**THE GATHERING PODCAST**

**SEASON 2: REMAKING**

**ACCESSING THOSE WHO CAN’T ACCESS ONLINE**

***An Interview with Julie Bell, Head of Libraries, Museums, Culture and Archives, Lancashire County Council***

**Tell us a little about the communities you work with - how you traditionally work with them and the methods that have helped you to engage with residents?**

Lancashire Libraries:

* provides nearly 600 computers for communities across the county via our 64 libraries
* we provide free WiFi
* we provide online courses, with support from our staff and volunteer digital champions
* we deliver Learn My Way courses, as part of the Good Things Foundation Online Centres Network
* we work with Lancashire Adult Learning to also deliver basic courses for people to access the internet and learn other digital skills such as photography.
* we provide coding and making clubs in some libraries for children and adults.
* We have different types of equipment, such as VR headsets, robotics etc., which we have used with a whole range of age groups.
* before lockdown, we had been focusing on upskilling our workforce and the county council's workforce as part of the council's digital strategy. The next step was to use staff skills more extensively to support more people in our communities. We had just started some work with Citizens Advice.
* we have a wide-ranging Digital Library, which we branded as *Your Library At Home* from March. It includes access to eBooks, eAudiobooks, newspapers, magazines, comics and subscription research resources, such as Oxford English Dictionary, World Book Encyclopedia and business resources.
* we have an online chat enquiry service – Ask a Lancashire Librarian
* we use Twitter and Facebook and our webpages to promote our digital offer.
* our five year strategy for Libraries, Museums, Culture and Archives has five goals and one is our digital offer.
* we support around 1000 people each year on our digital courses.

In 2019/20: -

People downloaded 353,007 eBooks and eAudiobooks from Lancashire Libraries;

We facilitated 504,007 public computer sessions;

Library staff delivered 1,423 assisted digital support sessions with commercial partners on behalf of UK Visas and Immigration;

Our staff answered 503 online chat enquiries through *Ask a Lancashire Librarian;*

We secured capital funding to provide new digital equipment for customers -

* 584 new public computers
* 50 new self-service machines
* 74 new public printers/photocopiers

**What has been the impact of Covid on the work of Lancashire Libraries?**

During COVID we started to work more collaboratively with different community groups. Through the county's vulnerable people cell, it had been identified that there were large numbers of people without either the skills, or the tech kit, or the data, so they were totalyl excluded from connecting effectively with people during lockdown. The government started the channel shift in 2000 when it gave libraries across England the funding for the public computers we have. Twenty years later, despite tech being cheaper and more internet offers available, it is still something that is required by people as the gap widens in terms of the rich and the poor.

We branded our Digital Library resources *Your Library At Home* and promoted digitally. We ran virtual activities - a weekly Lego club, adult and family book clubs, quizzes, Emoji book recommendations, weekly adult and family storytelling performances from Spot On Lancashire artists.

We have worked with Devices Dot Now to provide 75 tablets to gift to people over 50 with some data included. Staff are working remotely to support the individuals to use the tablets, install apps and be safe online. This is really intensive work, but so valuable to everyone involved.

We are working with more organisations to look for further funding opportunities to provide more equipment for different targeted audiences as well. We also need to find a way to get more data at a reasonable cost for people on low incomes.

The library service refreshed the public computers in 2019. However, though we have reopened, because of Covid safe restrictions we cannot provide access to all the computers. We have the demand, but it has to be managed much more than before Covid. We do provide printing at every library and will be rolling out WiFi printing, meaning you can print from your phone.

We recognise that there is even more demand for IT for students and children. Some kit was provided for children through the Department of Education in lockdown and that kit was circulated. There are still opportunities for kit to be provided through the schools, but it is through specific criteria.

No delivery of group online courses yet. This is why the DevicesDotNow work is so important.

We kept working on the Small Bells Ring project by connecting online which has been great the project has not been stopped by Covid.

We purchased more eBooks and eAudiobooks for our Borrowbox library and provided a new offer of online newspapers and mags with RBdigital. (both offer apps free to download and can also be used on a web browser). Over 23,000 newspapers have been downloaded in the last quarter. Last year in July, we loaned 26.696 eBooks. This year it was 63,364. Our e users, joining in March and April, were over 1,000 new users each month. It is usually about 350/400 each month.

We purchased a new subscription to Medici TV, which offers free home access to hundreds of concerts, operas, ballets and cultural documentaries.

We purchased a subscription to Niche Academy, a library based online learning platform. We have used this to create staff and public academies of tutorials and quizzes to support digital literacy and use of digital resources, such as eBooks and online newspapers.

**How have the different age groups within the community responded to the changes in your working practices?**

We have more demand for the public computers than we can meet at present in some libraries. Adults are looking for jobs or universal credit applications. Currently unaccompanied under 12s are not allowed to use the library.

There is slow interest in the free devices, but this is moving as we get more people recommended to us who meet the criteria.

We have two groups of young people working with us, the Culture Hacks and the Hope Street Group, and they have worked online with us – once we sorted all the safeguarding procedures, which are different when doing things online.

**In a Covid world, what have been the things that became most important to your communities and how has your work been able to support this? From the fundamental basic needs, to the places and spaces they live and work in, to knowledge and skills.**

We are reshaping our offer, but the basics are still the same – our priority is to support people to develop their digital knowledge and skills so that they are literate in this area. It is has shown how vital libraries are to the way our communities connect with the arts and with each other.

We have provided a whole range of links to various online courses for people to access through our website

We have also provided a whole range of cultural activities during lockdown that have been online from Spot On story sessions for adults and children to Lego club, to Twitter and Facebook book clubs, to online quizzes. We delivered over 76 different sessions and over 3221 people attended virtually.

Moving forward, the support we give individuals is a key priority as it was before, but we have learnt more about what is needed during Covid.

**What sort of digital tools, apps or new technology did you put in place that you are continuing to use and develop?**

* Niche Academy – online tutorial platform
* We’re using Zoom to engage with our young volunteers and the young people on the Hope Street project.
* YouTube was used by our colleagues in the Music Hub and Outdoor Learning Centres.

**With everything you put in place in response to Covid what happened to the levels of participation and engagement overall?**

I think I have touched on the levels of participation above. We are limited in our actual physical offer of computers at the moment ,but this is work in progress to see what funding and kit we can find to equip our communities and work with partners to provide support with learning etc.

**How important is digital inclusivity in enabling people to participate in the arts now compared to pre-Covid?**

It is vital especially if we face a further lockdown – not just restrictions. We provided access to various art forms for free and for some people that would have possibly been their first experience of an opera, or an adult story time session. But more people need the kit. Those same people would probably have struggled to attend performances in the past because they had to travel, or the ticket was too expensive.

**How have you maintained visibility within the community and a connection to residents since coming out of lockdown?**

By offering all of the above for all age ranges and we also provided links to other arts organisations like More Music singing sessions etc.

**What has been the greatest learning for Lancashire Libraries during this time?**

That digital has brought people together in a way in which we didn’t think it could via Zoom/Skype/Teams and we have been very creative in that space. The pandemic has provided more opportunities for people to discover the arts in an affordable way. However, it has its limitations. It doesn’t match up to a live gig, people are getting square eyes and it doesn't support financially the arts. We require a blended mix of offers.

**Has your purpose and the actions you take towards this changed as a result?**

I don’t think so. We have had a mindset that we are always learning and refining our offer. I think I am surprised more than 20 years on, we still have this definite gap in digital access.

**Longer term, how do you foresee Lancashire Libraries’ creativity and creative practices developing as a result of what’s happened in 2020?**

We will develop and grow our offer. The way we have been able to engage with younger and older audiences is a positive in that these groups may find it difficult to travel, but they don’t need to travel so they are able to access us and other people more easily.