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Rates of COVID-19 cases in public libraries

December 2020

## Introduction

Libraries have been operating with new COVID measures since the beginning of July, when they reopened their doors to users. Through the summer and autumn, the operating environment has continued to be fluid, with national and local restrictions shifting in line with rising and falling local infection rates. In November, we felt it was a good point to gather some information on infection rates within libraries, to review how well the control procedures are working to keep staff and users safe.

## Methodology

An online survey was carried out between 24 and 30 November 2020. Heads of Service from all 176 public library services in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies were invited to complete the questionnaire.

We received 91 responses, although not all respondents answered every question. The figures quoted in this report are based on the responses received for each question rather than the total number of surveys returned. Due to the sensitive nature of the survey, responses were anonymous.

## Findings

The survey had 91 responses and found that:

* 61 out of 91 (67%) library services had staff test positive
* 144 out of 10,254 staff (1.4%) tested positive for Covid-19 (see Chart 1).

**Chart 1: Percentage of library staff who had tested positive for Covid-19 in each library service**  
91 responses

* Four out of 87 library services (4.8%) had staff in the same branch or in the same team testing positive at the same time – a total of 10 people (4, 2, 2 and 2)
* Two out of 89 (2.3%) library services had been told by track and trace that library users had tested positive. In each case it was a single user
* 22 out of 91 library services (31.9%) closed a branch following an infection. The reasons given for closing were, as a precaution, staff shortages, or to clean (see chart 2).

**Chart 2: Reason for library closures**23 responses

* 36 out of 70 library services knew where their staff had contracted Covid-19 – none reported that it had been caught at work, most commonly it was through friends and family (see Chart 3).

**Chart 3: Where library staff reported contracting Covid-19**40 responses

* 11 out of 88 library services revised their procedures or services following an infection. This included re-checking risk assessments, tightening cleaning and social distancing procedures, and responding to the changing advice from public health.

When asked what processes was in place if an infection was reported, measures included:

* Staff advised to stay at home if they or someone in their household has symptoms, until a negative test has come back.
* If a member of staff tests positive, follow the NHS and track and trace guidelines related to close and recent contacts of anyone who tests positive for coronavirus, which includes:
  + Reporting to track and trace
  + Closing the library
  + Asking staff to self-isolate
  + Identifying and contacting any customers and staff that have been in close contact.
  + Deep cleaning the library.
* Follow local authority protocols for reporting
* Liaise with public health colleagues for any other further advice needed
* Reinforce Covid-19 secure processes and procedures within teams.

## Conclusions

The data shows that there have been a relatively small number of public library staff infected with COVID-19, and none of these were reported to have been contracted within a library building.

A small number of library services did report having had staff in the same branch or in the same team testing positive at the same time, but the reports do not confirm whether the virus was contracted or spread at work.

There have also been a couple of instances where track and trace have contacted a library following a library customer testing positive, but these have not led to further outbreaks in the library.

Following the report of a member of staff or library customer testing positive for COVID-19, library services have followed their processes to prevent further infections. They have also revised their services and procedures in response to changing government advice or when they have seen ways to improve them.

As there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections originating or spreading in a library building, the data would suggest that, as long as the safety measures library services have put in place are followed, there is minimal risk to staff and customers.

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Email:

info@librariesconnected.org.uk

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