



Library Re-Opening Strategies Around the World

An Overview of Current Proposals (6 June 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures taken to limit it, have had major impact on libraries and the communities they serve. Restrictions aimed at reducing infections have obliged libraries to put a hold on in-person access and services, and a much greater use of digital tools in order to engage with users.

The innovation and resourcefulness that libraries have shown has meant that they have continued to be able to provide information, support and wellbeing to many. Nonetheless, being able to re-open the doors is a vital step towards resuming fully the work of libraries in support of their communities.

Clearly, it does not make sense to resume services before it is sufficiently safe to do so. For the health and wellbeing – physically and mentally – of users and staff alike, it is important to have plans in place for doing this.

An increasing number of countries now have these, developed by library associations or agencies, national libraries, or public health authorities. These provide varying levels of detail and coverage (from one particular library type to all), take differing approaches to re-opening (in phases as in France, or service-by-service as in the Netherlands), and leave more or less room for local interpretation (for example providing checklists and questions to consider as in Australia or Canada, or guidance about how to assess risk, as in Japan). In many instances, it is made clear that unless certain criteria can be met, a library cannot open at all.

This paper brings together some first observations about what these contain, based on those strategies which have either been shared with IFLA headquarters, or which we have identified. A fuller overview can be found on the [IFLA COVID-19 and Libraries page](#). Further suggestions are welcome at updates@ifla.org. So far, there are examples from 32 different countries and territories, but with this representing less than 1 in 6 countries globally, there is much further to go. All references in the below are to documents mentioned in the Annex.

Furthermore, and recognising that our understanding of the spread of COVID-19 is still evolving, they almost all make it clear that changes and updates are possible. As such, this paper can only reflect the state of knowledge as of its preparation (6 June 2020). The list of guides cited is included in annex.

At the end of each section, a number of recurring issues from different sets of national guidance is identified. These are illustrative and do not represent an exhaustive list.

Limiting Numbers at the Library

The importance of limiting close contact with people is a repeated theme in official advice. As a result, the question of how to avoid libraries getting too busy is a key issue in almost all guidance published. A first step to doing this is setting rules around the maximum number of people who can be in the library at any one time, with means of calculation a key concern.



In general, this is done using a calculation of the space within the library available to the public, and then dividing this by a minimum area per person. This minimum area ranges from 20m² per person in Ireland, Portugal and Slovenia to 15m² in Poland and Belgium, 10m² in the Czech Republic and Austria, 10m² for adults and 5m² for children in the Netherlands, and 4m² in Australia, Estonia and Romania. In Croatia, meanwhile, the figure given is 15 per 100m². In other situations, a simple figure is set from the beginning – 200 in the National University Library in Croatia, and 100-150 in the Russian State Library. Calculations of space per staff member tend to be done separately. The Netherlands also makes clear the need to ensure that avoiding too many people inside the library does not lead to crowds forming outside.

In order to enforce this, different means of counting people in and out are suggested, from tokens or tickets (as in Macao), using a set number of shopping baskets or other ‘entry items’ as in the Netherlands and forbidding entry without these, or only allowing people in who have pre-booked, up to a certain limit (as used in some national libraries already). Some countries also limit the number of people who can come into the library together, for example to two in the case of Estonia or the Netherlands.

Another means of maximising access while respecting maximum numbers of people, as set out in the guidance from the Czech Republic and Shanghai is to limit the length of stays in the library. Libraries in Hong Kong, for example, do this by closing every hour in order to carry out cleaning. Public libraries in Geneva, when they first opened, indeed offered readers specific time-windows to come and collect pre-ordered books.

Finally, it may be possible to reduce demand by limiting access only to certain groups, with Belgian and Portuguese guidance, for example, suggesting that use of library computers can be limited only to those with no access at home.

In order to reduce the need to come into the building in the first place, many plans underline the value of continuing to provide services outside, from kerbside or drive-through services (in France and Estonia), holding activities outdoors where possible (in Denmark and the Czech Republic), click-and-collect services (such as in Vancouver, or via remote lockers in Korea), and of course maintaining digital offerings.

Issues:

- Is there guidance on how to calculate a maximum number of users?
- Is there a means of measuring and controlling this number?
- Are steps being taken to limit need to enter the library building by offering alternatives?
- Are the consequences of decisions being taken into account?

Limiting Concentrations of Users in the Library

Even if the number of people in the library is within the limits set out according to the rules in the previous section, there is broad recognition in planning documents that additional actions are needed in order to avoid physical contact. Various suggestions are in place – from separate entrances and exits (as in Germany), ensuring that children are dropped off outside (rather than



inside) the library (as in the Netherlands), and closure of social areas (including play areas and coffee corners).

Study and internet areas have been a particular area of focus. In many cases, such as in Germany and France, these have been kept closed at first, at least in public libraries. In National Libraries, where the options to take books away are fewer, solutions have had to be found, with options including designating spaces for readers (as in Russia), removing furniture, or organising rooms to avoid people sitting face to face (University of Macao, China).

Similarly with internet areas, while some guidance recommends against giving access to public computers (Denmark), others allow this but with workstations more spread out (Helsingborg, Sweden), or with a focus on swapping mice and keyboards after each user (Netherlands).

Where this is mentioned, it is recommended to limit use of lifts to people who absolutely need them. If they are used otherwise, it is suggested, the number of users should be strictly limited.

As for shelves, there are differing approaches to allowing access, with Portuguese and Slovenian guidance suggesting that this should not be possible at first, while the Dutch guidance and practice in Helsinki, Finland, is more open to this, but with encouragement to readers not to touch works they do not intend to borrow.

As for specific approaches to group use of libraries – for example by schools – this has generally been excluded at first, but the Dutch guidance offers a set of principles on how to do this (for example keeping the rest of the library closed), or only allowing it when people can maintain social distance and wear masks when entering and exiting (as in the Czech Republic).

Issues

- Where is there a risk of groups forming, and how is it possible to limit this?
- Where users may need to stay for extended periods, how is it possible to maintain distance? What other risks are there in such spaces, and how can these be minimise?
- Are there any small enclosed spaces, such as lifts, that need particular attention?

Ensuring Hygiene

In addition to avoiding close contacts with others, maintaining high standards of hygiene has also been a constant theme in official guidance on how to limit the spread of the pandemic. The guidance issued to libraries reflects this, with almost all recommending that hand-sanitiser be made available at the entrances to libraries, and at other points in the building. Some suggest also making it available at exists as well.

Rules on facemasks for users vary more. France and Macao, China, recommend that users should wear them inside buildings, at least at first, while others suggest that they may only need to be worn at certain times (when receiving support from staff, when using entrances and exists for example). Similarly on gloves, while some guidance recommends these (including changing



these between each interaction with users), others such as the French underline that regular hand-washing is just as good, and likely better for materials.

The potential role of air-conditioning systems appears in some guidance but not others. While some studies underline the risks of the virus passing through the air, it remains to be shown that air-conditioning systems present a risk, as highlighted by French and Italian guidance, at least when properly maintained. Nonetheless, where the subject is mentioned in guidance, there is a preference for natural airing of spaces (as in the Czech guidance, which recommends 5min per hour), while the Portuguese guidance notes that leaving doors open not only helps ventilation, but also saves electricity and reduces the number of things to touch.

There is also considerable attention to surfaces. Various sets of guidance encourage reflection on which surfaces are most likely to be touched, and suggest intensified cleaning routines, with a strong focus on plastic and glass in particular. Computer stations, study desks (where these are open), and spaces for borrowing books are particular areas of focus (in general, book-drops are recommended for returns), with multiple guides suggesting cleaning surfaces after each use. In the case of self-service machines, there is the proposal to give users the necessary equipment to sanitise surfaces, and even to promote touch-free options (as suggested by the Canadian guidance).

Clearly in any move towards automatic options – including for payments – it will be important not to exclude. For example, people without bank cards, or who may struggle with automatic machines, are at risk of being at a disadvantage. In these cases, either extra precautions can be taken for in-person services (such as in Helsingborg, Sweden), or payments simply waived (such as for printing in Switzerland).

An obvious area of risk are toilets. The initial Czech guidance suggested keeping them closed, while others – notably the Slovak, Chinese and Japanese guidance – allow for them to be open, but with intensified cleaning schedules. Throughout this, the Portuguese guidance underlines the need to bear in mind training for cleaning staff, or even to hire more in order to ensure standards are met.

Another question is around materials that may be brought into the library by users. United Kingdom guidance to school libraries suggests that coats, bags and other items should, as much as possible, be left outside for example. As for essential items for work, such as pens and books, the Dutch guidance for school groups suggests that each visitor should bring their own materials and keep them with them. Surfaces used should be cleaned afterwards.

There are differing approaches to temperature checks and others on visitors coming into libraries. The Hong Kong, China and Croatian guidance do suggest this, while others simply recommend that people with symptoms stay away. The Polish and Japanese guidance does provide suggestions on what to do if someone is found with suspected COVID-19, including recommendations to isolate the person, identify which surfaces may have been contaminated, and provisions on closing the library or parts of the library until cleaning can take place or the virus is likely to have become inactive.



A more controversial point is around registration of users. While this may help in terms of contact tracing, the Japanese Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee has noted the potential for conflict with the principle of privacy in accessing and using library services.

Issues

- Is there adequate access to hygiene products (sanitiser, cleaning fluids) and equipment (masks, screens, gloves where appropriate)?
- Have potential risk surfaces been identified, and is this risk being managed?
- Are there ways of reducing contacts, and have the consequences of this on all library users been identified?
- How to encourage people with symptoms to stay at home?

Safe Handling of Materials

A core topic of almost all sets of available guidance is now to ensure safety when handling library materials. Books, DVDs and other items that are consulted in libraries, or lent out, remain core to the work of libraries, and are often the things that people have missed most while the doors have been shut.

While there certainly have been efforts to promote various techniques for cleaning books (including leaving them outside in the sun), most national guidance starts from a point of promoting quarantining of materials. This has the added advantage of not creating risks of damage to materials. There are different approaches to the question of how long though. Some countries have indeed suggested that quarantining is not necessary, given the potential difficulty of catching the virus, even from contaminated materials (such as in Sweden and Denmark).

Elsewhere, Public Health England has suggested that 24h is sufficient for paper and cardboard and 72h for plastic. Guidance in Australia (based on government recommendations), and practice in Egypt and some Brazilian libraries is that 24h is sufficient, while the Czech recommendation is to wait two days. Meanwhile, the Swiss, Dutch, Belgian and some Lebanese Universities are suggesting three days (although ten for plastic-covered materials in the latter case), the Slovak guidance five days, and the French guidance ten days. The Italian Ministry of Culture, Andalusian Library Association and Slovenian Public Health Agency have suggested two weeks, on the basis of maximum caution.

In order to store books safely, it is generally recommended that a space that is inaccessible to the public be used, and that only small groups of staff should handle books, and use appropriate protection equipment. It may be necessary to dedicate (and cordon off) a part of the library, or hire external space, as well as to ensure that boxes of quarantined books are labelled with the time when they have been deposited. It should be noted that the Slovenian guidance also suggests that quarantining may be applicable for books delivered to users' homes as well.

Some guidance recognises that in the case of some materials, neither quarantining or cleaning may be appropriate, for example in the case of rare books or materials (as suggested in a Lebanese University) or newspapers or magazines. The Estonian guidance does, however, suggest that access to newspapers may be possible if users wear gloves.



Finally, the Estonian and Slovak guidance underlines that similar caution should apply to other materials, such as waste (keeping separate bins for potentially contaminated waste, and ideally using pedal bins in order to avoid needing to touch things with hands). The Slovak guidance also addresses the question of safety in library vehicles, given that these may still be used for deliveries.

Issues

- Is there consideration of the potential risk posed by materials, including of different types, and how to manage this?
- Where quarantines are adopted, how is this managed? Is the number of people in contact with quarantined books minimised?
- Are there certain materials where it may remain necessary to deny access, given that neither cleaning nor quarantining is feasible?
- Are there potential materials or activities outside of the library where hygiene needs to be considered?
- Are there provisions in place for dealing with waste?

Ensuring Communication

While libraries will be re-opening doors, services are very unlikely to be the same as before, at least at first. This will take some getting used to, both for staff and users. In the case of staff, many guidelines – for example the Danish – underline the importance of providing thorough training and consultation with staff groups, as well as regular briefings in order to share news and experiences.

Meanwhile, the Australian and Canadian guidance both underline the importance of reaching out to users, who may indeed have more questions than usual. Social and local media can be key tools here, as can library websites, and simply putting up posters outside libraries and around the local area.

Similarly, inside the library, various sets of guidance, such as the French and Dutch underline the need to explain the rules clearly and repeatedly, while the Japanese guidance indicates that public announcements can also help. Nonetheless, as the French guidance underlines, it may not be realistic to expect everyone to respect rules, such as children, or people who may struggle to understand rules. Using visual guides may help in this respect, but it will be important for libraries to be realistic.

In particular, as the Danish guidance indicates, the presence of staff may be essential in order to ensure that rules are followed – as such, staffless opening hours may not be an option at the beginning.

Issues

- What questions are users likely to have about the library? How can you answer them?



- What barriers may there be to users understanding information? How can you reach them most effectively?
- How can staff be kept most effectively informed, trained, and involved?

Services to Vulnerable Populations

Through law and or through practice, libraries can have a particular mission to support vulnerable populations. However, many of these – older people, those with underlying health conditions or otherwise – may also continue to face restrictions on their movement, even as the rest of society is able to return towards something like normal. As the Canadian guidance underlines, it is important to give special consideration to the needs of all groups in plans to re-open services.

In some cases, such as the Czech Republic or Portugal, the idea of special opening times for specific groups, such as older users has been proposed as an option. Other countries suggest that it may be better for at-risk groups is to remain at home, and instead to introduce, increase or maintain remote services, such as home-deliveries (as suggested in France), or digital services as far as possible.

The same need to take special precautions also applies to staff and volunteers – see the next section for more.

Issues

- How can services to more vulnerable populations best be maintained?
- Do other elements of re-opening plans risk having a disadvantageous effect on vulnerable populations?

Keeping Staff Safe

Staff and volunteers need to be able to work without facing unacceptable risks in order to be able to support users fully. Guidance from Denmark and China, for example, underlines the need to make staff safety a priority, both during lock-downs and restrictions are limited, while the Canadian checklist notes that there needs to be particular attention to stress at an uncertain time. The recommendations produced by the Polish National Library underline, indeed, that libraries should not open until staff can be kept safe. Giving staff time to return to work, get used to new rules and carry out necessary tasks, before opening to the public, may also help, as was done in Cologne, Germany.

Measures to limit or prevent contacts between staff, and between staff and users, are a regular theme of the guidance produced. Meetings between staff can be limited by staggering breaks (as in the Polish guidance) or avoiding in-person meetings (as in the Czech guidance), having set groups of people working together in shifts (in order to reduce risks of transmission – suggested in a number of guides), allowing staff to come and go from work outside of rush-hours (as in Helsingborg, Sweden), only designating a limited number of people to work with quarantined books, and advising against use of public transport. For those who do come to work, almost all



guidance notes the need for regular hygiene, with some setting out minimum frequency for hand-washing, and others given times for this.

As highlighted above, some guidance recommends taking special account of staff for whom coming into work may not be possible, in order to protect them or those in their households. In these cases, continued home working is recommended by some. A number of sets of recommendations also make it clear that staff should not come back to work if they are experiencing symptoms, with the Croatian document suggesting a temperature check every morning.

Limiting numbers of staff at the library can also help in maintaining distance, with the Swiss guidance offering indications on social distancing and limiting sharing of space as far as possible, including turning unused public spaces into offices if needed. The same goes for working on service desks, with adequate distance between these, and no sharing of computers between staff as far as possible.

A number of libraries have indeed planned to work with only a fraction of the staff who normally come into work, such as the national libraries of the Netherlands and China. This will require planning, as in reality operating a library following safety precautions may in fact be more labour intensive than usual, as suggested in the Norwegian guidance. As the Andalusian guidance notes, it may not be the case that enough staff are available to open safely .

Similarly, there is an emphasis on what can be done to limit contacts between staff and users. A common recommendation is the use of screens at service desks, which need to be large enough to provide protection. Other suggestions include separate routes around the library for staff and users (in the French guidance), using tools such as pointers to help explain where things are without needing to get close (as in Helsingborg, Sweden), and promoting self-service machines (see above).

Generally, guidance documents recommend against providing in-person help where possible, but if this is necessary, they suggest that both the staff member and user should wear masks at a minimum (as recommended in Lebanon). There is general support for the wearing of masks or other face-coverings inside the library by staff, although in some cases this is focused on situations where staff may be around users without other forms of protection (such as a screen).

Issues

- How can contacts and physical proximity between staff members be minimised?
- How can staff members – especially those at risk – avoid needing to come to the library, in particular in busy periods?
- How can staff be fully informed, trained and involved in re-opening plans and their implementation?
- What impact will new measures have on staffing needs? Can these be met? If not, what can be done?
- How can contacts between staff and users be minimised?
- Are there enough materials (sanitiser, masks, gloves if needed, screens) to keep staff safe?



Maintaining Readiness

As highlighted above, the need to be ready for the worst appears in some guidance documents, especially in the case of identifying a user or staff member with suspected COVID-19. More broadly, some guidance, notably from West Virginia, United States, notes that new peaks in cases may force libraries to close their doors again. In this case, it suggests that library managers would be wise to ensure that staff do not lose the habit of working effectively from home.

Also mentioned above is the value of maintaining digital services and offers. To the extent that in-person library activities continue to be disrupted, continuing to engage with users digitally, including by innovating, will continue to be important.

Issues

- Is there a plan for responding to any new restrictions?
- Are there plans to maintain digital offers and services for as long as possible?



ANNEX: List of Plans Identified to Date (6 JUNE)

Australia (May): Library association [checklist](#).

Austria (ongoing updates): Library association [guidance](#) (auto-translate possible).

Belgium (Flanders) (28 May): Library Association [Guidance](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Belgium (Wallonia) (30 April): Government [Circular](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Canada (May): Library association [Checklist](#) (Canadian Urban Libraries Council)

Croatia (April): National library [update](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA), government [guidance](#) dated 24 April.

Czech Republic: Government [guidance](#) (dated 24 April, translated into [English](#) by IFLA). Library authority [guidance](#) (27 April, translated by the authority). Library authority guidance (18 May, translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Denmark (13 May): Government [guidance](#) (translated into English by Christian Lauersen).

Estonia (7 May): Government guidance (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Finland: Library agency [overview](#) of approaches.

France (29 April): Library association [guidance](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Germany (23 April): Library association [checklist](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA). National library [plans](#) for reopening (undated).

Hong Kong (China) (26 April): library association [plans](#) for re-opening academic libraries. Public library authority [plans](#) (28 April).

Iran (May): Public Library Federation [guidance](#).

Italy: Library association [review of the literature](#).

Japan (May): Library association [guidance](#) (translated by Yasuyo Inoue).

Lebanon (May): Kaslik Holy Cross University [plans](#).

Mexico (April): university library [infographic](#).

Netherlands (April): Library authority protocols (addressing [lending](#), [activities with primary school-aged children](#), [groups of up to ten people](#), and [computer use](#)), as well as a checklist (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Norway (8 May): Library Association and Librarians Association [guidelines](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Poland (28 April): National Library/government [guidance](#).

Portugal: Government [guidance](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Romania (17 May): Public health institute [guide](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Serbia (May): National Library [report](#) on re-opening.

Slovakia (20 May): National library [guidance](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Slovenia (30 April): Public health institute [guidance](#) (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

Spain (9 May): Government [guidance](#) (auto-translate possible). National library association (FESABID) [steps](#) to re-opening (7 May). Regional library association (Andalusia) [guidance](#) (5 May). University library association (REBIUN) [guidance](#) (in Spanish) (undated).

Switzerland (30 April): Library association guidance (translated into [English](#) by IFLA).

United Kingdom: Library association [resources page](#) (ongoing updates). Focused plan for [school libraries](#) (15 May).

United States: State plans from: [Alaska](#) (27 April), [Colorado](#) (April), [Georgia](#) (April), [Idaho](#) (a range of re-opening plans) (May), [Indiana](#) (April), [Massachusetts](#) (23 May), and [West Virginia](#) (27 April). See also examples of re-opening plans from the State Library of Montana ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), and specific guides for kerbside pickup from [Illinois](#) and [Vermont](#).