

Equalities Monitoring Libraries

Annual Report - 2023-24



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1. Introduction

The library service has nine libraries located throughout the Borough. They provide a wide range of resources to their local communities and visitors to the area. These resources include books, e-books and e-magazines, spoken word CDs, DVDs, newspapers, free internet access via public computers, free Wi-Fi, digital resources, photocopying, printing and scanning, plus a wide range of activities and events.

Residents and visitors to the area can apply for an e+ smartcard that acts as a membership card to access the resources. Each time the card is used a transaction is recorded to enable usage to be monitored.

The purpose of equalities monitoring is to ensure the Council is providing a fair and equitable service to all of its residents.

To ensure the service is fair and equitable, monitoring has been undertaken in terms of:

- Access to the service
- Changes in service provision

It has been analysed by the following equality groups:

- Age
- Race
- Sex
- Religion
- Disability

When sufficient data for analysis is available for the other protected groups in the Equality Act 2010, these will also be included.

The data below has been taken from:

e+ smartcard database – enrolments and transactions for libraries (1/04/23 to 31/03/24).

Office for National Statistics (ONS) population estimates unit published tables. Crown copyright.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) - Census 2021.

2. Performance against Public Sector Equality Duty

- a) The Library Service runs a large programme of events and activities for people of all ages, backgrounds and protected characteristics and are socially inclusive. These include reminiscence sessions for older people, chess clubs to improve memory, knitting and craft activities, sensory storytimes for children with special needs, storytimes in languages other than English, and a range of activities to promote general health and well-being, such as yoga, mindfulness and Tai Chi.
- b) The service has also actively supported Holocaust Memorial Day, with flameless candles in the windows of each Library, plus Black History Month, Diwali, Pride and LGBTQ+ with displays and events.

In Great Hollands Library, there is a neurodiverse children's group that meets weekly to provide activities and support. Groups of children who are school refusals meet in Crowthorne, Sandhurst and Whitegrove Libraries in a non-threatening environment where they are encouraged to participate in learning activities.

Four volunteers with special needs have been appointed across the service: two at Bracknell Library, one at Great Hollands Library and one at Whitegrove Library in partnership with Activate Learning.

The Library Service has continued to work in partnership with the Social Prescribing Team, who refer clients with depression to the Library Service to take part in the activity programme. Feedback received has indicated the positive impact that joining the library has had on people's health and well-being and some have stated that the Library Service has been a lifeline for them and enabled them to meet new people and make friends.

Open+ is live in all branches apart from Bracknell and Crowthorne. This has made facilities at all seven Libraries more accessible to everyone, but especially for people who work as they can use the branches at times that are convenient to them. Overall, opening hours have increased by 355 hours per week through the Open+ technology. The technology has also enabled Libraries to remain open and accessible during bank holidays and over holiday periods such as Christmas and Easter.

- c) Progress has been made to extend opening times at Bracknell Library with Open+, with modifications to the entrance, to enable accessibility for everyone.

The Library Service became a member of the Good Things Foundation's National Digital Inclusion Network with Bracknell Library becoming a designated National Databank in partnership with Vodafone and Three, providing free mobile SIM cards to people who are unable to access the Internet, as they are unable to afford a phone contract and have no home Internet access. This lack of access often affects vulnerable people who face other inequalities. In addition, the service offers over one hundred free digital skills' courses, in partnership with the Good Things Foundation, to combat digital exclusion and to support the unemployed.

3. Breakdown of service users

Access to the library service can be measured by enrolments and transactions using the e+ smartcard at the nine libraries. Although people who do not use the e+ card may also use the service, the e+ card numbers are sufficiently high to make this a viable measurement of access to the library services.

As people may enrol for the e+ card but not use it, transactions have also been analysed. The tables below show the age, gender, ethnicity and religious belief of those who are using the library facilities.

All data is for residents of Bracknell Forest only. Enrolments for access to library facilities by non-residents were 498 in the year.

The data below pertains only to enrolments undertaken within the Library Service and does not include enrolments for library membership undertaken at other Council venues. For this reason, some data may appear lower than expected.

Table 1 – Enrolments by age

Enrolments in e+ card - Libraries 01/04/2023 - 31/03/2024 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Age Range	Enrolments in e+ card	E+ card %	BF population Census 2021	BF population Census 2021	Variance
Under 18	1,075	34%	30,100	24%	10%
18 to 34	237	8%	24,000	19%	-11%
35 to 49	940	30%	27,400	22%	8%
50 to 64	264	8%	24,300	20%	-12%
65 to 79	577	18%	14,000	11%	7%
over 80	63	2%	4,700	4%	-2%
Total	3,156	100%	124,600	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Table 2 – Transactions by age

Transactions - Libraries 01/04/2023- 31/03/2024 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Age Range	Library transactions	Library transactions %	BF population Census 2021	BF population Census 2021	Variance
Under 18	19,443	36%	30,100	24%	12%
18 to 34	1,046	2%	24,000	19%	-17%
35 to 49	10,082	19%	27,400	22%	-3%
50 to 64	6,120	11%	24,300	20%	-9%
65 to 79	11,810	22%	14,000	11%	11%
over 80	5,599	10%	4,700	4%	6%
Total	54,100	100%	124,600	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Comments

The number of enrolments within the age ranges is split i.e. either slightly below the Bracknell Forest population, or above it in the 'under 18', the '35 to 49' and '65 to 79' age groups where there is a positive variation of 10%, 8% and 7% respectively. This trend reflects the high usage by children and their parents, and the significant role that Libraries play in the development of children's literacy, plus the over 65 age group who have more time for leisure activities.

The number of transactions by the over 65 age ranges is also significantly higher than the Bracknell Forest population and highlights the important role that Libraries play in also combatting loneliness and social isolation.

Table 3 – Enrolments by Race

Enrolments in e+ card for Libraries - Race 01/04/2023 - 31/03/2024 (Residents of Bracknell Forest only)					
	Resident	% (exc. 'unknown')	BF pop. Census 2021	BF pop. Census 2021 %	Variance
White	653	86%	107,269	86%	0%
Mixed	8	1%	3843	3%	-2%
Asian	73	10%	8879	7%	3%
Black	17	2%	2993	2.5%	-0.5%
Other	4	1%	1621	1.5%	-0.5%
Not known	2,645	(78%)			
Total (exc. not known)	755	100%	124,605	100%	

*N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding
Non-specific data included under not known*

Table 4 – Transactions by Race

Transactions for Libraries using e+ card - Race 01/04/2023 - 31/03/2024 (Residents of Bracknell Forest only)					
	Library transactions	Library transactions % (exc. unknown)	BF pop. Census 2021	BF pop. Census 2021 %	Variance
White	11,422	89%	107,269	86%	3%
Mixed	252	2%	3843	3%	-1%
Asian	914	7%	8879	7%	0%
Black	211	1.8%	2993	2.5%	-0.7%
Other	31	0.2%	1621	1.5%	-1.3%
Not known	41,282	(76%)			
Total (exc. not known)	12,830	100%	124,605	100%	

*N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding
Non-specific data included under not known*

Comments

Race enrolments and transactions using the e+ card are broadly in line with most of the population. However, given the number of enrolments and transactions where people have opted not to provide their ethnicity, the results are rather skewed and have, therefore, been omitted from the calculations. The reality is that the majority of Library users actually reflect the Bracknell Forest Census data.

Table 5 – Enrolments by Sex

Total enrolments by Gender for Library Service 01/04/2023 - 31/03/2024 (Bracknell Forest Residents only)					
Gender	Resident	Library transactions % (exc. unknown)	BF population – Census 2021	Bracknell Forest %	Variance
Female	1,761	53%	63,200	50.7%	2.3%
Male	1,410	43%	61,400	49.3%	-6.3%
Unknown	140	4%			
Total	3,311	100%	124,600	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Table 6 – Transactions by Sex

Transactions - Libraries 01/04/2023 - 31/03/2024 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Gender	Library transactions	Library transactions % (exc. unknown)	BF population - Census 2021	Bracknell Forest %	Variance
Female	32,576	60%	63,200	50.7%	9.3%
Male	17,859	33%	61,400	49.3%	-16.3%
Unknown	3,691	7%			
Total	54,126	100%	124,600	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Comments

Enrolments and transactions show more women than men are using Libraries with a positive variance of 2.3% for enrolments and 9.3% for transactions respectively.

It is a national trend that women constitute the majority of users of all public library services. Bracknell Forest is clearly reflecting this. This has also been corroborated by previous user surveys.

Table 7 – Transactions by Religion

Transactions - Libraries 01/04/2023 - 31/03/2024 (Bracknell Forest residents only)					
Religion	Library transactions	E+ card %	Bracknell Forest population Census 2021	Bracknell Forest population Census 2021 %	Variance
Christian	907	50%	59,140	48%	2%
Buddhist	4	0%	1,039	1%	-1%
Hindu	71	4%	2,942	2%	2%
Jewish	11	0.6%	190	0%	0.6%
Muslim	8	0.4%	2,216	2%	-1.6%
Sikh	21	1%	1,055	1%	0%
Other religion	7	0%	7,680	6%	-6%
No religion	772	44%	50,338	40%	4%
Prefer not to say	51,182	(96%)			
Total	1,801	100%	124,600	100%	

N.B Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Non-specific data included under prefer not to say

Comments

Data on enrolments by religion is not currently available through the SmartConnect database as all but 12 new members chose “prefer not to say”. Religious group transactions using the e+ card are broadly in line with the population. However, as 96% also prefer not to say, the results may not wholly represent the religious profile of the Borough’s population.

The Library Management System and supplier databases do not record ethnicity data nor religion either.

4. Key issues for 24/25

Although data from the E+ enrolments and transactions should ideally be used for service planning, the available data is very limited due to the large number of people who refuse to answer questions relating to equalities’ monitoring when joining the Library Service. Therefore, feedback about usage is usually obtained from frontline staff, public feedback forms and stock suggestions.

There is a need for more engagement with specific groups, such as the Hong Kong community and more detailed customer surveys and focus groups. This will be communicated to staff through appraisal objectives and team meetings.

5. Actions and mitigations planned

- a) Engagement with specific community groups through surveys and focus groups is planned, including a survey for all customers on what services and

facilities they would like to have within the borough libraries. In addition, more use of the library buildings by different sectors of the community.

b) Top priorities include:

- Fostering good relations and understanding between different religious groups through displays of religious artefacts in Bracknell Library.
- Promoting more use of the library service by men, such as support groups for men.
- Purchasing additional stock in languages other than English and dual language stock for children.

c) There is a need to work with other partners to achieve the above, including community and support groups, the Public Health Team and the voluntary sector.

6. Performance against the equality objectives

1) Inclusive in all we do

The Library Service runs a large programme of events and activities for people of all ages and are socially inclusive.

The Creative Youth group for young people aged 11 to 17 on Saturdays in Bracknell Library, in collaboration with South Hill Park, has been fully booked every week. Young people can learn a new skill each week with a different artist, from dance and drama to arts and crafts.

The Library Service has also developed a partnership with Stepping Stones Recovery College enabling people to attend taster sessions and gain access to support and advice if they are undergoing mental, physical or emotional challenges.

All Libraries have specially chosen collections of “Books on Prescription”, which are books recommended by health professionals and are self-help books on dealing with a wide range of physical and mental health issues, including dementia, long-term physical conditions and depression. A similar collection for teenagers and children has been developed, called “Reading Well”. There is also a large stock of resources to support people going through the menopause. All resources are free to borrow for Library members.

In order to assist customers who are suffering from financial hardship, all Libraries have increased the amount of stock available on subjects such as managing finances and debt, eating well for less, grow your own and repair and recycle.

The Library Service also subscribes to Press Reader, enabling library members to access thousands of newspapers and magazines in every language.

Although LGBTQ fiction is purchased, it is not identified as a separate genre within the Borough’s Libraries. This is a result of feedback from this community, some of whom completed customer comment forms, who did not wish LGBTQ stock to “stand out” and requested that it be interfiled with general fiction.

The Library Service continues to provide support for those who are seeking employment. The staff provide ad hoc assistance for those who require help completing application forms at all branches. Northern Training Solutions also provide free advice on benefits and employment advice on Tuesday mornings in Bracknell Library. On the first Friday of each month in Bracknell Library, BEEP (Berkshire Education Partnership) provides one to one appointments and workshops for young people aged between 15-24 with special needs and disabilities, who are unemployed and not in education. Adviza also provide support on Mondays with CVs and preparing for job interviews.

2) Accessible for All

Visually impaired users can borrow up to 6 spoken word items at a time, free of charge.

Members who are registered hearing impaired can borrow up to 2 subtitled DVDs per week, free of charge.

Adults and children with special needs can borrow up to 6 spoken word items at a time, free of charge.

The accessibility of buildings has been of paramount importance when considering the rollout of Open+ technology to extend opening times, and consultation was held with the Bracknell Forest Access Group. A full Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out. All Libraries, apart from Bracknell, are fully accessible to wheelchair and motorised vehicle users when staffed and unstaffed. Bracknell Library has lift access to all floors but the Access Group felt it was acceptable to put the lifts out of action in Open+ mode, to avoid anyone being trapped in the event of a fire.

Older people and users with disabilities who have difficulty physically visiting a library can sign up for the Home Library Service. A selection of stock will be chosen for them, according to their preferences, and will be delivered to their homes free of charge either by a volunteer, or by a member of the Home Library Service staff. Volunteers also play a befriending role, as many of our housebound clients are socially isolated.

There are 25 loanable Galaxy tablets, purchased by the Library Service, with full training materials, to enable people who lack digital skills, or who lack the means to fund their own access, to get online, download e-books, and connect with other people through Zoom activities. Initially, the tablets were loaned through the Dementia Services' team, for dementia sufferers and their carers to use as a way of keeping in touch with others. However, the tablets were also made available for library members to borrow. This in addition to free Internet access and free Wi-Fi that is available in all Libraries.

The Princh air printing service has also been launched in Bracknell Library to enable members of the public, who are not Library members, to print from their personal devices and collect and pay in the Library at a time that is convenient for them. This will be rolled out to all Libraries shortly.

3) Accountable and fair

The Library Service is open to everyone who lives, works or studies in the Borough. Access to services and stock is free of charge.

4) Diverse and Inclusive Workforce / Volunteers

6% of the current library workforce represent different ethnic minorities and 18% of the workforce are male. Traditionally, library services have been dominated by a largely female workforce. However, the Library Service has been pro-actively recruiting a more diverse workforce.

Sixty-nine volunteers are assisting the Library Service, with over ten new recruits starting in the last quarter. Of these, 14% are from ethnically diverse backgrounds, 22% are male, 7% have special needs and 1% are registered disabled. This has enabled us to foster good relationships with people from protected characteristics' groups. All have reported that they enjoy the positive contribution that they are making not only to the Library Service, but to the local community as a whole.

7. Views of our customers / service users

Feedback has largely been gathered through customer feedback forms, evaluation forms following events, a survey and anecdotal feedback from frontline staff.

80% have expressed satisfaction with the service overall, including staff helpfulness and the quality and range of stock. Home Library Service users have described the home delivery service as a lifeline, and evaluation forms relating to events are 95% positive.

There have been some requests for stock in other languages, and, in particular, in Mandarin and Cantonese. As a result, some stock will be purchased as a trial to assess popularity.

The majority of complaints received relate to libraries being put into Open+ instead of being staffed during times of staff shortages, or problems with the Open+ technology, which have subsequently been rectified.

There were two complaints of a racial discriminatory nature received from members of the public about a specific former member of Bracknell Library staff. These complaints were taken very seriously and dealt with effectively. The staff member no longer works for Bracknell Forest Council. There were no other complaints from people with different protected characteristics.

8. Conclusion

Plans for the coming year include extending opening times at Bracknell and Crowthorne Libraries with Open+, which will increase accessibility for everyone in all areas of the Borough, rolling out wireless (air) printing at all branches and offering more space for hire by community groups.

There will also be a satisfaction survey carried out, using the Objective tool. This will provide useful feedback on the demographics of service users, and their satisfaction with stock, opening times and the level of service received, which will, in turn, inform further decision making.

Plans are also underway to merge with Customer Services to provide more access to Council services from libraries.