Shared Intelligence

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Helping jobseekers help themselves

Research into the role of public library services in improving employment outcomes

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ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

cambridge econometrics
clarity from complexity

Contents

"It's a community hub, it's not just a library.

I didn't see that so much before, but I see it now. It empowers people. It kind of is unique."

Library user

Research summary: the role of public library services in improving employment outcomes

This research, commissioned by Arts Council England, describes how England's public library services, which are free and open to all, provide a unique combination of human help, digital and learning resources, and desk-work environment. These support factors serve as vital 'precursors' to positive employment outcomes and are an example of critical social infrastructure. This report recommends that these services be consolidated and expanded through local action and a national partnership with Jobcentres and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The research has heard first-hand from jobseekers across England about how hard job seeking can be, how it leaves individuals feeling anxious, stressed, and disconnected. It has also heard how other services and spaces that are supposed to help, can actually make things worse. The research finds jobseekers rely heavily on public library services, often contrasting positive experiences in libraries to less-positive experiences elsewhere. According to jobseekers, libraries are different because they help them build confidence and encourage progression, and have free practical resources on hand. For some, the library feels like the only place where wanting to move forward is respected, with nothing quite like it available elsewhere.

"So in the library, you do your own job search, and you apply for your own self. But there is advantage; then you can do the application in your own time. Do it in one day and send it off. If you go to a Jobcentre you can do the application but there's a time limit to use the computer there and you can't print there…"

"They're like, 'We are holding your hand and you're going to reach the end of the tunnel with us.' And you actually feel that. It's like, 'What is important is for you to reach that goal that you want to achieve, and we can be walking with you.' That's what it feels like. I've never experienced it elsewhere."

(Jobseekers describing their libraries)

Alongside testimony from jobseekers, this research looked objectively at what library services provide through two national surveys of library services. Results of those surveys were compared with existing literature about library services and routes to employment. This confirmed what jobseekers were saying and showed library services provide a unique combination of three forms of support: human help; digital and learning resources; and a calm desk-work environment. This report describes in real-life terms the difference these forms of support make to job seeking and how they serve as important 'precursors' to getting a job. This unique combination of support is available on a national scale across England's 150 library services, which are among the public's most trusted institutions[1] and which between them operate 2,800 individual libraries.

The infographic below illustrates the support described in this report.

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1 [Ipsos MORI Veracity Index](#), Ipsos MORI (2021). Librarians ranked second most trusted profession by UK public.

A unique combination of support

Offer >	Benefit to jobseekers	How widespread? (% of library services offering this based on October 2021 survey)

Human help

Offer	Benefit to jobseekers	How widespread?
Support with email or accessing employment websites	Removes digital access as an additional barrier to finding or applying for jobs.	**98%** Email support **93%** Support accessing job websites
Volunteering opportunities	Provides experience for CV, builds confidence for job seeking and interviews.	**74%** Volunteering
Support with CVs and applications	Jobseekers not held back by lack of written communication skills.	**65%** CV and application support
Job clubs	Provides mutual encouragement and opportunities to share information and knowhow.	**46%** Job clubs (most often these are weekly)

Digital and learning resources

Offer	Benefit to jobseekers	How widespread?
Free access to computers, internet and Wi-Fi with generous limits on use	Jobseekers without their own desktop PC can spend as long as they need on online job seeking.	**100%** Computers and Wi-Fi **57%** Have no time restrictions, and/or exemptions for disadvantaged users
Access to printing and scanning, often with reduced or waived fees	Jobseekers can apply for jobs which require hard copy applications, or scanned forms of evidence.	**100%** Printing and scanning
Access to tablet PCs	Removes an access barrier for jobseekers who are more confident with mobile/touch devices.	**41%** Tablet PCs
Skills and training courses	Learning at jobseekers' own pace in an environment which is unpressured increases confidence.	**57%** Skills and training courses

Desk-work environment

Offer	Benefit to jobseekers	How widespread?
Desks and computers in spaces with privacy and/or in quiet areas	Jobseekers can focus without distraction, complete more applications, and easily access other resources in same place.	**50%** Quiet desk space **54%** Computers in quiet areas
Child-friendly setting	Jobseekers can find ways to occupy their young children so they can focus on job seeking.	**29%** Ways to occupy children (some availability – a further 36%)
Suitable spaces for taking part in a video-call interview	Jobseekers who lack space and/or Wi-Fi can accept video interviews, and not have to decline.	**17%** Spaces for video-calls (some availability – a further 65%)

Research summary: the role of public library services in improving employment outcomes

Who uses library services for job seeking?

Data on library use shows that jobseekers, and male jobseekers in particular, are much more likely to use a library than the general population. National data from the DCMS Taking Part survey shows 37% of male jobseekers have used a library compared to 26% of men in the general population.

There is also evidence to suggest that jobseekers who use library services come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and other disadvantaged groups. Meanwhile the wider evidence shows digital access among the poorest households is as little as half that of households with average earnings.

What is the scale of this type of support?

The surveys of library services undertaken specifically for this research in May 2020 and October 2021 indicate that computers, internet access, and Wi-Fi are provided by all library services. Other learning resources are provided by the majority of library services, even taking account of pandemic disruption. The October 2021 survey also found that printing and scanning facilities are provided by all library services who responded.

Which of the following resources does your library provide to support people into work? (includes comparison with May 2020)

Legend: ● Oct 2021 (n=46) ● May 2020 (n=49)
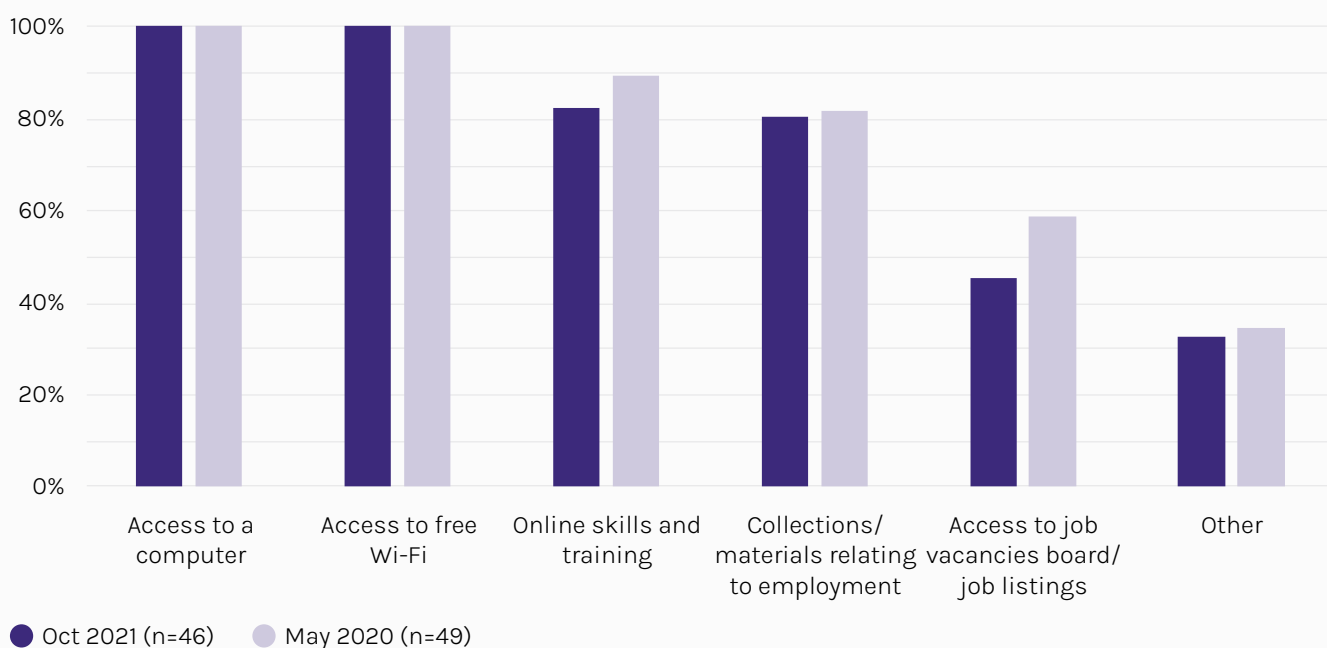
Research summary: the role of public library services in improving employment outcomes

Again, even with the disruption of the pandemic, almost all library services say they provide direct human help to set up email or to use 'Find a Job'. More than half of library services provide support with basic digital skills including using video-meeting tools like MS Teams or Zoom.

What support is provided for…
(n=46, open-text answers coded as below)
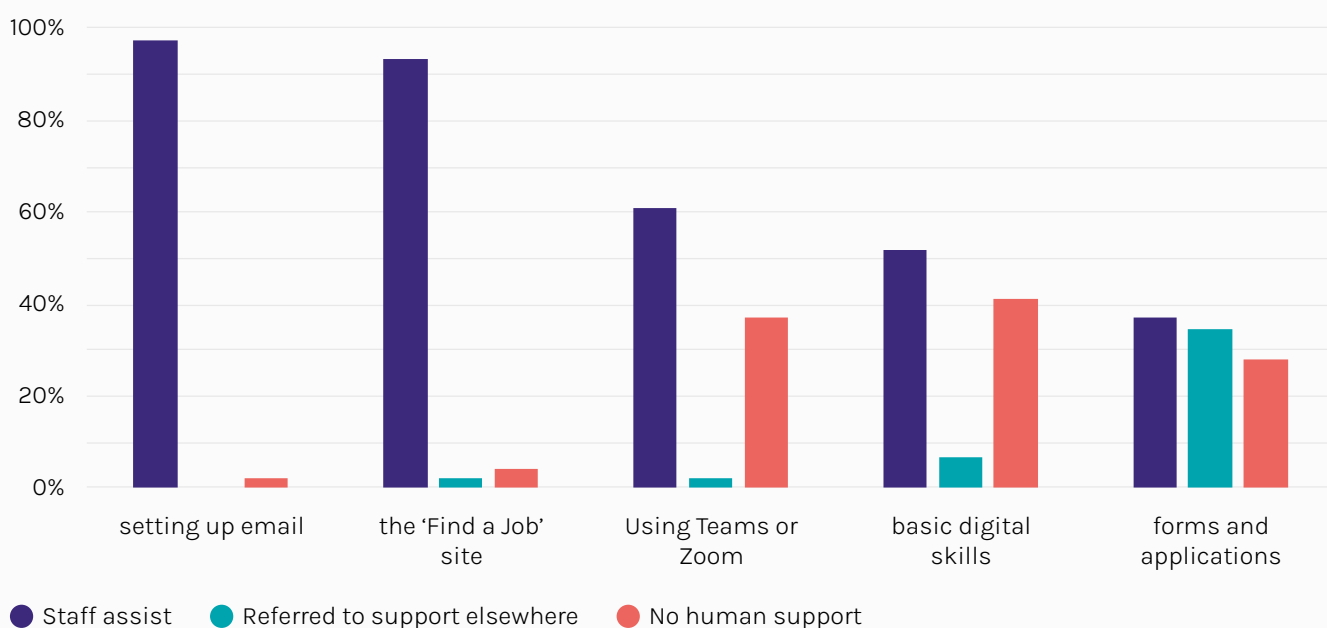
However, while support is provided on a large scale across England, it also seems uncoordinated. The surveys show variation in both range of provision, and access arrangements from one service to another. Survey responses also indicate that many users would only find out about support if they asked staff or volunteers. Many types of human help have also been paused due to the pandemic.

Research summary: the role of public library services in improving employment outcomes

Recommendations

This report makes three recommendations:

Recommendation 1: actively co-ordinate the support provided to jobseekers by library services with other forms of jobseeker support.

This could be achieved through a formal partnership between Jobcentres and library services as critical social infrastructure, negotiated through national library sector development and support bodies, and DWP.

Recommendation 2: invest in quality and consistency.

Individual library services should consider how they can increase the benefit to jobseekers by making the resources and activities identified by this research much more widely available (just as PCs, Wi-Fi, printing and scanning already are). Individual library services which do not actively promote their support (but do provide it) should also consider how greater promotion could deliver more impact.

Recommendation 3: reinstate human help for jobseekers which has been paused due to the pandemic.

Individual services where provision has been reduced and not yet brought back, should use the evidence in this report to inform decisions about how to reinstate provision – in particular CV-writing, careers advice, and training courses – which are most likely to have been paused.

1. A unique combination of support

1.1 This report draws on existing national data, new survey data gathered during the pandemic, ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in late 2021, and evidence from existing literature. This report finds that England's public library services, which are free and open to all, provide a unique combination of human help, digital and learning resources, and desk-work environment – which serve as vital 'precursors' to positive employment outcomes.

Our ethnographic fieldwork described in section 3 shows why these forms of support are important to jobseekers in practical ways and why jobseekers feel nothing similar exists. Data from the annual DCMS Taking Part survey and other sources described in section 4 show the extent to which jobseekers use library services. New survey data in section 5 shows the scale at which this jobseeker offer is provided across England.

How were these findings reached?

1.2 A review of wider literature summarised in section 2 enables us to see how libraries are a form of social infrastructure which provide 'precursors' to getting a job.

What is the unique offer?

1.3 The unique offer is a combination of human help, digital and learning resources, and desk-work environment:

	Offer	Benefit to jobseekers	How widespread? (% of library services offering this based on October 2021 survey)
Human help	**Support with email or accessing employment websites**	Removes digital access as an additional barrier to finding or applying for jobs.	**98%** Email support **93%** Support accessing job websites
	Volunteering opportunities	Provides experience for CV, builds confidence for job seeking and interviews.	**74%** Volunteering
	Support with CVs and applications	Jobseekers not held back by lack of written communication skills.	**65%** CV and application support
	Job clubs	Provides mutual encouragement and opportunities to share information and knowhow.	**46%** Job clubs (most often these are weekly)

1. A unique combination of support

Digital and learning resources

Free access to computers, internet and Wi-Fi with generous limits on use	Jobseekers without their own desktop PC can spend as long as they need on online job seeking.	**100%** **Computers and Wi-Fi**
		57% Have no time restrictions, and/or exemptions for disadvantaged users
Access to printing and scanning, often with reduced or waived fees	Jobseekers can apply for jobs which require hard copy applications, or scanned forms of evidence.	**100%** **Printing and scanning**
Access to tablet PCs	Removes an access barrier for jobseekers who are more confident with mobile/touch devices.	**41%** **Tablet PCs**
Skills and training courses	Learning at jobseekers' own pace in an environment which is unpressured increases confidence.	**57%** **Skills and training courses**

Desk-work environment

Desks and computers in spaces with privacy and/or in quiet areas	Jobseekers can focus without distraction, complete more applications, and easily access other resources in same place.	**50%** **Quiet desk space**
		54% **Computers in quiet areas**
Child-friendly setting	Jobseekers can find ways to occupy their young children so they can focus on job seeking.	**29%** **Ways to occupy children** (some availability – a further 36%)
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1. A unique combination of support

How the pandemic has changed views of social infrastructure

1.4 Over the course of the pandemic there has been a growing recognition of the economic role of social infrastructure. The importance of "the physical spaces and community facilities which bring people together to build meaningful relationships"[2] has been set out in a slew of new research from the Bennett Institute, Local Trust, Onward, and MP Danny Kruger's report, *Levelling Up Our Communities: Proposals for a New Social Covenant.* The consistent message is that to reduce socioeconomic inequalities at all geographic levels requires social infrastructure as well as traditional large-scale physical infrastructure.

1.5 The growing literature on social infrastructure also describes the declining number of settings like pubs, libraries and youth clubs over the past 20 years. Yet, despite the wider decline in social infrastructure, there are currently around 2,800 library service points in England[3]. Not only that, but due to the local scale on which they operate, there are around four times as many public library service points as Jobcentres[4], including many in rural locations far from larger towns.

1.6 The evidence presented here helps us understand some of the specific ways individual jobseekers derive benefit from using library services – one of the most widespread examples of social infrastructure – which in turn can reduce wider inequalities.

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2 Townscapes: 7 The Value of Social Infrastructure, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy (2021)
3 2775 static service points (statutory and non-statutory) open more than 10 hours a week, around 2200 of which are local authority statutory services. (CIPFA statistics 2019/2020)
4 639 Jobcentre Plus centres as of March 2021, and a Government commitment to open another 80 in 2022

2. Providing 'precursors' to getting a job

2.1 Our literature review (provided as Annex B to this report) suggests library services are seen as important places by jobseekers and that the combination of support they provide removes practical barriers and helps users grow in confidence and obtain skills – which in turn improves their chances of getting a job[5]. This wider evidence frames our model of library services providing a unique combination of human help, digital and learning resources, and desk-work environment which act as 'precursors' to better job-seeking outcomes. The literature identified two broad areas of support:

- **Specific services or interventions (human help) deliberately aimed at improving employability and digital skills:**

  - Programmes specifically designed to provide support, including digital and basic skills, offered universally or targeted.

  - Activities and support which help overcome individual job-seeking challenges, including writing CVs and job applications, setting up a business, or developing other employment-determining skills.

  - Other activities where the rationale is that library-provided support helps improve the competitiveness of users in the labour market.

- **Access to resources (digital and learning resources, plus desk-work environment):**

  - Access to free digital resources, in particular PCs, Wi-Fi, printers, and copying/scanning, which remove financial barriers compared to other settings (eg home, coffee shops).

  - Free access to learning resources (eg books, online learning resources).

  - Library spaces are a resource in themselves, either general purpose or tailored to specific uses (eg study desks, learning areas). For some jobseekers, libraries may be preferable to other locations because they provide calm, safe, neutral and trusted environments, which are more conducive to job searching.

2.2 Evidence from the Business and IP Centre network[6] also shows libraries play a direct role in supporting self-employment as a route to work. There is also growing evidence that "digital skills are becoming near-universal requirements for employment"[7] and that over the pandemic, access to digital devices and skills have become essential for job seeking[8]. This is particularly relevant to the support library services provide for basic digital tasks such as setting up email and accessing employment websites. The Social Mobility Commission has also found that home internet access in the poorest households is now half that for households with average incomes[9].

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5 City University; Culture, Policy, Management Department, 2008. Helping people get started – cited in Evidence review of the economic contribution of libraries, BOP (2014). Also Evaluation of the Libraries: Opportunities for Everyone innovation fund, DCMS (2018).
6 Democratising Entrepreneurship, British Library (2019).
7 No Longer Optional: Employer Demand for Digital Skills, Burning Glass for DCMS (2019).
8 Supporting digital inclusion for jobseekers, Reed (2021).
9 State of the nation 2021:Social mobility and the pandemic, Social Mobility Commission (2021).

3. Jobseekers get help they cannot find elsewhere

3.1 Our ethnographic research consisted of 17 in-situ depth interviews in libraries in Eastbourne, Pimlico, Norwich, and Mansfield, during September 2021. A full report of the ethnographic fieldwork is provided as Annex A to this report.

3.2 The overarching messages from this research were:

- Libraries are essential places for many jobseekers.

- Jobseekers are looking for a fresh start, but it can be hard to find one.

- Libraries help them feel more confident about themselves and their future.

- …Libraries achieve this through a unique mix of people, resources and space.

3.3 When asked what creates this unique combination, five features came up most.

1. Easy access to PCs, printers, scanning, and the internet

> **"…am I going to go and get a printer as well? Probably not. Even if I typed all my letters up and put them on a memory stick I'm probably still going to come to the library."**
>
> **Jobseeker**

- Libraries provide digitally excluded jobseekers with all the IT equipment they need in one place to find and apply for jobs.

- Sessions on PCs are of an appropriate duration for the complex, stressful work of job seeking (typically two hours which is longer than other places offer. This is usually free and often extended for jobseekers).

- Some also reported feeling safer printing and copying personal data in the library than in an internet cafe or a Jobcentre.

- Some jobseekers (along with other library users too) find desktop PCs intimidating but are comfortable using touchscreens. Where touchscreen devices are available for loan in the library (eg Hublet devices), job seeking becomes easier for these users.

2. Supportive staff and volunteers

> **"They made me feel special. They made me feel comfortable. They've made me feel like, 'You can do this, you've got this.' And I'm looking forward to doing my 'level two'".**
>
> **Jobseeker**

- Welcoming staff make users feel more confident to make use of help and resources.

- …This is enhanced when staff take additional time to orient new users towards the different job-seeking resources available.

- …which in turn makes users feel equal to staff not inferior.

- Users feel a strong tie to staff and volunteers.

- Exceptions made and a flexible implementation of rules enable users to complete job searches and applications and make them feel supported and understood.

3. Jobseekers get help they cannot find elsewhere

"And then I came to the library"
Library user
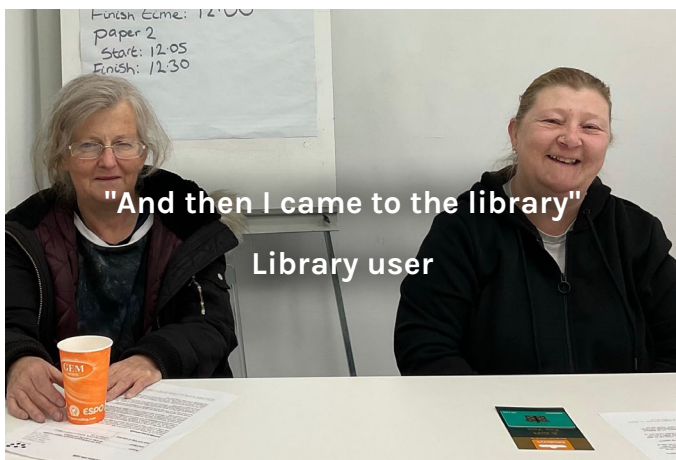
3. Choices over learning methods

> "I feel better with the library doing it one-on-one because I'm getting used to the reading. The woman I'm with is really nice. She doesn't rush you."
>
> **Jobseeker**

- Being able to learn in an environment which suits users, at a pace that works for them, increases confidence in the outcome and makes the experience less stressful.
- The variety of activities offered through libraries means jobseekers feel they have control and choice, eg between classroom-learning (for those who value peer interaction and mutual support) and one-on-one learning (for those anxious about group settings).

4. Volunteering opportunities

> "Basically, Emma's got a record of things she has done, because the first thing they ask when you go for a job is, 'What have you done?' And now we can say."
>
> **Library staff member**

- For some jobseekers volunteering is the only way to get the work experience potential employers require.
- Volunteering is also instrumental in rebuilding confidence, as it provides very low-risk, self-directed work opportunities.
- Staff who implement volunteering programmes are equally instrumental; encouraging volunteers to move out of their comfort zone at the right pace.

5. Calm but sociable space to work and study

> "I use their Wi-Fi even though I've got Wi-Fi at home now. It's a better environment. You come here, you actually focus on what you're doing."
>
> "It gets me out meeting new people. You can be sat at a computer and somebody else can come and sit at one and you end up talking to them. You can make a new friend just by popping to the library."
>
> **Jobseekers**

- Quiet, airy and well-lit spaces are more conducive to work than the other settings available to jobseekers.
- …This can include the library being a place to escape from the distractions of home.
- Jobseekers benefit from mutual encouragement from other library users.
- There is an interesting tension between wanting quieter, more private spaces for important tasks, but also valuing the diverse social contact afforded by the library; a need to be alone, without feeling lonely.

3. Jobseekers get help they cannot find elsewhere

"A library is a transformative space"
Library user
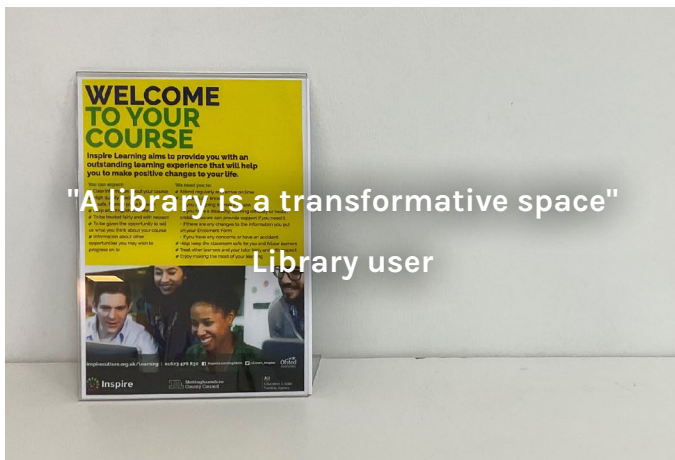
Practical examples of better outcomes

3.4 The ethnographic research findings illustrate real-life ways in which library services help increase jobseekers' chances of securing a job by providing 'precursors'. Here are three examples.

3.5 Jobseekers need desk space and facilities in a calm setting in which they can work for hours at a time. Job seeking requires multiple applications to be completed. This involves hours of work at one time, along with access to printing, scanning and copying, or other information. Libraries provide access to these facilities along with free internet access, and with fewer time-restrictions than other settings.

"So in the library, you do your own job search, and you apply for your own self. But there is advantage; then you can do the application in your own time. Do it in one day and send it off. If you go to a Jobcentre you can do the application but there's a time limit to use the computer there and you can't print there. So what will you do when you have to send an application with your passport and driver's licence which you need to photocopy? How would you do it?"

Jobseeker

3.6 Jobseekers who are anxious about what they will do if they have to go for an interview need reassurance. Libraries provide a setting which feels supportive, with formal and informal support to increase interview skills and confidence.

"[Without the library] I will be totally lost, because say I've got an interview. I can come in the library and take a book for interviews, read the book and return it. You can't do it anywhere else."

[On the effect of literacy tuition at the library] "I've moved from nought to one, and I'm going to keep working up and up and up. I feel more confident in my brain. I can do it. When you go to a job interview if they're asking you questions or they put a form in front of you – if I can read what that says on there I can answer them properly. But if I can't read it, I wouldn't know what to say, would I?"

Jobseekers

3. Jobseekers get help they cannot find elsewhere

3.7 Jobseekers with thin CVs need work experience for confidence and to be competitive candidates. Library services give (often direct) routes to volunteering and work experience which provide experience required by employers, and build jobseekers' confidence.

> "It helps to find you work because it shows you have been volunteering, and they ask about that in interviews. It was a one-week work experience programme working in two different libraries, and at the end of it you got a reference. They ask what you have done previously and you can show the reference. It details exactly what you've done and it's all very official on Norfolk County Council paper and everything. So it's something that helps you obviously in getting a job"

> "I had a telephone interview, and the lady that was interested in me said to me, 'What are you doing now?' And I could have just said to her, 'Well, I'm applying for jobs.' But I was able to say, 'Well, I'm volunteering. While I'm applying for paid work. I'm also volunteering.' It makes you sound more active."

Jobseekers

There is nothing else quite like public libraries

3.8 This complex combination of human help, digital and learning resources, and environment, is unique. This is confirmed by testimony from ethnographic interviewees who could not think of alternative spaces offering the same combination of benefits and outcomes; rebuilding confidence, inviting users to progress, and enabling people who feel excluded because they are out of work to feel part of the community again. In fact, many became upset when contemplating a scenario where a public library service was not available to them.

3.9 In addition to their unique nature, the user experience of public libraries was consistently more positive than accounts of other physical settings, especially Jobcentres.

> "I decided to come off job seekers, because they were giving me so much pressure and the way they were doing it was more about figures, than trying to get you the right job; I was looking for a complete change of career."

> "People arrive at the library sometimes and they're completely defeated."

Library user and staff member

4. Which jobseekers use libraries?

Rates of library use are higher among jobseekers, but especially among job seeking men

4.1 Data from the national DCMS 'Taking Part' English household survey[10] (Table 1) shows that active jobseekers (ie those who are unemployed and available for work) are the most likely of all groups to report having used a library. Across the period 2018/19 to 2019/20, 39% of jobseekers surveyed in Taking Part had used a library in the past 12 months, with little gender difference. Compared to jobseekers, library use in the general population is lower at around 31% of respondents.

4.2 The most noteworthy feature of these figures is the difference in library use between job-seeking men, and men in the general population, where there is a difference of 11 percentage points (37% compared to 26%). In other words, job-seeking men are much more likely to use libraries than men in the general population.

Pooled sample from DCMS Taking Part 2018/19 and 2019/20	Library use in past 12 months – **jobseekers** answering "Yes" %
Male (n=216)	37%
Female (n=174)	41%
All	39%

From DCMS Taking Part 2019/20	Library use in past 12 months – **all** answering "Yes" %
Male (n=3,417)	26%
Female (n=4,084)	37%
All	31%

Table 1

4.3 For further context, Taking Part 2019/20 also shows that in the general population, rates of library use overall are higher for the following groups:

- Among 25 to 44-year-olds and 65 to 74-year-olds compared to other adult age groups.

- Among non-white groups, with library use highest of all among those describing themselves as Asian or Black.

4.4 Taking Part 2019/20 data also shows that the socioeconomic status of library users (based on Index of Multiple Deprivation) has no effect on library use. This contrasts with all other forms of arts and cultural participation which are higher among those living in better-off areas.

10 Taking Part is a continuous face-to-face household survey of adults aged 16+ and children aged five to 15 in England. Figures used here for unemployed library users were generated from a pooled sample of 2018/19 and 2019/20 data (pooled to achieve a viable sample size), accessed from UK Data Service under an End User License. Other Taking Part data cited is from the publicly accessible results for the 2019/20 survey.

4. Which jobseekers use libraries?

Jobseekers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

4.5 In addition to analysing national Taking Part data, in summer 2020 the sector support organisation Libraries Connected, shared data with us on the socioeconomic status of library users and those using public access library PC computers immediately after the end of 'lockdown 1'. Data had been gathered from three library services: Norfolk, Somerset, and Wandsworth. Across these three services between, 63% and 68% of users had home postcodes in the lower half of the national deprivation distribution. At Norwich Millennium Library, one in five PC users (21%) had home postcodes in the most deprived 10% nationally. At Battersea Library (Wandsworth), staff were able to capture more detailed data which showed 62% of PC users were unemployed and

31% of PC users were using a PC for job seeking. This confirms our findings that jobseekers are more likely to use public libraries than the general population. It also fits with the evidence (described in section 2) that disadvantaged groups face significant barriers to digital access.

4.6 Separate to our work, the technology firm Lorensbergs, who provide software used on public-access library PCs, have also undertaken survey work (Figure 1) which indicates libraries are important places for jobseekers. Their data shows that in 2020 job seeking was the second most common purpose for public library PC use (coming after 'email' and ahead of 'Universal Credit and other benefit applications'). In terms of printing, the same report shows that CVs are the most commonly printed item[11]. The most recent data from Lorensbergs found that in late 2021 and early 2022 one-third of library services reported that use of PCs by jobseekers was rising[12].

What are library PCs being used for?

- Finding jobs and applying for benefits and government services are among the top reasons for library PC use

- Keeping in touch with family or friends has been a significant reason for use during the pandemic, helping to reduce social isolation and supporting mental health

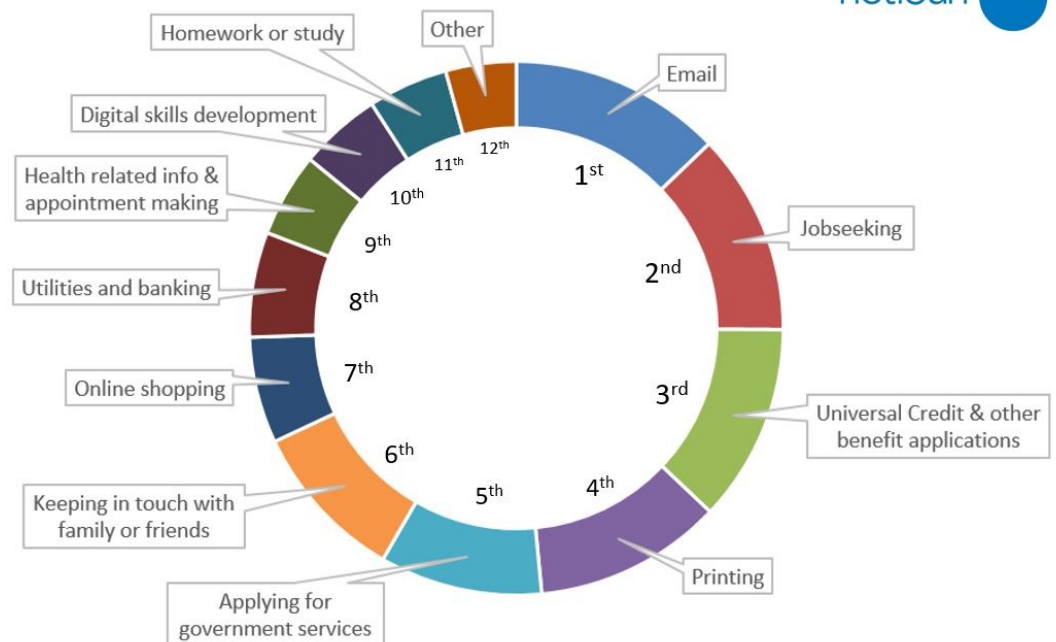- Use of both email and printing support the top reasons for PC use and other tasks

Figure 1 (reproduced with kind permission from Lorensbergs)

11 Figure reproduced with permission from Public libraries 2020, Lorensbergs (2021).
12 Public Libraries 2021, Lorensbergs (2022).

5. What is the scale of provision?

5.1 Survey data from October 2021, conducted as part of this research, shows how many library services provide the specific resources and activities that this research has focused on[13]. Forty-six out of 150 English library services responded, and headline findings are provided separately as Annex C to this report. The October 2021 survey was preceded by a scoping survey in May 2020, enabling comparison between the two sets of results.

5.2 The October 2021 survey showed that even with significant pandemic disruption, digital and learning resources were being provided by almost all library services, at broadly the same level as in May 2020 (Figure 2). Every respondent (100%) said they provided PC and Wi-Fi access, 83% said they provided online skills and training, and 80% said they had collections relating to employment.
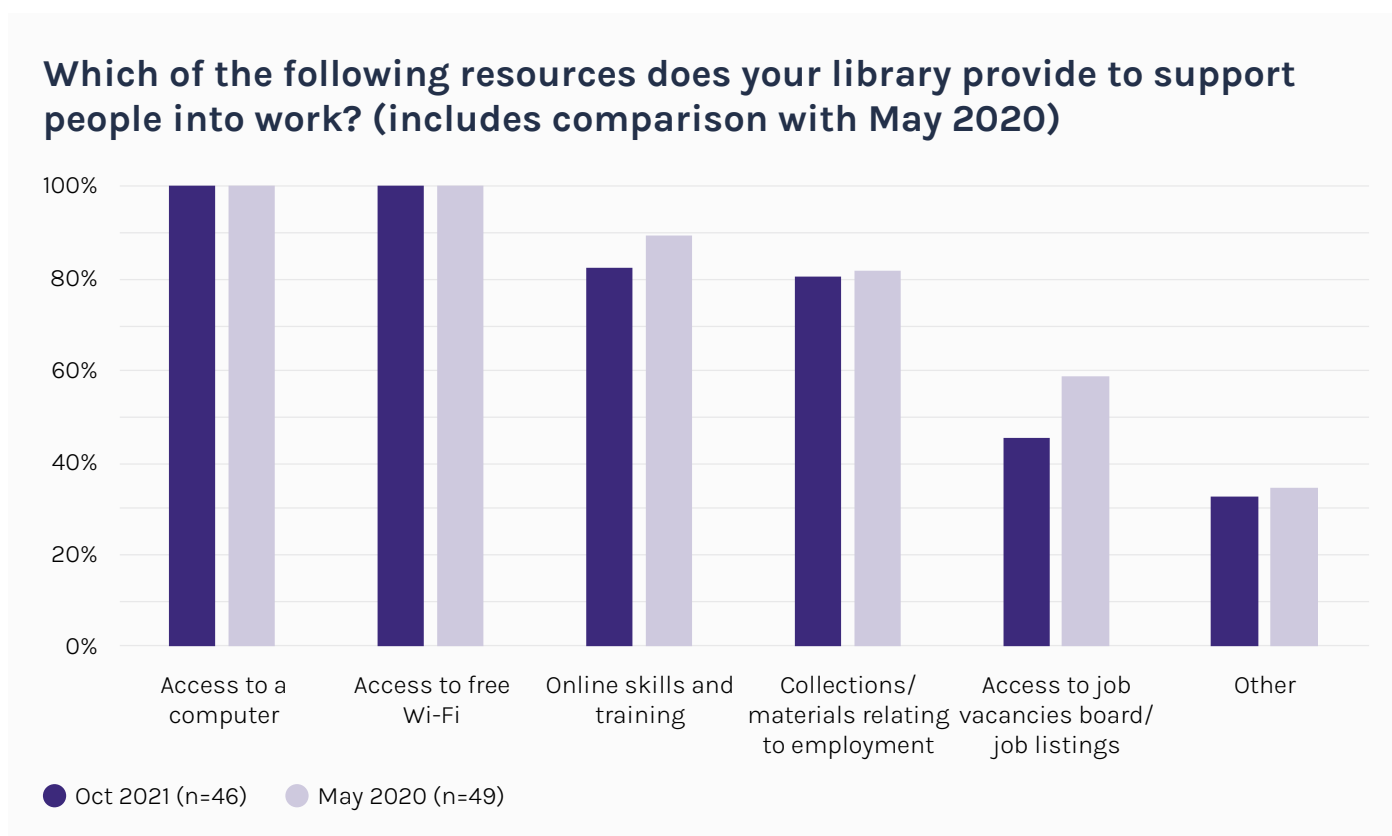
Which of the following resources does your library provide to support people into work? (includes comparison with May 2020)

Figure 2

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13 The October 2021 survey was our second survey. Our first survey in May 2020 (similar response rate) served a scoping purpose. Some questions were replicated in both surveys, enabling comparison between May 2020 and October 2021, which helps explain the pandemic effect on these services.

5. What is the scale of provision?

5.3 The October 2021 survey also found that: printing and scanning facilities were provided by 100% of respondents; tablet computers (as alternatives to PCs) were provided by 41% of respondents; and while 43% of respondents had time restrictions on PC use, 57% had no time restrictions at all or exemptions from time restrictions for certain users (which often included jobseekers).

5.4 In terms of different forms of regular or scheduled activities, the October 2021 survey shows (Figure 3) this is widely available although highly varied from one library service to another. Support with CV-writing is the most consistently provided (65% of respondents), compared to careers advice which is only provided by 30%. However, the survey also shows (unsurprisingly) that library services scaled back human help between May 2020 and October 2021. For example, only 65% of respondents offered support for CV- writing in October 2021 compared to 83% in May 2020, and only 30% offered careers advice in October 2021 compared to 48% in May 2020. Provision of skills and training, another commonly provided form of support, also reduced from 63% to 57% between 2020 and 2021.

Which of the following resources does your library provide to support people into work? (includes comparison with May 2020)
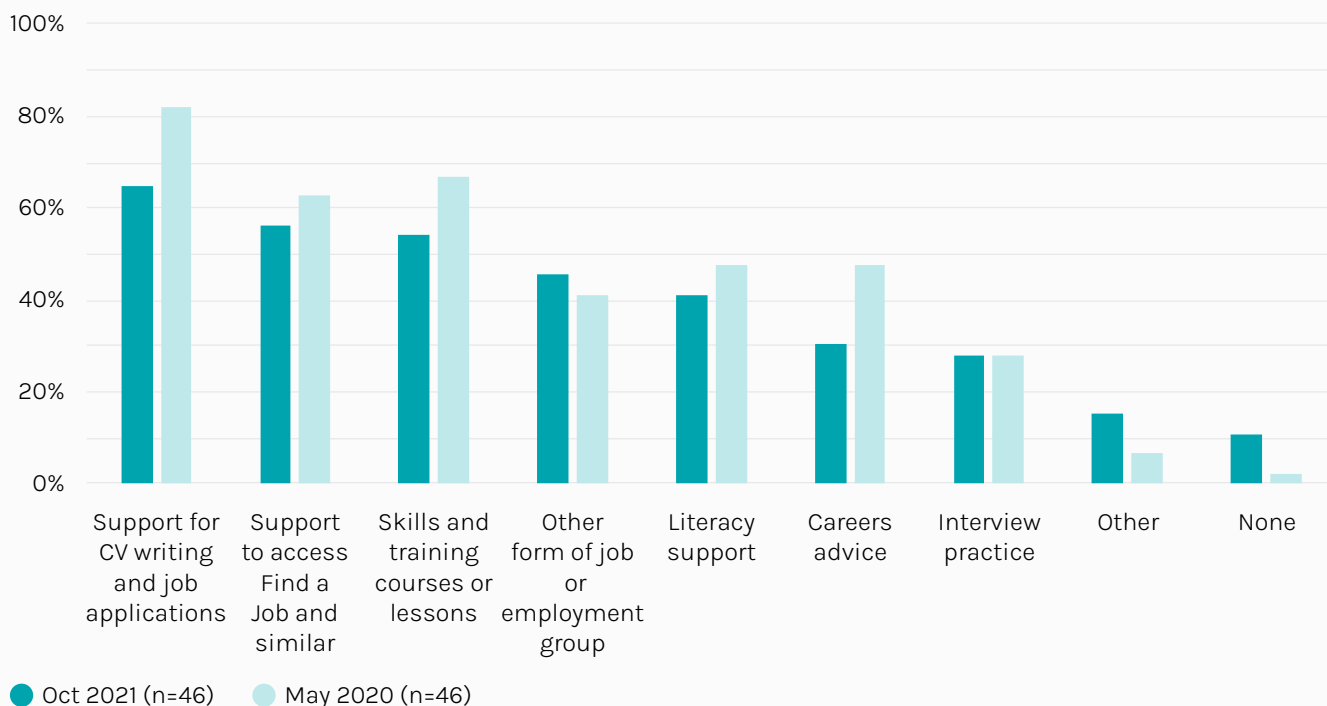

Figure 3

5. What is the scale of provision?

5.5 The October 2021 survey also found that in terms of the frequency of job clubs (offered by 46%), the majority of these were weekly (64% of those who offered these), and that 74% of respondents offered volunteering opportunities to jobseekers.

5.6 The October 2021 survey also asked follow-up questions about specific types of help identified by the ethnography, including how the help was provided. This showed (Figure 4)

that almost all respondents (98%) provided direct human help to users to set up email, and a similar proportion (93%) provided human help to access or use 'Find a Job'. While some respondents also offered human help in relation to video-call meetings, other basic digital skills, or completing forms and applications, there was a mixed response in *how* this support was provided (ie direct assistance versus onward referral).

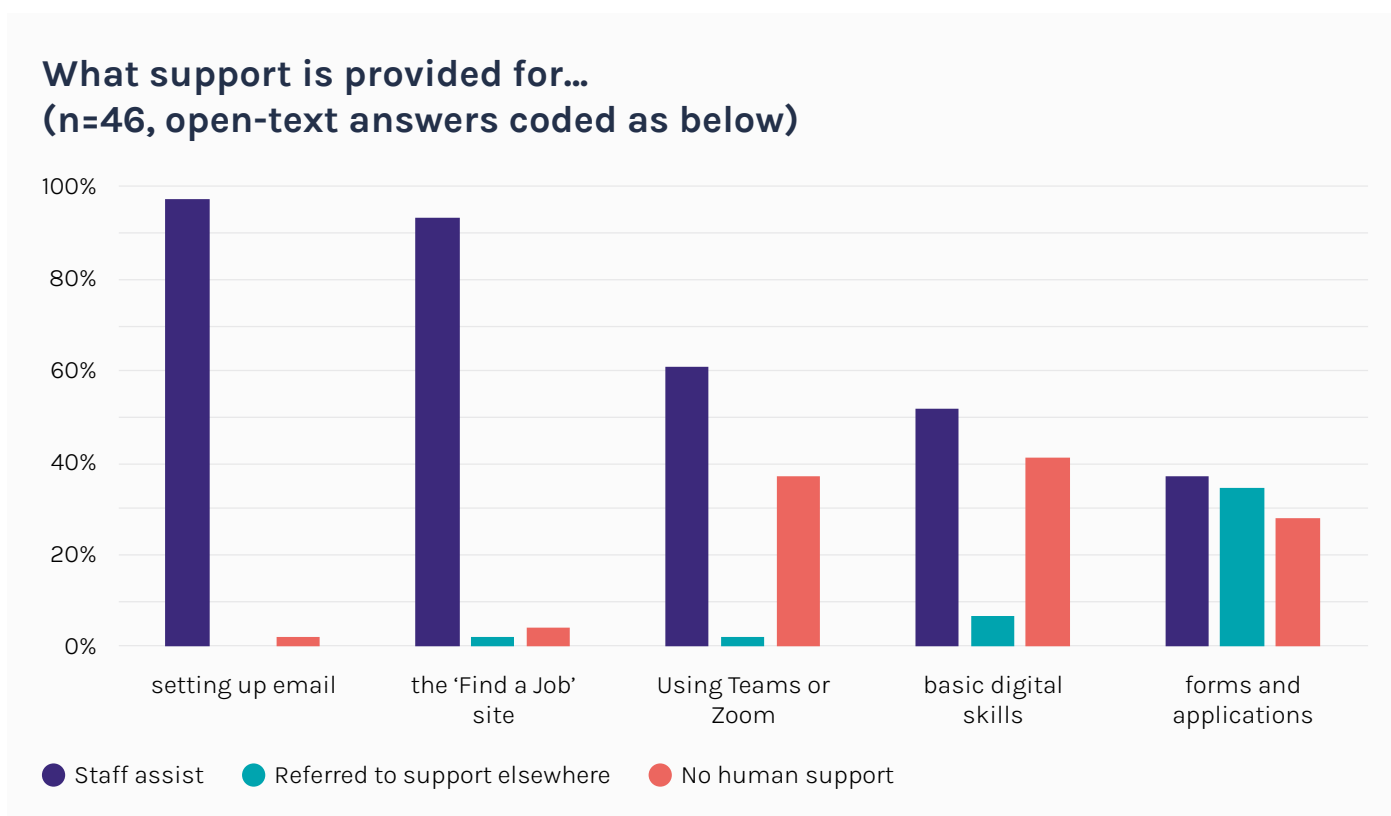## What support is provided for… (n=46, open-text answers coded as below)

Figure 4

5. What is the scale of provision?

5.7 In terms of environmental factors conducive to desk-work and job seeking (Figure 5), half of all respondents (50%) answered "yes", that they provided quiet areas for job seeking with a further 39% indicating this was available in some circumstances. Around one in three (29%) said users would be able to find ways to occupy their children while job seeking, and a further 36% answered "it depends". While only 17% answered "yes", that jobseekers would find a suitable space for video-call interviews, a further 65% said "it depends", and only 17% said definitively "no". All respondents indicated they would change physical factors such as these if there was evidence it helped jobseekers.

Physical environment
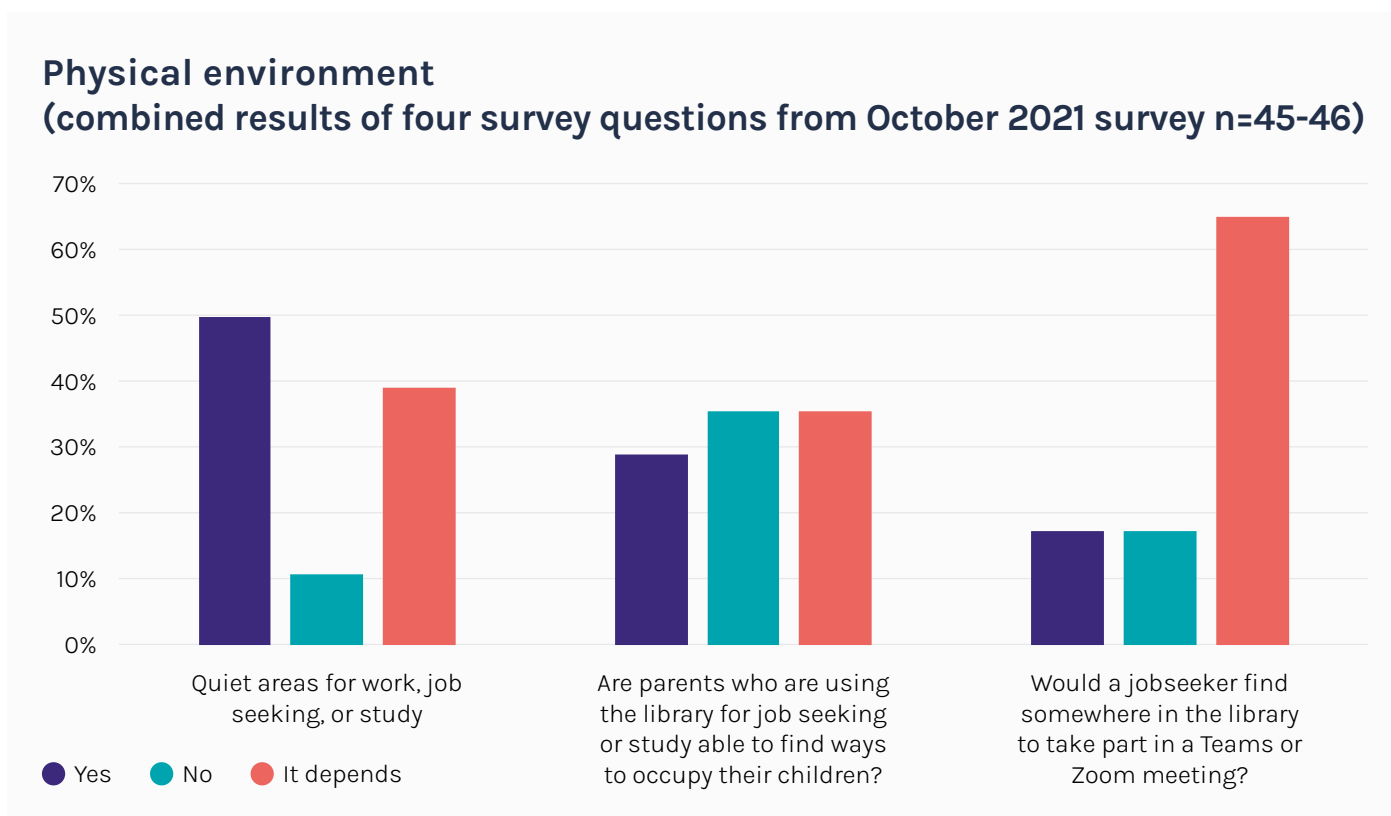## (combined results of four survey questions from October 2021 survey n=45-46)

Figure 5

Using the October 2021 survey to test specific issues highlighted by the ethnography

5.8 The October 2021 survey was drafted after the ethnographic fieldwork enabling us to test the extent that library services provide the kinds of support highlighted by the ethnography. For example, the ethnography found that jobseekers want PCs located in quiet areas and with privacy.

5. What is the scale of provision?

5.9 The survey asked about this and found more than half (54%) of respondents had public access PCs located in either "designated quiet areas", "areas where each user has privacy (eg booths or corners)", or "somewhere else quiet, or with privacy". All respondents said they would consider changing this aspect of their physical settings if there was evidence it helped jobseekers.

5.10 Similarly the ethnography illustrated how jobseekers value flexibility in how library services apply access restrictions to PCs and printing and scanning facilities (eg time restrictions or page limits). The survey found that more than half (54%) of library services who responded had flexible policies for printing and scanning, with these flexibilities often aimed at jobseekers and other in-need groups.

One library service explained that: "Officially, everyone is charged [for printing and scanning], but we ask colleagues to use their empathy and discretion." Another explained, "Jobseekers get six free CVs before they have to pay", and another said, "Free printing for children doing homework and free for Jobseekers and those using PCs for applying for a council service. Free scanning for all users".

5.11 However, another key finding from the October 2021 survey (Figure 6) is that human help for jobseekers is not widely advertised. Most respondents said users would only find out about help if they asked, and most forms of help were not advertised. This means jobseekers might not be accessing support which could help them, because they do not know about it.

How do users find out about help? (n=46)

- We advertise this as available
- Word of mouth
- Asking a member of staff/volunteer
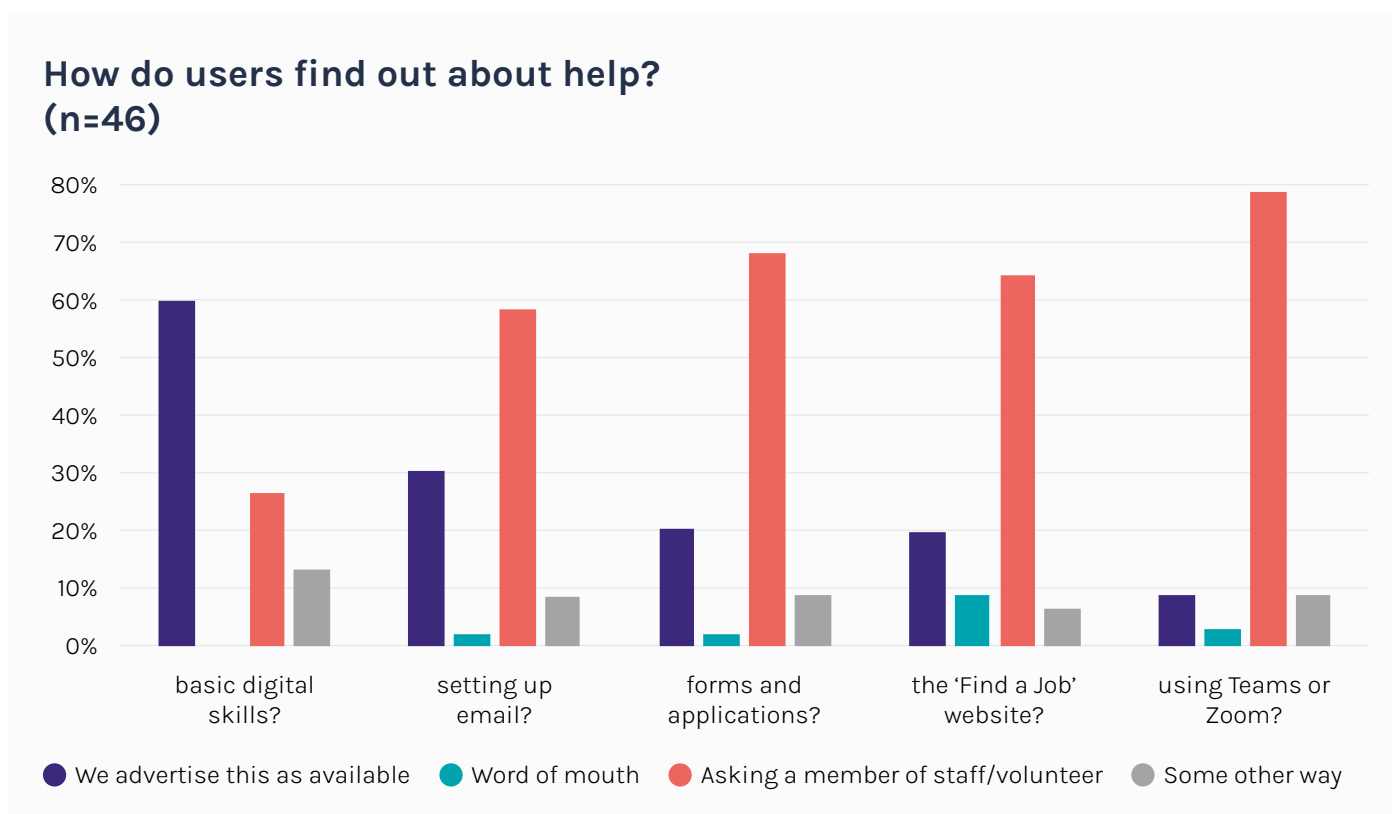- Some other way

Figure 6

5. What is the scale of provision?

On what scale are these forms of support provided nationally?

5.12 The survey data can (cautiously) be extrapolated from those who responded to anticipate a national picture of provision. Taking the 46 responses as indicative of the entire population of 150 library services would imply:

- All of England's library services provide access to PCs, Wi-Fi, printing and scanning (NB this is corroborated by other data including annual CIPFA data for public library services).

- At least 90% of library services provide human help for setting up email or accessing the 'Find a Job' website (extrapolated that would mean 135 out of 150 library authorities).

- Around 80% of library services provide access to materials related to employment and/or access to online skills and training (scaling up would mean 120 out of 150 library authorities).

- Around 74% of library services offer jobseekers volunteering opportunities (extrapolated that would mean 111 out of 150 library authorities).

- Around 65% of library services provide support with CV writing and job applications (extrapolated that would mean 98 out of 150 library authorities).

- Around 50% of library services provide quiet areas for work, job seeking, or study (extrapolated that would mean 75 out of 150 library authorities), and 54% have computers in areas with privacy and/or in quiet areas.

- Around 41% of library services provide access to tablet PCs (extrapolated that would mean 62 out of 150 library authorities).

- Around 17% of library services offer suitable spaces for users to take part in video-call interviews (extrapolated that would mean 26 out of 150 library authorities). A further 65% could offer this in certain circumstances (a further 98 library authorities).

6. Conclusions

6.1 Libraries are calm, safe, neutral and highly trusted settings which provide free access to a unique combination of human help, digital and learning resources, and desk-work environment. Jobseekers gain direct benefits from these forms of support which serve as vital precursors to getting a job.

6.2 Data from Taking Part shows jobseekers, especially job-seeking men, are more likely to use libraries than the population as a whole. This is confirmed by testimony from jobseekers themselves who say libraries are important places and provide support they cannot find elsewhere. This over-representation of jobseekers among library users makes library services an efficient way to reach and support jobseekers.

6.3 With around 2,800 service points, England's public library network is four times the size of the Jobcentre network. Added to this, ethnographic interviewees often reported better experiences of libraries compared to other places where they would expect to be helped. This points to significant potential for library services to play a bigger and more co-ordinated role in jobseeker support on a national scale. The role of library services in delivering the national Business and IP Centre[14] network provides a template for this scale of co-ordination and investment.

6.4 The ethnography we conducted helps explain how and why jobseekers benefit from using libraries. Jobseeker testimony describes libraries as different from other forms of support because they provide help, which builds confidence and encourages progression, and they do so in settings with free resources easily on hand. In practical terms, libraries provide quiet desk space which can be used for hours at a time, help with digital access, access to printing and scanning with waived charges, and opportunities to gain CV experience through volunteering.

6.5 Provision of free internet access, access to devices, coupled with on-hand digital skills support, play a particularly important role in supporting digital access and skills, which many jobseekers struggle with, and which are increasingly essential to getting a job.

6.6 Jobseeker testimony closely accords with evidence from existing literature which suggests libraries are important places for job seeking, and a practical example of social infrastructure. The combination of support they provide removes practical barriers, which in turn improves the chances of getting a job. Conversely, lack of access to these forms of support makes it harder to search for jobs, complete and submit applications, and prepare for interviews. This evidence provides a detailed and practical model of support which can be consolidated and developed.

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14 The 2020 Budget included expansion of the BIPC network to provide 'business support on every high street'

6. Conclusions

6.7 Throughout this research there is evidence of genuine additionality – both in terms of jobseekers being unaware of comparable alternatives, and objectively in terms of the library offer being unique in a practical sense.
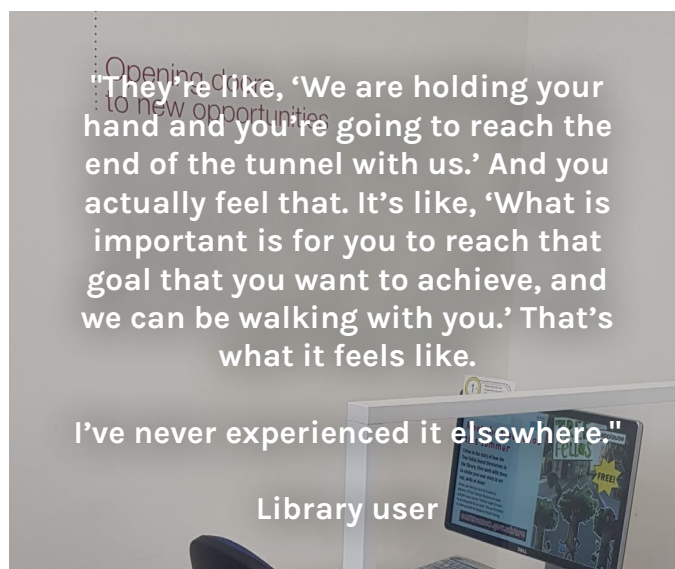
6.8 Even after two years of pandemic disruption our October 2021 survey indicated that:

- Access to PCs, Wi-Fi, printing, copying and scanning is available across all library services in England, and human help for digital skills and access (eg setting up email or accessing 'Find a Job') is provided by 90% of services.

- Access to materials related to employment and/or access to online skills and training are available in 80% of library services and support with CV writing and job applications is available in two thirds of library services.

- Over half of library authorities provide quiet areas for work, job seeking or study, or computers in quiet areas. Provision of tablet PCs is also widespread.

- The survey responses also show that most library services who do not provide these resources and interventions would be willing to provide them if there was evidence this would benefit jobseekers.

But impact could be greater

6.9 Despite the evidence of jobseekers benefiting from the support they get from library services, this research also shows that:

- While all forms of job seeking support (human help, learning resources, and desk-work environment) are offered widely, provision is variable in terms of quality, access arrangements and rules.

- Support is often unadvertised, with many users only likely to find out about it if they ask.

- Many forms of human help for jobseekers have been paused due to the pandemic, and it is unclear whether or when these will be reinstated. The most likely to have been paused are CV writing, careers advice and training courses.

"They're like, 'We are holding your hand and you're going to reach the end of the tunnel with us.' And you actually feel that. It's like, 'What is important is for you to reach that goal that you want to achieve, and we can be walking with you.' That's what it feels like.

I've never experienced it elsewhere."

Library user

7. Recommendations

Action now

This report makes three recommendations:

7.1 Recommendation 1: actively co-ordinate the support provided to jobseekers by library services with other forms of jobseeker support.

This could be achieved through a formal partnership between Jobcentres and library services as critical social infrastructure, negotiated through national library sector development and support bodies, and DWP.

7.2 Recommendation 2: invest in quality and consistency.

Individual library services should consider how they can increase the benefit to jobseekers by making the resources and activities identified by this research much more widely available (just as PCs, Wi-Fi, printing and scanning already are). This would be tailored to the needs and profile of their community and include:

- Staff and volunteers who can provide human help with digital access and skills.
- Volunteering opportunities as routes into work.
- Learning and digital resources appropriate to local needs.
- Flexible courses and learning opportunities.
- Good quality space for work and study.

Individual library services which do not actively promote their support (but do provide it) should also consider how greater promotion could deliver more impact.

7.3 Recommendation 3: reinstate human help for jobseekers which has been paused due to the pandemic.

Individual services where provision has been reduced and not yet brought back should use the evidence in this report to inform decisions about how to reinstate provision, in particular CV writing, careers advice, and training courses, which are most likely to have been paused.

Further exploration

7.4 This research raises additional questions which deserve further investigation. First is the need for better data on library use by jobseekers, especially to understand the characteristics of jobseekers who choose to use libraries for job seeking and to gain more understanding of individual outcomes. National library sector development and support bodies could use this research to make the case for improving the quality and availability of these kinds of data.

7.5 Secondly, this research can be used to plan additional programmes at national scale, aligned with wider action to reduce geographic disparities in employment access. Such programmes could focus on:

- Discovering the cold spots where the kinds of support identified here are lacking.
- Targeting places with higher unemployment, low skills, and poor digital access.
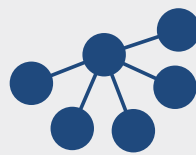- Enabling public library services to play a greater role in these places through identifying what is needed in terms of investment and other positive action.

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Helping jobseekers help themselves