

2020 Provincial Public Library Grants Report (PLGR)

Elkford Public Library

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Introduction

The Elkford Community

Elkford, B.C. was founded in 1971 as a home for miners working at Fording Coal operations (now Teck Coal). Elkford is located in the southeast corner of British Columbia, approximately 16 km west of the Alberta/B.C. border. Elkford has an elevation of 1,300 m, is located on the Elk River, and is bisected by Boivin Creek. Elkford's current population is approximately 2500 residents.

There are five coal mines within a one-hour drive from Elkford, and mining continues to be the dominant industry in the town. Over 50% of employment in the Elkford community is in resourced-based industry, and 40% of Elkford's labour force works in trades, transport, or equipment operator occupations.¹ Teck Coal is the leading employer in Elkford. The employment rate in Elkford is high compared to the East Kootenay region and B.C. in general and Elkford has one of the highest average household incomes in B.C. Many of Elkford's current residents are at or reaching retirement age, both prompting an influx of replacement mine workers and contributing to a growing community of seniors in Elkford. Amenities in Elkford include a swimming pool, skating rink, local ski hill, and arts studio. Residents also enjoy recreational activities in the area such as hiking, mountain biking, camping, fishing, and golfing. In the summer, the town's population decreases as residents leave the community temporarily for recreation.

The Elkford Public Library Profile & Strategic Plan

The Elkford Public Library acts as a hub in our small, rural community in several ways. There are many services that the library offers to the community that are unavailable elsewhere in the District. These include but are not limited to book lending, printing, copying, scanning, and faxing, access to computers and free high-speed internet, and access to government services. New residents and jobseekers in the area often rely on the library for computer and internet access to complete resumes, job applications, and employment-related training. We offer topical workshops throughout the year, and several community-wide activities including our annual photo contest, story times, and Summer Reading Club. We also publish a free local monthly newspaper called the Elkford Focus.

Our library is currently in the middle of a five-year strategic plan, which began in 2018. Our 2018-2022 strategic plan consists of four objectives: fostering connected communities, building capacity, working together, and sustaining our success. Through these priorities we hope to

- Promote access to all types of information and tools to reflect the evolving information landscape,
- Offer access to high quality service and collections and be responsive to community needs,
- Strengthen staff competencies related to innovation, creativity, and continuous improvement,

- Increase community awareness of and engagement with library programs, services, resources, and collections,
- Develop partnerships and opportunities for collaboration, and
- Enhance governance and ensure long-term sustainability.

Some of our goals for 2020 included providing staff training, starting book and writing clubs, and providing more kids' programming. We met most of our goals for 2020, though their implementation looked a little different in the COVID-19 climate.

Ongoing challenges that the library faces deal primarily with our remote location and our often-harsh winter weather, as well as needing to fill multiple library roles with a small employee team. Travel, including attending conferences and workshops, is difficult from our location both logistically, due to unsafe winter road conditions on the highway out of town, and in terms of budget. This has been alleviated somewhat this year due to many events moving online. Patrons and professionals can also experience difficulties traveling to the library in the winter. An additional challenge we experienced in 2020 was the loss of our library's former director, who was our senior employee. This year, along with the rest of the world, the Elkford Public Library faced several challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, including a lockdown, disruptions to programming and service, as well as challenges associated with the implementation of COVID-19 safety protocol.

This year was unpredictable and came with many changes and challenges, but we worked hard and did our best to provide service to our community throughout the pandemic. As much as possible, we tried to keep the 'new normal' normal by offering as many of our regular services and programming as we could.

Provincial Priorities

Priority 1: Improving Access for British Columbians

Priority one in B.C.'s Strategic Plan for Public Library Service aligns with our strategic priority, *Fostering Connected Communities*.

With respect to improving broadband internet service and digital collections, we used the 2020 Library Technology Grant to improve internet access, introduce loanable technology to our patrons, and will be using the remainder of this grant to supplement our electronic collection. See the *Technology Grant: Final Report* section below for more details.

This year, demand for digital materials was high due to factors relating to COVID-19 (see *COVID-19 and Public Libraries*) and starting in October we reallocated a significant portion of our books and materials budget to purchasing e-books and e-audiobooks through OverDrive Advantage. We purchased nearly 100 in-demand titles, as well as introduced lending using the Cost Per Circ model, and saw 182 circulations of Advantage titles in October through December.

We continued to offer eLearning platforms to our patrons throughout 2020. It is important we offer platforms such as Gale Courses to our patrons, as very few educational courses are offered in our remote community and the nearest college campus is over 60 km away. In 2020, we had 74 total enrolments in Gale Courses and 987 total course logins, with 125,909 total minutes spent in class. This is compared with 2019, which saw 29 total enrolments, 782 total course logins, and 68,432 total minutes in class. In 2020, popular courses included *Introduction to Microsoft Excel 2019/Office 365*, *Introduction to Microsoft Word 2019/Office 365*, and *Introduction to QuickBooks Online*. In general, patrons are using Gale Courses to further their technological know-how.

Employees of Teck Coal continue to use our public computers to access the Teck Contractor Safety portal. Teck Coal employees use this portal to complete mandatory training courses, without which they cannot access the mine sites. Elkford Public Library employees frequently help patrons who are struggling with the portal, even occasionally acting as liaison between patrons and Teck's Health & Safety employees.

Elkford Public Library employees and volunteers also frequently help patrons use their own computers and devices, offering one-on-one assistance and support. This support has included but is not limited to help with sending and viewing e-mails, printing documents, connecting to internet, accessing web pages, troubleshooting computer issues, and helping patrons set up hardware such as wireless (Bluetooth) devices. Note we offer printing, faxing, and scanning on-site. We also purchased two iPads for in-house use and programming, promoting technological literacy and enabling access to educational material for kids and teens.

Priority 2: Building Capacity

Priority two in B.C.'s Strategic Plan for Public Library Service directly aligns with our strategic priority, *Building Capacity*.

During 2020, Elkford Public Library employees attended several professional development and library-related courses and workshops. These included a college-level introduction to libraries course, technical courses on computer troubleshooting, courses on how to use popular software, and Ryan Dowd's *Librarian's Guide to Homelessness* series. Employees received education in how to support older and vulnerable adults. Employees also learned how to use many of the new devices we are now offering to patrons, including our Digitization Station,² tablets, and e-readers.

For patrons, the library continued to host Kootenay Employment Services when permitted by local and provincial COVID-19 guidelines. Kootenay Employment Services helps connect jobseekers with employers as well as aids patrons with resume writing. As mentioned, patrons often use the library, including our public computers and internet, for job seeking activities such as resume writing, submitting job applications, and completing job-related training.

We also continued early literacy programs such as our Tales for Tots story time and our Summer Reading Club, though many of those activities moved online this year or were offered in take-home format. Our Tales for Tots story times saw a total of 79 attendees in 2020, including both in-person and online variants. We offered take-home activity packages during the latter half of the year, including a package aimed at teens which featured the bestselling phenomenon *Wreck this Journal* by Keri Smith. We are in the process of developing new programs aimed at kids and teens, such as a stop-motion workshop and a virtual escape room.

Priority 3: Enhancing Citizen Engagement

Priority three in B.C.'s Strategic Plan for Public Library Service aligns with our strategic priority, *Working Together*.

In 2020, the Elkford Public Library partnered with the BC Association of Community Response Networks to deliver the Gatekeeper Program to interested Elkford residents. Through the Gatekeeper Program, people in the community who are in regular contact with older adults learned how to identify isolated and at-risk individuals, how to recognize signs of abuse and neglect, and what steps to take to support adults and connect them to relevant community services. Twenty-six individuals attended the Gatekeeper Program in 2020. Further educational programs regarding the prevention of adult abuse and neglect were deferred to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With respect to access to government services, residents without internet at home have few options in town to access services. This was further exacerbated in 2020 due to COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions. The Elkford Public Library offers access to public computers and free Wi-Fi, allowing patrons to access government services and apply for government benefits, including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and other COVID-19 relief.

The Elkford Public Library engages Elkford residents through a monthly community newspaper, the Elkford Focus, which is printed at the library and distributed by several businesses in town for free. The Focus includes advertisements for local businesses, news and information about events around town, and many other articles of local interest. We distribute approximately 450 copies monthly and offered this publication in digital format during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Priority 4: Enhancing Governance

Priority four in B.C.'s Strategic Plan for Public Library Service directly aligns with our strategic priority, *Sustaining our Success*.

At the end of 2020, the Elkford Public Library Board and Director began a critical review of our 2018-2022 strategic plan in light of changes brought on by COVID-19. We are currently in the process of updating our strategic plan.

Throughout 2020, our new director attended several workshops and meetings about library governance, and the roles and responsibilities of the Library Board and Director.

Technology Grant: Final Report

The funds from the 2020 Library Technology grant were distributed amongst three projects: installation of an outdoor Wi-Fi access point to provide high-speed internet outside 24/7, implementing a technology lending program which includes loanable tablets, e-readers, and laptops, and starting a local e-book and e-audiobook collection through OverDrive Advantage to supplement our online collection managed by the BC Libraries Cooperative and shared with over 60 other libraries.

Outdoor Wi-Fi Access Point

Our new outdoor Wi-Fi access point was installed on July 7th, 2020. The outdoor access point allows patrons to connect to free, high-speed internet 24/7, including during library closures. Wi-Fi signal strength was measured outdoors prior to and after the installation of the new access point. Signal strength in the library parking lot, approximately eight metres from the building, was –81 dBm prior to installation of the access point and –43 dBm after the access point was installed. The latter is comparable to our indoor Wi-Fi signal strength.

Wi-Fi usage for the year increased by 58% compared to 2019,^{3,4} with 4351 clients connecting to our wireless internet in 2020. Note a Wi-Fi client is defined as a device that connects to a wireless network, e.g., laptops, smartphones, and tablets. The bulk of Wi-Fi usage in 2020 took place after the outdoor Wi-Fi access point was installed, with a total of 3844 clients connecting in July through December. Summer saw the most wireless internet traffic, and our busiest month of the year was September, with 880 clients connecting to our wireless internet and 192 GB of data transferred.

Patron Loanable Devices: Technology Lending Program

Through the technology lending program, Elkford Public Library patrons have access to different devices to try out and take home. These devices can be used to access our electronic collection, popular software, and internet, reducing barriers to digital inclusion and promoting technological literacy. Prior to the implementation of the program, the Elkford Public Library did not offer loanable devices for patrons to take home.

Tablets, e-readers, and laptops were ordered in the fall of 2020; four tablets and two e-readers were added to our collection for circulation in October. These six devices have collectively seen a total of 20 circulations over the four months that they have been available to patrons. We have had positive feedback about the devices and we are finding that patrons typically renew them. Since implementing the technology lending program, we have had requests for additional loanable devices such as audiobook

readers and portable CD players. This year we used some of the remaining 2020 Library Technology Grant funding to order a DAISY mp3 player, which, alongside two laptops, is anticipated to be incorporated into our collection in 2021.

Electronic Collection: OverDrive Advantage

We anticipate using the portion of the 2020 Library Technology Grant allocated to supplementing our electronic collection in 2021. See *COVID-19 and Public Libraries* for more information about electronic resource use.

COVID-19 and Public Libraries

COVID-19 Response Timeline

The level of service that the Elkford Public Library was able to offer in 2020 was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 18th, the library was closed in response to growing concern about COVID-19. Our new director commenced her position on March 24th; note that a coincident challenge that the Elkford Public Library experienced while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic was the loss of our former director, who was also our senior staff member with ten years of experience. On March 25th, library employees and Board members were barred from accessing the library due to building closure. Other than short visits for equipment collection, employees were not able to access the library until June 1st. During the lockdown and building closure, Elkford Public Library employees worked from home. Employees were available six days per week to respond to patron enquiries, issue library cards, and help patrons access library services. Patrons maintained access to our electronic collection, eLearning platforms, and our local newspaper, which we continued to publish in digital format. Our new director was also trained while working from home. Some programming, such as our monthly book club meetings, moved to virtual platforms.

Curbside service commenced on June 9th. Curbside service ran from June 9th to July 7th and has been available upon request thereafter. Curbside service is a contactless service in which materials are exchanged outside the library with social distancing in place. Curbside service allows patrons to safely access our physical collection as well as other services such as printing, scanning, faxing, and copying.

On July 8th, with permission from the District, the Elkford Public Library re-opened to the public in limited capacity and reintroduced most of our in-person services, including some programming, with restrictions. We remained open to the public in limited capacity through the remainder of 2020, with services and protocol adapted to evolving provincial guidelines.

Impact on Budget and Staff Hours

The Elkford Public Library was fortunate not to receive any budget cuts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of our budget is allocated to payroll, and we were able to

employ our staff throughout the pandemic. Employee hours were cut by approximately 13% during the initial lockdown, and employees' pre-COVID schedules were restored once the library re-opened. Note that our payroll spending was impacted by the unexpected resignation of our former director, due to overlap with the current director for training. Other budgetary items were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g., decreased revenue due to fewer fundraising campaigns and less traffic, as well as decreased spending on travel. In 2020, we spent approximately 1% of our annual budget on COVID-19 related supplies such as barriers, cleaning supplies, and other materials needed to adapt to new guidelines. This low figure is somewhat misleading, as the bulk of COVID-19-related spending in 2020 was on employee time allocated to COVID-19-related planning, training, and protocol implementation. Total COVID-19-related expenditures including employee hours are estimated to be closer to 6% of our 2020 budget. It is likely that 2021 will see more spending on COVID-19-related employee time and supplies.

Impact on Lending

Throughout 2020, we experienced challenges accessing materials. For just over two months during the lockdown, library employees and patrons lost access to our physical collection, public computers, printers/copiers, and phone line. See Figure 1 for impact of the pandemic on physical material circulation. As mentioned, during the lockdown we instead offered electronic materials and were available six days per week to address patrons' concerns and assist patrons in finding available services. Provincial interlibrary loans were also halted for a significant portion of the year, shutting down at the end of March and resuming in mid-August. As a small library, we rely on interlibrary loans as an effective expansion to our modest collection.

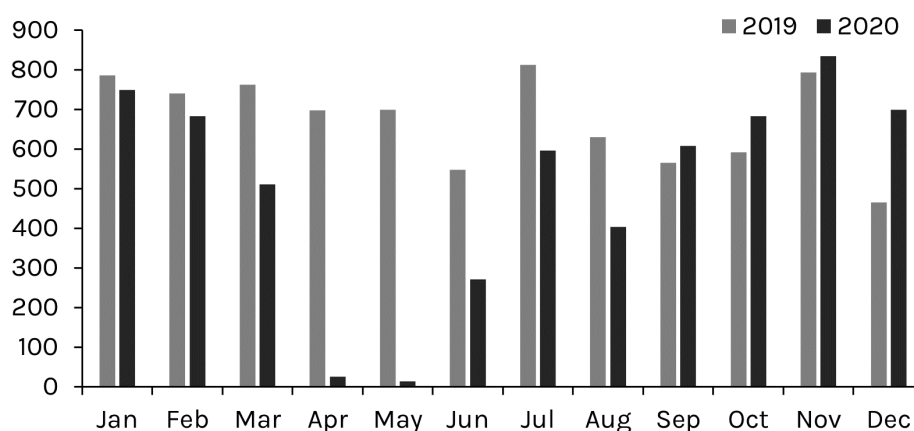


Figure 1. Total circulation of physical materials from Elkford Public Library by month for 2019 and 2020. Note the impact of COVID-19 on the circulation of materials during and following the lockdown.

Elkford Public Library patrons access electronic materials primarily through OverDrive (Library2go), via a shared e-book and e-audiobook collection managed by the BC Libraries Cooperative. Demand for digital materials increased province-wide due to COVID-19, resulting in longer waiting times and reduced access to digital materials for

Elkford Public Library patrons. This is reflected in the electronic circulation statistics for the months of April through July, which showed a 15% decrease³ in number of titles circulated compared to the same months in 2019. In response, we reallocated a significant portion of the library's physical materials budget to meet demand for digital materials, purchasing titles through OverDrive Advantage for the exclusive use of our patrons. We also introduced new lending models, such as Cost Per Circ, which allowed patrons immediate access to in-demand titles. Electronic material lending rates in 2019 and 2020 are shown in Figure 2. Total electronic checkouts through OverDrive increased by 3% from 2019 to 2020, with the number of checkouts in 2020 exceeding 2000. After introduction, OverDrive Advantage titles constituted 31% of total OverDrive checkouts at Elkford Public Library.

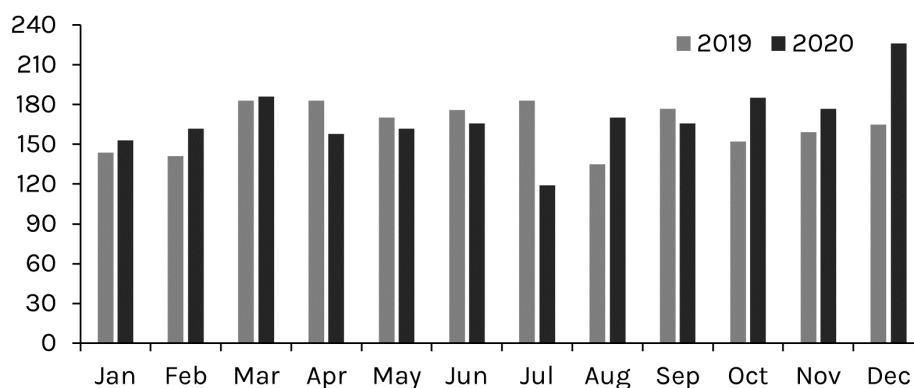


Figure 2. Total electronic circulations on OverDrive by month for 2019 and 2020. All lending models included.

Moving into 2021, we plan to spend the remaining funds from the 2020 Library Technology Grant to supplement our electronic materials collection and are currently looking for additional funding through other available grants.

Impact on Daily Activities, Programming, and Services

The pandemic had a noticeable and negative impact on daily activities at the Elkford Public Library. The library's open hours were reduced to accommodate new COVID-19 safety protocol such as cleaning and disinfecting. The loss of our volunteers also put strain on employee time. One of the more tragic impacts of the pandemic was the loss of the library's function as a community gathering space. Provincial guidelines discouraging close, prolonged contact between patrons meant reduced seating in the library, the cancellation of most in-person programming, and a decrease, on average, in the length of patron visits. Total physical visits to the library in 2020 decreased by 48% compared to the number of physical visits in 2019 (Figure 3).

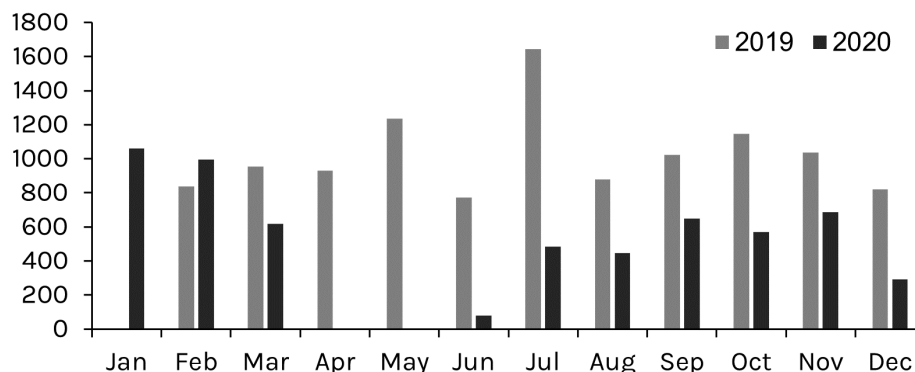


Figure 3. Physical visits to the library per month, as tracked by our electronic “people counter.”

Patrons’ access to computers and internet was extremely limited during the initial lockdown and reduced thereafter. The signal strength of our indoor Wi-Fi access point was unsuitable for sustained and heavy outdoor use during the initial lockdown. After the library re-opened, our number of public workstations available decreased from three to one to accommodate social distancing. To address these issues, much of the funds from the 2020 Library Technology Grant were used to purchase loanable technology and to improve patrons’ Wi-Fi access by installing an outdoor Wi-Fi access point.

In terms of programming, several events scheduled for March, April, and May were cancelled, and some of our programs moved online. Moving programs online has been a challenge for our small team of employees, primarily due to lack of employee experience in creating virtual media. Challenges have also stemmed from the small physical space our library inhabits, as in-person visits, activities, and seating were severely restricted to meet social distancing guidelines. In our community, the demand for in-person programming far outweighed that for virtual programming, and we kept to our regular in-person programming schedule as closely as we could while following provincial guidelines for COVID-19 safety. Specifically, in-person programs were held outdoors and/or participant numbers were capped to allow space for social distancing. We offered activities for small groups outdoors as part of our Summer Reading Club and offered a variety of take-home activities for kids and teens throughout the latter half of the year. We offered both in-person and virtual story time activities in 2020. Overall, programming attendance was low compared to previous years, particularly for virtual substitutes.

Ongoing Challenges

Demand for both digital and physical materials has continued to increase since the library re-opened in July (see Figures 1 and 2). At the time of writing, Elkford Public Library patrons have a total of 116 holds on electronic materials through OverDrive and the current average wait period for holds in the consortium is 51 days. Note also that the total number of physical circulations at Elkford Public Library recorded in January 2021 is the highest number of circulations per month we have recorded in the past

three years. We anticipate that we may have difficulty meeting demands with our current books and materials budget, which has not increased for several years.

Maintaining our former level of service in terms of programming and open hours will also be a challenge, as daily COVID-19-related tasks such as disinfecting and contact tracing cut into staff time formerly allocated to fulfilling library services. The creation of virtual library programming also continues to be a challenge for our employees. Developing online media has a high cost in terms of training, equipment, and time, and producing quality online media is difficult compared to delivering the equivalent in-person program or service. Furthermore, many of our patrons are simply not interested in virtual programming. We anticipate that attendance at virtual programs will continue to be low through 2021.

Summary

2020 was a challenging year, with changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as hiring and training a new library director. Despite these challenges, we endeavored to keep service as 'normal' as possible and offered most of our regular amenities and programs, altered to meet COVID-19 restrictions.

We updated our wireless internet, introduced new technology to our patrons, and expanded our digital collection. We also saw increased engagement in eLearning platforms such as Gale Courses and increased demand for both electronic and physical materials. The employees at Elkford Public Library learned new skills and worked above and beyond our job descriptions to make the year successful and provide high-quality library service to our community.

We anticipate that as COVID-19-related restrictions continue through 2021, so will the challenges to our small, rural library.

References

¹ District of Elkford Community Profile. <https://www.elkford.ca/include/getOc71.pdf?nodeid=132> (accessed February 5, 2021).

² The Digitization Station includes a high-quality photo scanner, photo printer, and film-to-digital converter. It also features Photoshop software for photo editing. See our 2019 PLGR for more details.

³ Calculated by $\frac{[(2020 \text{ value}) - (2019 \text{ value})]}{(2019 \text{ value})} \times 100$.

⁴ See our 2019 Annual Survey.

2020 LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY GRANT REPORTING FORM: ELKFORD PUBLIC LIBRARY

Total Technology Grant Amount: \$8,671

Area of Need	Outcome	Metrics	Strategic Links	Actions	Collaborative Links	Timeframe	Project Budget	In-Kind/Leveraged funds	Comments
Connectivity Wi-Fi Access Point outdoors to provide high-speed internet outside library building	Wi-Fi strength outside increased to allow patrons access to internet (1) safely in the climate of COVID-19, (2) for extended hours during the day, and (3) during library closures. Improving access to internet for patrons who rely on the public library for connectivity helps reduce barriers to digital inclusion.	Increase Wi-Fi signal strength outdoors, including in library parking lot. Increase Wi-Fi usage by library patrons.	Reliable internet connectivity supports the provincial strategic priority to improve access for British Columbians.	Install outdoor Wi-Fi Access Point.	N/A	June 2020: Research options and obtain quote(s). Obtain permission from district to alter building. July 2020: Installation	\$800	N/A	
Patron loanable devices Loanable tablets, e-readers, and laptop computers	Providing easy-to-use devices for accessing digital collections, office software, and internet to patrons helps reduce barriers to digital inclusion, provides learning opportunities, and supports technological literacy.	Introduce technology lending program and increase device lending at Elkford Public Library.	Access to devices that can be used to connect to the internet supports the provincial strategic priority to improve access for British Columbians. Increasing opportunities for patrons to access information and resources supports the strategic objective of advancing citizen engagement.	Purchase iPads, e-readers, and laptops as well as accessories where necessary. Develop technology lending policy and procedures.	N/A	September 2020: Research options and place orders September/October 2020: Train staff on new devices, develop technology lending policy and procedures. Set up devices for patron use. Advertise new technology lending program.	\$6,100	N/A	

Electronic collections Start Overdrive Advantage ebook and eAudiobook collection	Supplement the collection of ebooks and eAudiobooks available at our library by starting an Overdrive Advantage collection. Expanding the library's digital collection encourages patrons to use library resources, helps support literacy, and helps reduce barriers to digital inclusion for patrons who rely on the library for reading and educational materials.	Reduce wait times for Elkford Public Library patrons borrowing ebooks and eAudiobooks, increase ebook and eAudiobook circulation.	Growing digital collections and making ebooks/eAudiobooks more accessible to library patrons via increased availability supports learning and literacy and is in line with the provincial strategic objective of improving access for British Columbians.	Research in-demand titles and purchase ebooks/eAudiobooks	N/A	October 2020: Gather statistics from Overdrive Fall 2020/Winter 2021: Purchase ebooks and eAudiobooks	\$1771	N/A	
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