Library Study Zones

Culture and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission

Date of meeting: 4th November 2024

Lead director/officer: Sean Atterbury

1. Purpose

1.1 This report provides an overview of the Study Zones initiative in libraries in the context of the digital support provided by libraries for people living, working and studying in Leicester.

2. Overview

2.1 Neighbourhood Services were awarded £135k grant funding by Arts Council England in February 2023 following a successful application to the Libraries Improvement Fund (round 2). A further £30k matched funding was provided through the Council's capital programme for 2022 – 23. The total funding for the scheme is £165k

2.2 The scheme responds to changes in the digital support required by Leicester library customers. The report outlines the ways in which libraries are supporting residents of all ages to access digital services. The proportion of customers using their own devices has grown in comparison to those using cabled library computers.

2.3 The scheme will create Study Zones for all residents and customers with a focus on young people to respond to increased demand for using personal IT devices. The zones will offer study desks at incorporating charging points to support the use of laptops, phones and tablets for study & leisure at all libraries. Informal study furniture will also be installed to accommodate shared study, reading and socialising for library users of all ages.

2.4 Information display screens have been installed at all libraries as part of the scheme, to enable the delivery of information, advice and signposting to library events through the provision of updatable and targeted display screens.

2.5 Cycle parking facilities have been updated at two sites to ensure children, young people and adults are able to travel sustainably to access their local library Study Zone.

3. Report

Background and current provision

3.1 Neighbourhood Services are committed to the provision of quality digital and information services appropriate to the needs of Leicester residents as one of four Universal Offers developed by Libraries Connected and supported by Arts Council England:

- **Information & Digital – Goal: "To ensure local communities have access to quality information and digital services, to learn new skills and to feel safe online"**

The other Universal Offers are linked and rely on the digital and information support provided by libraries:
- Health & Wellbeing
- Culture & Creativity
- Reading

3.2 Leicester's libraries provide a wide range of equipment, resources and signposting support to respond to the needs of residents of all ages and from all communities across the city.

3.3 The service currently provides 159 public access computers across all 16 libraries. Free Wi-Wi access is available at all sites. Printing is available at a charge to cover the cost of paper and toner and is increasingly in demand as customers often do not have home printers yet require printed labels, vouchers and tickets for a wide range of services accessed online. Printing is available both from the library computers, and from customer's own devices. Scanning services are also available from library computers.

3.4 Library staff provide informal signposting and support for customers using IT. Ad-hoc support is available for customers to help navigate the internet and to find online forms for Council and other services. Libraries also offer informal basic IT courses through the self-learning "Learn my Way" sessions. These resources are provided through the Good Things Foundation to enable complete beginners to learn at their own pace. The courses are self-led with staff to support for confidence. Topics covered include internet safety, filling forms, Universal Credit and health online.

3.5 In addition Leicester Adult Education deliver formal IT classes from 5 digital classroom suites located in neighbourhood services facilities. The sessions include entry level sessions funded by Public Health through the "Let's Get Digital" initiative.

Changing patterns of IT usage in libraries

3.6 Since the pandemic patterns of IT usage and the digital support requirements have changed. Although the usage of traditional cabled library computers continues to recover year on year, the overall number of hours used has decreased significantly from 179,000 in 2019-20 (pre-pandemic) to 86,100 in 2023 - 24. The recovery of Wi-Fi usage for customers bringing their own devices has been much quicker, and has indeed overtaken library computer use at just over 86,200 accesses in 2023 – 24. It is thought that many more customers now have their own device following the need to access online services during the extended lockdown period in 2020 – 21.
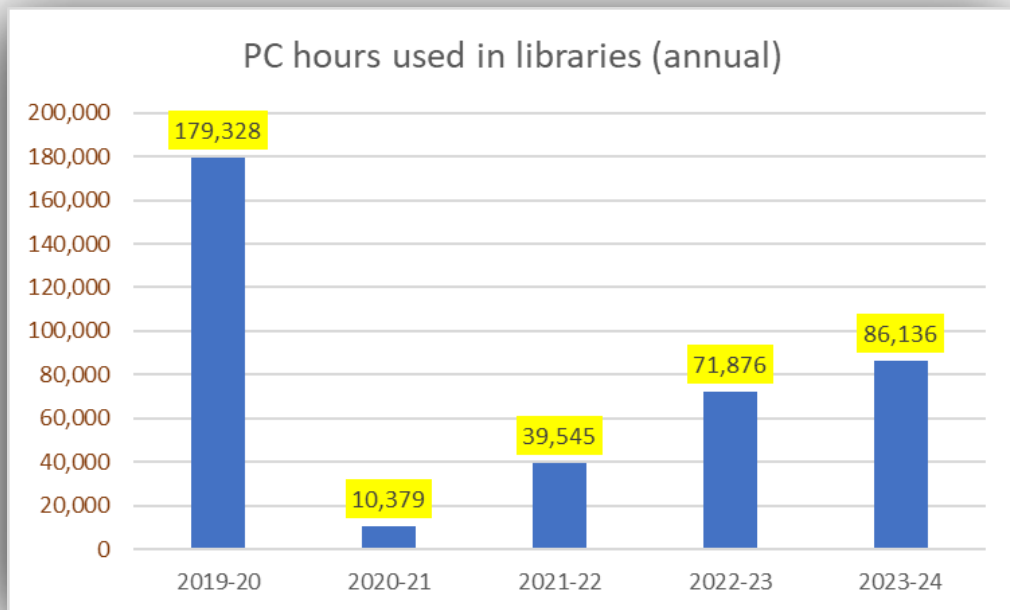
PC hours used in libraries (annual)

Year	Value
2019-20	179,328
2020-21	10,379
2021-22	39,545
2022-23	71,876
2023-24	86,136

Chart showing the number of hours spent on library computers over the past 5 years

Library Wi-Fi accesses (annual)

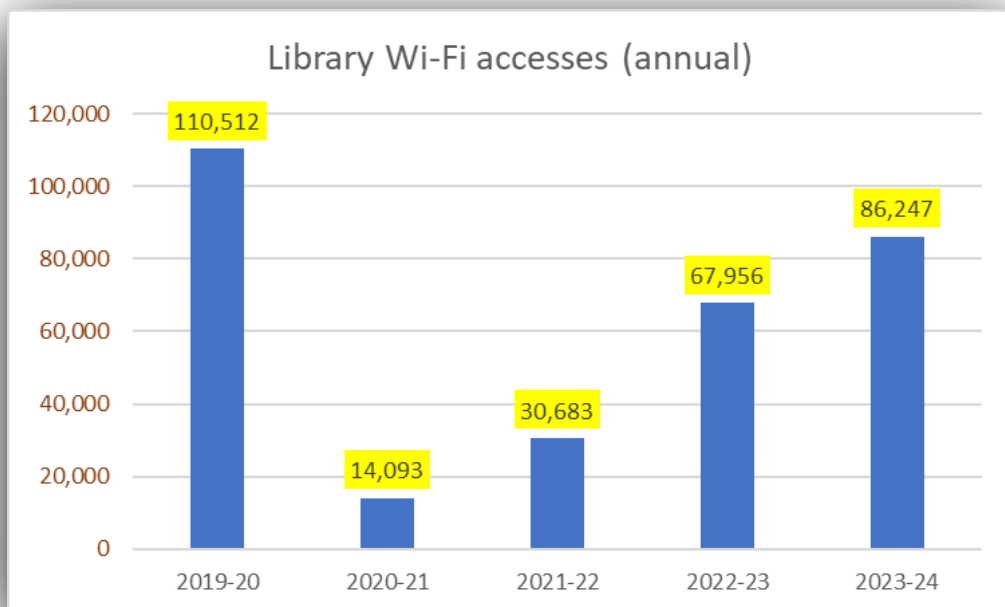| Year	Value
2019-20	110,512
2020-21	14,093
2021-22	30,683
2022-23	67,956
2023-24	86,247

Chart showing the number of accesses to library Wi-Fi system over the past 5 years

3.7 As a result the library customer survey undertaken in 2023 identified a lack of facilities in libraries for customer's bringing their own devices. Whilst free Wi-Fi services in all libraries have been available for over 10 years, customers highlighted the need for suitable study furniture and in particular charging points for their devices.

Study Zones scheme

3.8 Neighbourhood Services were awarded £135k grant funding by Arts Council England in February 2023 following a successful application to the Libraries Improvement Fund (round 2) for the Study Zones project. A further £30k matched funding was provided through the Council's capital programme for 2022 – 23. The total funding for the scheme is £165k

3.9 The project has delivered distinctive Study Zones for all residents and customers with a focus on young people to respond to increased demand for using personal IT devices in the library. The zones were installed in libraries between June – August 2024 and offer charging points to support the use of laptops, phones and tablets for study and leisure at all 16 libraries. The zones will enable individuals and groups to work, study, connect and relax in dedicated spaces using Bring Your Own Device facilities. The project optimises use of existing wi-fi and wi-fi print facilities at all libraries, providing desks, seating and USB and standard charging points.

3.10 In total, 55 study desks with USB and standard charging points have been installed. Allocations were determined by the available space within the library and the local demand for study and use of devices. It is to be noted that Highfields and Knighton Libraries did not require additional powered desks as both libraries had been equipped with pilot Study Zones under recent refurbishment works.

3.11 20 information display screens were installed across all 16 libraries to promote library services and local events. The screens are centrally administered for ease of updating and ensure consistent messaging across the libraries estate.

3.12 Benefits of the investment include:

- Improved facilities for the relaunch of library after-school Homework Help sessions for school children and better provision for students.
- The zones will provide facilities for home workers and families in high density housing who cannot afford large data packages or internet providers and struggle to pay for heating & lighting. The scheme links to the "Warm Welcome" offer in all of our libraries, providing disadvantaged communities with well-equipped facilities where they can come together to meet, learn and study.
- The scheme supports residents to access Council and other online services using the own device with power, printing and signposting help from library staff.
- Support for partners delivering advice surgeries, for example the 9 weekly DWP Job Shops in Leicester Libraries. Work Coaches are able to signpost clients to the Study Zones to continue their job searches.
- Provision for both individual and group study, with open desk clusters available for group work.
- All equipment and furniture is portable providing greater flexibility for managers to develop and optimisation the usage of library space
- Information screens are a key part of the project to promote and signpost to services, events & activities and to provide information relating to key campaigns, for example health and wellbeing and cost of living initiatives within libraries.

- Improved cycle parking has been installed at two sites to support cycle, e-bike and scooter travel for all and in particular to remove barriers to access for young people accessing the Zones.
- Study Zones have been branded, signed and promoted citywide to promote awareness and use of the facilities.

3.13   The Study Zones complement the Leicester libraries' online offer, providing spaces for customers to borrow and read a wide range of electronic media on their own devices. The e-library, available free of charge to Leicester library members, includes an extensive range of eBooks, e-audiobooks, e-newspapers and e-magazines which can be borrowed and read in the library, or at home.

3.14   The Study Zones scheme was formally launched in August 2024 by the "Values" group at the Central Library. The group meet every week and are using the new facilities to learn more about the range of online library resources available, including e-newspapers and e-magazines. The group leader said "we find that meeting up to study together really helps us, but we need a large enough space that is quiet where we can plug in our laptops and concentrate properly. The new study zones are going to be ideal for us"

Study Zones launch with the "Values" group , August 2024

Study Zones promotional poster, August 2024

Monitoring and evaluation

3.15   Initial feedback and observed usage of the Study Zones has been very positive with most desks attracting users from installation onwards. The usage of the Study Zones will be monitored through:

- library Wi-Fi access figures
- Study Zone usage sampling
- customer comments and feedback forms
- Homework Club feedback sessions

Mid-year Wi-Fi usage figures indicate that usage has already increased by 20% since installation, with overall Wi-Fi accesses forecast to increase to over 100,000 by the end of the year.

4. Financial, legal, equalities, climate emergency and other implications

4.1 Financial implications

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The details of the grant and Council match-funding are contained within the body of the report.
Signed: Stuart McAvoy, Head of Finance
Dated: 25th October 2024

4.2 Legal implications

In relation to any funding which has been received from Arts Council England need to ensure that it complies with any specified conditions imposed. Legal Services can advise on any terms and conditions relating to the funding and any funding will need to be assessed against subsidy rules. It is recommended that ongoing legal advice should be sought as and when necessary. Meera Patel, Solicitor (Commercial) Ext. 37 4069
Signed: Meera Patel, Solicitor (Commercial)
Dated: 25th October 2024

4.3 Equalities implications

Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which means that, in carrying out their functions, they have a statutory duty to pay due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act, to advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't. Protected Characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. The report updates on the study zones that have been implemented across library services. It may be useful to do some equality monitoring to understand who is using the services and to see if some targeted promotion is required where certain characteristics aren't. It may be prudent to also review that all desks and equipment are accessible for people with disabilities. The initiative is positive and is likely to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't.
Signed: Kalvaran Sandhu, Equalities Manager
Dated: 24th October 2024

4.4 Climate Emergency implications

There are limited climate emergency implications directly associated with this report. As noted within the report, the scheme has implemented measures to enable cycle travel to libraries, as well as linking to the Warm Welcome offer in libraries, supporting people struggling to heat their own homes over the winter. Whilst increased use of digital devices

in libraries is expected to lead to an increase in energy consumption, this is likely to be relatively minor. More widely, improving digital access may also provide benefits through enabling access to online services by the public, potentially reducing emissions associated with travel to access services.

Signed: Aidan Davis, Sustainability Officer, Ext 37 2284

Dated: 23/10/2024

4.5 Other implications (You will need to have considered other implications in preparing this report. Please indicate which ones apply?)

N/A