

# Engaging Libraries

public engagement on health, society and culture



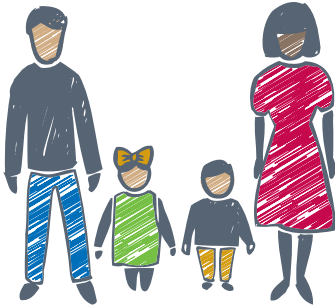
# Delivering Public Engagement Digitally

Emerging Learning from Engaging Libraries in Lockdown



# Highlights

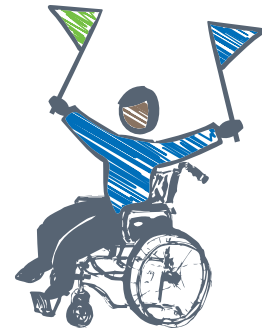
Of those event participants\* who responded to a survey run by the external evaluator:



Nearly **70%** were members of their local library service



Nearly two-thirds (**62%**) were aged 45-64 years old



**16%** of respondents identified as being **deaf** or **disabled**, or having a **long-term health condition**



Participants enjoyed their experience, with **97%** rating the activities as either “**excellent**” or “**good**”



**86%** of participants stated “**It made me more interested/curious in a topic**”



**87%** of participants stated “**I learned something new**”



**65%** of participants stated “**It made research seem more relevant to my life**”

\* Sample size: 234 respondents

# Introduction

Engaging Libraries Phase 2 is supporting 16 public library services across the UK to run public engagement activities on research within the themes of health, society and culture. It is designed to help facilitate partnerships between public library services and researchers, and spark people's curiosity around topics that are relevant or interesting to them. The programme is a partnership between the Carnegie UK Trust, Wellcome and the Wolfson Foundation.

The extraordinary circumstances of a global pandemic and national lockdown have impacted public library services, with the majority of library buildings having to close their doors to the public for much of 2020. Nevertheless, library services have sought to reach people as best they can throughout the pandemic, within the restricted circumstances. We have seen services pivot to deliver digital services, develop new physical services and reach out via phone to support people in their communities. We have seen the positive impact of this work on members of the public<sup>1</sup>.

When the first UK-wide lockdown was announced in March, we encouraged our Engaging Libraries participants to take time to adjust and we altered the timeframe for project delivery accordingly. Later in lockdown, we sought to provide stimulus to support our participants to think about how they might rethink project delivery to suit the changed external environment – be that digitally or physically in a hyperlocal context. The majority of our participants are currently engaged in this phase of revisiting and rethinking their planned projects.

Two of our Engaging Libraries projects delivered digital public engagement during lockdown. Whilst significantly different in scope and scale, the activities these projects delivered were interactive, enabling two-way interaction and conversation. We were keen to share these digital activities, what they tell us about digital forms of public engagement and the learning gleaned from them.<sup>2</sup> The emerging learning summarised in this leaflet has been compiled by an independent evaluator.

## The Programme Aims

Engaging Libraries Phase 2 has three core aims. The programme aims to:

1. Energise and empower people through engagement with research about health, society and culture in one of the following ways:
  - Enable people to access, use and respond to research
  - Enable people to value and think critically about research
  - Enable people to play a role in formulating research
2. Enable public libraries to build upon and explore their civic role as safe spaces for participation and engagement with research.
3. Facilitate partnerships between public libraries and universities or Independent Research Organisations (IROs).

<sup>1</sup> You can read more about what public library services did and the impact this had on the public in our report series [Making a Difference](#).

<sup>2</sup> In focusing on two projects that were delivered digitally we are not suggesting that this is the only way in which public library services could, or should, seek to engage members of the public. We, like the staff who responded to our [Making a Difference](#) survey, are mindful of the need to reach and include the digitally excluded.

# Learning from digital projects

Library: **Falmouth**

Project: **AccessLab for Libraries**

*This project aims to run AccessLab workshops which bring scientists and citizens together to access research around climate, environment and health.*

AccessLab looks to support people to gain skills that will better enable them **to access and use scientific research in their everyday lives**. The project seeks to engage a small group of people, but in considerable depth, and to enable a high degree of interaction. The library service is collaborating with the European Centre for Environment and Human Health at the University of Exeter, as well as FoAM – a non-profit organisation bringing together art, science, nature and everyday life.

Prior to Covid-19, Falmouth Library intended to engage the public through workshops in the library space. During lockdown they amended plans to provide the first of their AccessLabs over **Zoom**.

The AccessLab workshops consist of **two parts** – an initial researcher training event to explore ways to find and access research that are available for people outside academic institutions, and a full day workshop for researchers and other community participants to come together.

The project investigated using different online software to run the event, such as **Big Blue Button**. However as the workshops required people to be able to use other applications during the call, and due to the numbers involved, they used Zoom for the workshops.

The project made full **back up plans** for each workshop in case of any connectivity issues, with a central email address for attendees to write to if they were experiencing problems. They also created a document for each part of the workshop outlining an **offline version** that participants could work on themselves if they became disconnected, and all talks were recorded.

The project offered a **one-to-one test session** in advance of the workshop for a participant who had expressed concern about using the online software. The team showed the individual how to use the software and check it all worked, which helped build confidence. This offer will be included in future online event advertisements to start to address digital inclusion issues.

## Key facts

- **1 AccessLab**
- **10 people** took part in the first event (researchers only)
- **20 people** took part in the second event (which included researchers and community members)

## In conversation with:

**Sarah Scott**

*Access and Interpretation Manager  
Falmouth Art Gallery*



**Q** What's been the single biggest benefit for you as a service from being involved so far?

**A** I think just it's challenged us to try something new and step out of our comfort zone. And it's enabled us to start looking at the library as a much broader service for the community and what we might do next.

**Q** What advice would you give to an organisation who were perhaps less confident in using digital?

**A** Don't rush into investing in particular platforms or technology until you're absolutely sure they're right for you – there's plenty available on open source. Don't assume that you can translate a public event in digital without putting in the extra time and budget. If you've not initially budgeted for your partner to do any digital delivery and activity like setting up, researching the tech, extra run throughs etc then these will come at an extra cost somewhere.

**Q** If you could share one nugget of wisdom with your fellow Engaging Libraries services what would you say?

**A** I'd say the Carnegie team are all really friendly, so just ask them any questions you might have. I think sometimes if you're working with a big funder you feel like you need to know all the answers, but this project is great because we're learning about what works and doesn't work, testing as we go.

**Q** What's next?

**A** Our next AccessLab will be in November. We're going to take it to other local libraries, like in Truro and Penryn, and that will give an opportunity for growth in the project.



# Learning from digital projects

**Libraries:** Redbridge, Kirklees and Newcastle

**Project:** Tickets for the Afterlife

*This project aims to explore the concept of libraries as 'death positive' spaces.*

In particular the library services involved in Tickets to the Afterlife are opening up spaces to talk about a challenging or taboo subject. They are also investigating whether people's attitudes to death change depending on where they live, on their cultural backgrounds or both. A research partnership with Northumbria University is in place for the project across all library services involved. The library services are keen to engage as wide an audience as possible through their project. The project itself emerged from work Redbridge Libraries ran in Phase 1 of Engaging Libraries. This phase of work seeks to expand and extend knowledge, resources and contacts to Kirklees and Newcastle.

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the library services intended to engage the public through co-created interactive installations, panel debates and events such as death cafes and workshops in local hospices.

**During lockdown, the services delivered three author events and a Death Cafe over Zoom.**

The author events enabled people to explore the themes of death and loss within the "safe" boundaries of a book. They were held on **Facebook Live** and later **Zoom**, with a reading from different authors followed by a discussion facilitated by a researcher from the University of Northumbria. Attendees were encouraged to continue the discussion after the event on the project's dedicated Facebook page, and recordings of the author events were uploaded to Facebook afterwards.

The online death café offered a **digital space for participants to share stories, hopes and fears about loss.** Some

participants had attended a physical death café

previously, while others were new to the concept. The

online event used 'breakout rooms' on Zoom to

allow discussion in smaller groups, with each

breakout room facilitated by an End of Life

specialist, who were introduced to the project team by their research partners.

Registration and a **pre-screening**

**questionnaire** were required for

attendees at the online death

café, and the project team were

clear that events were not

bereavement counselling.

## Key facts

These relate to events held up to and including August 2020:

- **4 events** (Author Q & As with Kate Mayfield, Kevin Toolis and Kathryn Mannix, and a Death Cafe)
- **614 participants** engaged in the events 'live'
- **2272 digital users** viewed content recorded and posted after the live events<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> These cannot confidently be claimed as unique users as they may have watched the recorded content more than once.



## In conversation with:

**Anita Luby, Katherine Hornby,  
Judith Robinson, Rhonda Brooks,  
Fiona Hill, Joanne Ghee**

*Staff from the Redbridge, Newcastle  
and Kirklees project*



### **Q How have you dealt with engaging the public in such a sensitive topic during lockdown?**

- A** We've created a safe digital online space. Just because it's digital, it's still about creating a safe space where people feel comfortable and those conversations can happen. We collectively joined another network of Death Cafés which included organisations that weren't libraries. We all talked about what had happened in various scenarios, and difficult situations that might arise, and actually just sharing experiences with other people was great. We came up with a plan around how you deal with those sorts of things in the future. We've also been clear around the messaging as well: what that event is and isn't (so for example, we say 'this is not a bereavement counselling event') and we've been clear about what's going to happen and what the topics will be.



### **Q What advice would you give to others restarting their projects over the next few months?**

- A** Go for it – if you go into it thinking this isn't going to work then it won't! Be flexible and be patient. Just let go of the fear. At the start of this if we'd been told, "right, you're going to be doing this online," we'd just have froze and thought, "oh no, we can't do this!" But we gave it our best and we've astounded ourselves!

### **Q Which words would you use to describe your experience of Engaging Libraries so far?**

- A** Exhilarating, collaborative, inspiring, supportive, teamwork, creative.

### **Q What's next?**

- A** We've got John Troyer who's Director of the Centre of Death & Society at Bath University. He'll be talking about his bestseller 'Technologies of the Human Corpse' with Claire Nally on Wednesday 9 September.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Event passed by time of publication. For future events you can follow <https://www.facebook.com/DeathPositiveLibrary/>

# Key learnings from digital Engaging Libraries projects

The key learnings stemming from the evaluation of these two digital projects are found below.

## 1. Learning about Digital Delivery

### Confident facilitation, preparation and moderation is key to hosting a smooth digital event

Projects found that sharing **clear guidance and 'ground rules'** about how participants are expected to engage (such as putting their virtual hand up) was important to aid group communication. When delivering an event online, having a member of staff who is able to answer questions in the chat box or deal with technical issues as they were raised was deemed to be equally as important as a high standard of facilitation.

Preparing for various possible eventualities, including having an awareness of **digital safeguarding**, was described as vital. One project offered a 'test run' in advance for anyone uncertain about using the technology, which they will proactively advertise in the future. The other project had instructions ready to share with anyone who was uncertain about accessing or using Zoom.



“Usually in face-to-face talks people happily interject if they don’t understand something, this didn’t happen at all online. Online it’s very difficult for the speaker to notice people waving or adding things to the chat if they’re concentrating on presenting. One way to alleviate this is to explicitly say that if people don’t understand something, then they can ask in the chat, and have a facilitator answer as the talk continues or have the facilitator interject for them.”



## Choice of platform is key

Using a digital platform where participants could discuss the topics with each other (before, during and after) was important to help to create the right kind of atmosphere and foster dialogue and engagement. It was also crucial in ensuring an event wasn't simply 'broadcasting,' but was **interactive**. Making participants feel comfortable, whether in a breakout room or in a chat box was important for creating a 'safe space' for discussion, especially with sensitive topics.

Both projects described the challenges of replicating the face-to-face **welcome** that their libraries are known for – and the socialising that happens before and after events in the physical space. One project has created an online space (on Facebook) to **continue conversations** after events, aiming to enhance the user experience and provide some element of the discussions that happen after a face-to-face event.

However, a key benefit of digital activity is the opportunity to involve and include members of the public who perhaps wouldn't be able to attend at the library due to other commitments or mobility/health issues.

“After you've been to a physical event when you're all standing around, people just want to keep talking. So, having a forum after the event for people to come and gather and carry on those discussions is what's needed – so that was the idea of the Facebook Group really – we're saying OK, you've come to this event, come and join us now if you want to carry on chatting.”

Redbridge/Newcastle/Kirklees

## 2. Learning about Marketing

In the absence of frontline library staff cross-promoting events, there is a need to consider **how to promote public events through digital marketing**. This could include using partners' networks to promote activities, or promoting events through social media accounts created specifically for the project. On the other hand, it is also important to recognise that not everyone can access digital events and activities, and consider how this audience might be catered for. You can read more about the Trust's 'Learning from Lockdown' report on digital inclusion [here](https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/learning-from-lockdown-12-steps-to-eliminate-digital-exclusion/)<sup>5</sup>.



5 <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/learning-from-lockdown-12-steps-to-eliminate-digital-exclusion/>

### 3. Learning about Partnerships

The shift to digital delivery means that many of the planning tasks which would have been discussed in person have shifted online. This had potential to **strengthen the sense of team** where staff or partners are in different areas geographically, as meeting online can be easier to organise than a face to face meeting.

It was also noted that there can be different or **additional work** required to set up digital events, research the technology and facilitate run throughs. This could be undertaken internally or by an expert partner, but may come at an **additional cost** which would need to be factored in.

“It’s more about learning the technology and feeling confident with that over the next few months, then I’m hoping we’ll start to see how we can apply our normal core programme into that and what works and what doesn’t. I’m starting to think how do we set ourselves up to be more flexible in this way, and the skills that we need to do that.”

Falmouth

### 4. Learning about impact on the wider service

Skills, confidence and knowledge gained through Engaging Libraries events can impact on the wider service offer.

Both teams that delivered Engaging Libraries activities digitally have either already used, or plan to use the new digital skills they have developed through the experience. For example, Newcastle’s Summer Reading Challenge moved online and drew on the **confidence and knowledge** gained around safeguarding and moderation through their experience with The Death Positive Library. Kirklees were able to move an event online using their well-rehearsed tech set up, which avoided it being postponed. Falmouth are also keen to review how digital can be applied to their core programme.

“We’ve been incredibly lucky with our partners, the university. The researchers are incredibly well connected. Their professionalism and their confidence around the subject and how they present – they’ve made it very engaging. And going back to the crux of what this project is about, engaging the public with research and new ideas, I think they’re doing an incredibly good job of making the subject really accessible.”

Redbridge/Newcastle/Kirklees

# Top Tips

In summary, here are our top tips for digital engagement that stem from our evaluation thus far, which we hope will be of use for both the Engaging Libraries cohort and the wider sector.

- 1 Practice with the technology** – have a dry run to test both the tech and timings. On the day of an event, test that everything works ahead of time.
- 2 If project partners can't commit, it doesn't necessarily mean that they don't want to be involved** – it might be that they can't currently think too far ahead. Keep in touch with them but be mindful of their situation.
- 3 Have a back up plan in case your technology doesn't work or if participants can't connect**  
e.g. record the event, decide on a system of communication between facilitators and with participants if things fail.
- 4 Develop and use a detailed checklist for each online event** to make sure everyone is clear on their roles.
- 5 Consider how to add in a social element** so people can talk before or after and allow more time than you think for this.
- 6 Think about what you'll need to produce a quality online event as you would in a physical space.** For example, do you need to invest in new microphones? How good is your internet connection? Do you need a better webcam? Are there any access needs to consider?
- 7 Work out who is managing things behind the scenes** – have a producer role as well as a facilitator. Having a behind the scenes 'producer' monitoring the waiting room, chat function and troubleshooting is the key to the facilitator being able to concentrate.
- 8 Try out different technology options** and think about what you want participants to get out of it. Consider offering run throughs or phone calls with participants who might be unfamiliar with the technology.
- 9 Think about how to follow up with participants** – how will you ask about their experience?
- 10 Find digital solutions to replace things you would normally do in person,** for example using online whiteboards instead of post-its and flipcharts.
- 11 Things take just the same amount of time (or longer) in the digital space.** Don't assume people won't want to talk. In our experience, participants have wanted to proactively have a social space.
- 12 Put the effort into building up and nurturing your partnership over time** as it will bring multiple benefits both for this project and beyond.

## Next Steps

The Engaging Libraries Phase 2 programme will continue until November 2021, with projects delivering their public engagement activities throughout the next year. We hope to publish our next evaluation interim report in spring 2021 and a final evaluation report will be available in November 2021.

For more information, or to get in touch, please visit [www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk) or email [engaginglibraries@carnegieuk.org](mailto:engaginglibraries@carnegieuk.org).

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**Andrew Carnegie House**  
**Pittencrieff Street**  
**Dunfermline**  
**KY12 8AW**

**Tel: +44 (0)1383 721445**  
**Fax: +44 (0)1383 749799**  
**Email: [info@carnegieuk.org](mailto:info@carnegieuk.org)**  
**[www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk)**

This report was written by Marge Ainsley, Georgina Bowyer, Rachel Heydecker and Jenny Peachey

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