

DC on Public Access in Libraries: Impacts and Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

As many have underlined over the last few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn sharp attention to the deep challenges of digital inequality. As part of their response, DC-PAL members have worked to aggregate information and facilitate an exchange of libraries' experiences with supporting digital inclusion throughout the pandemic.

EIFL, for instance, [has issued a call for information](#) about their public library partners' responses and released a summary of findings from around Europe and Africa. IFLA is [keeping track](#) of library closures and gradual re-opening globally – as well as examples of libraries' adjusted services and new initiatives, including those focusing on digital inclusion. Gigabit Libraries Network has run a [series of webinars](#), in partnership with IFLA, bringing together librarians, technologists and other experts from across the US and around the world. Below are some of the key lessons and priority areas for future work around public access in libraries these initiatives highlighted.

1. Evolving and adapting public access solutions. During physical closures, many libraries have explored different ways to continue offering public internet access. A survey by the [Public Library Association \(PLA\)](#) in the United States, for example, pointed out libraries' initiatives to maintain and expand their WiFi coverage, and offer device and hotspot loans. Next to such initiatives, the [Australian Library and Information Association](#) reported that some libraries were able to offer limited access to PC workstations for most vulnerable members of the population with strict precautions.

As restrictions are gradually lifted, libraries are considering how traditional public access can be reintroduced. IFLA is collecting information on [available guidelines](#) for reopening libraries, [including](#) suggestions on how and when internet access and workstations can be safely made available - e.g. reservation systems, cleaning protocols, workstation placement, and more.

In addition, new large-scale initiatives are launched to expand digital inclusion through libraries beyond the pandemic. In Ireland, for example, the Department of Rural and Community Development and libraries in partnership with Microsoft Ireland [have announced a plan](#) to provide high-speed connectivity to disadvantaged students. They plan to extend libraries' broadband connectivity to households using Microsoft's Rural Airband TV White Space technology. In the US, PLA and Microsoft have launched a [microgrants programme](#) that allows rural libraries to install public internet access points outside library buildings in underserved areas.

However, in some areas libraries may not have appropriate resources, infrastructure, capacity or skillsets to carry out such initiatives. The African Library and Information Institutions Association (AFLIA) carried out a survey of library disaster preparedness and response in 24 countries. [Early insights into the survey data](#) suggest the importance of ensuring broadband connectivity for African libraries – this can help offer access to education and information online, especially for communities which have few or no other means of getting online.

2. Skills in the spotlight. Rapid digitalisation also highlights the importance of the wider public's digital skills and literacy. [A rise in cybercrime](#) during the pandemic has been reported in many countries, and individuals' ICT skills are crucial to help them avoid the potential threats – and of course to be able to participate in work, educational and recreational activities that have shifted online.

Libraries traditionally offer digital literacy programming; and some were able to adapt their initiatives to continue throughout the pandemic. The [Connected Lithuania](#) project, for example, was launched before the pandemic to deliver digital skills training through public libraries – and has moved to offer [online classes, workshops and consultations](#) during quarantine. Similarly, other libraries were able to offer ad-hoc support (e.g. by phone or online) for users who are less confident with their ICT skills. Such initiatives are especially relevant to make sure that more vulnerable populations (e.g. older users) are able and feel comfortable participating in online activities.

3. Access to content. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has put an increasing demand on digital services and content. Members of DC-PAL and other actors in the library field called for supportive copyright laws and practices which allow for key work and educational activities to continue. EIFL, for instance, [carried out negotiations with their publisher partners and was engaged in several initiatives aiming to broaden access to COVID-19 research](#). IFLA has worked with EIFL and several other partners to prepare an [Open Letter on Intellectual Property and COVID-19 to WIPO](#); and both EIFL and IFLA have joined the [ICOLC statement on the Global COVID-19 Pandemic](#). [EIFL has endorsed the Open COVID Pledge](#) that seeks to remove barriers to the use of intellectual property to help in the fight against COVID-19.

As part of the concerted action to accelerate digital inclusion and meaningful access to information during and beyond the pandemic, DC-PAL therefore suggests:

- Prioritising policies and interventions towards universal broadband access, and making use of library networks to offer reliable and affordable public access – especially for more vulnerable or underserved communities. It is useful to adopt a definition and long-term goal for universal public access – meaning everyone should live, study and/or work within a walking distance of a high-capacity public access point.
- Considering what emergency measures to ensure equitable access to key digital content during the pandemic should be retained and codified into everyday practice.
- Ensuring the capacity of library/information professionals to support digital inclusion and digital literacy training.