

Library
Sláinte

Cork
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Council

Social Isolation: Mobile Library Service during the Pandemic

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When the first lockdown was announced by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on March 12th 2020,¹ the initial priority of Cork County Libraries was our ‘cocooning’ members. Older and medically vulnerable people were being asked to restrict their movements and social interactions. Where possible, they were to avoid shopping, collecting pharmacy prescriptions. Family visits and attending church services were strongly discouraged. Within hours, all the structures

¹ https://merrionstreet.ie/en/news-room/news/statement_by_an_taoiseach_leo_varadkar_on_measures_to_tackle_COVID-19_washington_12_march_2020.html

which link us to our community, which combat isolation and loneliness, were gone. With all of this in mind, we looked at how we could reallocate resources to deliver a library housebound service to those who found themselves cocooning at home.

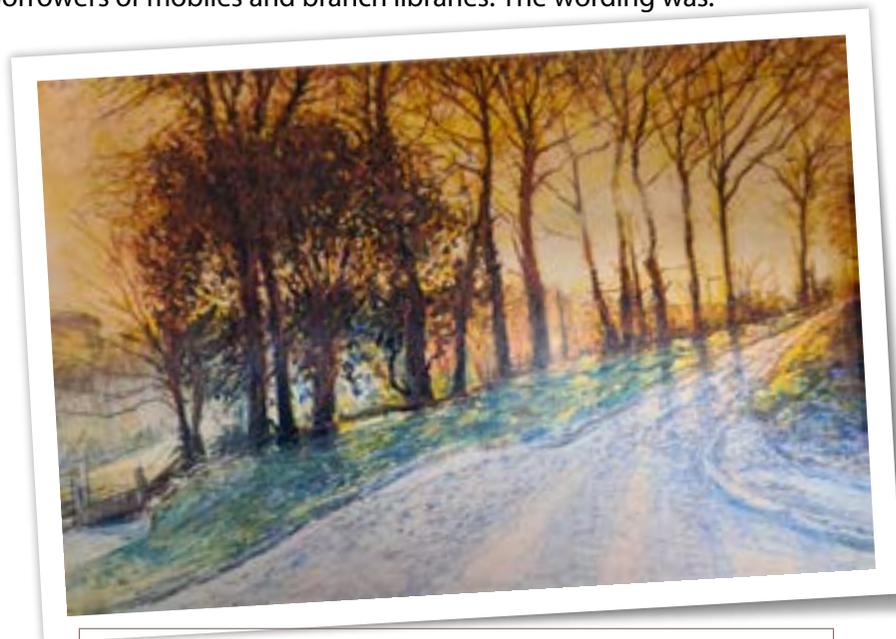
The mobile libraries have a unique role within their communities. Cork County has 4 mobiles (North, South, East and West of the county, serving approximately 340 stops). They have provided a tailored service, over the course of decades, to thousands of individuals. The rapport built up between customer and staff member can be incredibly strong and long lasting. This bond was the driving force for ensuring a safe, effective service was rolled out to our customers while their regular mobile library service was off the road. The mobile service contributes to social inclusion all over the world. In this article we describe how feelings of social isolation which were experienced during the pandemic can be addressed through the mobile libraries.

The library service developed a proposal outlining how we could safely deliver a housebound service during the lockdown and approval was secured from management to deliver the service as part of the overall local authority Community Response initiative. Management met and teased out the practicalities of implementation in compliance with Health and Safety protocols. We became very well versed in the Standard Operating Procedures which were finalized and issued to all staff to ensure the highest level of safety standards for staff and service users.

Within two weeks, we were making those first calls to customers and the reaction was one of surprise and delight. Some craved distraction from the constant news stream, some found time dragged without the usual routines of the day. Getting books would certainly fill some of those gaps. But there were others who weren't inclined to get anything, they just wanted to talk. Talk to someone they knew, whom they weren't directly connected to, about their worries, their loneliness, their struggles. As time went on, and the Housebound Service became the norm, the calls and conversations were as vital as the books themselves. Well into the second lockdown a borrower rang from Cork

University Hospital one night as having fallen and broken her hip she was awaiting surgery and felt the need of reassurance from her library friend. One cocooner rang her local radio station to highlight and praise our housebound service and another was responsible for her daughter who lives in another county contacting her library to see if they might offer a similar service.

There was also an initiative whereby postcards with an image from an artwork by Josef Keys, part of the Cork County Council collection, were sent to borrowers of mobiles and branch libraries. The wording was:



**The Staff of your Library are thinking of you
and we look forward
to when we can open our doors
and give you the service you deserve again.**

Mobile Library Number: xxxxxxxx
Staff Members Name: xxxxxxxx

There was plenty of room for a tailored message of encouragement to the borrower.

The local library staff made the decisions as to who would receive a card from the allocation available, each mobile got 30 cards. These were greatly appreciated and we received many phone calls of thanks and admiration for the beautiful picture. Speaking of phones, the dedicated mobile library smartphone, which is a recent resource, was of vital importance during lockdown particularly for our drivers to locate remote houses via Eircode.

We promoted the online library services during our phone calls to the housebound and helped people set up an account and with any teething problems they had. Many of our non - cocooning borrowers made contact on foot of ads in local media (arranged centrally and nationally) for help in setting up or accessing their online accounts. People are amazed at the wealth of resources available and most especially that it is free. We've been saying it all along but the pandemic really helped people listen! National statistics show there has been a huge increase in use of Borrowbox, RBdigital and Universal Class and Press Reader. We have one borrower aged 91 who is an avid Borrowbox user. Her only complaint is that since so many others are now using the service (she was using it long before lockdown) there is more competition for the titles she favours! For those who fancied learning a new instrument during lockdown, the library housebound service was extended to include the delivery of musical instruments to homes across Cork County as part of the library's Sound Initiative project.

Recognizing that both staff and borrowers might need extra help in choosing books while in isolation an online subscription to *Who Else Writes Like?* and *Who Next?* (children's authors) was organized. It is accessible through the home page of Cork County Library under 'Other Resources'.

A frequent feedback comment from patrons who received boxes was that our choices sometimes introduced them to authors they might never have picked off the shelves for themselves but whom they would now welcome more books from.

Someone came up with the idea of a weekly quiz which we would add to outgoing boxes and a team was duly put together to make this happen.

Sometimes they came back in the boxes untouched but others loved them. One borrower in a nursing home looked for extra questions so she could do quiz sessions with fellow residents and we were happy to oblige.

Rural schools are an important part of our mobile library service schedule - we visit approximately 130 schools fortnightly. Usually the children each come out to choose their own books from the library, but when our mobile service was back on the road in September 2020 and prior to the second lockdown, we had to adjust our service to schools in line with Health and Safety guidelines during the pandemic and offered schools the following options:

1 teacher or SNA to come on the bus to choose for class

2 pupils from one room to choose for the class

Or a monthly delivery of a box of books per class chosen by the librarian pre-packed as per Covid Protocols. Specific requests from teachers were welcomed with this option too.

Most schools chose the third option. The main issue with that from our side was we had a huge amount of stock constantly tied up either because it was out in the schools or in boxes awaiting the 3-day quarantine. We had to be very resourceful with rotating stock between branches and mobiles, accessing our extensive back catalogue and purchasing new books to ensure that we kept up with demand.

At the time of writing, Cork County Library's Housebound service has delivered over 4000 boxes. During the first lockdown (March 27th to June 29th) 1931 boxes were delivered to homes of readers by our team of 5 mobile library drivers. When restrictions were imposed again in the autumn, the housebound service which had been so successful in the spring came back into action and between 23rd October and December 4th, we delivered 995 boxes of books. On January 4th, we again resumed the service as lockdown restrictions were imposed for a third time and library staff began preparing boxes for customers who contacted their local branch or mobile library to request the service. We began deliveries on Thursday January 7th and by the end of February had 1135 boxes were delivered.

As we approach the anniversary of the first COVID-19 case in the Republic of Ireland, we reflect on challenges we have endured. Many of us have lost loved ones, been unable to visit or hug family members or friends, felt the emotional strain of constant vigilance and the not-knowing what is yet to come. But we will continue to provide a Housebound Service to the vulnerable and isolated in our community, for as long as it is required. We will make the calls, pack the boxes, arrange deliveries, and we will listen. This is our contribution to providing a library service during the pandemic.

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