in new and wider audience when hosted in local church café space
- Staffordshire Libraries has found new users need the library's help now more than ever. The need to save money, look for new jobs or apply for benefits is bringing new people through library doors:
 - To assist with the cost of living crisis, Staffordshire Libraries launched their 'Warm Welcome Campaign' promoting their free books, electronic resources, Wi-Fi access, PCs, events and activities.
 - On this theme, Perth and Kinross Libraries are running a money saving campaign '[Can it be true](#)' to encourage greater uptake of their services and resources

Explore new avenues and try new things

Some activities work better for some sites or venues than others. A big success or failure might change when you try it elsewhere. The secret here is not to just repeat activities without question or simply by habit. Also to note that while new staff or staff in new roles are still finding their feet, it's also at this time they are most likely to think of fresh ideas. Here is a list of the various initiatives that libraries are experimenting with:

- Try approaching local authors and they might agree to come in, a successful initiative for Barnsley Libraries
- Health and wellbeing zones with health monitors for BMI and blood pressure measurement, specialised online health content and a massage chair: this is all part of libraries becoming Be Well hubs across South London working with NHS and Citizens UK. Nuffield Health is also a partner
- Jigsaws have worked really well, with people staying for a few hours when determined to not leave the jigsaws unfinished for someone else
- Interfilm licenses enables the library to stream movies. This is being used for showing children's films. Reported as approx. £112.00+VAT per library site
- Reaching teenagers: as graphics books have proved very popular with them, offering a graphics course to support this interest
- Drag Queens story hour. A very successful initiative in many cases although came with the need to manage some negative feedback and potential for protests. Events were run as story reading to children for purposes of inclusivity
- A new service [BFI Replay](#) launches in February 2023 and will give public libraries a digitised collection of video and television archive

- Warm spaces / Warm welcomes / Community living room – with warm packs given out (blankets, thermos mug, hot water bottle, socks etc) and hot drinks sponsored by supermarkets. Works well when activities help users stay entertained. Connect4, jigsaws and Top Trumps have all proved popular. With jigsaws missing pieces can be a problem
- Use Canva to enhance your social media posts (see more details in section above)
- Topical themes help grab attention (potentially with funding to support related initiatives)
 - Environmental theme promoted for **Barnsley** Bee Festival and Wild Flower Seed Bomb making, with funding from Green Libraries Partnership
 - This year's gadgeteer theme for the Summer Reading Challenge. Although already well established, this year's theme proved really popular with 8000 participants at **North Yorkshire Libraries**. It also encouraged spending time on library PCs to use Makey Makey etc.
- **Torfaen Libraries** have seen more students visit after hosting a stall at a local college Freshers' Fair. Promotion included availability of study space, free Wi-Fi, some free printing for college work. Wi-Fi printing soon to be added to offer. Also appealing to this demographic: teen reading section, graphic novels, Borrowbox and Libby for online magazines, and Theory Test Pro (driving)
- Appointment of new Health and Wellbeing officer at **Torfaen Libraries** with aim to start new groups, informal talks, music sessions, dementia support and coffee drop-ins
- **Staffordshire's** Library Arts Officer launched an initiative called Crafting Communities (ACE funded) to tackle loneliness and forge new connections between the library and communities. Several artists in residence formed creative hubs. Over 1300 participants benefited in person, plus thousands more engaged online

Run events and services that offer clear, attractive outcomes

Publicise the difference your services offer, both the benefits they provide or the problems they solve. Here are some examples in use:

- After-school activities are presented as a 'Family Hour' offering crafts, games and other activities both to keep children busy while having quality family time
- Torfaen Libraries offer 1:1 bookable 30 minute IT sessions which lead to referrals to relevant Adult Community Learning courses. Clarity of their offer and a clear pathway to what's available next is helping both staff and users
- A six-week creative writing course with [Grampian Association of Storytellers](#) (GAS) at Aberdeen City Libraries concluded with a performance event coinciding with Book Week Scotland
- Highlighting events in connection with Get Online Week's 'Try One Thing' at Barnsley Libraries:

- send an email
 - download an ebook
 - compare a price on a shopping price comparison site, etc
- Start-up Info hubs at Staffordshire Libraries have provided much needed help to a new group of users. Over 100 information sheets in a month were downloaded from the Cobra database, which included information on how to create a business plan and how to set up a business bank account. The library received ACE funding and worked with the Council's Business Team and external partner [BES](#) (Business Enterprise Support), a local organisation that supports clients in becoming self-employed and helps get new businesses off the ground
 - Health and Digital Literacy initiative being run by Staffordshire Libraries with NHS Foundation Trust, aimed at 16-25 year olds (initiative is currently in early stages)
 - Offer sessions that specifically help achieve applying for a bus pass, blue badge etc

Challenges and solutions

Previous research has shown that much of libraries' best work is provided 'ad hoc' (see our previous survey findings on this topic [here](#)). However, when this is combined with clear service offers, libraries are more likely to retain users for repeat visits and group sign ups. With some internal signposting a user that came in spontaneously for some help is converted to being a regular user.

For all the great help that staff deliver outside formal sessions, it's an enduring problem of how to record and have recognition for this crucial work. At Wiltshire Libraries, Good News Stories reports are shared with senior decision makers and IT staff within the Council. Libraries are required to share good news stories each week. These are compiled by a team who take it in turns to do this and the report is circulated. Here's an extract from one of these reports:

A lady wanted help with getting to Yorkshire to have a supervised visit her Granddaughter, who she hadn't seen for some time. (The member of staff) spent time looking up different modes of transport and provided the lady with travel plans and worked out which was the cheapest option for her as she had limited funds. The lady said thank you so much for her help and patience. The lady said she had been to the travel agents first but they hadn't been very helpful.

A customer sheltering from the rain asked for help sending photos to his daughter using his iPad. Afterwards he asked about our Tech support sessions and has now signed-up to come in as his employment requires him to do everything using computers and he doesn't know how.

A young mum came in to do a quick print of a returns label, unfortunately just at that moment the PN printer went down. As it was rhymetime I suggested that she could join in with her little one while I tried to sort the problem. After rhymetime she came over to ask if she could come again next week as she had really enjoyed it and hadn't ever taken her daughter (around 12-18mths) to any groups before. It really was lovely to see how happy they were leaving the library.

A customer wanted to complete some online forms that required a photo upload and also set up a Facebook account. He didn't have any photos in digital form. We suggested that he went to the Post Office to have photos taken and come back to the library with them. He came back a few days later with his photos and we helped him, to scan them in, save them to his email, upload to the forms and create a Facebook account. He was really happy and said he would never have been able to do it on his own.

A regular library user came in on Saturday morning distressed that she had not slept well as it had been so cold. She had not been using her heating as she was worried about the cost. We asked her if she would like one of our warm packs and she was very grateful. On Monday morning, she came in to tell us that she had spent Saturday evening wrapped in the blanket with the hot water bottle and drinking soup from the mug. She said it had made her feel so much better and that she really appreciated being given the pack.

A lady who came in a couple of weeks ago and needed some help on the computer came in again, needing some help on Word to lay out a letter properly that was needed for a legal case. She was really grateful for the help and said she wouldn't be able to do it without us.

Provide a modern experience with support from latest IT

We have heard many times how helping users with their IT queries or problems has turned visitors into regular PC users. Libraries are reporting increased footfall to use IT from a range of demographics and are seeing pre-Covid regulars returning in greater numbers. Here's a list of experiences reported:

- Where PC use is not as high as before, users are often needing more time or require greater levels of support. Review your user group settings in netloan to allow longer sessions where possible to meet needs while increasing usage
- For the same reasons as above, automated self-extensions in netloan are helping to boost usage at library authorities. Make sure this feature is set up and switched on in netloan
- Jobseekers and refugee groups are especially evident as higher usage groups, but even these users benefit from outreach and other awareness raising to encourage them to visit, with publicity paying off in footfall. Noting that Libraries are seeing a rise in BRP (Biometric Residence Permits) applications from their PCs
- For older users, having staff to support them is crucial as technology moves so fast they need lots of help, both with the basics and for newer phenomena such as two factor authentication
- One authority reported securing funding for a digital champion to support PC use queries
- If it's suspected that previously regular customers are now staying at home with new iPads, there are still plenty of reasons for them to continue using the library. They can learn more about how to make the most of technology, make IT use a social experience through a library group, or simply keep updated on how to stay safe online. These users present a new opportunity and are not necessarily gone for good

- Recognising that slow and broken PCs will directly impact the number of people who come in to the library to use them. If your BYOD (bring your own device) numbers are going up at the expense of PC use, this could be a significant cause. With PC upgrades and moves to Windows 10, usage generally increases. Use the fault category in netloan's broken PC functionality to help track and address your IT issues
 - Recent PC refresh (2019) is helping attract usage at North Yorkshire Libraries. In addition, groups of PCs are used for digital activities e.g. after-school coding clubs
 - New computers have driven lots more users in to Torfaen Libraries. No more slow PCs or outdated browsers following move to Windows 10
- Library refurbishments continue to encourage greater PC use along with other services, as users stay to enjoy more in the revamped surroundings
- PCs remain popular with children who come in to play games
- Alongside PCs, continue to support own device usage. A digital hubs approach at one London authority is recognising importance of both types of user
- Netloan's early login functionality enables users who turn up early for their sessions to login without waiting when the computer is available. This functionality has been well received by libraries and their users
- Netloan's login messages that display to PC users are helping to promote events and activities in the library
- Microsoft office products remain in demand on PCs
- With lots of things more difficult to achieve on a handheld screen, people continue to come in to use the PCs. For example, people who use online banking via their phones are finding it's easier to see their account details on a larger screen

In addition, printing remains an important and often unique selling point for libraries. It's easier and cheaper to use a library printer than running or fixing one at home. As a service, printing remains in strong demand. Visa offices and job centres are directing users to libraries to print their documents. People often visit to print off health service letters too. Libraries are anticipating much more printing of flight tickets and passes as we move towards summer. Further survey feedback tells us:

"With the rise in buying and selling online, people need printing facilities for returns/packaging labels - this has increased hugely over the last year."

Partnerships bring new reach and make more possible

Some in-demand services are labour-intensive, making partnering an important strategy to increase the capacity to deliver. Most importantly, it also grows the library's reach. Some of the initiatives that have demonstrated the greatest success in footfall numbers have simply involved working with other council departments and clearly communicating availability of library services to residents

- Joint bid working for new funding helps the library connect with other council departments, e.g. Aberdeen City Libraries have partnered with Adult Learning in a bid to secure new funding to support vulnerable, ‘underserved’ adults and help them build confidence and develop life skills:

“What’s being most effective is working in partnership with other agencies – they know the people who need the support and it’s the library that can provide it.”

- Social prescribing is being brought back where trained staff signpost people directly to community groups and activities. This would involve working with a number of partners to provide help in the library
- A library health day supported by partners and local organisations attracted 300 people
- One library authority mentioned promoting library services via their parish councils
- Another authority mentioned working with the adult learning team to get them to run events using their PCs
- The £150 council tax rebate brought in 400-500 new customers over a 6 month period according to one library authority. Residents who did not pay their council tax via direct debit received letters from the council advising them that libraries had free PC access and staff that could help them register for the rebate online. For most users, staff either helped with the online form process (10-15 minutes each) or supported them logging onto the PCs. Those without library cards joined the library to use the PCs
- One to one employability support sessions at Aberdeen City Libraries; the library has relied on local partnerships which help deliver these in sufficient numbers, including with [ABZ Works](#) and [Pathways](#)
- Household Support Fund brings greater numbers into libraries
 - Grant scheme for household support was offered to families with free school meals and to those on pension credit in North Yorkshire. 3000 people came into the libraries after receiving a council letter that signposted them there for help with applying for vouchers online
 - Helping vulnerable people in Staffordshire. As part of the council’s Household Support Fund for vulnerable pensioners, Staffordshire Libraries facilitated access to supermarket vouchers which had been provided as tokens. Where vulnerable pensioners could not access IT themselves many came to their libraries to redeem these tokens for vouchers. This resulted in more than 5,000 extra visits in just over a week
- Community services at Cwmbran Library in Torfaen includes Credit Union, Citizens Advice Bureau and council registry and blue badge services two days a week, supports greater use of library services. Community solutions service at a London borough council is a further example of a catch-all place helping to drive library footfall

Conclusion

Libraries have a proven track record of recognising and quickly responding to the changing needs of their customers. While many of the approaches described here are still in the experimental phases, there are many successful examples and plenty of inspiration to show that they can continue increasing use and interest in library services. Together with a commitment to serving their communities, it's clear they are able to succeed.

With such important work to do, it's critical they continue to receive the necessary support and recognition for the vital services and resources they provide. For further details on any of the initiatives included in this document, please contact Lorensbergs at enquiries@lorensbergs.co.uk and we will be happy to provide more information.