Self-service libraries in Finland 2022

Flexibility and equality of access

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Summary

This publication talks about Finnish self-service libraries, which have rapidly become common since the 2010s. In 2022, self-service libraries were already available in three out of four municipalities in Finland. Municipalities have been able to apply for government grants to establish self-service libraries for more than ten years.

A survey was conducted for the publication, to which 90 percent of all municipalities in mainland Finland answered. The statistical database of public libraries has also been used as a data source. This publication provides a nationwide overview of self-service libraries. The publication examines the development of operations, looks for solutions to possible problems, and anticipates new prospects for self-service libraries.

Self-service libraries have garnered praise from customers. The use of facilities and collections has become more efficient, and more accessible opening hours serve citizens better. From the point of view of libraries, self-service has affected the service culture and working methods. The amount of work has not decreased but changed. Some negative effects of self-service, such as unauthorized entries, breaking of places or equipment and disruptive use, have occurred in libraries to varying degrees. The situations have been solvable by anticipating possible hazards, addressing problems quickly and by having versatile cooperation with different stakeholders.

The Regional State Administrative Agencies recommend that, in addition to technical solutions, when introducing and developing self-service, libraries reevaluate their operating and work culture. In order for libraries to be able to carry out their statutory tasks that require professional library skills, the self-help libraries are an opportunity to reduce the workload of the staff by prioritizing work tasks.

Index

1 "The self-service library is the best invention since the wheel"

This is a report on the self-service service of public libraries, which is used in three out of four municipalities in Finland. The title of the chapter is a direct quote from a library's customer feedback.

Self-service libraries have rapidly become common. The first self-service libraries were introduced in the 2010s. In 2015, there were self-service libraries in every fifth municipality, in 2019 already half of the municipalities offered self-service in their libraries.

As a result, the use of facilities and collections has become more efficient, the accessible opening hours serve the citizens better. Customers' self-reliance also affects the library's service culture and working methods.

Municipalities have been able to apply for government grant to establish self-service library for more than ten years. Regional State Administrative Agencies (RSAAs) have monitored the development of the quantity and quality of self-service libraries in reports published in 2015 and 2019, so updating the overall picture is timely again in 2023. In the text, the results of the 2019 report are marked in parentheses after the data from this latest survey.

The report focuses on the national overview of self-service libraries and the development of their operations. The RSAAs want to know, what the impact of state subsidies has been, and whether there is still a need to assist the establishment or development of self-service libraries in the future. The aim of the report is also to seek solutions to possible problems. In addition, we anticipate new prospects for self-service.

The most important source of the report is a survey conducted for libraries in the fall of 2022, to which 90 percent of municipalities (n=264) answered. Thank you to all libraries who answered! The national statistical database of public libraries, the Aviavustukset.fi database of RSAAs and theses on the subject have also contributed to this report. Current, constantly updated information has also been obtained from different media outlets, social media, and discussions with libraries.

2   Statistical overview

According to the national statistical database of public libraries, in 2022 there were self-service libraries in 76 percent of municipalities in mainland Finland (in 2019: 53%). In 2022, self-service libraries were open for more than 1.1 million hours (in 2019: 0.7 million). Self-employed hours already account for 47 percent of all opening hours (in 2019: 36%). The national library statistics do not separately record the number of loans and users during self-service opening hours. Since 2020, statistics have been recorded for opening hours when staff are present at the library premises, but not engaged in active customer service.

Self-service libraries in continental Finland

2019
158 municipalities
with one or more
self-service libraries

2022
224 municipalities
with one or more
self-service libraries

Is there a self-service library in the municipality?

Yes

No

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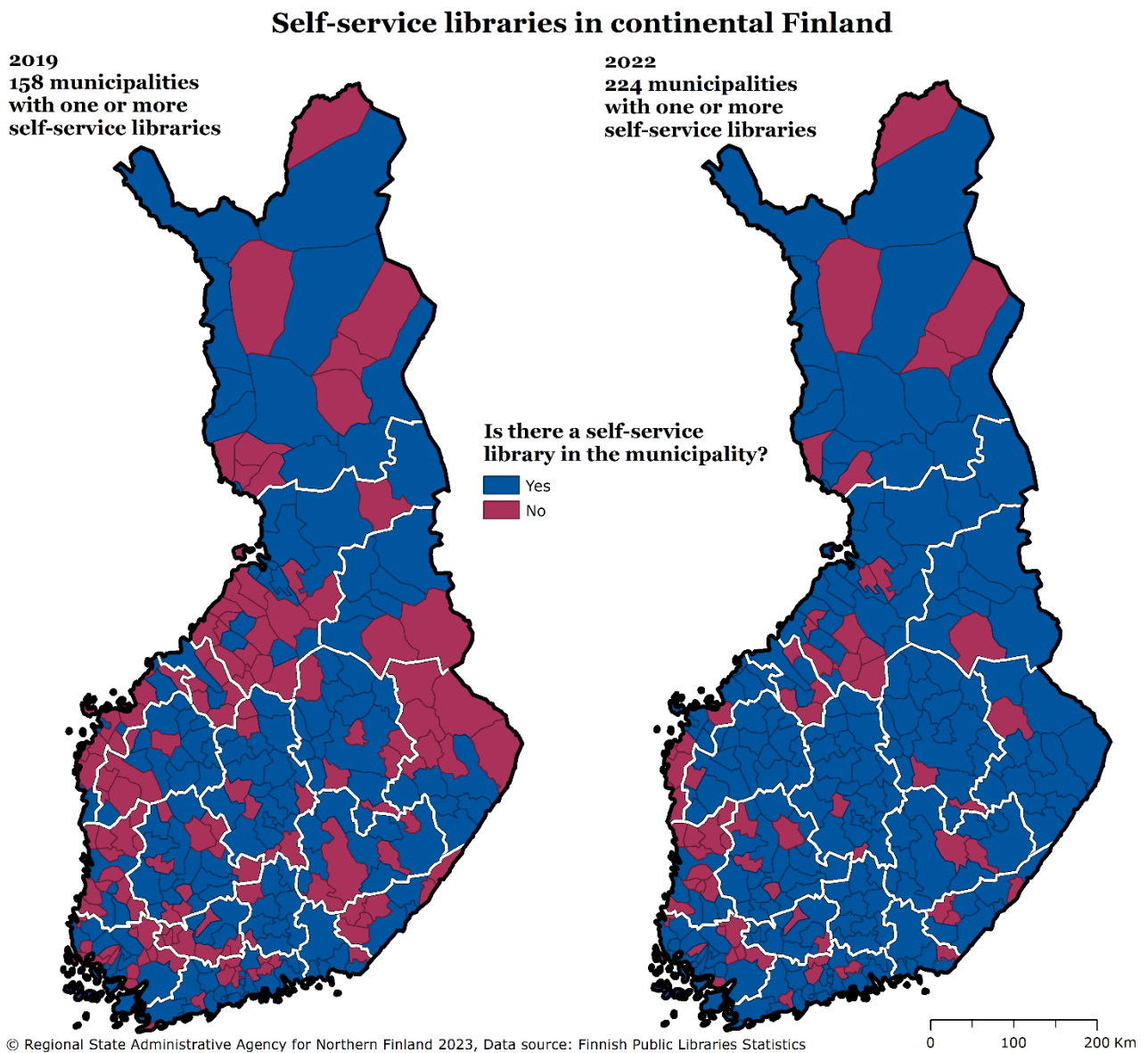
0   100   200 Km

Figure 1. Map of municipalities with self-service libraries in Finland in 2019 and 2022.

Self-service libraries became more common after 2017, after which the number of borrowers, book loans and physical visits has slightly increased, or at least the downward trend of the 2010s has reversed. Based on the national statistics, however, it is difficult to say how much the self-service libraries have increased the use of the library. Self-service hours have been recorded since 2014, and since the years 2020–2022 cannot be counted as normal statistical years due to the pandemic, the possible period under review is short.
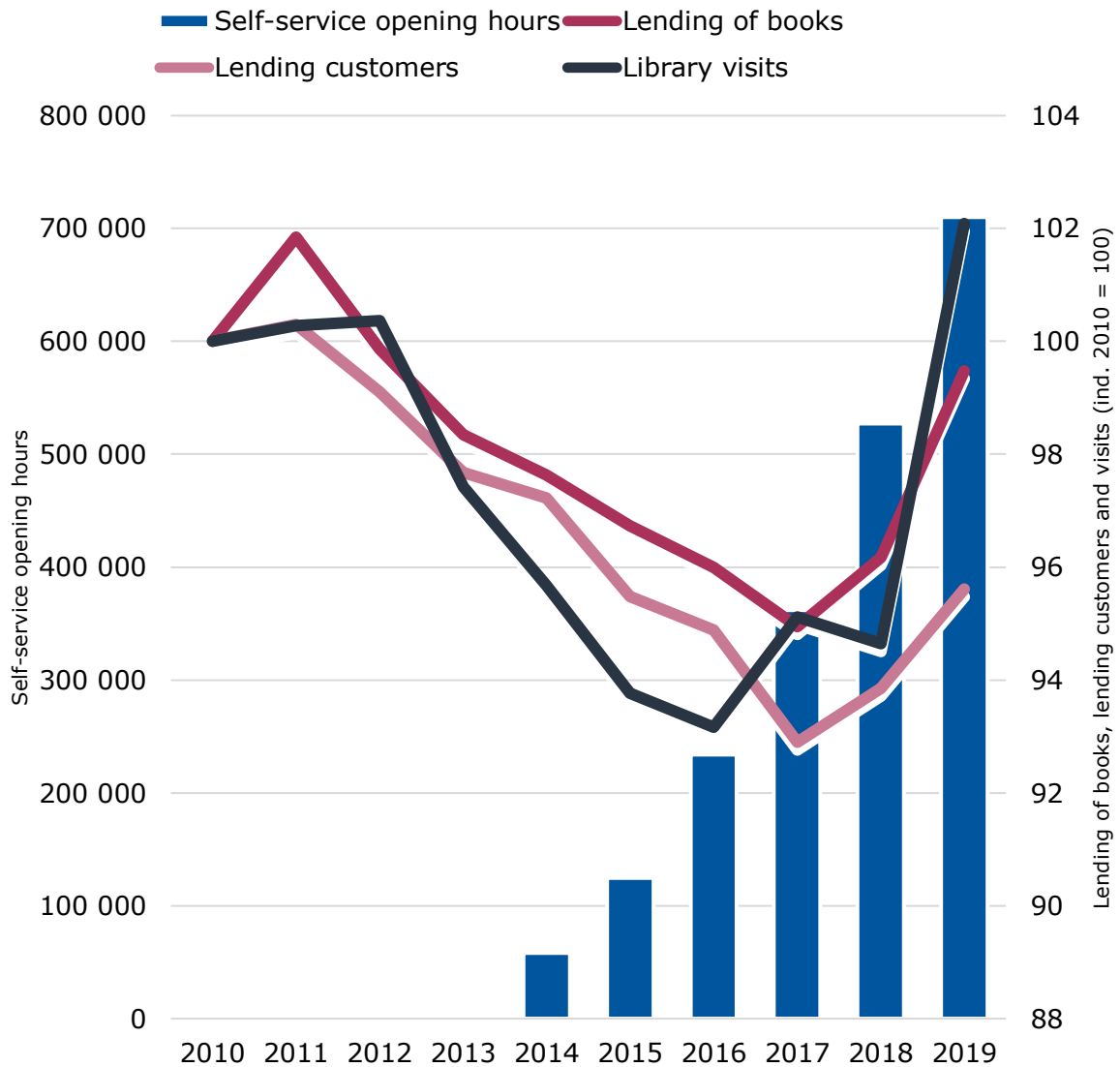

Figure 2. Change in self-service opening hours, lending of books, lending customers, and library visits 2010-2019 (index 2010=100).

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The statistics also show that the number of personnel has decreased in the 2010s and the downward trend has continued as self-service libraries have become more common. Self-service is possibly a factor in the reduction of human resources, especially in densely populated and rural municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants. In urban municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants, this development does not seem to have had the same effect.

Since the number of personnel has been decreasing for a longer time, one can ask whether the personnel would have been reduced in any case without the introduction of self-service libraries? Indeed it might be possible that a self-service solution can save libraries from a reduction in opening hours, for example, when the positions of retirees are not filled and the library is under pressure to save money?

3   Results from the survey

3.1   A self-service library can almost be regarded as a basic service

In a few libraries, the introduction of self-service was still in progress or nearing completion during the survey conducted by the RSAA, so from the beginning of 2023, the number of self-service libraries has increased even more. When the situation is examined by branches, it appears that only a third of the 592 branches of the responding libraries are without their own self-service libraries.

In addition, two of the three municipalities that do not yet have a self-service library plan to introduce one in the next five years. The remaining third of the municipalities do not plan, or cannot say whether a self-service library is planned.

Self-service is planned to be introduced either at the request of customers or municipal decision-makers. Every other library planning to do it themselves stated, that one of the main reasons for introducing the service was the wishes from customers. Libraries want to offer customers the widest possible opening hours and guarantee equal access to services. With the current number of personnel in the libraries, it is not possible to increase the opening hours without self-service.

The libraries answered in their own words to the question, as to why there are no self-service libraries in the municipality. The reasons most often mentioned were the unsuitability of the facilities, the set-up costs or the fear of possible vandalism and disorder, as well as the deterioration of the quality of the service. The effect of self-service on library use and the number of staff were also mentioned.

The survey revealed that some libraries assume that customers do not want or need a self-service library. There are also libraries where the director of the library or the staff do not want it. In some libraries, self-service and personal service are seen as mutually exclusive, not complementary. From a national point of view, the issue is the general availability of library services, which is now implemented unevenly depending on which municipality you happen to live in.

3.2   Self-service and its impact on professional duties

The self-service libraries have greatly influenced the quantity and quality of library work. Two out of three report that the quality of work has changed (in 2019: 54%), while a half think that self-reliance has increased work (in 2019: 44%). Less than a fifth say that the amount of work has decreased. A tenth of the respondents think that it has had no effect on the quantity or quality of the work.

	n	%
Self-service has altered the quality of work	128	61 %
Self-service has increased the amount of work	110	52 %
Self-service has decreased the amount of work	36	17 %
Quality or quantity of work has not changed	20	9 %
Total	**211**	**100 %**

Table 1. Effect of self-service libraries to the quantity and quality of professional duties in the library.

The work has changed, some tasks have increased, some have decreased. For example, more time is spent on logistics, organization and general maintenance and supervision, but lending and returns in customer service have decreased. The increase in loan volumes due to self-service increases work. The management of technical problems and informing about them takes more time, as does guidance in the initial stages of the service.

In many libraries, double work is done. The material returned by the customer will be returned again just to be sure. A library commented: "*Returns made during self-service hours must be checked, customers do not sort all the material correctly*." When customers use automation in lending and returning of materials, the nature of customer service changes. Guidance and counseling require even more library expertise and pedagogical skills. When the customer service representative does not have a loan and return queue, it is easier for customers to approach him with more difficult and time-consuming questions. The library staff moves more between the shelves. In addition to actual customer service, other work is done in the vicinity of customers, which means that interaction with customers has increased.

Self-service has given libraries the opportunity to examine the need for customer service. It has evened out customer flows and congestion peaks in those libraries where customers' use of the library is monitored, and activities are planned based on this information.

In some libraries, self-service may have been a bigger change for the library staff than for the customers. The ownership of the library space has been transferred from the staff to the customers. The library space and furniture locations change according to the needs of the customers. The library staff have had to learn to trust their customers.

In the past, routines related to collection work were handled "at one's own pace" before opening the doors. This is no longer possible, because there can be customers in the library all the time during self-service hours. Many librarians stated that self-service requires a change of attitude and adaptation.

On the other hand, self-service has brought a lot of flexibility to library work. Self-service fills in the temporary personnel shortages caused by vacations and sick leave. It has been possible to accept more school classes and kindergarten groups. At its best, "*self-service has given time for the library's various projects, the development of operations, and the planning and running of event programming*." On the flip side, however, many libraries said that the personnel resources were small to begin with, or they have decreased because of self-service, so it has not made it possible to participate in training any more than before.

Has the introduction of self-service led to staff reduction?

- No
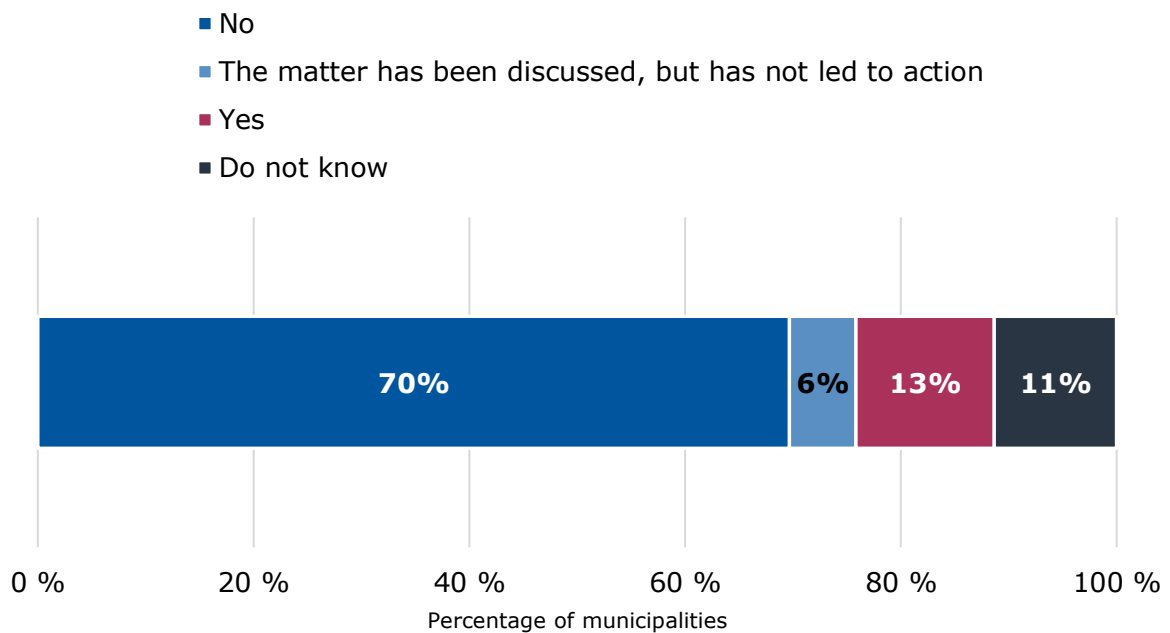- The matter has been discussed, but has not led to action
- Yes
- Do not know

Figure 3. Effect of self-service to staff numbers.

More than two-thirds of the responding libraries said that the implementation of self-service has not resulted in staff reductions. 13 percent reported that the staff has been reduced. The results are in the same vein as in 2019. A few comments pointed out that the reduction in personnel itself has led to the introduction of self-service. However, the number of these was small among all the answers. An ideal situation was also found in the libraries' open answers: "*The self-service library has only improved our service. The opening hours have not been shortened, and the staff has not been reduced. Nowadays, we are able to do more development work, because those customers who want and know how, use the service on their own*."

3.3   Libraries take advantage of self-service

Every other library has utilized self-service time to develop the skills of the staff, for example for joint development days of the work community, or staff meetings. Several employees have been able to participate in the same training sessions at the same time. Joint training and meetings have also been deliberately scheduled during self-service time.

The threshold to participate in professional training has been lower when the library does not have to be closed completely. Participating in training has been made easier by the increase of distance learning and training recordings. Especially in many small libraries with one librarian, self-service has given the employee the opportunity to break away from customer service from time to time to participate in remote training.

What about the third of the libraries where self-service has not been utilized for competence development? Most of the time, the reason is limited human resources and the fact that self-service has increased the work. In this case, there is no additional time for skill development compared to before. In some libraries, the possibility of using self-service time to develop skills is understood, but it has not been utilized so far.

However, half of the libraries where the introduction of self-service has led to a reduction in personnel resources have utilized the self-service time to develop professional skills. This perhaps indicates that, due to the reduction in human resources, the threshold for taking advantage of self-service time is lower, especially it is the only opportunity to participate in training.

3.4   Self-service poses a challenge to both employees and customers

Every fourth municipality reported that there have been no problems in the self-service library. However, from the point of view of both library staff and customers, self-service has meant a change in the operating culture, which does not always go smoothly. The staff can't control the space like before, not all library customers are known individuals, and employees have to put up with some misuse of the premises.

The operating culture of the library and its staff does not change by itself or by command. "*Transitioning to the self-service library operations involves a change in the service structure, which requires leadership in order to bring the whole process to a happy conclusion. However, the change will not be successful without the participation of the staff. In terms of commitment, it is important that the staff with their expertise is involved in all stages of the change, so that the new operating methods become familiar, and the old ones are unlearned, and prejudices and resistance to change are minimized.*" (Asukas 2020, pp. 6.)

Customers have more and more responsibility for the use of the common space. Library users must get along with each other with mutual respect. A library is a public space where one should voluntarily behave in a matter-of-fact manner for the sake of everyone's comfort.

Customer feedback from the self-service time received by the libraries has generally been positive. 208 respondents to the survey said that they had received feedback from customers about the self-service either from surveys or spontaneously. According to 201 respondents, the feedback was positive. The few negative feedback from customers concerned technical problems and disruptive behavior of other customers.

For customers, self-service is important and appreciated. Doubtful comments have only been received before self-service was introduced. Since the introduction, customer feedback has been "almost exclusively positive" or "exclusively grateful". The customers have given thanks especially for the longer opening hours, the availability weekend accessibility, and the calmness of the self-service time.

3.5 Disorder occurs in varying degrees

The problems of self-service libraries can be roughly divided into technical problems and disorder. This report does not go into more detail about technical problems, because they can be solved with the suppliers of the systems. Theses regarding self-service (e.g. Ojala 2021) describe how the staff's attitude, motivation and trust in the new service improves when comprehensive technical support and training are received from the system supplier before implementation. Thorough training in using the system prevents many technical problems.

What kinds of disturbances or other issues has the self-service caused?

━━Below 5 000 inhabitants (n=84)

━━5 000 - 9 999 inhabitants (n=50)

━━10 000 - 19 999 inhabitants (n=33)
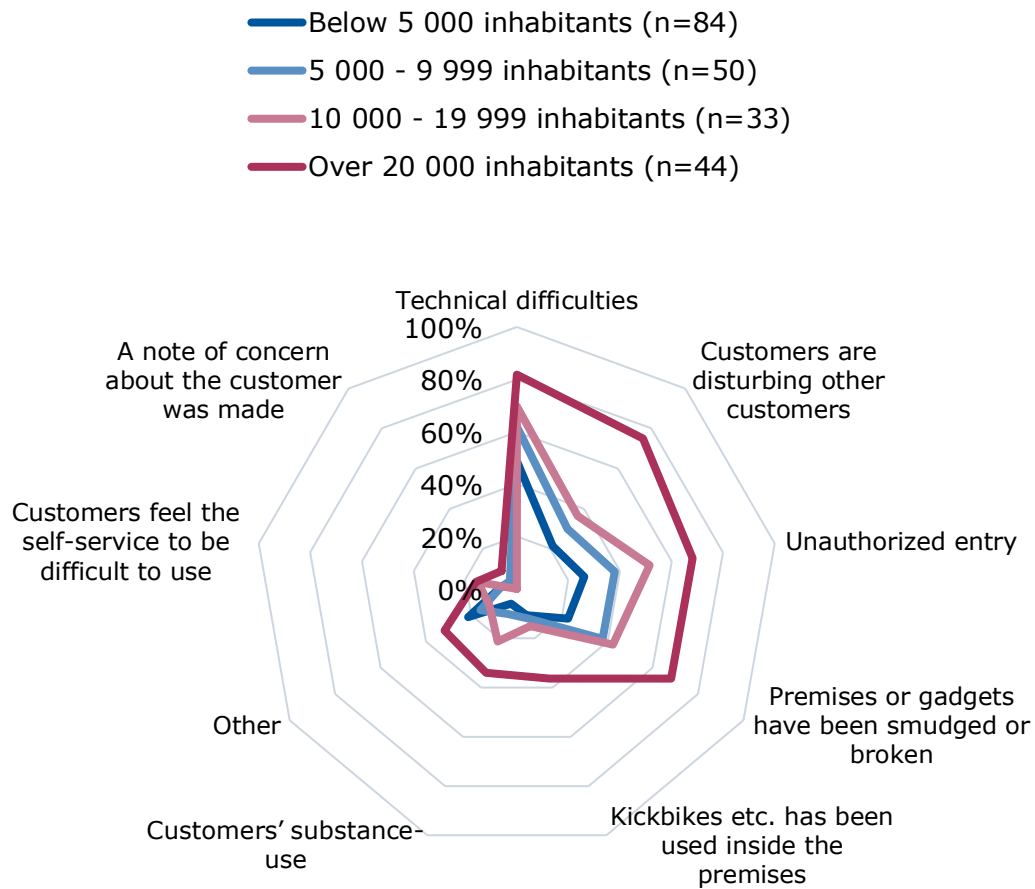
━━Over 20 000 inhabitants (n=44)

Figure 4. Disturbances and other issues in self-service libraries.

There have been technical problems in almost two out of three self-service libraries. In addition to concrete problems related to technology, customers' experiences of the difficulty of self-service use, which was brought up by almost every tenth library respondent, can be counted as a technical problem. Libraries receive the most negative customer feedback from individual technical problems related to loan and return automation, logging into the self-service library, operation of the front door, or lighting.

Disorder has occurred in libraries to varying degrees. The most common were cases of trespassing, breaking and messing up premises or equipment, and disturbing other customers. In almost every fifth self-service library, the problem has been the use of substances by some customers or the use of kickboards and other means of light transportation in the library. Customers have given feedback on the loud behavior of children and young people, the messing up of spaces by young people, and other restless customer behaviour.

Regarding the reported problems, it should be noted that the survey did not ask about the frequency of their occurrence. The respondents have therefore been able to mention problems that occurred either only once or several times, each mention has been given the same weight. Based on the open answers, many reported problems have been individual and smaller than the problem listing suggests. As one librarian wrote: "*The problems I mentioned are very rare, only a few problems in four years*."

In addition, it is important to note that the results of the survey talk about the overall situation of the municipality, not an individual library. If there has been a problem in any of the municipal libraries, it is reflected in the results. The size of the municipality affects the frequency of problems. More problems are reported in larger municipalities, especially those with more than 20,000 inhabitants, than in smaller municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants. In cities, there are more self-service libraries, which increases the probability of problems.

We presented the libraries with a list of issues, from which the libraries chose the measures they used to reduce disorder. Mostly, disturbances have been solved by positive means, such as guidance, instructions or increasing customer interaction.

When necessary, libraries have resorted to more drastic measures, such as limiting self-service opening times and adding security guards and surveillance cameras. To some extent, age limits have been introduced, rules of use have been changed, or spaces for self-service have been limited.

A temporary ban has been used as an extreme measure. However, its use has decreased slightly compared to the 2019 report. According to the Library Act, the municipality can place a library user on a temporary library-specific ban on library use, if the library user repeatedly and substantially causes disruption to the library's operation or endangers its safety or damages the library's property. The ban can be valid for a maximum of 30 days. This is how every fifth library has tried to solve disruptive behavior. The use ban has even had to be used in such a way that the same person has been given several consecutive use bans because the person has not improved their behavior.

Almost all customers behave in a matter-of-fact manner in the self-service library. Therefore, customers may feel unfair if everyone is denied the library's self-service due to a few people behaving inappropriately.

13 libraries have closed for the weekends due to problems with their self-service availability. In a few municipalities, self-service opening hours have been temporarily out of use completely, when some customers' actions has become too wild. However, libraries want to be on the side of the majority who behave decently: *"...the only way to prevent disruptions and messes would be to close the self-service library completely, and there was no desire to go there*."

It is encouraging that the problems have been solved by intervening quickly. In many cases, for example, the harassment of some young people has remained a one-off and the situation has been calmed down.

In three out of four libraries, the library staff has been the one to resolve disorder or other problems during self-service. More than a third of libraries solve problems with the troublemaker or their custodian. School and youth services are part of the solution in every fourth library.

16 percent of libraries have resorted to the police in problem situations. 6 percent are connected to social services. 13 percent report that customers are involved in solving problems. The municipality's decision-makers are involved in 4 percent of the situations. 27 percent mentioned other decision-makers, which are the municipality's technical service and janitors, system and equipment suppliers, other municipal officials, or the youth council.

3.6 Problems are solvable

We asked the libraries to tell us in their own words how they have prevented or solved problems. We received dozens of solutions, which have been summarized in this chapter. The same solutions are not suitable for every place, of course. Solutions to technical problems have not been included, but the perspective is that of the customers.

The solutions proposed by the libraries can be summed up in two basic things
1. Problems are best avoided when the library anticipates possible problem situations and actively seeks solutions.
2. Versatile cooperation is a strength also in self-service.

Already in the planning phase, the operating environment of the self-service library must be taken into account. If there are several libraries in the municipality, the location and times of the self-service are to be carefully considered and planned.

Involving customers, other stakeholders, the third sector and other actors in the municipality, e.g. schools, youth services and councils, already in the planning and implementation of the self-service increases shared responsibility for the common space. With the system supplier, libraries should reserve enough time to study the system and plan security.

Libraries can support each other in a self-service library network, where "*all joys and sorrows are reviewed and problems are solved under the leadership of the system and network manager*".
In general, the library is usually not the only place where disorderly behavior occurs in a community. The library does not have to try to manage alone, but the most effective way is to approach the matter in a multi-professional manner and by involving all the actors in the operating environment.

The library should document all disturbance situations, so that the subsequent investigations are not based only on "the gut". This is also important because issuing a possible ban requires consulting the customer and recording the reasons. Sometimes there is also a question of occupational safety.

Some of the problems are avoided when communication is continuous, repeated, visible in the space and targeted. Schools must be informed in advance about the self-service principles, customers' rights and responsibilities, control systems, rules of use and the consequences of breaking them, etc. What may seem boring from the library's point of view, may actually be new information for customers.

A minor receives a pin code when a guardian is with them in the library. The guardian reads the rules of use, fills in and signs the consent form. If problems do occur, it is important that they are addressed as quickly as possible. If it is a question of minors, contacting the guardians is paramount. The library must tell schools about the principles of self-service libraries and the consequences of disruptive behavior over and over again. If necessary, formal reports of concern can be made about customers.

If there is vandalism or violent behavior in the library, a criminal report must always be made to the police. It makes things processes easier, documents the situation in full, and sometimes even makes it easier to find out other crimes in the locality. In the following, a few legal measures that have been used in libraries to deal with disorder will be discussed in more detail.

Some libraries have temporarily banned the use of the self-service library from customers who constantly cause disturbances during self-service time. It is easy to technically monitor the ban, because it is saved in the customer information, so the library card cannot be used to access the library during self-service hours.

There is no mention of the ban on the use of self-service libraries in the Library Act or the preparatory documents for the law, probably because self-service libraries were not yet in use to their current extent at the time. There is therefore no direct legislative basis for a ban on use that would only apply to self-service. It would be a lighter sanction than a complete ban on the use of the library permitted by law, because the customer still has the option of using the library when the staff is present. There is no legal precedent on this, so it is not possible to know for sure whether the ban on the use of self-service libraries is in accordance with the law. A partial ban on use is left to the discretion of the municipality.

Attempts are made to prevent disturbances in such a way that children under the age of 15 are required to have their guardian's permission to use the library on their own time. Some libraries have temporarily had a practice where children under the age of 15 have only been able to access the library during self-service hours accompanied by a guardian. This is justified by the fact that children under the age of 15 are the

responsibility of their guardians. They have no criminal liability. On the other hand, the age limit is justified by the protection of children.

Requiring a guardian's permission for the use of the self-service library is not entirely without problems in terms of children's rights. On one hand, getting a library card also requires the consent of a guardian from those under 15 years of age, and using a self-service library requires your own personal library card. However, children under the age of 15 can come to the library when the staff is present just as freely as all other customers.

The best and most desirable course of action is that if a child under the age of 15 acts against the rules, the library will contact the guardian as quickly as possible. The rules of use are recounted, and possible reimbursements for damages are clarified.

3.7 Libraries consult the customers and follow customer satisfaction

According to the Library Act and the Municipalities Act, municipalities have an obligation to provide opportunities for residents to participate and influence matters. 59 percent of libraries (in 2019: 42%) have worked on the idea of a self-service library together.
In the planning phase of the self-service, customers are involved in thinking about the opening hours. If the initiative is to renew or renovate the premises, the customers are more likely to have participated in the planning. The methods of participation have usually been surveys, but in addition interviews, customer evenings, customer councils and workshops have been used.

Lack of time and the rapid progress of a self-service project are the most common reasons why customers are not involved in the planning. Sometimes one's own service is seen as being so obvious, established and improving the accessibility of the library that there is no reason to gather ideas of feedback from the customers.

Libraries are increasingly evaluating customer satisfaction. Two out of three libraries measure customer satisfaction – in 2019, two out of three did not. Customer feedback about self-service received by the libraries has been generally positive, as already stated above.

The use of self-service libraries is monitored and measured in almost all libraries in some way. The use of self-service libraries is most monitored by the number of visitors (88%). Almost half of the responding libraries follow the most popular visiting times and self-service loan amounts. Other monitoring metrics mentioned are self-service opening hours, age distribution of visitors, number of check-ins, failed check-ins, number of self-service contracts or access cards and security guard alerts.

In many libraries, the use of the self-service is monitored only occasionally and when necessary. Monitoring of self-service should be done systematically in all libraries,

because without information about the current situation it is difficult to make decisions or anticipate possible problems or changes in, for example, customer behavior or needs.

Libraries seem to have very little information about what customers actually do on self-service time, how they move around the library space and which facilities/services they use. For example, customers' self-directed library use could be observed directly in addition to or instead of interviews and surveys. This could increase the staff's trust in customers and bring out areas for development that have not been revealed in customer feedback.

3.8 Libraries develop self-service

The majority of libraries plan to develop the self-service library further. However, there are also those who did not have any development plans at the time of the survey, for example because the service has just been put into use.

Almost half of the libraries plan to improve signage and signs, activate community use of the facilities, enhance marketing and/or develop the facilities in some other customer-oriented way. One in three plans to involve customers in development.

Other mentioned development plans are related to e.g. for updating self-service technology and equipment and improving other technology regarding the premises, e.g. electricity supply and light control. In addition, the introduction of rules for a safer space, the development of self-service statistics, printing services, improving the presentation of material (recommendations, tip lists) and increasing the responsibility of residents' associations received mentions.

In theses dealing with self-service libraries, a customer perspective has been sought for the development of the service. For example, an electronic transaction agreement would make it easier for the customer to start using the self-service service (Ojala 2021, 24). In many libraries, the user experience and communication of the self-help service have already been developed with service design. According to professor Tuomas Harviainen from Tampere University, heat maps and step paths can be used in the development of self-service, which are used to map where and how customers move in the space and whether key devices can be found easily.

Libraries should observe the spaces yourself and think about what the customer perceives in the space at every step. Simple, visual and accessible instructions and adequate preparation for errors and exceptional situations are important in self-service. For example, when using automatic machines, it is important that the customer immediately receives feedback when working correctly. Customers can be guided even during self-service time by presenting the materials with care, and by fully utilizing the library collection.

The customer feedback received by the libraries revealed that it would be worthwhile for libraries to draw up rules for self-service libraries that would be the same regardless of the location. Of course, the same applies to other library usage rules, because a large part of customers use libraries in different locations. Confusion is caused, for example, by the fact that in some libraries the customer must sign in when the self-service period starts even if they already are in the library. In other libraries, the customer can continue their stay in the space without signing in.

In several libraries, together with customers, the principles of a safer space have been drawn up, which can be used as a room board for a self-service library. The principles of a safer space encourage customers to intervene in disruptive behavior if necessary. Customers have the option to send an email to the library's contact person when they notice security problems in the library. In acute, difficult situations, direct contact with the security service is of course obligatory.

It is possible to increase security and the feeling of it with remote monitoring, as has been done in one library: *"Intelligent monitoring requires sensors, cameras and speakers installed by the security company, in which case the sensors can raise an alarm under certain conditions, and the security service takes a visual and audio connection to the space, and thus intervenes in the unwanted behavior at the premises*."

The mere absence of a direct threat of violence does not increase the experience of safety. It is also a sense of security. "*Light, general cleanliness of the premises, low noise, guard call button and camera surveillance, as well as the fact that other users followed the rules of use, were perceived as factors that positively affect the safety experience. Vandalism, noise and generally disruptive behavior of other customers were felt to have a negative effect on the sense of security. The perceived sense of security was not always felt to have an effect on using the library, and if it did, the effect was mostly positive*." (Väätäinen 2021, 31)

In the open answers section of the survey, the libraries told what kind of support or training is needed to develop self-service libraries. The libraries hoped for support in many practical matters, such as for example communal use of facilities, customer participation, proactive resolution of problem situations and interpretation of legislation related to self-service. In addition, ready-made material would be needed for customer satisfaction measurement and information.

In many answers, it came out that not everything needs training events, but above all, peer support, sharing of things and experiences, free-form discussion is needed.

3.9   From self-service to cooperation

The subtitle of the 2019 self-service report was "*accessibility and growth of community*". The accessibility of library services has improved with availability, as self-service has increased the opening hours. Measuring the growth of communality is more difficult. Libraries network more and more widely, they act as platforms for events, associations and organizations organize their events in library premises. As a measure of community spirit in library services, e.g. the number of events organized by other operators in libraries can be used, but there are still not very many observations of this kind of activity during self-service hours. Diversifying the use of space could be one opportunity to develop the self-service time.

Preliminary work in this direction has already been done in a few projects financed by the RSAAs. In one project, libraries that participated put together a toolkit for developing self-service libraries with customers. The purpose of the guide is to "*meet the needs of customers on their own time and enable grassroots civic activities even when the staff is not there*." The tools are customer participation, customer communication at the premises, active presence and agile experiments as well as networking and cooperation. Another project aimed to make the third and fourth sectors aware of the possibilities of using library facilities.

Avi has also financed democracy projects in libraries, where the importance of library space for civic activities has been highlighted. Strengthening inclusion and increasing cultural well-being are important themes throughout the country. It would be important to have more development projects for self-service libraries based on these themes, so that views on the possibilities of self-service time would expand.

Those who work remotely in self-service libraries are important customers to libraries. They are used to working in a public space, they do not require complete silence in their work environment, but their presence calms the space. A remote worker usually works on their personal laptop, so at least they need an electrical outlet, a wireless network, a chair and a desk. One can register their library as a remote workplace at https://www.etatyotilat.fi/.

In discussions with libraries, the impact of the municipality's general information point on self-service opening has come up. If a municipal clerk works at the information point during the library's own working hours, then it is a good, safe solution for everyone.

4   The RSAAs have supported the establishment of self-service libraries

All Regional State Administrative Agencies have given municipalities government grants for the establishment of self-service libraries and the development of the service in the years 2014–2022, totaling more than three million euros. Grants have been awarded to 175 self-service library projects. Some of the grants have been given to joint library projects, in which case the grants apply to several municipalities. Almost three out of four municipalities have received assistance.

The starting point of government grants is to promote the objectives of the Library Act. The goal is to increase the availability and accessibility of library services. Grants for self-service may not reduce customer service time or the library's human resources. Self-service should be seen as an additional service that increases the accessibility and services of libraries.

Availability improves when the opening hours of self-service libraries better meet the needs of customers and residents. As a byproduct, the use of the library space and collections have become more efficient. The customer feedback received by the libraries shows that, from the point of view of the customers, self-service has been "*the best innovation in the library in decades!*".

Of the libraries that responded to the survey, more than half (116) believed self-service libraries have contributed the most to the population's equal opportunities for education and culture. 74 respondents thought self-service promoted the availability and use of information. Other goals of the Library Act were also mentioned as having been achieved.

In recent years, the RSAAs have supported the development of self-service libraries according to the following principle. "*Funding can be granted for a self-service library service if the project improves the availability of library services and the diversity of the operation of the self-service library. A grant can only be given for the development of a self-service library if the library is developing it for the first time, or if the library is further developing an already implemented self-service or service concept.*"

From the point of view of government grants, improving the availability of library services and the diversity of operations means that, in addition to extended opening hours, customer groups can be offered, for example, digital guidance and book advice during self-service hours. Thanks to automation, a large number of customers can smoothly handle the borrowing and returning of items, which previously required a customer service representative. The personnel can allocate more of their working time to special groups, children and the elderly, and to cooperation with the school and other stakeholders.

In the survey, 61 percent of the libraries believed self-service has changed the quality of the work. Libraries must think about their work processes even more from the perspective of customer service and its quality. Which library activities can be given up? What can be done differently? How do customers use customer service? What do they lose or gain in self-service? What kind of customer experience do you get from self-service compared to the service provided by a person? What do customers want/can/are allowed to do in the library itself?

The RSAAs strongly recommend that, in addition to technical solutions, when introducing and developing self-service, libraries reevaluate their operating and work culture. For libraries to be able to carry out their statutory tasks that require professional library skills, the self-service library is an opportunity to reduce the workload of the staff by prioritizing work tasks.

In addition to the self-service for customers, the development of new work methods and processes related to it also need an additional boost, for which libraries need a government grant.

In their population survey, Regional State Administrative Agencies have asked citizens' opinions about the availability of library services. In the next population survey, it is possible to ask about citizens' use of self-service libraries. This information can be used when considering the impact and future of government grants for self-supporting libraries. Prime Minister Sanna Marin's government program included an entry on enhancing the use of cultural facilities. The government had more urgent things to think about with the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, so the investigation has been delayed. However, in the spring of 2023, the Ministry of Education and Culture has started the preparation of a survey related to cultural buildings and facilities. According to the RSAAs point of view, the library is a cultural space, the use of which has been significantly improved by the self-service concept.