

Explore York Libraries and Archives Report against contract July 2022

At Explore York Libraries and Archives, this is our vision:

We inspire everyone to challenge their imagination, explore their potential and connect with each other, supporting and enriching our communities.

We make a difference to the communities across York and deliver on the requirements of our contract and achieve this vision by focusing our work on these six key purposes:

1. **Strong and Sustainable** – we are well governed, financially sustainable and entrepreneurial
2. **Connect communities** – we build stronger communities by being a safe, welcoming space where all can belong, enjoy new experiences, and connect to each other and the wider world
3. **Share the joy of reading** – we enable everyone to share the joy of reading and literacy
4. **Support Digital Inclusion and Information Literacy** – we support digital inclusion and enable access to trusted information
5. **Challenge Imaginations** – we inspire people to learn, imagine, create and share ideas
6. **Wellbeing** – we support individual and community wellbeing

Overview

The financial years 2020/21 and 2021/22 have positioned Explore at the beating heart of local communities, recognised as an essential service. We supported the city and its residents through the pandemic and then we supported recovery as the city emerged from the crisis with new and growing challenges.

- In March 2020 our Explore Labs won a prestigious Edge Award, but just two weeks later lockdown happened and the whole service had to close. As York residents moved to life online, Explore was at the forefront of making that happen. Our staff were involved in national work to create a toolkit for libraries and to set up a series of web links to support people at home. We transformed our Explore Centres into community hubs and Explore staff

volunteer to support vulnerable residents to stay safe in their homes while we obtained their medicines and shopping.

- During the second lockdown in Winter 2020 libraries were declared an essential service nationally, and their staff were designated as key workers. This meant we could open our three largest Explore Centres to provide access to computers and the internet, so that online services so many people take for granted were accessible for all. At a time when being online was so important, Explore also led on a 100% Digital York Partnership to give everyone the opportunity to be online. Most importantly, we provided up to date, accurate health information about the pandemic, the latest Government rules, and access to resources to support wellbeing as residents shifted to living their lives within the confines of their home. In 2020 we really were here for everyone.
- 2021 was the year Explore bounced back. We welcomed everyone back into our spaces in droves, restarted work with partners, volunteers and Friends groups, and continued to grow our online offer. After a cautious start, visits increased month-on-month as the year progressed, with a full in-person events programme returning across the whole organisation from October. Our spaces became vibrant, busy, owned, loved and laughter-filled once more, and we continued to support City of York Council with emerging city-wide challenges post-pandemic: doing the things we have always done so well - supporting wellbeing, improving digital confidence, and helping to rebuild literacy levels.
- Looking ahead, in 2022, we continue to build and grow, further contributing to the City's agendas. We offer free access to information, books, Wi-Fi, PCs and free events and activities for families struggling with the increase in the cost of living, as well as supporting mental wellbeing, improving digital confidence in our communities, and supporting families with their literacy skills.

How we delivered against our 6 key purposes:

1. Strong and Sustainable

1.1 Overall performance

As we brought more people together through the year, our footfall figures grew month by month, we ended the financial year 2021/22 in the fantastic position of

being back to 75% of pre-covid footfall figures on average. At the end of April 2021, we were at just 24%, so this is a considerable achievement, testament to Explore's staff teams and the communities across York, and evidence that Explore can and does make a difference.

At the start of the year, only book borrowing, and PC use was available to customers, but as our full offer was introduced, customers came together in our reading cafes and participated in our events. Volunteer support bounced back too, with 1700 hours of support given to Explore by volunteers - 70% of our pre-pandemic volunteering levels.

Our real value to the community is shown by the way our safe welcoming, accessible spaces support wellbeing, and are places of cultural activity.

Library Visits	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep
18/19	71112	67228	72015	87353	81439	77638
19/20	72065	76511	78403	83689	86249	78443
20/21	0	0	0	6521	7144	21210
21/22	17105	23688	29198	34575	43172	44675
21/22 as % of 18/19	24%	35%	41%	40%	53%	58%

Library Visits	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
18/19	84315	77104	59547	81439	74116	78118
19/20	84567	76680	60433	81201	75249	48339
20/21	27341	7782	15843	5873	4345	5358
21/22	48879	50831	37143	47187	49005	59515
21/22 as % of 18/19	58%	66%	62%	58%	66%	76%

1.2 Performance Trends

We identified several emerging trends which will influence and inform our decision-making and our delivery models as we move forward into the next financial year:

- Hybrid use** Customers have moved to using us in an increasingly hybrid way: while our physical book issues returned to 90% of pre-pandemic levels, our e-Book issues, which had more than doubled during lockdown, remained at significantly increased levels even following the opening of physical libraries. Our customers are making use of both online and physical buildings to access our services and events audiences are still engaging online as well as in-person. Some who were previously excluded due to disability or other

challenges can access our programme now it is online. We have introduced new metrics to capture the growth in this area.

- **PC usage is reduced.** We do not necessarily expect PC use to return to its pre-pandemic level. Nationally PC use in libraries has been on a downward trend for many years, so arguably 80% would constitute a full post-pandemic recovery. In a survey of our PC users just before the pandemic, 40% said that one of their main reasons for using library PCs were that they did not have a computer/internet connection at home. Some of those respondents (where they had the means) may have been forced to find alternative solutions during lockdown. Library PCs remain a very important offer to which Explore is committed.
- **Evening footfall** has been slower to recover. By end 2021, evening footfall began to increase, but was still less than half of former level. As more people continue working from home, it remains to be seen whether evening usage will return to pre-pandemic level, and we may decide to adapt our evening offer. We continue to monitor this closely.
- **Event attendance** increased rapidly in 2021 as confidence grew, from 29 events attended by 597 people in Q1, rising to 545 events in Q4 with 5,959 attendees. During 2021/22. total of 1305 public events and activities were attended by 14,931 people.

1.3 Financial overview

When we entered the contract with City of York Council in 2019 there was a debt of £902k from the first contract. It was agreed that this would be re-paid over the first four years of this new contract at £225k per annum. It was therefore important to us to show that we can manage our budget so that we could meet these debt repayments and thanks to increased funding from CYC and close monitoring of our finances we have exceeded our budget in each of the first 3 years of this new contract. Towards the end of the first financial year, the Covid-19 pandemic struck and for the whole of the 2020/21 we were either in lockdown or operating under various restrictions. We were grateful for the financial support we received from both central and local government, and we were able to fully re-open our services during 2021/22. Except for the first full lockdown, we operated as much as we were able to so that we could both help our customers and keep as much income coming in as possible. The Reading Café in Rowntree Park has flourished, and we feel that this is partly because we are open 7 days a week consistently and were open throughout the pandemic.

- **Financial Controls** To help manage our finances we have improved our financial reporting and a full pack of management information is reviewed by the Strategic Management Team, our finance committee attended by 2 board directors, as well as a monthly update meeting with CYC. Variances are looked at to ensure that any permanent cost variances are taken into account in the monthly forecasts we prepare.
- **Budgeting** We have improved our budget process and following the procurement of the new contract have included more contingencies to allow for unforeseen items of expenditure and to provide for a drop in income. In the current year's budget with inflation increasing each month we have included significant contingency for heat and light. We treat our budget as a baseline of what we need to achieve, but we target to exceed the budget as much as possible and we do this by having an income generation and fundraising strategy. The aim of this strategy is to maximise all our income streams as well as developing new income streams which are in line with our vision and values.

In the procurement of the new contract, it was a requirement to increase our spending by year 4 in bookstock and in repairs to maintain our buildings and we have done this. We intend to increase further in both areas in the years ahead, whilst also continuing to invest in our staff.

- **Future financial growth** As mentioned above we have developed an income generation strategy which will help us cope with increased running costs, and it will also help us build more capacity so that we can provide more services and activities for our customers. As part of our income generation strategy, we aim to improve our messaging, so we need to look to additional funding sources to support the growth of Explore. Whilst our funding from CYC is significant, we also need the income as generated via our successful reading cafes and via some of our activities and as some costs increase by more than inflation, we need to increase this external income by exploring other routes. We have applied to become an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation, which will mean significant additional funding and reputational gain, we and will apply for other grant funding where appropriate. We have developed a three-year strategy which will be incorporated into our budget each year ensuring we have adequate resources to meet our plans.

1.4 Quality and Excellence

- **Archives Accreditation** was achieved in July 2021, further embedding quality in an already excellent and nationally recognised service. City of York Council have recently committed to purchasing Preservica for its born digital records, securing the preservation of the archive of the future and continuing CYC's unbroken run of around 900 years of council records. A key element in Explore retaining Archives Accreditation (when we go through the process again in 2 years' time) is having a strategy for managing born digital records, so this purchase is crucial for us.
- **Public Library User Survey October 2021.** 2000+ customers took part in our Public Library User Survey with 95.8% of them stating they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the service. Scores for Library Attractiveness were highest at Tang Hall, New Earswick and Mobile; and lowest at Haxby and Clifton, which strongly endorses the council's commitment to the investment programme in terms of libraries already refurbished and those identified for imminent improvement. For the first time, we collected evidence that our larger multi-purpose sites are used in quantifiably different ways – more services are used in a visit, and customers linger longer. 74% of customers indicated that libraries had helped them in one or more of the ways indicated, which were social impact terms such as “your job” or “family and relationships”. Specifically, 38% of customers indicated that using libraries had helped with their health and wellbeing, and this figure was higher among long term sick or disabled customers (50%), and widowed customers (49%). There were approximately 900 free text comments, in which the themes which came up most often were praise for staff (c215); requests for more books (c90), and comments on opening hours (c50). A sizeable minority of the comments contained practical suggestions which have since been addressed, by measures such as reviewing our holdings of classic novels; increasing the rotation of the audiobook stock; and bringing in an additional storytime at Tang Hall.
- **Staff wellbeing survey December 2021.** This showed 100% of staff who completed the survey are proud of the work they do and are proud to work for Explore – fantastic statistics demonstrating the commitment of the whole staff team.
- **National Recognition for Explore staff** Barbara Swinn, Head of Strategy and Engagement received a British Empire Medal (BEM) in the Queen's Birthday Honours in June 2021 for her work developing York Explore as cultural hub,

and Fiona Williams, Chief Executive of Explore also received a BEM in the 2022 New Year's Honours, recognising her work and that of the whole staff team of Explore.

2. Connect Communities

Our communities are at the heart of Explore. As a mutual organisation Explore is two thirds owned by the community. We had 787 community members at the end of March 2022, 242 volunteers and 8 local library Friends groups all advocating for Explore and contributing to our outcomes.

During lockdown and throughout 2020, Explore demonstrated how we were there for our communities. Explore pivoted its services online immediately and offered alternative ways to access books and digital services once the country emerged from lockdown. We provided safe, welcoming spaces across all our venues as residents emerged, hesitantly at first, from the national lockdown. We gradually reintroduced more and more services (always with customer safety and possible anxiety in our considerations). For example, we reintroduced baby rhymetimes as bookable events to manage numbers and keep everyone safe.

2.1 Capital Developments

- 2020 saw Explore open 2 additional venues, thus broadening access to the number of communities who have ready access to our service. We opened a new reading café in Hungate, and a library at the Community Stadium at Monks Cross. Both have received excellent feedback from residents.
- In January 2022, we secured £7.7m capital to develop the Explore Centres at Clifton and Acomb into multi-partner Explore Centres offering cultural opportunities, access to expert advice and information from city-centre agencies, and safe, welcoming, accessible spaces for all. The investment also enabled the development of Oaken Grove Community Centre in Haxby, to provide a fit for purpose library for residents who have been without a library in Haxby & Wigginton since 2015.

Explore led community conversations about the 'live' developments at Clifton and Haxby & Wigginton and in both cases, residents who were involved expressed 90% support for the 2 new libraries. The new library in Haxby &

Wigginton will open this autumn. More focus groups with residents are planned and these will inform the detail of the design at Clifton.

- We continue to explore partnership opportunities in other local communities with the possibility of co-locating our other libraries with like-minded community partners

2.2 Volunteers

Explore continues to support community resilience by offering a growing range of opportunities for residents, thus contributing to development of skills and confidence, and wellbeing. The number of volunteer hours given to Explore have remained stable since re-opening post-pandemic – on average these are around 50% of pre-pandemic levels, with a slight up-surge in March 2022 to 70%. As a significant number of our volunteers are older people, this may perhaps explain some reluctance to return, given the vulnerability of this group during the pandemic. Our focus is now on building and growing our volunteer opportunities as we work towards achieving Investing in Volunteers Accreditation in 2023. The work we do would not be possible without the support of the volunteers from within our communities and whilst they are crucial to us and what we can do, we know that we are also invaluable to them:

(volunteer)..... is recovering from a stroke and is taking small steps towards getting out and about on his own & regaining a sense of normality, doing something for himself He is doing great, and every week is finding it that little bit easier and is able to do more. He is becoming more confident and is starting to chat more to staff and able to engage with customers

2.3 Diversity & Inclusion

In March 2022 Explore hosted the inaugural Our City Festival, bringing partners and local communities together for a one-day festival at York Explore to celebrate inclusion and difference. The project brought together people of different backgrounds, faiths, and countries to share their stories and passions. An important outcome of the event was the commitment to develop a regular Our City Hub, and this was launched at York Explore in June 2022. The Hub will bring communities together regularly in our safe, welcoming, accessible space.

3. Joy of Reading

3.1 E-books, newspapers, and magazines

- Use of e-books more than doubled during lockdown and was valued by both adult readers and by families with children. Generous donations from

publishers, and cash grants from City of York Council and the Government, meant Explore kept up with a hugely increased demand for e-books. Use of e-books has remained stable as we emerge from lockdown and our trend is now for hybrid use, with customers using both physical and e-books for their reading.

- In 2020, we introduced PressReader which gives free access to a wide range of online newspapers and magazines – including some we could never have offered in hard copy. Explore is very grateful to City of York Council for providing emergency funding to buy the subscription in April 2020. PressReader’s ongoing popularity means Explore will continue to fund it going forward.

3.2 Early years – how Explore’s support helped improve the literacy attainment gap

- Rhyme-time and storytime sessions were re-introduced in libraries as soon as we were able as the government’s covid-19 restrictions were relaxed. These sessions are invaluable in supporting language and cognitive development and provide a good foundation for literacy.
- Explore supported *Early Talk for York*, rolled out to 7 participating schools, by providing the Family Learning Team with Bookstart’s *Time to Read* packs for targeted families. Explore also worked closely with CYC’s Healthy Child and Early Years Teams so that targeted families received the packs but were not made to feel ‘targeted’. The Early Years Team also identified the settings that receive highest funding, so packs are gifted universally in these settings and the Healthy Child Team also directly gift packs to families identified during 9–12-month visits.
- All our frontline staff and volunteers received training from the NSPCC on *Look, Say, Sing, Play*, a city-wide initiative to embed a common language across all organisations with a link to early years provision, enabling parents to hear a consistent message on the power of engaging with young children to support their development.

3.3 Children: Summer Reading Challenge

The Summer Reading Challenge continued in 2020 and 2021, despite the pandemic.

The 2020 Challenge was digital only, with 305 children signing up with 46 completing - lower than in previous years, a reduction seen across the region. To support the

challenge, we provided additional on-line activities: 4 craft activities had a total of 197 visits to the webpage and 2 videos had a total of 142 views. We recognised the significant challenge and barrier to digital participation for many children and families, and to address this we successfully applied for Ward Funding to provide 840 Summer Reading Challenge bags, which included books and craft activities as an alternative to the digital challenge.

In 2021, the Challenge returned to being in-person and 2,344 children and young people took part, 499 children and 58 adults joined the library as new members, and children who took part in the challenge across libraries came back and told us about 7,067 books they had enjoyed reading. 108 volunteers gave 355 hours of their time, and 50 were young volunteers. We received £6,636 in grant funding which meant that the total cost to Explore (not including staff costs) was £536.60.

We were alert to the effects of the pandemic on literacy. Extra support was offered to children from disadvantaged families. Working with the Early Years Team at CYC we approached nurseries with higher-than-average disadvantaged families to help them run the Summer Reading Mini Challenge we arranged a storyteller and library visits and put families in contact with their nearest library. As a result, parents read more with their children and said that children's reading skills, concentration and confidence improved. We also introduced a targeted offer this year - 120 disadvantaged children received a bag containing the Summer Reading Challenge folder and stickers, a bookmark and game, as well as a fiction book. These were distributed through York's Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) summer schemes. As one nursery owner fed-back:

"I knew that it had been worth doing, when a hard-to-reach Mum said how much she had enjoyed some quality time reading with her son and that she was going to continue this every night as her baby daughter sat engaged with it also. Result. We have continued the "lending library" for the nursery and the interest in books has increased

3.4 Adults: Reading Together

Our Reading Together initiative supported three groups: people with dementia and their families, people at risk of isolation and loneliness, and people whose first language is not English. We had received funding from Libraries Connected Yorkshire and Humber in 2020 to run groups in partnership with Fiona Shaw and Daisy Hildyard from Reading Together, but due to covid, the groups were deferred to 2021.

Tang Hall Explore: a weekly session in partnership with the Wellbeing Co-ordinator at Mossdale Residence was organised for a group of residents with dementia and their families/companions. Average attendance was 8 people each week, with 3 residents and the Wellbeing Co-ordinator attending all sessions.

Acomb Explore: Local Area Co-ordinators referred people to the group and other recruitment was through local promotion. Grant funding for this group included money to train and mentor a volunteer and the Reader Development Librarian to continue to run the group after the main funding ended. Attendance was 70% over the 10 weeks and at least 9 members wished to continue attending.

York Explore: This group was for people whose first language is not English. Recruitment was done through the Community Involvement Officer (Minority Communities) and York Learning. The group included people who were new to the city from Hong Kong, Romania, Spain, Italy, Syria, Korea, and Japan. Many participants want the group to continue.

Looking ahead, our focus shifts to the return of our popular Big City Read which engages communities across York in the joy of reading together, bringing people together to share their experiences of reading the same book.

4. Support Digital Inclusion and Information Literacy

Libraries' role in encouraging and enabling digital inclusion and access to IT was made prominent nationally during the pandemic, when visiting a library to access IT was identified as one of the reasons that a person could leave the home in the second lockdown of 2020. Libraries were established as safe, trusted places where people can get access to a) support and b) equipment to get online. This gave vital access to the internet for those without it at home and 1,200 people used this service at this time (access was pre-booked and PCs available were reduced due to social distancing). This was at a time when online access made such a difference to people's lives. We gave them the chance to apply for jobs and benefits and keep in touch with family and friends.

4.1 100% Digital York

Lockdown highlighted the disadvantages for people who are not online. Recognising this gap, CYC organised a digital inclusion seminar facilitated by Citizens Online and Explore. 84 organisations came together to consider how this gap might be closed, and the 100% Digital York partnership was born. The key priorities for the partnership are to ensure everyone can embrace digital, or if they choose not for whatever reason, they have access to digital support. The partnership continued to develop during 2021, working together to develop common terms of reference, stakeholder mapping and workstreams. Funding was achieved to create a post within Explore to take forward this significant area of work in 2022, establishing a network of digital champions across the city.

4.2 Supporting City of York Council's channel shift

Aligned to the city-wide 100% digital strategy, Explore has played a key role in enabling the roll-out of City of York Council's digital channel shift agenda. Frontline staff have supported residents with applications for the Household Support Fund, residents' parking permits, the reporting of housing repairs, Council Tax rebate and energy rebates, enabling them to access funds they are entitled to, and this has been particularly important as the cost-of-living increases.

4.3 Trusted information

In 2020 our Libraries at Home web pages provided links to accurate information about the pandemic, health information, support for home schooling, and a huge variety of content for people to explore and be entertained or learn something new. So that people could easily find what they needed, we refreshed the Explore website using a new tile design to highlight and link to specific content. Our re-design was used as an example of good practice at a marketing seminar facilitated by The British Library and was praised for its simple layout and ease of access. As lockdown eased, but students could not return to class, we also partnered with both universities to provide bookable study spaces for university students in the city centre.

4.4 Providing information and advice through partners

Explore Centres regularly host partners who provide information and support for communities. A few examples include:

- Wilberforce Trust - providing free information and guidance to individuals with or supporting those with sight/hearing loss.
- North Yorkshire Police – promoting their Community Messaging service and to encourage people to sign up to this initiative.
- National Careers Service - help and guidance for anyone looking for employment, a change of career, CV help etc
- Yorsensory - mobile outreach service. Providing free professional help and advice for sight and hearing loss.

5. Challenge Imaginations

Creating opportunities for exploration is at the heart of what Explore does every day. Our ambition is to create a dynamic environment for collaboration and transformative experiences, challenging imaginations and igniting dreams. Our Arts Council funded *World Turned Upside Down* lockdown project which combined poetry and archives resources to create an online participatory experience, received national recognition at the Annual Libraries Connected Seminar in October 2021.

5.1 City of York Cultural Strategy

In July 2020, Darren Henley, Chief Executive of Arts Council England was a keynote speaker at an online event hosted by Explore. He applauded the city for recognising the role of libraries in enabling communities to access cultural activity. In December 2020, York's Creative Future: York Cultural Strategy 2020-2025 was launched. It positions Explore as a key player in the cultural life of the city and over the next few years we will work with the Cultural Forum to deliver the strategic outcomes.

5.2 Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation (NPO).

Explore applied to become a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in May 2022. This will cement the role of our libraries as safe, welcoming accessible spaces, where communities can engage in high quality cultural experiences. We will find out if we are successful in October, but in the meantime are working on embedding the NPO framework of investment principles across the organisation, with an emphasis on sustainability, dynamism, diversity and equality, and ambition and quality.

5.3 Innovative access to archives

In November 2020 we used a podcast for the first time to bring an original, archives-inspired audio play, *The Nuisance Inspector*, to a wider audience as part of Explore Your Archives week. Based on the story of the Hungate clearances and inspired by letters, maps, books and photographs from the internationally significant Past Caring archives, *The Nuisance Inspector* used drama, comedy, and live music to transport audiences into a powerful and poignant past. Learning how to create a podcast meant we grew in knowledge and experience which will help us bring in new audiences

5.4 Children and families: affordable live theatre for families and schools

York Children's Trust funded performances of *The Snow Bear* by Hoglets Theatre and gave additional funds to buy a book for every child attending. 7 family performances were delivered in Acomb, Clifton, Tang Hall, and York Explore Centres. These venues were chosen because they are in wards with most disadvantaged families. To identify the families, we worked with Local Area Co-ordinators, York Learning and Social Workers. 285 adults and children attended the family performances, including refugee families, children in foster care, and families on low incomes. Carr Infants and Tang Hall Primary School were invited to free schools' performances: these schools serve some of the most disadvantaged families in the city.

5.5 Adults: Northern Girls performance and workshops.

Explore hosted 8 writing workshops in partnership with Pilot Theatre for a targeted group of young women. Workshop participants and professional writers created 8 monologues which were rehearsed at York Explore and performed to audiences on Library Lawn over 4 evenings in October 2021. Bookings were high with a total audience of 200 playing at 100% capacity. As part of the partnership, Pilot Theatre also delivered a community workshop at Acomb Explore, attended by 18 people.

Film performance. Northern Girls on Library Lawn was professionally filmed and edited for screening. The film was shown at Acomb Explore in February 2022. The screening was introduced by Hannah Davis, who had written one of the pieces and she led a Q & A with lively discussion about feminism and female identity after the screening. The film will be made available on YouTube in due course.

6. Wellbeing

Explore continues to play a key role in supporting mental health recovery after the pandemic, as individuals feel safe and less isolated in our spaces with our programme of events and activities bringing people together. Customers, volunteers, and partners have told us a wealth of stories about the positive impact of using our services in their many forms. For example, a customer told us their first post-pandemic outing to a public space was to York Explore Library. They came to us because they felt safe and reassured and it helped increase their confidence.

6.1 Online reading groups

During the pandemic, we ran online reading groups, in partnership with Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust and Ways to Wellbeing, to combat social isolation and improve health and wellbeing. The groups read aloud together, then talked. No preparation was needed, so people who did not necessarily have confidence with literature and did not often access cultural services felt comfortable attending. The sessions were promoted specifically to people who were socially isolated and vulnerable during the pandemic lockdowns.

6.2 Creative Cafes

at Tang Hall and Acomb Explore were funded by CYC and Ways to Wellbeing. The participants were either self-referred or referred by a social prescriber. The impact on wellbeing is clear from the comments of participants:

"I have really enjoyed the course, particularly the cheerful and supportive input of the 2 artists. I did not expect that to be so influential. I would definitely like to do more craft activities as they are very calming."

"Got new ideas for creativity, met people with lively chat. After covid with deaths of friends etc. and isolation, this class has been essential for my mental and emotional well-being."

6.3 Books on Prescription - work with partners

We received 15 sets of Books on Prescription core collection, Shelf Help and Reading Well for Children and Young People, funded by DCMS. We offered the collections to trusted partners on a long-term loan aligned to Health Information Week. The partners included Ways to Wellbeing, Snappy, Door 84, NSPCC, CYC Early Years' Service, St Nick's, and Kyra. We also linked to Foss Park Hospital and GP surgeries via the link workers.

6.4 Converge@theHaven

This programme is aimed at individuals who access mental health services in the city. An archivist delivered sessions (one via zoom and one in person) focused on *The York We Have Lost* looking at aspects of the city and civic life that have changed beyond recognition. While the zoom session went well, the social interaction and discussion that followed the in-person session was clearly of the most benefit to this group. The archive sessions were very well received. Tutor workshops and training on teaching individuals with mental health issues was attended before the sessions providing Explore staff with a valuable development opportunity.

7. Looking Ahead

Explore has demonstrated how we provide an essential service to residents and communities, now more than ever, as we supported people through the pandemic and now as we emerge and recover and continue to strengthen our communities. We are here to support residents as they deal with the various challenges facing them. We are continuing to help people to get online or to access information online, making sure that everyone is connected, and nobody is left behind. We continue to bring people together, re-connecting them with each another and with their sense of place, strengthening local communities and improving individual wellbeing. We are working with children and young people to support and improve literacy through our fun reading programmes that enable children to develop through the joy of learning. We have an increased focus on children in receipt of free school meals as we partner with the HAF programme. We look forward to continuing to work with and support the council and other city partners on these wider issues – leading the 100% Digital partnership, as a partner supporting delivery of the Early Years' strategy, and with cultural and creative organisations across the city as we play our key role in delivering on York's' Creative Future (Culture Strategy 2020-2025). Of course, we are excited about the capital developments at Haxby & Wigginton and Clifton, and look forward to creating even more safe, welcoming accessible spaces for everyone in these communities. Explore is continuing to strengthen and build up our financial position, with the outcome of the bid to become an Arts Council National Portfolio holder expected in October. We are also growing our social

capital as we build our board of directors with 2 new appointments to be made directly from the local community and we continue to recruit to our army of volunteers to support our work and cement our excellence in this area as we work towards the Investing in Volunteers Accreditation quality standard next year. We have strengthened the future of the City's archive by working with the council towards a solution for the archive of the future and ensuring that records that are born digital will remain accessible for future generations. We are supporting the City's ambition to be carbon neutral by 2020 as part of the Sustainability Leads group across the city and we are also involved in national libraries work to mitigate climate change.

Our staff teams are constantly amazing, and they have played a pivotal role in enabling and building stronger communities. They have emerged more resilient from the challenges of the past few years, with a newly formed Staff Advisory Group made up of a cross-section of the staff team and they directly influence the direction of the organisation. As one staff member puts it:

"One thing that stands out is the ability of Explore staff to innovate and change. Discovering this about our organisation will inform everything we do in the future."
