

**Report to / Rapport au:**

**Ottawa Public Library Board  
Conseil d'administration de la Bibliothèque publique d'Ottawa**

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**Submitted by / Soumis par:**

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**File Number: OPLB-2021-0101**

**SUBJECT: OPL COVID-19 Recovery Plan - Update**

**OBJET: Plan de relance COVID-19 de la BPO - Mise à jour**

#### **REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS**

**That the Ottawa Public Library (OPL) Board:**

- 1. Receive the OPL COVID-19 Recovery Plan Update report; and,**
- 2. Approve the COVID Current strategy, as described in the report.**

#### **RECOMMANDATIONS DU RAPPORT**

**Que le Conseil d'administration de la Bibliothèque publique d'Ottawa (BPO):**

- 1. Prenne connaissance du rapport de mise à jour du plan de relance COVID-19 de la BPO ; et,**
- 2. Approuve la stratégie sur la situation actuelle de COVID, telle que décrite dans le rapport.**

## BACKGROUND

The Ottawa Public Library Board (the “OPL Board”) is constituted under the Public Libraries Act, R.S.O. 1990, Chapter P.44 (“the PLA”) as amended from time to time. The OPL Board has adopted a policy governance model, designed to empower Boards to fulfill their obligations over the organization. The model enables the Board to focus on a policy or strategy model of governance that focuses on setting strategic directions and objectives for the organization.

In March 2020, the Province of Ontario declared a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, OPL has developed a strategy to modify its services as a variety of legislation and restrictions were put in place. The Board approved the Library’s recovery plans for the early stages of the pandemic in May and June 2020. For a detailed timeline of applicable legislation, Board approvals, and other governance considerations, please refer to Document 1: COVID Recovery OPL Background.

In the early stages of the pandemic, OPL’s virtual service offerings were vastly expanded to include on-line programming, increased e-content, and virtual customer service. Some employees who held in-person public-facing positions were reassigned to support virtual activities; part-time employees were placed on Declared Emergency Leave for up to four months. When the province allowed public libraries to reopen with modified services, OPL implemented strict infection control measures and increased safety protocols and began to resume physical services while continuing to offer enhanced virtual services. At present, approximately 20% of employees (those not involved in the provision of Branch Operations services) continue to work at home, with the appropriate supports. Staff continually review guidance issued by Ottawa Public Health and Public Health Ontario to ensure that protocols are up-to-date and incorporate best practices to keep employees and customers healthy.

Additionally, based on advice from the provincial Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries, OPL has held its Board meetings virtually since April 2020. On November 3, the Board approved a report regarding “Ottawa Public Library Board Rules of Procedure By-law amendments” (OPLB-2020-1002). These amendments adjust the wording of the OPL Board By-law to accommodate future virtual meetings, and virtual online participation by trustees and members of the public. Public attendance at Board meetings has increased since meetings have been held virtually.

While the pandemic is ongoing, and it is difficult to predict the future, staff foresee that there are two periods of time for which planning is now required:

1. COVID Current: While COVID-19 vaccines are becoming available, it will be some time before inoculations are completed. Protective measures such as physical distancing, wearing masks, washing hands, and cleaning high-touch surfaces regularly will likely continue to be required for the next year or more, particularly to protect vulnerable members of the community. "COVID Current" is what we are calling the period of time when OPL will be required to move efficiently between service zones as directed by Provincial legislation, until such time that the COVID-19 pandemic is declared over by the Province of Ontario. This is the period we are currently in and is estimated to last for the next 12-18 months, from the present day.
2. Post-COVID: For the purposes of ongoing OPL planning, "Post COVID" (previously called "New Normal" in OPL reports) refers to the ongoing period which occurs after the COVID-19 pandemic is declared over.

The purpose of this report is to provide the Board with an updated Plan for the COVID Current period. Almost a year into the pandemic, staff now have more information and a better sense of the conditions needed to re-open locations and resume services and can apply lessons learned from the last eleven months to future decisions. During the current province-wide shutdown, additional locations may re-open for curbside service; resuming services will begin to occur after the current shutdown ends. The Plan continues to be developed with a project management approach, and is driven by a focus on a safe, gradual return to services, emphasizing employee and customer health. The Plan is intended to assist in providing some certainty as well as manage expectations for trustees, employees, customers, and stakeholders regarding OPL's services during the remainder of the pandemic.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Lessons Learned**

In implementing the Plan up to this point, several key "lessons learned" have informed planning and decisions:

1. Virus transmission and infection risks: At the beginning of the pandemic, there was limited information available regarding modes of transmission. As more was

learned about the virus, it was confirmed by public health authorities that COVID is primarily transmitted via respiratory droplets or airborne transmission, and that transmission via surfaces is “not thought to be a common way that COVID-19 spreads”.<sup>1</sup> Emphasis is placed on the importance of physical distancing, wearing a mask, and washing hands after touching surfaces. OPL’s preliminary plans were developed with the limited information available in the initial stages of the pandemic; subsequent decisions, and updated workplace health and safety protocols, have been and will continue to be based on updated information regarding transmission and advice from local, regional, and provincial public health authorities.

2. OPL must be able to pivot and respond quickly to legislative changes that come from the province or City on very short notice.
3. This isn’t short-term: Ottawa residents generally now understand that the pandemic will be a part of society for the medium-to-long term. This informs OPL’s ongoing response in numerous ways.
4. During an emergency, it is crucial to identify levels of service: When OPL was able to re-open for physical services, staff developed several services: curbside services, contactless services, and expanded services (See Document 2: Provincial Zones and Library Impacts for more details). Staff learned that curbside service is much more labor-intensive than contactless services.
5. Data is crucial: In keeping with OPL’s strategic priority to develop data-driven decision-making, staff used key performance data and statistics to support pandemic-related decisions such as opening hours, staffing needs, computer workstation availability, facilities space planning, and planning for Materials Delivery services. Staff also conducted an online customer survey in late September 2020. Recognizing that not all residents can access a survey offered only online, staff were able nonetheless to draw several key observations from respondents:
  - a. Customers want in-person services in order to pick up and return materials, primarily.
  - b. If branch services were to expand, customers are most interested in 24-hour access to book returns. Resuming that function, however, is a

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<sup>1</sup> How COVID-19 Spreads <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>

challenge, due to legislation (the quarantine requirement), the need to consider appropriate process changes to minimize repetitive strain injuries, and the customization of library software used in many book drops. Staff have been actively working on a solution.

- c. Respondents also indicated they would like:
  - i. Their local branch opened;
  - ii. Access to collections expanded/improved; and,
  - iii. More hours, especially Sundays.
6. At the same time, data can sometimes be divergent: Comments from the public indicate that customers have a variety of opinions about OPL's recovery plans: some believe OPL should move more quickly to resume additional services, some believe OPL has been moving at the right pace, and some believe OPL has been moving too quickly. Similar conflicting opinions about OPL's pandemic response can also be found among employees. Along the same theme, customers value virtual library services, but also physical, in-person services. Residents' library needs are not uniform: as a result, OPL must (for example) continue to offer virtual services, while being mindful of options for those who are unable to access it, or those who choose not to take advantage of it (perhaps due to screen fatigue). Virtual services do not replace physical services; rather, the two operate in tandem and must be supported on an ongoing basis during the recovery process and beyond. Planning can be challenging when balancing these differing perspectives.
7. Communications are complex: Ensuring clear, consistent, and regular internal and external communications helps manage expectations, and is important when residents and employees are facing information overload and stress in their own home and work lives.

## **Opportunities**

While the pandemic has had an impact on how OPL operates, it has also presented OPL with several opportunities:

1. eCollection usage rose exponentially, doubling over previous years. Staff responded to demand by purchasing additional copies of eBooks and eAudio books and adding new databases and streaming services.
2. Virtual programs were introduced, including virtual events with partners. These were either livestreamed or recorded and posted to OPL's YouTube channel.

Virtual programs reached a broad audience, with an average of three times the number of attendees per program than past in-person programs.

3. New memberships: While some memberships lapsed during the pandemic, nearly 4500 residents obtained a new card online to take advantage of virtual services.
4. New initiatives were expedited:
  - a. New communications software was purchased to reach customers more quickly and effectively;
  - b. Staff developed an in-house booking system for picking up holds as part of the initial branch re-openings;
  - c. Virtual 1:1 appointments were introduced, assisting an average of 14 customers a week; and,
  - d. Solutions for E-chat and full online registration were also procured and will be launched in 2021.
5. Remote work: As mentioned above, some employees have been working from home since the early days of the pandemic. This is being explored for longer-term options.
6. Staff developed new partnerships and expanded existing community relationships, such as working with Computer Wise to help make face shields using OPL's 3D printers, collaborating with Community and Social Services at the City for virtual Orange Shirt Day programming, and partnering with 37 organizations (including 20 new partners) to lend over 200 Chromebooks and 22 hotspots to vulnerable community members to promote digital inclusion.

### **The Path Forward: COVID Current Strategy**

The "COVID Current" strategy consists of key assumptions, strategic pillars, and key milestones for the next 12-18 months. This strategy forms the next portion of the Plan, bringing OPL to the end of the pandemic.

Key assumptions:

1. Respect health and safety guidelines for employees and customers, including mental health considerations.
  - a. Rationale: While traditional health and safety measures must be prioritized and maintained, it is also important to acknowledge and address, when

possible, the unique mental health considerations that both customers and employees are facing due to the pandemic.

2. Honour the guiding principles from OPL Priorities 1-4 (safety, geography, equity, accessibility, and usage)
  - a. Rationale: These principles are still relevant and have greatly assisted in resuming operations in a logical and appropriate manner.
3. Contactless service is the preferred baseline level of service at OPL locations.
  - a. Rationale: Identifying a baseline is important when scaling services up or down as necessary. Contactless service is OPL's preferred baseline, given curbside services are more labour intensive. OPL will only offer curbside services if restricted to this option by legislation.
4. Virtual services will continue, with centralized coordination and contributions from branch staff. As restrictions are lifted, OPL will gradually shift to a hybrid model for programs and events: large-scale events will continue to be offered virtually (including on YouTube) while gathering limits remain in place; smaller programs may occur in person with branch support. As additional locations re-open and in-person services scale up, the balance of virtual and in-person programs will change, and staffing will be adjusted accordingly. Staff will continue to maintain a robust collection of e-resources and adjust based on customer usage. Online membership registration will continue, as will virtual 1:1 tutorials.
  - a. Rationale: Virtual services have enhanced the customer experience and need to continue during the pandemic to keep meeting the needs and expectations of our customers.

Strategic pillars:

Staff identified four strategic pillars for service planning and delivery during the COVID

Current phase:

1. Implement contactless service across all branches and bookmobile stops.
  - Rationale: Re-opening all branches with a baseline level of service will ensure that residents across the City have convenient access to library services. This aligns with statements made by public health officials,

including a recommendation that trips outdoors should be kept closer to home.<sup>2</sup>

2. Add services in an incremental manner, taking advantage of opportunities to introduce additional services in select locations.
  - Rationale: To manage risk, services will resume in an incremental way. Once all branches have a baseline service, there will be opportunities to resume additional services at some locations before others.
3. Respond efficiently to new provincial restrictions or re-openings: OPL will resume services when provincial restrictions are lifted and scale down services when provincial restrictions are required. For instance:
  - Under the current “stay at home” order, customers are not permitted in branches at all, meaning that OPL can only provide curbside services.
  - In the grey zone, customers are permitted to enter and pick up holds or use a computer, but not browse the collection.
  - In the red zone, customers are permitted to browse the collections, but there is a top limit of 10 customers allowed in the branch.
  - The orange zone is similar to the red zone, except that 50 customers are allowed in the branch. A large branch may be able to hold a small program (implementing all distancing requirements) while in the orange zone.

Document 2: Provincial Zones and Library Impacts provides details regarding which services are permitted in each category of the provincial COVID-19 response framework.

  - Rationale: As part of risk management, OPL must be ready to modify services and follow provincial and municipal restrictions on short notice.
4. Expand hours of operation: Current hours of operation include two mornings and two evenings a week in addition to afternoon hours, as well as Saturdays. These limited hours were designed to meet key community needs while balancing lower levels of available staff and provincial restrictions such as the stay-at-home order. OPL’s goal is to continue to adjust hours to meet community needs, such as adding Sundays starting at the “Big 6” branches (Beaverbrook, Cumberland, Greenboro, Main, Nepean Centrepointe, and Ruth E. Dickinson), and subsequently resume pre-COVID hours of operation in all locations.

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<sup>2</sup> Ottawa in COVID-19 ‘crisis again’; mayor, top doctor support Ontario stay-home order  
<https://globalnews.ca/news/7571733/ottawa-coronavirus-crisis-stay-home-covid19-jan-12/>

- Rationale: OPL must respond to current needs and use, while balancing operational capacity and applicable government legislation.

### Key Milestones

Several key milestones identified for completion during COVID Current phase are outlined in Table 1, “COVID Current Key Milestones.” In developing these milestones, staff considered several dependencies, including:

- Staffing resources: stable and sufficient staffing levels to provide service, as well as manage COVID-specific tasks such as sanitizing equipment;
- Requirement to quarantine returned materials, as currently mandated in the provincial restrictions<sup>3</sup>;
- Capacity limits: Requirement to adhere to strict capacity limits, impacting the types of service available, as described in the third strategic pillar; and,
- The procurement, design, or modification of technology to support new operational requirements: For example, re-opening the book drops for 24/7 returns requires a modification to the library management software, which would accommodate a quarantine period after an item is returned, while delaying customer email notices. Another example is that offering study spaces may require a booking system or other tools to monitor usage while capacity limits remain in place.

The first key milestone aligns with the first strategic pillar and speaks to the resumption of baseline services at the five branches that remain closed (Constance Bay, Fitzroy Harbour, Munster, Osgoode, and Vernon). Staff expect that all five branches can reopen once the province moves from the current province-wide shutdown to a zone (grey or higher) that permits contactless library services.

The next key milestone aims to address feedback from customers regarding Sunday hours, and usage statistics indicating that Saturday hours are currently quite popular. Staff aim to resume Sunday service hours at the Big 6 branches (Beaverbrook, Cumberland, Greenboro, Main, Nepean Centerpointe, and Ruth E. Dickinson) in Q2

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<sup>3</sup> Enhancing Public Health and Workplace Safety Measures in the Provincewide Shutdown.  
<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/20448861/enhanced-provincewide-shutdown.pdf>

2021, provided dependencies outlined below are resolved. This milestone supports the fourth strategic pillar, as identified above.

The third key milestone also addresses customer feedback by resuming regular hours of operation at all branches, including remaining Sunday hours. Staff aim to achieve this milestone by Q3 2021, provided dependencies outlined below are resolved. This milestone also supports the fourth strategic pillar.

Subsequent key milestones do not have a date attached (noted as “TBD”) and are not in chronological order. As mentioned earlier in this report, resuming services will begin after the current province-wide shutdown ends. These milestones may be achieved at any time during 2021, provided their dependencies have been resolved. For example, the milestones referring to service resumption (such as study spaces, expanded technology access, FOPLA sales, and in-person programming) could be achieved as soon as applicable Provincial restrictions are lifted. See Document 2: Provincial Zones and Library Impacts for detailed information about each key milestone, dependencies, and the applicable provincial restrictions.

**Table 1: COVID Current Key Milestones**

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Milestone</b>	<b>Dependencies</b>
Q1 2021	All locations open with baseline service	Staffing resources
Q2 2021	Sunday hours at select locations	Staffing resources
Q3 2021	Regular hours of operation at all branches	Staffing resources
TBD	24/7 book drop service	Quarantine requirement, process changes
TBD	Access to study spaces, lounge areas, select FOPLA shelves	Quarantine requirement, capacity limits, staffing resources
TBD	Access to creative spaces	Tools to monitor usage, staffing resources
TBD	Select in-person programs	Quarantine requirement, capacity limits, staffing resources
TBD	Passive programming, print newspaper access, additional FOPLA shelves and donations, and meeting room rentals	Quarantine requirement
TBD	In-person community development activities	Staffing resources, partner readiness
TBD	In-person Library Board meetings	Capacity limits, procurement of necessary tools

With additional public health information, lessons learned regarding library operations during a pandemic, and key customer feedback, OPL is well-placed to provide an updated COVID-19 Recovery Plan that will guide operations during the remaining phases of the pandemic. Interesting opportunities have allowed OPL to continue to grow and evolve over the past ten months, building robust virtual services and expanding community partnerships. The updated Plan, if approved, will help OPL continue with a safe, gradual return to services, and provide some certainty when possible for customers, employees, trustees, and stakeholders regarding library services during the remainder of the pandemic.

## **CONSULTATION**

The Plan has been developed with the assistance of a Board COVID-19 Ad hoc Committee (“the Ad hoc Committee”), consisting of Vice-Chair Fisher and Trustee Brockington, to guide staff in developing the strategy for resumption of services. Plans were developed based on provincial regulations and underpinned by guiding principles that prioritized customer and employee safety, involved the expertise of the Ministry of Health (MOH), and were aligned with the City where possible.

OPL also consulted with the City of Ottawa Service Recovery Task Force; the Friends of the Ottawa Public Library; and the City of Ottawa Recreation, Culture, and Facilities Services (RCFS).

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

## **RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

Several risks were considered in the development of the Plan, including:

- Potential changes to the provincial restrictions or zones: mitigated by a robust, flexible Plan including an awareness of the impacts of each legislative change;
- Sufficient resources to scale up services: mitigated by an incremental approach to resuming services, to manage key dependencies;
- Competing demands for service, including physical and virtual: mitigated by a hybrid approach to services, balancing services in an evolving mix of physical and virtual to respond to customer needs; and,

- Public health risks, particularly around virus transmission: mitigated by strict adherence to public health guidelines and ongoing monitoring of evolving research.

Risks have varying degrees of likelihood and impact; in cases where the risk was determined to be minimal, it was accepted with mitigating controls established.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no direct financial implications of this report. Any impact on OPL's 2021 budget due to the ongoing response to the COVID 19 pandemic will be reported on as part of the regular financial reporting to the Board.

### **ACCESSIBILITY IMPACTS**

Accessibility was considered when developing the priorities, branch re-openings, and service offerings. Parking and transit accessibility were considered when developing the location waves, as well as geographic distribution and equity of access for residents living in poverty or without computer access.

### **TECHNOLOGY IMPLICATIONS**

The technological implications of the recommendations in this report are minimal in nature. The ability to resume the use of book drops (both during and outside of opening hours) is contingent upon technological modifications to the materials processing transactions to account for the quarantine period. Discussions with the related vendor have proven positive and a technological solution is being tested.

### **BOARD PRIORITIES**

This report aligns with the Board's approved value of integrity: "We embody the principles of public stewardship, transparency, and accountability in our operations and interactions." The OPL COVID-19 Recovery Plan will help inform several strategic priorities under the "Redesign the Library Experience" direction; specifically, the Plan will assist in developing a programming strategy, defining the ideal experience across physical and virtual channels (including developing the physical space experience), and assessing the impacts of barriers to service. Lastly, the Plan will assist in promoting the value of OPL, by strengthening stakeholder relationships to support the Ottawa community during the pandemic.

**SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

Document 1 COVID Recovery OPL Background

Document 2 Provincial Zones and Library Impacts

**DISPOSITION**

If approved, staff will work with the Ad hoc Committee to implement plans, inform the Board as elements of the plan are implemented, and report out on progress at OPL's regularly scheduled Board meetings during 2021.