Help us design a new delivery model for Buckinghamshire Libraries – Frequently Asked Questions

Are libraries being closed in Buckinghamshire?

No, we are not proposing to close any of our libraries in Buckinghamshire. The development of Library Flex is a means of ensuring that we can reduce costs and deliver a cost-effective service without closing any of our 29 libraries.

Are all libraries going to be affected, or just County libraries?

We are proposing to install Library Flex at eight County Libraries (Amersham, Aylesbury, Buckingham, Beaconsfield, Chesham, Marlow, Hazlemere and Princes Risborough). Although the technology is only being installed in these locations, there will also be a review of staffing at High Wycombe and Burnham libraries.

Why have Burnham and High Wycombe been excluded?

All the potential Library Flex sites have been individually assessed against criteria to ascertain if they would be suitable for this option. That included the scale and costs alterations that would need to be made to the buildings, and risk assessments looking at accessibility and security. High Wycombe and Burnham libraries have buildings with complex structures, and consequently, it has been decided not to implement the Library Flex technology.

Why can't you make savings in other areas? The staff in libraries are really important in delivering services.

We value the care and commitment of our staff and understand how much our customers appreciate the support that they provide. The library service has worked hard to reduce costs and generate more income and this work will continue. We constantly look for efficient ways to develop and improve our services. This includes achieving savings through contract management and our work to generate income via our new online room hire service. Our staff represent the greatest cost for the service and with a savings target of £555,000 it is not possible for us to meet this target without reducing our staff numbers.

You have some libraries that are run by volunteers, why can't you apply this model across all Buckinghamshire libraries?

We value the work that our volunteers do across our libraries. Community libraries work well in smaller communities. The 10 larger libraries where changes are proposed account for 70% of memberships, loans and visits. Therefore, having staff available at times of greatest need, and using self-operated technology supported by volunteers and community groups during unstaffed hours, would ensure a resilient and sustainable model.

I have recently seen publicity that you are renovating Chesham and Wendover libraries, why is this being funded whilst you are also looking to save money?

Chesham and Wendover building projects are funded by one-off capital budgets or external funding that sit outside of main Library Service budget. Savings in these areas would have no impact on our revenue savings target.

Will there still be staff available in Buckinghamshire Libraries?

Yes, in the eight Library Flex libraries our staff will be available most of the time. We will be using the feedback from the consultation to design library services so that staff are available at the times of greatest customer need. We also recognise that there are times when our libraries are less busy and so this is when we will offer the self-operated service.

Which other library services do this, and is there evidence from other sectors?

There are currently 45 local authorities in the UK and 17 in Ireland that are using self-operated library technology. Local to Buckinghamshire, the technology is used in Surrey, Hertfordshire and Milton Keynes. We have actively engaged with eight authorities and conducted site visits to two authorities to learn from their experience and will continue to learn from them.

Are self-operated libraries safe?

The priority is to retain a safe and welcoming environment by working with volunteers, Friends of libraries groups, local community organisations and other council services to make use of the library space when there are no staff on site, as this will make it more welcoming and create more community ownership.

Extensive research has already taken place to learn from the experiences of other library services in managing safety. Comprehensive measures will be in place including customer induction, access via card and PIN, monitored CCTV, fire and intruder alarms compliant with the technology and, emergency contact buttons.

What are the opportunities of using self-operated library technology?

There is the potential to increase hours of access to our buildings, particularly in the morning, evening, and weekends. We know that many customers value convenience, therefore enabling self-serve access at different times has the potential to attract different users such as commuters, students and working families who may not have been able to access us during our current hours. Library Flex will enable access to the library for local groups or council services and make better use of our buildings.

What is the provision for people who are not members who would want to visit the library during unstaffed hours?

Any customer who would like to visit the library during the unstaffed hours would need to sign up as a member to gain access to Library Flex. This is so they can be provided with a full induction and so we know who is accessing our spaces out of hours as part of the security measures. Customers who do not want to sign up as Library Flex members will have the option to visit their branch during staffed hours, or they may choose to travel to a neighbouring branch with staffed hours.

Will I need a new library card to access Library Flex?
No, you will be able to use your existing library card. However, you will be required to complete an induction and agree to terms of use, for your information and safety, prior to your card being activated for Library Flex.

What does this mean for people with access requirements and vulnerable adults?
The majority of library opening hours will remain staffed and we will be using the information generated during the consultation to help us design the Library Flex service so that staff are available when needed. In addition to the consultation survey, we will be conducting focus groups with people with access requirements and representative groups. We will also be using the induction process to support our customers in using self-operated technology.

Will children be able to use Library Flex?
Library Flex will be available for anyone aged 16 or over. Children under 16 would be able to visit during Flex hours when accompanied by a Library Flex registered adult.

Will you close the library if you don't get volunteers to deliver activities during unstaffed hours?
No, customers will be able to access the library using self-operated library technology for limited services (study/social space, printing, use a PC/loanable tablet, book loans, room hire, council access point phone). Community activities are an important part of Library Flex, but we know that they will not always be available during unstaffed hours.

At the moment I need a staff member to access printing services, how will you resolve this during unstaffed hours?
We are installing self-service printing technology in the eight Library Flex libraries (Amersham, Aylesbury, Beaconsfield, Buckingham, Chesham, Hazlemere, Marlow and Princes Risborough). You will be shown how to use this during your induction, and instructions will also be available onsite.

I sometimes use the library as a social meeting, working or study space, will I be able to continue doing so even though I am not using any of the services such as printing and book borrowing?
Absolutely. All you would need to do is complete your induction and register as a Library Flex member and then you would be welcome to access the building to use the space for social, work or study.

When can I start to use Library Flex?
A launch date has not yet been agreed. The consultation will help us design a model that meets our customers needs. Information gathered form the consultation will be evaluated and, subject to the approval of the council's Cabinet Committee, we anticipate launching Library Flex in June 2025.

I live near a library that is not proposed for Library Flex, can I use my membership at a Library Flex site?
Yes, you would be able to register to use Library Flex at selected Buckinghamshire Libraries. You will be required to complete the induction for the Library Flex library, so that we can introduce you to the space and make you aware of our safety and security arrangements.

I am not interested in using the library when staff are not available, what will my options be?
There are 29 libraries in Buckinghamshire and Library flex will be introduced at eight of these libraries. For the eight Library Flex libraries staff will be available for the majority of the library opening hours. We will ensure that the staffed hours are clearly communicated to our customers.

Will there still be activities in my local library such as Bounce and Rhyme, Film Club and theatre performances?
Yes, Library Flex will not prevent these activities from taking place and the opportunity to increase opening hours with Library Flex means that we are likely to see more activities taking place over time.

I am a volunteer who runs community activities and I am interested in supporting my local library, who should I contact?
We would like to work with volunteers, Community Groups and Friends Groups to programme activities during the unstaffed hours to continue providing access to the library building for community activity and maintain a safe and welcoming space for customers. You can register your interest on the consultation survey or speak to staff at your local library.

I regularly hire library spaces at the proposed Library Flex locations, how will room hire work without a staff member to get in touch with?
It will be possible to hire rooms during the unstaffed hours in the usual manner i.e. using our online Lemon Booking system. We will be working up operating procedures for each site to enable hirers to access the rooms on the day.