

Digital services 'are no substitute' for traditional libraries

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More than half (57 percent) of GB adults disagree that digital services are an adequate replacement for traditional libraries, according to a survey conducted by the University of Strathclyde.

[The survey](#), conducted in partnership with YouGov, also found that, while the number of people using digital library services increased by 11 percent in 2020–21 from pre-pandemic levels, they still amounted to only a fifth of all library users.

The [online survey](#) covered the views of just over 2,000 GB adults aged 18 and over. It found that, overall, 57 percent of people surveyed tended to disagree or strongly disagreed that "[digital services](#) are an adequate replacement for traditional library services." Just under a quarter (22 percent) of those surveyed agreed with this suggestion.

The responses were broadly reflected consistently across each age group in the [survey](#), with disagreement among 48 percent aged 18–34, 58 percent aged 35–44, 53 percent aged 45–54 and 64 percent aged 55 and over. In the younger [age groups](#) (ages 18–34), where fewer than 50 percent disagreed, they still outnumbered those who agreed once 'don't know' answers were taken into account.

The study was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It was undertaken in 2021 by Dr. David McMenemy, Professor Ian Ruthven, and Dr. Elaine Robinson of Strathclyde's Department of Computer & Information Sciences. Dr. McMenemy is now a Senior Lecturer in Information Studies at the University of Glasgow.

Dr. McMenemy said: "People have missed physical libraries while they have been closed during lockdowns. They are stress-free, calming places where people can go to relax, borrow books or study.

"They are also social spaces at the heart of communities, where people can take their children. They host events and even, in some cases, have acted as COVID-19 vaccination centers.

"In parallel with this survey, we have made Freedom of Information requests to public library authorities across the UK. The responses show that, in the vast majority of libraries, increases in e-book use account for on average 10–20 percent of the physical loans that might have been expected had the libraries been open, and this bears out the findings of our survey.

"There has been a definite rise in use of e-books during lockdown, but it comes from a very low base. When library patrons can choose between e-books and physical books, they choose physical books."

Respondents were also invited to state what the impact of library closures during lockdown had been for them. Answers included:

- "It was devastating not to be able to borrow books and I missed it more than anything else"
- "This has impacted deprived students as well as people relying on accessing archives and documents for their jobs"
- "Really missed weekly visit to library with my kids and having a big stack of books to choose from"
- "It was traumatic especially as people couldn't get books while stuck at home. I organized a book swap to help people read."

For others the digital services were a revelation. The researchers asked if library users found any "unexpected benefits" from using digital services. Answers included:

- "It had just never occurred to me before to use these services for audiobooks, and it was very convenient"
- "Access to a range of magazines that I otherwise would have had to purchase. Links to [free downloads](#) in the magazines, all work, which was an added benefit"
- "New and popular books were available and a waiting list"

- "I love audiobooks and find them more convenient than actual [books](#)."

Just under a quarter (24 percent) of respondents to the survey agreed that their experience during lockdowns would change how they might use public libraries in the future, while 47 percent said it would not.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,005 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 24th–25th November 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Provided by University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

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