

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

22nd July 2020

STATEMENT OF COUNTY COUNCILLOR GREG WHITE

Library and Information Service

Libraries are back!

Members will be pleased to hear that North Yorkshire residents will again be able to pick up books by their favourite authors as libraries began a phased reopening from Monday, 6 July. To begin with, visits will be by appointment only. From 6 July, customers will be able to take advantage of a free Select and Collect service. They will be able to call or email their local library to request the kind of books they like. A member of the library team will hand-pick a selection that meets the customer's request, then contact the customer to arrange a convenient time for them to collect the books from the library entrance. As usual, books can be borrowed for up to three weeks.

Customers can also use a new "library takeaway" service, which offers specially selected book bundles to borrow. There will be a menu to choose from each week with something for all ages. Details will be on local library Facebook pages. People will be able to return books, but for now library buildings will not be open for any other services. Books will be quarantined when they are returned.

From Monday, 13 July, libraries managed by North Yorkshire County Council at Scarborough, Harrogate, Malton, Whitby, Pickering, Filey and Skipton are providing limited access to public computers. Ripon, Selby, Northallerton, Knaresborough and Richmond will follow suit on 20 July. Some community libraries are also providing access so customers should check locally. Unfortunately, due to the need for social distancing, the library teams will not be able to offer computer support.

Also restarting from 13 July is the Home Library Service. Before lockdown, the library service was delivering books to more than 1,600 people across the county. All customers have been contacted to make sure they still want to receive the service and volunteers are gearing up to start getting books out to them again

The aim will then be to open further services over the following weeks, starting with bookable access to libraries' public computers, followed by a return to browsing with social distancing in place. Only when restrictions are eased sufficiently will libraries reopen their public toilets, desks and tables for public use and café areas.

All details will be on the County Council's website and press releases will be issued as the situation changes. A staggering 65,000 emails were sent to users informing them of the changes on re-opening.

Libraries under Lockdown

In line with government guidance our libraries closed on 23 March 2020. However, our staff and volunteers were determined that the service would be maintained and did so magnificently. The buildings might be closed but over 2,000 new members have been signed up to use the digital resources. Over the last three months over 80,500 e-books and e-audio books have been borrowed and 125,723 newspapers and magazines, compared to the same period last year a 125% for e-books and a 500% increase for newspapers etc.

Libraries also proved up to the task of maintaining contact with their customers – innovative live storytimes, craft activities, memory cafes, author talks and even several ‘escape from the library’ session. National events were also celebrated in virtual style including VE day, Pyjamarama, Mental Health week to name a few. Ripon library worked with Gateshead to launch an LGBTQ writing competition and a Black Lives Matter book collection was launched. The launch of the Then and Now local history project was transferred to social media which increased awareness of this amazing project with refugees in Skipton. Facebook followers more than doubled, with a total reach of over 741,500, over 71,700 watched videos posted by the service.

Library Strategy 2020 – 30

As members will have noted the Library Strategy 2020 – 30 is presented to Council for approval.

The new strategy recognises the changes of the past decade and has been developed together with partners, volunteers and other stakeholders. It demonstrates the council’s commitment to continue investing in libraries as a community resource able to support its ambitions for North Yorkshire.

The last three months have seen just how important our libraries are with many becoming hubs for the local organisation of volunteers supporting their communities during the pandemic. We have a family of libraries in North Yorkshire that includes volunteers, charities, partner organisations, parish and town councils, all of whom are involved in delivering services. We recognise the huge contribution in time, energy, commitment and fund raising efforts of community library groups which together with the staffing, infrastructure and financial support from the County Council is critical in keeping all our libraries open especially as we start on recovery.

The strategy shows how working together the service as a whole can develop and remain relevant to the communities served by our libraries. It focuses on four core objectives: literacy and learning; health and wellbeing; digital and communities. These are set against key outcomes of raising aspirations, stimulating enjoyment of culture and helping people live independent lives.

Your Library, your place went to public consultation 7 January – 24 February 2020 with the document published on the council website with an on-line questionnaire. 282 responses were received from individuals, volunteers and organisations. The draft strategy was well received and the four objectives are supported. All the community libraries responding were supportive. The vast majority of the respondents had a positive opinion of the strategy with 83% of those who replied feeling that it was ‘very good’ or ‘good’. Only 4% (10 people) felt it was ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. The majority of respondents agreed with all the objectives, with 95% agreeing (strongly or somewhat) with the objectives: Literacy and learning and Digital; 92% with Communities and 91% with Health and wellbeing.

Coroners

Coroners have continued to work throughout the lockdown and have now resumed holding simpler inquests. It is, however, likely to be some time before more complex jury inquests can be resumed safely.

Registrars

Registrars have also been working throughout lockdown, principally registering the many deaths that have occurred during the last few months. These have been carried out over the telephone. In line with government guidance, the team that supplies copy certificates has also been open to internet orders.

Birth registrations resumed from 3rd June and all North Yorkshire offices are open for these appointments. There is a backlog of birth registrations and it is estimated this will be early August before it is cleared. In the meantime, as an emergency measure, alternative arrangements meant that parents have been able to access child benefit without the need to register the birth.

Citizenship services for those seeking UK nationality have resumed.

Weddings and civil partnerships resumed from the 4th July but with many restrictions. These particularly affects the number of persons in the ceremony (maximum 30), the need to maintain social distancing in the venue which in practice further limits the numbers who can attend and the reception afterwards cannot be held for 30 people. This has disappointed many couples who are continuing to postpone their ceremony until the restrictions are more relaxed.

There are a few services still not open, mainly changes to a birth registration, but this should be resumed in August

Archives

The Record Office has been working hard during lockdown to improve its digital offer and digital access to the archives. Staff have added almost 10,000 item level descriptions of documents to the online catalogue, which saw a rise in visits between April and June of 35%.

Pop-up archives, which were due to be held at Whitby, Knaresborough, Malton and Richmond during Local History month in May, were moved online via the Record Office's new blog. Illustrated articles, covering subjects ranging from the medieval cartulary for Whitby Abbey, to architectural plans of Malton, to 19th century schooling in Knaresborough, shone a light on different aspects of the towns' histories and were viewed over 1700 times. The blog will continue to promote and open up access to the huge range of collections held by the Record Office and to provide a new way for people to engage with the heritage of the county.

Many volunteers have continued their work for the Record Office from home whilst the public service is closed and have begun a new project to transcribe over 300 of the county's tithe apportionments. These documents were drawn up in the 1840s to assess the tithe payable in cash to the parish church. They include what was often the earliest complete map of a parish, and give detailed information about land owners and occupiers, field names and land use, providing a snapshot of a parish or township at that time and a basis for further research. The project is the first step towards making the information more accessible online and to giving local historians much improved access to this amazing resource. The team of 25 volunteers have already transcribed 40 apportionments and the website is under development.

The Record Office's Lottery funded Resilient Records project has also been able to continue its work digitally through lockdown. Working in partnership with Dementia Forward, six digital reminiscence sessions have been delivered to an early onset dementia group based near Harrogate, who have begun meeting online. The sessions aimed to stimulate engagement, connection and enjoyment by encouraging the sharing of conversation and memories inspired by images and documents from the archives. Feedback from the participants following the sessions was very positive and the model will be used to deliver further sessions around the county.

The date for re-opening the County Record Office is uncertain, but hopefully in July, and it will only re open when assurance can be given to visitors that they are in a safe environment. There will be strict limits on how many visitors may attend and there will be amended hours of opening.

Customer Update

During the Covid lockdown the Customer Service Centre:

- Made 20,000 outbound calls to vulnerable customers,
- Taken 7000 inbound calls from customers needing information and advice or support.
- Referred 2000 customers to support for accessing food, 1000 for prescriptions, 300 for wellbeing services like befriending, 100 customers with financial difficulties, 500 customers for smoke alarms.
- We have also helped customers to get access to tradesman for essential maintenance, access books from library services and connect with other community organisations offering everything from on-line crafting sessions to dog walking services.
- Over the phone we supported over 1000 customers to registrar on-line for their national food parcels.

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