

Letter of Transmittal

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August 2, 2022

Ms. Raneetha d/o Rajaratnam
Director of programmes and services
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Dear Ms. Rajaratnam,

I submit herewith a report entitled “Recommendations to Improve Community Engagement in Bedok Public Library”. This report aims to understand and find issues faced by libraries in Singapore because of the COVID-19 pandemic, find out what community members want to see in the Bedok public library in the future, and provide recommendations to improve the Bedok Public Library.

Thank you for taking the time to read my report. Please feel free to contact me at anushka.nair3108@gmail.com if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anushka Nair". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

Anushka Nair

Recommendations to Improve Community Engagement in Bedok Public Library

for

Ms. Raneetha d/o Rajaratnam

Director of programmes and services

National Library Board (NLB)

by

Anushka Nair

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August 2, 2022

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Abstract

Since COVID-19 protocols in Singapore have been lifted, public libraries have not seen a recovery in visitorship, causing their overall reach to go down significantly. This threatens the survival of Singaporean libraries along with the community programmes they host. Libraries are incredibly important for the local economy and its residents. Due to the free educational resources being offered, they serve as a hub for lifelong learning, professional development, community development and just as a safe space for underserved residents. With the help of surveys that were distributed to Bedok community members, used to gauge their interests in programs and library features, and an interview with senior leadership at the National Library Board, this report recommends ways to improve community engagement and increase foot traffic. If recommendations based on primary and secondary data are implemented, the National Libray Board would be enhancing local communities across Singapore.

Introduction

The National Library Board has a network of 27 public libraries that are conveniently located across Singapore. In 2020, the National Library Board saw COVID-19 causing significant disruptions to their physical operations and spaces (National Library Board). In April of that year, NLB's libraries and archives were temporarily closed for five months as Singapore entered a nationwide circuit breaker. This came just after the country experienced a severe spike in local COVID-19 transmission cases.

Background on the impact of COVID-19 on the library system in Singapore

Over the past few years, public libraries have significantly suffered due to the reduction of visitors and community engagement because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent budget cuts. In 2021, all Singaporean public libraries were forced to reduce their capacity to 25%, limit visits to 1 or 2 hours and shut down all additional services (like cafes) and community programs to adhere to the strict COVID-19 measures imposed by the government. The overall number of visitors reduced from 26.7 million in 2019 to 9.06 million. This has led to the inevitable shutdown of important community programmes, with the number of pre-pandemic programmes being 27,000 to the current number of programmes lying around only 6000 (National Library Board).

Purpose of this report

Library-based community programs are opportunities to support lifelong learning. They serve residents of all ages and income levels. They serve a community's diversity through

engaging entertainment, enrichment, and opportunities to encounter new ideas and learn new skills. Reduced visitorship threatens the survival of the library itself. Libraries help boost local economies and offer safe refuges for the underserved and poor. The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide recommendations, based on feedback from Bedok community members and employees of Bedok Library employees, to improve community engagement in libraries
- To gauge the interests and opinions of Bedok Community members regarding library-run community programmes and features present in the library

Description of data sources

The primary data sources in this report will include surveys distributed to members of the Bedok community to assess their interests as well as an interview with a high-level employee of the National Library Board, to get a better understanding of the challenges they are facing. The secondary sources in this report will include annual reports provided by the National Library Board as well as studies and publications on the issues that Singaporean libraries are facing in the post-pandemic economy.

Scope of this inquiry

To assess the feasibility of the proposed solution, the following areas of inquiry, with the specific branch of Bedok Public Library in mind, will be pursued:

- What are the current programmes that are running?
- Which programmes (in the past or currently running) are the most popular amongst community members?
- Can the most popular programmes be adapted for a digital platform?
- What kind of programmes do community members prefer in the post-pandemic world?
- Are community members open to engagement programmes hosted online?
- Is it feasible to improve the additional services (such as cafes, etc.) provided in Bedok Public Library?
- Is it possible to implement a digital learning zone in Bedok Public Library?

Data Section

The data can be divided into two sections. The first is survey results from Bedok community members on current and future community programs that the Bedok Public Library runs. The secondary data in this subsection is based on the issues that community programmes are facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second section is based on new features and additions to the Bedok Public Library. This includes results from the survey taken by community members asking their opinions on what new features they would like to see at the library. There is also a short interview with Ms. Raneetha d/o Rajaratnam, director of programmes and services for the National Library Board (NLB).

Community Programmes

Issues with community programmes post-pandemic

As libraries re-opened after the pandemic, libraries faced changes in space, services, safety, and sanitization (Dobrevă & Anghelescu, 2022). Due to the limits imposed by the government, regarding the capacity in an enclosed space as well as shortening the operational hours, NLB decided to reduce the number of community programmes. After the re-opening of the nation, most of the lost community programmes were not recovered and in-person

programmes were not given priority. As a result of these factors, spaces and facilities used for community programmes were not maintained.

Results of the survey taken by community members

The responses to the survey regarding community programmes are given below:

On average how often do you visit public libraries after the pandemic? ⓘ

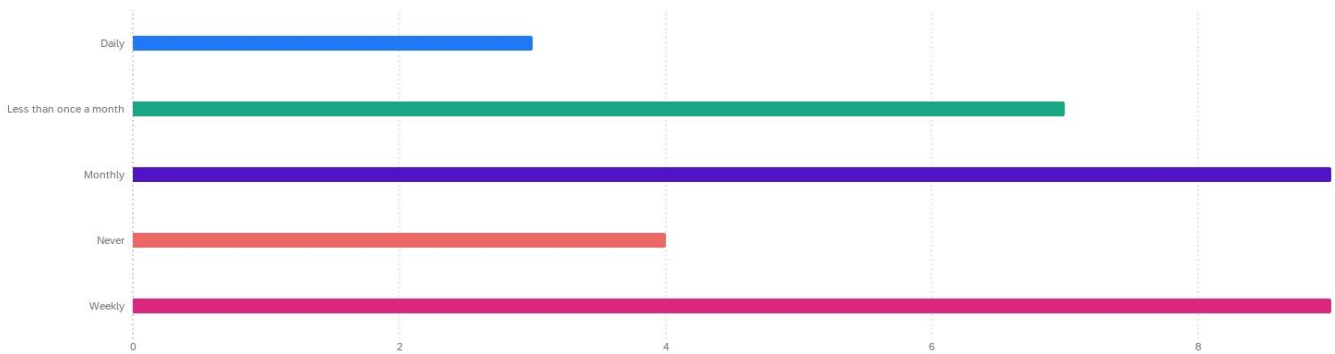


Fig 1. Results of Question 1: “On average how often do you visit public libraries after the pandemic?”

Have you participated in community programs run by Bedok Public library? ⓘ

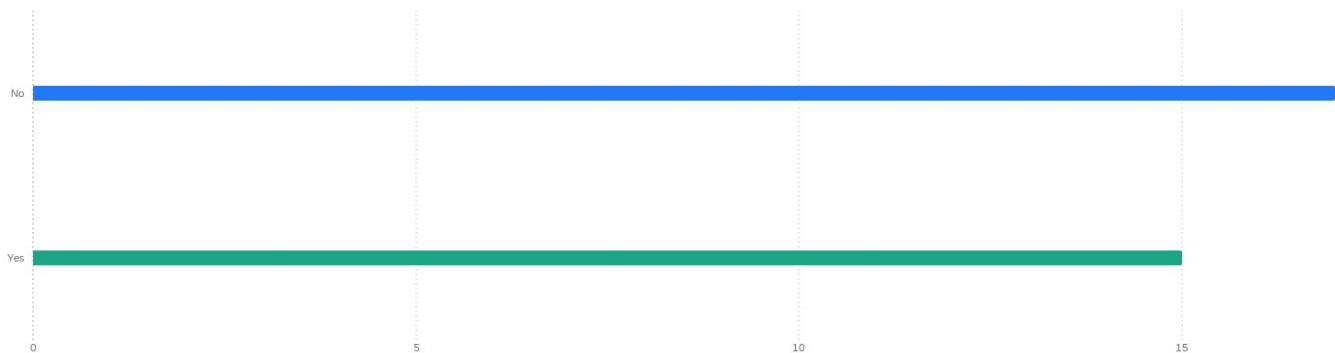


Fig 2. Results of Question 2: “Have you participated in community programs run by Bedok Public Library?”

Community programmes run by Bedok Public Library are valuable. ①

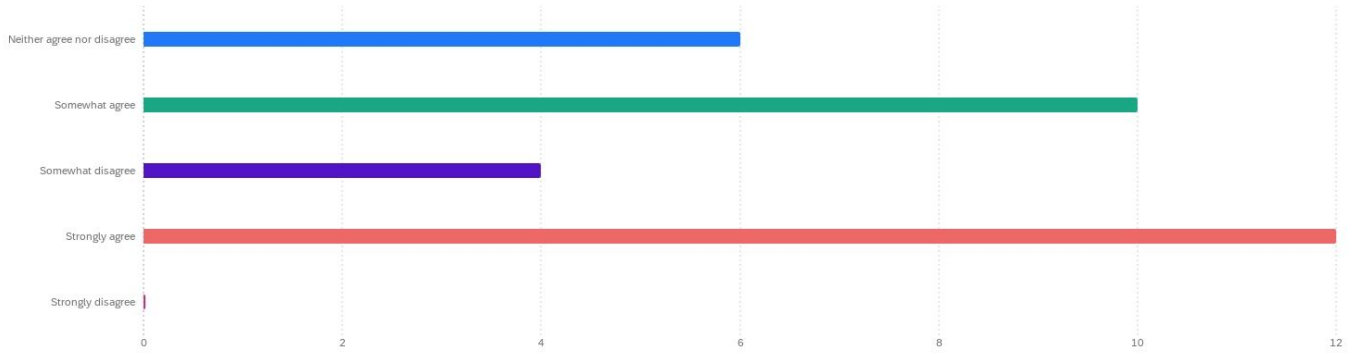


Fig 3. Results of Question 3 of the Community Programme survey

Community programmes run by Bedok Public Library are accessible ①

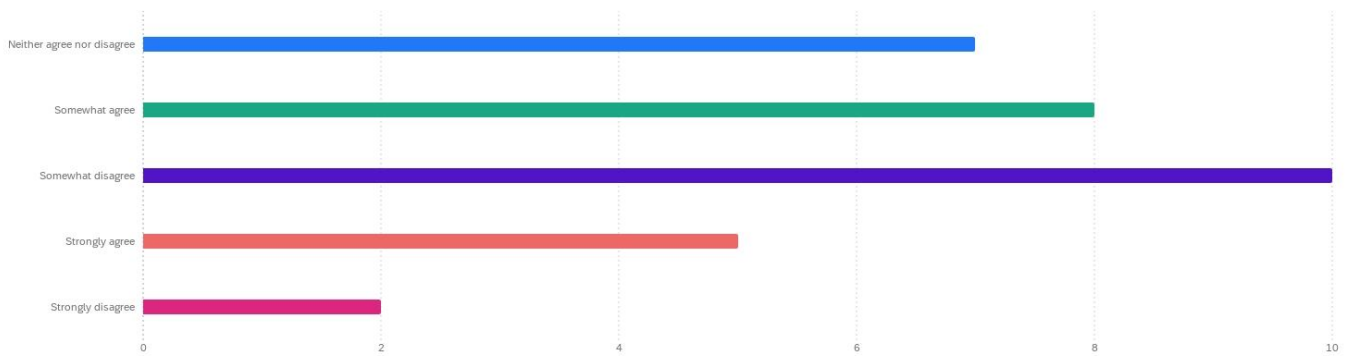


Fig 4. Results of Question 4: "Community programmes run by Bedok Public Library are accessible"

Would you attend community programmes hosted online? ①

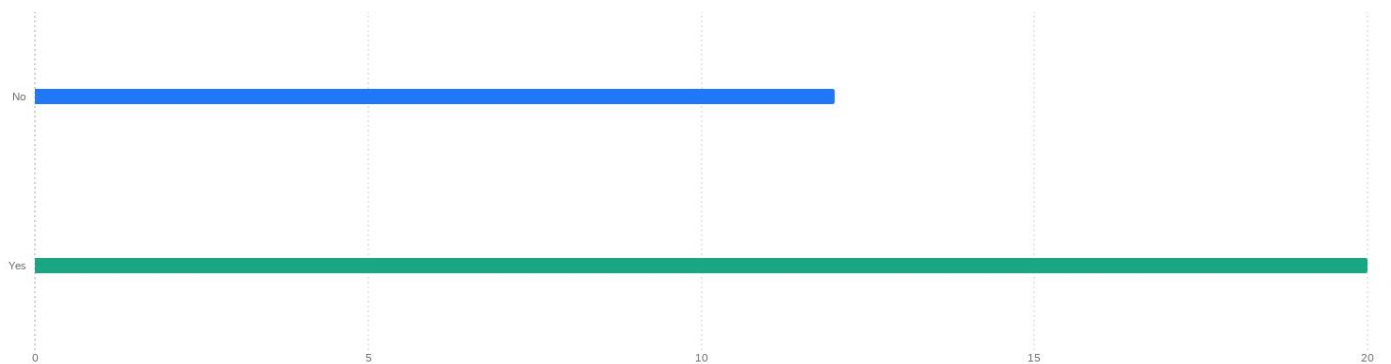


Fig 5. Results of Question 5: “Would you attend community programmes hosted online?”



Fig 6. Results of Question 6: “Programmes/events hosted online are:”

For the last question (question 7) titled “What kind of programmes do you want to see in Bedok Public libraries (Online or In-person)?”, the responses can be arranged into five broad categories.

These categories are:

- Film-based events such as screening, technical history, etc.
- Programmes that help senior citizens learn more about technology/educational workshops for seniors
- Storytelling programmes for young children
- History/History of Singapore-based programmes
- Anything digital/online based

New Features and Additions to the library

Results of an in-depth interview with Ms. Raneetha d/o Rajaratnam

Below is the transcript of the interview conducted with the director of programmes and services for the National Library Board (NLB):

Q: What are the current challenges libraries face in Singapore due to the pandemic?

A: We had to shut down all our branches for nearly five months. Even after we re-opened, the libraries were either working at reduced capacity or reduced hours. During this time, we were solely dependent on our digital resources, however, we noticed that our digital side had not been as developed or robust as we would like them to be. So our focus has been on re-vamping this side. In doing so our in-person facilities and programmes have taken a back seat, but as we slowly get back to normal we have realized how important in-person facilities are, especially for our senior population.

Q: What are the current programmes that are running after the pandemic?

A: Some of the programmes that are running are:

- An exhibition detailing our journey in Singapore's ever-changing landscape
- We are currently calling on citizens of Singapore to come in and share their pandemic experiences to archive and chronicle this historic event
- We have career workshops for young adults/adults

- We have science and sustainability programs for teens

Q: Can the most popular programmes be adapted for a digital platform to suit the post-pandemic world?

A: One hundred percent! Like I said before, this has been our main focus for the past few months, since the beginning of 2022. People are currently more comfortable with everything being online, so we want to keep up with the interests of these times.

Q: Is it feasible to improve the additional services/facilities (such as cafes, etc.) provided in Bedok Public Library?

A: Yes, we are focusing on updating our facilities/services across all branches as they were untouched for quite some time during the pandemic.

Q: Is it feasible to add any services/facilities (such as cafes, etc.) to the Bedok Public Library?

A: In the short run, no. This is due to COVID-related budget cuts and the fact that any renovation would cause libraries to close for a couple of months at a time. However, if we are looking at five, or ten years in the future, I believe new services such as cafes can be implemented in Bedok Public Library. Any new addition is not currently a big priority as we are trying to maintain and update our existing facilities/services.

Q: Is it possible to implement a digital learning zone in Bedok Public Library

A: I believe so! This is an exciting idea and falls in line with our efforts to digitize even more into the future. With so many technological advances, this seems like an attainable and relevant goal.

Conclusion

Summary and overall interpretation of findings

For the survey regarding community programmes, there were a total of 32 responses. Below is a summary of these responses:

- Nearly 52% of responses indicated that they had not attended any of the community programmes hosted by Bedok Public Library.
- However, 40% of the respondents indicated that they strongly believe that the community programs are valuable.
- 30% of the responses note that community programs that are currently hosted are not easily accessible.
- The majority (nearly 55%) would attend online programs/ events and 30% believe that online events/programmes are interesting and easily accessible.
- 31% stated that online events/ programmes are difficult to access.
- Meanwhile, 28% believed that while online programmes/events are easily accessible, they are not as interesting as they would be in person.

Looking at this data, it is clear that community programmes need improvement. People in the community want online programmes. However, hosting online programmes or events is not without its challenges as the National Library Board will have to ensure that people of all ages can easily understand how to access these events and they need to be interesting enough to captivate the audience so that the attendance numbers do not fall.

Recommendations

One possible solution is to create an omnichannel (engagement approach in which a company gives access to their products, offers, and support services to customers on all platforms, and devices) learning marketplace platform so that learning can take place both digitally and physically. This would include improving digital facilities offered by the NLB, including the mobile app, and ensuring that library spaces are open for work and learning. (National Library Board). Looking at opinions from community members, an introduction of programmes that centre on literacy and education would be the most beneficial. This is specific to youth and family literacy. If these programmes are set within a local context, such as those relating to the history of Singapore or art in Singapore, these programmes will have a more substantial impact. Moreover, programmes that allow participants to be involved in their own literacy development and let them share this development with others in the community will be more beneficial. It is vital for NLB to look at each community where their libraries are located as individual, since each of these communities has its own dynamic, that is formed by the people

that populate it, the jobs they have, the relationships they create, and the connections they form (Maddigan & Bloos, 2014).

Libraries that expect to engage youth and families in this new digital age must look for opportunities, welcome flexibility, and be daring and open-minded about inescapable change (Maddigan & Bloos, 2014). This is why the NLB must adopt online programmes. However, this will not be without challenges as NLB must come up with ways to make these programmes both engaging and accessible.

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Appendix

Survey: Community Programmes

I am an undergraduate student at UBC engaged in a technical writing project. The purpose of this survey is to obtain primary data for analysis and investigation that aims to provide recommendations for improving your experience with the Bedok Public library and its associated programs. The final formal report will be addressed to the programmes and services division at the National Library Board. Together with the annual reports available from the National Library Board website, the data I gather from this survey will serve the ultimate purpose of providing recommendations for increasing community engagement. This survey contains 7 questions, and it should take about 10 minutes of your time. Your responses are voluntary and anonymous. Thank you, I appreciate your generous participation in my survey.

Q1. On average how often do you visit public libraries after the pandemic?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than once a month
- Never

Q2. Have you participated in community programs run by Bedok Public Library?

- Yes
- No

Q3. Community programmes run by Bedok Public Library are valuable.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q4. Community programmes run by Bedok Public Library are accessible.

- Strongly Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q5. Would you attend community programmes hosted online?

- Yes
- No

Q6. Programmes/ events hosted online are:

- Easily accessible and interesting
- Easily accessible but not as interesting as they are in-person
- Difficult to access
- N/A

Q7. What kind of programmes do you want to see in Bedok Public libraries (Online or In-person)?