

X THE PLACE OF USEFUL LEARNING

## Downloading the new normal: exploring public library digital service use during COVID

University of  
Strathclyde  
Glasgow

Some preliminary findings from Scottish data

CILIPS Annual Conference – 7<sup>th</sup> June 2021

Elaine Robinson, David McMenemy and Ian Ruthven  
Strathclyde iSchool Research Group  
Computer and Information Sciences  
University of Strathclyde

UKRI UK Research  
and Innovation

1

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

## Background

AHRC bid under the UKRI's COVID-19 Rapid Response Programme

Key research theme of the call:

- ***“The ‘digital turn’ in cultural consumption: opportunities and limitations”***
- What are the effects of this for public library services and users?

Project will explore this from multiple perspectives:

- Organisational and sectoral issues
- Ethical issues
- User information behaviour issues

UKRI Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

2

---

---

---

---

---

---

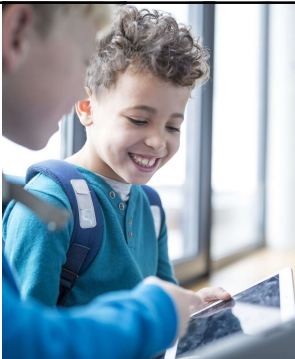
---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

## Today's presentation

- Present some preliminary findings from Scottish public libraries
- Highlight some key issues/learning points
- Provide overview of research still to be done
- Seeking input from sector to inform project, and to inform policy



3

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

## Issues to be explored (on UK-wide basis)

- (1) privacy and ethical issues in the utilisation of digital in the spaces that were previously overtly analogue in nature,
- (2) linked issues of digital exclusion and ensuring equity of access, and
- (3) how information behaviours have adapted and/or been impacted across age groups and other societal demographics.

4

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

## Data gathering

- Freedom of information requests of UK public library authorities
  - How have libraries responded to COVID and forced lockdown?
  - How has usage of traditional and digital services been transformed?
- Readability testing of third-party privacy policies
  - How understandable the documents are for readers?
- Focus groups with public library users across UK
  - How have user behaviours changed in lockdown, and what are the consequences for digital exclusion?
- Nationwide UK survey
  - How are physical and digital services perceived by the UK general public?

5

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

## Research Questions

- RQ1. To what extent has the usage of digital services in public libraries across the UK increased as a result of COVID?
- RQ2. How do the public libraries mitigate any digital exclusion issues?
- RQ3. What are the experiences of users in utilising these services from behavioural and digital exclusion perspectives?

6

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Research Questions

- RQ4. What information on privacy issues is presented by public libraries to users related to the use of 3rd party services?
- RQ5. How accessible/understandable are the privacy policies of the 3rd party vendors?
- RQ6. How aware of the privacy issues related to the use of 3rd party services in libraries are library users?

7

---



---



---



---



---



---



---

## Use of third-party vendors

- The move to digital resources during COVID-19 has meant the need to download third party apps and subscribe to third party services
- How are concepts of information sharing conveyed to the patron?
- Are patrons and public libraries fully aware of how e-services engage with patron information and privacy?

8

---



---



---



---



---



---



---

## Readability Testing

- Performed readability tests of third-party privacy policies
- Readability is defined as how easily a piece of writing can be read and understood (Grewal et al., 2012)
- Important concept, especially for the public library
- Researchers have used readability testing in previous work (Robinson and McMenemy, 2020)

9

---



---



---



---



---



---



---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

## Readability testing: Results

Readability Test	Output Type	Average Score	Ideal Score
Flesh Reading Ease	Score 0-100	44	60-70
SMOG	Grade 1-20	14	10 (Below 13)
Coleman-Liau	Grade 1-20	12	7-8 (Below 14)
Gunning Fog	Grade 1-20	13	7-8 (Below 12)

- For context, in similar study of UK public library internet acceptable use policies, only 5.5% met the recommended readability standards. 8% were as difficult to read as a scientific paper
- Robinson E. and McMenemy D. (2020) 'To be understood as to understand': A readability analysis of public library acceptable use policies. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*. 52 (3) pp.713-725 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000619871598>

10

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

## Freedom of Information (FOI) requests

- FOI legislation provides public access to information held by public authorities
- Researchers have carried out previous work in this area
- 214 public library authorities (PLAs) in the UK
- 32 PLAs in Scotland

11

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

## FOI responses

**32 PLAs in Scotland**

**14 run by Charitable Trusts**

**Replies**

- 29 replied within 20 days
- 1 replied day 21
- 1 replied day 32
- Still waiting on 1

12

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

### FOI Questions

1. Please provide data on active membership of the library service for each year for the period 2016-2021 (for the year 2020/21, please provide all data on usage that you have up to the date you received this request)
2. Please provide annual usage statistics for each year for the period 2016-2021 for your library service for the following digital services. (For the year 2020/21, please provide all data on usage that you have up to the date you received this request)
  - a) Electronic books and comics
  - b) Electronic audio books
3. Please also provide annual usage statistics for each year for the period 2016-2021 for your library service for physical library loans

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

13

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

### FOI Questions

4. Please provide costings for the amounts paid annually to the providers of these services in the same periods *(For Q1-3 please clarify in your answers if the figures refer to the financial or calendar year)*
5. Please provide information on any support services offered by your service to help library users access these electronic services (such as tablet or laptop loans, training sessions) and the costings for these
6. What advice is given to library users regarding privacy in use of digital services provided by third parties?
7. Please provide details regarding how the various lockdowns related to COVID have impacted on your library opening hours?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

14

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

### Initial findings: membership & physical loans

Since COVID-19 active membership has decreased on average -56%

Physical Loans have decreased (since COVID-19 down -78%)

Physical Loans had been decreasing pre-COVID-19, by -11%

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

15

THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

### Initial findings: E-Lending

E-Loan figures have climbed steadily

- E-books: 33% increase during non-COVID years
- E-books: 100% increase during COVID
- E-audiobooks: 65% increase during non-COVID years
- E-audiobooks: 76% increase during COVID

16

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

### Initial findings: Costings

- FOI reminder: Please provide costings for the amounts paid annually to the providers of these services [e-books/e-audio] for each year for the period 2016-2021
- Average cost increased by varying amounts

- During non-COVID years average increase 9% (Highest 110%)
- During COVID average increase 72% (Highest 277%)
- PLA 1: 2019/20 cost: £12,000  
2020/21 cost: £38,000
- PLA 2: 2019/20 cost: £14,818  
2020/21 cost: £15,754
- Information withheld by 3 respondents

17

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

### Initial findings: opening hours

- All PLAs have responded so far have felt the effects
- Most have Click & Collect system in place (23 PLAs)
- 11 PLAs with home delivery services or mobile libraries
- Libraries co-located within schools closed

18

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

**Initial findings:  
support services**

- Lots of different types of support in place, with a somewhat large variation
- Large amount of ad-hoc support
- Support sessions or training points for patrons
- Device loans: 6 PLAs + 6 have digital staff member
- Support services both in-house and for home
- Library provides both basic IT support, as well as social support (e.g., CVs)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

19

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

**Initial findings:  
support services**

- Highlights the role of library in the community
- For many, authorities, part of core service (costs worked into budget)
- Partnerships are key: co-operating with organisations, charities, other departments within the council, are integral for a lot of the support services offered (this is also reflected across UK PLAs)
- 4 PLAs mention voluntary support

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

20

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

**Initial findings:  
privacy advice**

- Mostly references to privacy policies
- 17 references to external privacy policy
- 16 references to internal privacy policy
- One PLA stated N/A, one stated no advice, unless specifically asked for
- Only one mentioned training for staff to help users

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

21

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

**Next stages**

- Focus groups with library users beginning over the summer
- Release of FOI data and papers based on analysis of this data
- Nationwide survey of UK population re their experiences re COVID lockdown and public library digital services

22

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

22

X THE UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

**Questions and feedback welcome**

- We hope this UK-wide study will provide strong evidence for public library advocacy
- We are keen to get experiences from people working in public libraries
- Please feel free to contact us
- Any questions?

Twitter: @DownloadNormal  
 Website: <https://newnormal.cis.strath.ac.uk/>  
 Email: [e.robison@strath.ac.uk](mailto:e.robison@strath.ac.uk) ; [d.mcmenemy@strath.ac.uk](mailto:d.mcmenemy@strath.ac.uk) ; [ian.ruthven@strath.ac.uk](mailto:ian.ruthven@strath.ac.uk)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

23

X THE PLACE OF USEFUL LEARNING



**University of  
Strathclyde  
Glasgow**

24

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

24