

Title of meeting: Culture, Leisure and Sport Decision Meeting

Subject: Digital Services in Libraries

Date of meeting: 5 October 2018

Report by: Director of Culture and City Development

Wards affected: All

1. Requested by
Cabinet Member for Culture Leisure and Sport

2. Purpose

2.1 To update the Cabinet Member on the success of digital services in Portsmouth Libraries and the impact of outreach activity on the number of downloads.

3. Information Requested

3.1 Background

3.1.1. Portsmouth Libraries have been offering digital access to reference resources for a number of years. Ancestry (a genealogy website), Encyclopaedia Britannica and Oxford reference online are all offered to library members via the internet - some resources can be accessed at home with a library card number, others, such as Ancestry, can only be accessed by library members free in their library. Over the last five years, the world has seen major technological development in access to digital resources via apps on smartphones and tablets. Libraries have also seen an increase in members owning their own smartphones and tablets which makes accessing resources 24/7 very easy.

3.1.2 In 2012 the Library Service subscribed to Zinio eMagazines (now RB Digital), supplied by WF Howes. Freegal music, supplied by Library Ideas, was subscribed to in 2014 and in 2015 the Library Service subscribed to Borrowbox- an eBook and eAudiobook service supplied by Bolinda - all services can be accessed via a website or via apps.

3.1.3 The Library Service pays an annual service fee for Borrowbox and buys eBooks and eAudiobooks individually. Once purchased, they are made available to library members within 24 hours on a one borrower, one book basis. They can be

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read/listened to online or downloaded for access offline. The Borrowbox app is particularly easy to use and has made the service very popular. There are a great range of eAudiobook titles available to purchase for library stock which are then made available to library members as 3 week loans. However there are more publisher restrictions on eBooks and therefore there can be limits on availability of new titles by bestselling authors. Some titles expire from the library collection after a time period of usually 2 years, meaning the Library Service has to repurchase the title if it is popular, or lose the title when it expires. These terms are set by the publisher. Some publishers have refused to make their titles available to public libraries as eBooks at all. It's also worth noting that the cost of both eAudiobooks and eBooks can be high. It's not unusual for a new title in eAudiobook format to be £60 and a new eBook by a bestselling author £35.

- 3.1.4 Freegal is a music streaming and downloading service by US based Library Ideas. Freegal offers 15 million tracks from every music genre. The Library Service pays an annual subscription charge based on population numbers that then gives library members access to five free downloads per week and three hours of streaming daily. Members can keep the tracks they download. The Library Service only pays the service fee; there are no additional costs for buying tracks or albums, making this an attractive alternative to buying music CDs for library stock. The Library Service stopped buying CDs in 2014. Issues were rapidly declining and costs for damaged/lost CDs were high. Freegal enables the Service to continue to offer music to customers and use of Freegal in Portsmouth has been high.
- 3.1.5 RB Digital is supplied by WF Howes. The Library Service pays an annual service fee and then pays a yearly subscription for each eMagazine title. The library offers nearly 40 different magazines, ranging from New Scientist to HELLO! to Women's Health. Library members can read magazines online or download and keep them. Each downloaded magazine is identical in appearance to the print edition. A new development for September sees comics become available through the app. These will have more restrictions placed on use - magazines will expire and there will be a 25 downloads limit per month on titles for the Library Service. A major draw is the availability of Marvel comics which is likely to make this service popular. The comic offer will replace the existing ComicsPlus service which has seen poor use due to lack of availability of Marvel titles. RB Digital is advantageous in that it enables the Library Service to present a broad range of magazines to members available 24/7.

3.2 Project to increase usage

- 3.2.1 In May 2017 the Library Information and Stock Team produced a project plan to increase use of the digital resources mentioned above. Usage was good, but as all were new services to Portsmouth library members it was important to ensure the services were visible and that usage was high to justify the costs involved in subscribing. The team set a goal of a 15% increase in downloads for all three of the resources by March 2018.

3.2.2 The team identified some barriers to use:

- All of the resources initially require registering with the user's library card number and library PIN - it was important to ensure people knew this and were able to retrieve their PIN as easily as possible.
- Poor IT skills. The initial usage of the resources was from those with good IT skills. Once set up, the apps are very easy to use but it was important to ensure workshops were made available for those new to their devices to learn how to download apps.
- Lack of visibility of the resources. It can be difficult to make digital resources visible to borrowers when they are not there on the library shelf to immediately see.

3.2.3 The team then identified actions and worked with the library Outreach Team to achieve these. Activity included:

- Staff Training Day workshops - the key to promoting the digital services in the library is for staff to feel confident in using the resources themselves. The training ensured that each library has a digital 'champion' to assist members of the public.
- Public workshops at the 60+ Festival - two workshops were delivered at Carnegie and Southsea Libraries and were very useful in that the Stock Team were able to assist people with registering for the apps and show them how to use the apps.
- Publicity - a new fold out leaflet was designed and printed by corporate communications to promote the resources. These were then distributed to libraries, community centres, Civic Offices and the University. The leaflets were also handed out at major library events such as BookFest and Summer Reading Challenge, as well as major city events such as Victorious.
- Commuter promotion at The Hard. The Stock Team attended The Hard early morning in September 2017 to hand out leaflets to commuters arriving in Portsmouth from the Gosport ferry, the railway station and the bus station. This promotion was very successful and reached a broad range of ages.
- The Stock Team actively promoted the services via Libraries Facebook and Twitter.
- The Stock Assistant now sends out a monthly Borrowbox newsletter to subscribers who have given approval to be emailed. The newsletter highlights new titles in stock and the Library Service have received positive responses to these - the titles highlighted are always on loan shortly after the newsletter goes out!
- Quick links to the resources are now available via the library catalogue making it easier to find the resources online.
- The Stock Librarian gave a presentation at the Portsmouth Grammar School, arranged by the School Librarian, to promote the offer to pupils.

3.2.4 Results

The 15% increase in downloads target was exceeded as a result of the hard work from the team. Overall downloads increased by 34.8% in the year 2017/18, and they have increased further in the four months since April 2018 (see Appendix). As noted in 3.1.5, ComicsPlus has never taken off, probably because of the limited content. The RBDigital magazines average over 500 issues/month, but the usage has declined slightly over the past 16 months. Results for the other resources have been much more positive. eBook downloads have nearly doubled, from 418 in April 2017 to 814 in July 2018. eAudiobook downloads have increased by 64.7% in the same period. With Freegal, there has been a steady increase in the downloads (anecdotal evidence suggests that most users are keen to download their allowance of five tracks every week), from 890 in April 2017 to 1278 in July 2018, an increase of 43.6%. The figures for streaming are much more variable month by month, perhaps because users stream music more casually, but there has been an overall increase in this period from 1616 tracks streamed in April 2017 to 2623 in July 2018 (62.3% increase), but with a couple of months showing over 3000 tracks streamed.

3.2.5 Feedback

The library regularly receives feedback about its digital services, either via email, social media, or often verbally from borrowers visiting a library. Feedback is always welcome partly to suggest improvements but it also gives the Stock Team an insight into how the digital services are used. A number of themes have emerged: not surprisingly, most people use tablets and smartphones rather than PCs; books and magazines are frequently downloaded for holidays, with reports of Portsmouth library members using digital services while in Germany, Florida and South Africa; the ease of use and 24/7 access are particularly valued; and users range from children to one 91-year-old man who regularly downloads eBooks for himself and his wife. The most frequent recommendation for improvement is to increase the range of titles in Borrowbox, and to a lesser extent to offer more magazines for RBDigital. One other point is worth noting: a lot of people only discover the library's digital offer at outreach events and express surprise when they first hear about the range and quality of resources. This suggests that despite the success of the past year's efforts as outlined in this report, there is still a long way to go when it comes to promoting the digital offer. A couple of typical comments are below:

I think services like Freegal are very under rated and I get the feeling that people do not realise it is available. I have mentioned to other people about your digital services and nobody was aware of them. I think they need to be better advertised. Personally I think they are brilliant. (August 2018)

I'm enjoying using the Borrow Box service since learning more about it from the mobile library at Victorious (I don't get much opportunity to visit the actual libraries). (December 2017)

3.3 The future

3.3.1 Financial investment

With increasing use of digital library services it's important that the Library Service continues to set aside stock budget for purchasing these resources, which can be expensive but which are essential in providing access to reading and resources outside of normal library opening hours and to those who might not easily be able to visit a library branch. Increasing numbers of downloads of eAudiobooks and eBooks means that it is sometimes a struggle to keep up with demand. The Stock Team monitors reservations on a regular basis and purchase more copies where necessary. It is likely that the Library Service will need to keep increasing the allocation of stock budget towards Borrowbox as we see more demand.

3.3.2 Increasing use

The Library Service is seeing fast increasing use of the digital services and it is essential these services are maintained to offer access to reading 24/7. However it is also worth noting that eBook sales in the commercial market have levelled off and there is still huge demand for printed books, so it is very important to retain stock budget for printed books in libraries. eAudiobooks on the other hand are seeing increasing sales in the commercial market and publishers are paying more and more attention to producing good quality spoken word versions of their titles with often a fiercely competitive process for audiobook companies to acquire the rights. eAudiobooks are now attracting a younger audience than before as the benefits of being able to easily listen to a book on a commute or whilst taking part in leisure activities or household work are recognised. The Stock Team will continue to monitor the market and the IT developments that will have an effect on the market.

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Signed by
Stephen Baily
Director of Culture and City Development

Appendices:

- A) Digital downloads report August 2018 monthly stats
- B) Digital downloads report August 2018 summary

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

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The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

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