**To: Secretaries of Local Government Branches with library members in England (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for information)**

**Regional Heads of Local Government**

**This circular informs branches of guidance issued by Libraries Connected on behalf of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on the re-opening of the public library service in England.**

**The circular also contains key issues and guidance for branches on the re-opening of libraries and links to the recent UNISON webinar on “Re-opening Libraries: Getting it Right”.**

**Libraries Re-opening – Guidance for Branches**

‘The Library Service Recovery Toolkit’ was finally published on Tuesday 30 June and provides guidance on the gradual re-opening of libraries.

[Download the Library Service Recovery Toolkit](https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/news/new-guide-help-libraries-reopen)

1. **Legal status and coverage of guidance**

The guidance was put together for DCMS by Libraries Connected working with Heads of Service and their teams. It was prepared in consultation with Public Health England and the Health and Safety Executive. It is designed to provide a set of resources to support Heads of Service and their teams in planning for library re-opening as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. It is not mandatory but employers cannot ignore it. It could be used against them in an inspection by regulatory authorities. Employers cannot refuse to undertake risk assessments because they say they are following the guidance.

The toolkit is designed to align specifically with government guidance for England but many of the principles and good practice will relate to public libraries in other nations.

The toolkit is designed for statutory public libraries, where recovery planning must align with wider local government planning. This is the case for contracted and spun-out library services too because statutory responsibility for libraries remains with the council and contracted services and spinouts will also want to respond to local priorities the council has identified. Where a statutory public library service includes community managed libraries, they should also be part of the library service’s recovery plan.

Many of the principles contained within the guidance will also relate to other types of libraries, such as school libraries and those in higher education.

**Talks with DCMS and Libraries Connected.**

UNISON was involved in discussions with the Government and Libraries Connected and sits on the DCMS “COVID-19 Recovery” Libraries Working Group. UNISON provided comments to the working group on toolkit drafts with the support of an advisory group of UNISON library workers. Ultimately however, DCMS had the final say in what made it into the final version of the toolkit.

The guidance is strong on the need to involve unions in local consultation and UNISON was able to make a number of successful amendments to the toolkit. However, UNISON feels there are a number of crucial areas where the guidance falls short, particularly in relation to key areas such as the need to use PPE in situations where social distancing is not possible and in highlighting the heightened risks from COVID-19 that Black members face.

These issues are dealt with later in this guidance.

1. **NJC guidance and local negotiations**

The NJC Employers have been reluctant to give advice about specific services so we do not have specific NJC advice for libraries. But the general NJC guidance, agreed between the unions and employers, continues to apply, and in many cases it will be helpful. UNISON branches are advised to use the joint NJC guidance when negotiating locally on behalf of library members. Issues covered by joint NJC guidance include the clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable groups, working from home, taking annual leave, staff redeployment, social distancing, application of test and trace, and quarantine.

Because the library toolkit is designed to supplement general government guidance on return to work, you may find your employers or managers relying on that government guidance, rather than the NJC guidance. In UNSON’s view, the NJC guidance is better for our members; and despite the existence of this broad government guidance, both unions and employers agree that the joint NJC guidance still applies.

You can download NJC guidance here:

[NJC Guidance on COVID-19](https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/local-government/coronavirus-guidance-local-government-workers/)

UNISON’s range of COVID-19 bargaining guides can be found here:

[COVID-19 Bargaining Guides](https://www.unison.org.uk/get-involved/in-your-workplace/key-documents-tools-activists/bargaining-guides/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Staff%20copy%20of%20activist%20200520&utm_source=Communications&utm_content=Check%20out%20our%20range%20of%20COVID%20bargaining%20guides)

1. **The Libraries Service Recovery Toolkit: Key Issues**

The toolkit is an extensive document linking to the relevant government guidelines and highlighting additional issues that libraries may need to consider. There are appendices of suggested checklists and resources. There are however a number of issues that are important to highlight:

1. **Re-opening must be a gradual process**

Discussions with DCMS and Libraries Connected indicate that the re-opening of the library service is expected to be a gradual and phased approach. UNISON welcomes this.

DCMS states on their website that

*“We recognise that restoration of services will take place in a phased way, varying according to local needs and circumstances. This interpretation will apply until such time as the government announces further relaxation of social distancing and other restrictions affecting access to library locations and library services.”*

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-libraries-as-a-statutory-service>)

The guidance (on page 6) outlines an example of what a slow, gradual and phased re-opening might look like for a library. But each library will be dependent on an individual risk assessment for that workplace. At the time of publication, it is expected that approximately only 34 libraries across England would be opening on either 4 or 6 July. UNISON reps will need to be vigilant and ensure things are not rushed.

1. **Risk assessments**

During the pandemic, employers should make every reasonable effort to enable staff to work from home in the first instance. If this is not possible, then before workers can return to their normal workplace employers should undertake a risk assessment to make it ‘COVID–secure’.

The recovery toolkit is explicit in stating that libraries must involve unions and workers in their risk assessments and recovery plans, and highlights the need to consult with the health and safety representative selected by a recognised trade union. It also states that if staff have concerns, they can raise them with their union rep. UNISON welcomes this.

The guidance also states that the risk assessment must be shared with the workforce. This will include sharing the risk assessment for each specific library building with the relevant library staff.

Reps will also need to ensure that library services are risked assessed, such as Home Delivery Services and Order and Collect Services.

For many staff, an individual staff risk assessment will be needed too. Risk assessments should be reviewed and updated on an ongoing basis.

Further information on risk assessments can be found here:

[Advice on risk assessment](https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/knowledge/health-and-safety/risk-assessment/)

[UNISON’s Risk Assessment Guide](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2014/07/On-line-Catalogue221002.pdf)

1. **Black members**

While UNISON argued strongly for the risks faced by our Black members to be explicitly spelt out in the toolkit, UNISON believes that the toolkit is not strong enough in recognising the heightened risks to Black members of staff from COVID-19.

It is therefore essential that branches ensure risk assessments reflect the increased risks to Black workers from COVID-19. Black workers must be offered individual risk assessments. UNISON has produced a template risk assessment form for Black and other vulnerable workers:

[Download UNISON template risk assessment for Black and other Vulnerable Workers](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/06/Template-risk-assessment-for-Black-and-other-Vulnerable-Workers.pdf)

1. **Other workers in higher risk groups**

The guidance states that risk assessments are required to cover the whole of the workforce and that this will include, in addition to ethnicity, risks such as age, obesity and those with underlying health conditions. These workers are at heightened risk to health from COVID-19 and must be offered individual risk assessments. As a significant proportion of library staff are older workers, this is particularly relevant to staff working in this sector.

1. **Equality considerations**

Equality considerations should apply to staff, library users, volunteers and self- employed people.

UNISON reps are reminded of the need for Equality Impact Assessments during the process of planning for libraries re-opening.

1. **Social distancing and PPE**

The guidance contains a range of examples of ways to ensure that social distancing needs can be met. But every library is different and risk assessments should carefully consider what works in each specific workplace.

The guidance acknowledges that social distancing may be hard to maintain in a library and says:

*“Libraries may need to fundamentally review the services they can offer if they are not able to maintain social distancing while delivering them. For this reason, most libraries are planning a phased service recovery to focus first on services where social distancing can be maintained and limiting public access into the buildings and face-to-face services.*

*(page 14)*

In relation to moving around buildings and worksites it advises employers to:

*“Introduce systems to control entry, so that two metre (or 1m with mitigations) social distancing can be maintained. To calculate the capacity of your buildings, as a broad rule of thumb you can use an allocation of 12.6 square metres per person, which equates to a circle with a two-metre radius.*

*(page 15)*

You will need to consider pinch points such as stairways, lifts and entrances.

During talks with DCMS and Libraries Connected, UNISON insisted that where social distancing was not possible and risk assessment highlighted a need for PPE, the workforce should be supplied with PPE to reassure staff and service users. UNISON strongly believes that this should have been made explicit and clear in the main body of the toolkit. Unfortunately, this was not included in the final text here. It is mentioned in Appendix A and reps are urged to negotiate at a local level for the provision of PPE where risk assessments flag up the need for this. With the move from 2 metres to 1 metre plus, this is even more relevant.

UNISON branches are reporting that at a local level local authorities are agreeing to the provision of PPE where social distancing is not possible and where staff feel happier to use it.

NJC guidance too may prove useful here. It says that “Social distancing rules must be adhered to” and that there may be circumstances where employers have no choice but to accept that some staff cannot come to work, and if they cannot work from home, they may have to remain at home and be paid.

1. **Managing Disruptive People**

UNISON research into violence and abuse in libraries shows that library members can face unacceptable levels of abuse, harassment and aggression from library users. In negotiations, UNISON emphasised the need for zero tolerance policies to be put in place for disruptive and unsafe behaviour and that UNISON reps frequently report an unwillingness on the part of library management to ban problem users. The guidance recognises that many libraries are introducing ‘zero tolerance’ policies for such behaviour. Reps are advised to negotiate at a local level for such policies to be put into place.

1. **Mental health**

It will be important that in discussions relating to the mental health of library workers, employers ensure that mental health support services for staff are fully resourced and signposted. Staff will have been redeployed to emergency roles, had distressing experiences and be fearful and anxious about returning to workplaces. Employers have a duty under health and safety and equality law to look after the mental health and wellbeing of the workforce.

**4) UNISON’s Libraries Webinar and News from Reps**

UNISON held a webinar for library and health and safety reps on 1 July. The webinar covered UNISON’s discussions with government and NJC Employers, gave an overview of the toolkit and provided an in-depth talk on the use of risk assessments for re-opening libraries. You can watch a recording of the webinar here:

[Libraries Re-Opening: Getting it Right – Webinar Recording.](https://register.gotowebinar.com/register/1631023652989907470)

You will be asked to register before you view. You can access the slides and presentations here:

[Libraries Re-Opening: Getting it Right – Slides with Resource Links](https://learning.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/sites/50/2020/07/Re-opening-Libraries-Getting-it-Right1.pptx)

During the webinar, reps shared experiences of what was happening in their library authorities.

**News from Library Reps**

During the webinar, library reps reported some worrying developments at local level for branches to be aware of. These included:

* Short staffing due to re-deployment
* Equipment to enable social distancing and hygiene delayed
* Library assistants not provided with equipment or enabled to be able to work from home
* Fears about local COVID-19 hotspots and the impact on re-opening plans
* Disorganisation in planning staff bubbles and rotas
* Staff transport not being taken into consideration
* Poor ventilation of library premises

It is vital that employers consult fully with UNISON health and safety reps and that proper risk assessments, as outlined in this guidance are undertaken. Employers have a legal and moral duty to do this.

Reps have also reported some of the risk mitigation measures that are being put in place in advance of library re-opening:

* Gradual and phased re-openings of a limited number of branches
* Risk assessments for vulnerable people and Black members
* Risk assessing travel to work for individuals
* Frequent reviewal of risk assessments following any incidents
* Training and site visits prior to opening, and dry runs
* PPE made available if social distancing is not possible and to ease staff anxiety
* Perspex screens to prevent infection
* Bookable slots for access to IT, with plenty of time scheduled for cleaning between users
* Reduced number of PCs available due to staff shortages
* Deep cleans on a rolling rotation
* Closure of public toilets
* New shifts and rotas
* Shorter working days
* Reduced hours, services and resources (like access to PCs)
* Reduced number of PCs available due to staff shortages
* Verbal health check for all staff daily on arrival
* Increased security measures e.g. managing entry and social distancing
* Staff provided with radios
* Limits on user numbers
* No payments taken &/no cash
* No reservation services offered

Branches and regions are asked to keep the Local Government Service Group informed of developments regarding libraries re-opening. If you have news, good or bad practice to share, or questions, please e-mail libraries@unison.co.uk.