

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO CABINET

22 JUNE 2021

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING

WELSH PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS 2019-2020

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present to Cabinet the Council's performance against the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) sixth framework for the period 2019-20.

2. Connection to corporate well-being objectives/other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objectives under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:
- **Supporting a successful sustainable economy** – taking steps to make the county borough a great place to do business, for people to live, work, study and visit, and to ensure that our schools are focused on raising the skills, qualifications and ambitions of all people in the county borough.
 - **Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient** - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.
 - **Smarter use of resources** – ensuring that all resources (financial physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of resources throughout the community that can help deliver the Council's well-being objectives.
- 2.2 The Council has a statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service for the benefit of all residents of the County Borough.

3. Background

- 3.1 The provision of public library services in the United Kingdom was made a statutory service for local government as a result of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. The legislation requires local authorities to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service for persons desiring to make use thereof'.
- 3.2 The responsibility for overseeing the terms of the 1964 Act and how it is applied within Wales currently rests with the Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism who has a duty under section 1 of the Act *"to superintend and promote the improvement of the public library services provided by local authorities, and to secure the proper*

discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries conferred upon them as library authorities by or under the 1964 Act”.

- 3.3 In order to assist discharging this responsibility, in 2002 the Welsh Government established a framework of standards for the management of local authority library services, by local authorities, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and other relevant bodies. As part of this framework, new targets relating to library provision and performance are reviewed and set every three years. One of the overall objectives of the standards is that libraries offer all the services and facilities listed as core entitlements within the framework with quality also being measured via a range of performance indicators and impact measures.
- 3.4 Since 2017 local authorities have commenced recording their performance against the sixth quality framework for Welsh libraries entitled ‘Connected and Ambitious Libraries’ and for the period 2017-2020. Welsh Government in their publication ‘How good is your public library service?’ states *“Libraries will not necessarily be able to achieve the top levels of performance in all areas, but are expected to achieve as many of the targets as possible and to seek improvements in those areas where performances are weaker. Authorities should also compare their performances with others in Wales and share best practice in order to bring about improvements.”*
- 3.5 On an annual basis, Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC), as the public library authority, is required to submit an annual Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) return for consideration by assessors. A report is issued in turn by the Museums, Archives and Libraries Division (MALD) of the Welsh Government, who have responsibility for administering the framework. The report produced represents the considered view of the assessors on the Council performance for the given year.
- 3.6 On 1st October 2015, BCBC transferred the operational management of a range of cultural services, including the library service, to the Awen Cultural Trust. The statutory duty to provide the library service and report on its performance remains with the Council, but Awen, under the terms of the management agreement, provides the Council with the information required on performance in relation to the standards to satisfy itself that the service is meeting the desired outcomes. MALD identify that *“The strategic vision of the Trust to; improve the literacy of people of all ages; support reading for pleasure and to enhance wellbeing is noted as reflecting the priorities and goals set out in several Welsh Government strategies including the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act”*. It should be noted that two libraries are operated by Halo Leisure at Ogmere Vale and Garw Valley with two others co-located in Halo run facilities at Bridgend Life Centre and Maesteg Sports Centre.

4. Current situation/proposal

- 4.1 **Appendix 1** is the 2019-20 report from MALD in response to the library self-assessment return against the sixth framework of Welsh Public Library Standards (2017-20).
- 4.2 The overall assessment underlines the quality of the library service being delivered to the citizens of Bridgend County Borough by Awen as part of the partnership agreement with BCBC. *“Whilst Covid-19 restrictions remain challenging to all library services in Wales, staff resilience, professionalism and care for the community they*

serve has been outstanding...The importance of the library as a physical place and the impact on the wellbeing of their customers through interaction with library staff cannot be underestimated”.

- 4.3 The 2019-20 report highlights that the service has continued to perform well, in particular relating to reducing barriers to access, investing in staff development and training and also partnership working with the community. The short term impact of the temporary relocation of the Ty'r Ardd reference library is noted but also the forthcoming opportunities afforded by the redevelopment of Maesteg Town Hall. *”Continued investment in library spaces is identified as central to the delivery of the strategy, with plans to continue to develop the layout and character of Maesteg Town Hall Library. The authority will continue to build on the home library service which should have a positive impact on isolated individuals and families”.*
- 4.4 Where concerns have been raised they have been in relation to reductions relating to investment into book stock and materials per head of population although library usage is becoming more diverse including on-line resources, digital engagement and mobile provision and this has been highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic. MALD have recognised that Bridgend is one of 18 local authorities not meeting acquisition targets but that budgets are carefully planned and targeted to deliver on agreed strategic outcomes. *”There were no reported unstaffed opening hours, unplanned service closures, or missed library stops. The service reports that the home delivery service has been expanded and has resulted in additional capacity due to removing the mobile van and improving the house service to include carers and other vulnerable people”.*
- 4.5 The MALD report explains that the library service in Bridgend now meets all of the 12 core citizen entitlements in full. *”All service points provide a full range of support for well-being and social inclusion”.* During 2017-18 the public accountability measures for libraries in Wales changed from estimated library visits to levels of achievement in relation to quality indicators with quantifiable targets.
- 4.6 The evaluation by MALD identifies that of the 9 quality indicators which have targets Bridgend has achieved 6 quality indicators in full, 1 in part and failed to achieve 2 of the indicators.
- 4.7 The quality indicators not met relate to acquisitions or materials spend per capita (QI9) and also the amount of material budget or spend on Welsh language resources per capita (QI10) although the amounts invested are noted as having grown. *”There has been an increase in the expenditure on Welsh Language materials ...there is a pleasing increase in Welsh book loans”* Further details can be seen in section 2.2 of **Appendix 1**.
- 4.8 Although the reports provided by MALD have recognised the careful planning of resources by Awen, the availability of resources in future years could have a more negative impact if the overall position on making best use of resources is not fully considered. The partnership with Awen has delivered significant financial efficiencies since commencing in 2015 and in recent years.
- 4.9 The report identifies a series of positives, including an increase in library membership per 1000 residents, and a notable 25% increase in library book issues since 2018 for children and adults. *”A children’s survey, undertaken in March 2020 clearly*

demonstrates the positive impact of the library service on the lives of children in the area. Bridgend have invested heavily in their IT facilities and continue to perform well in this area". The service is also one of only 4 in Wales to meet standards relating to levels of qualified staff. "Library staff have supported a number of different generations within the same family in obtaining information for their hobbies and pursuits. The important role that libraries play in the lives of their communities is emphasised and through this, the role of librarians as navigators through the world of information". The investment into ICT is noted as helping to meet community needs whilst the removal of library fines is helping to further reduce barriers to engagement. "Their innovative approach is praised, along with the high scores for customer satisfaction". Awen are identified as the lead regional partner for the 'Books 4 U' scheme with excellent evidence of impact demonstrated.

- 4.10 The aggregate annual opening hours of Bridgend libraries remain the highest in Wales and similarly for mobile stops which is positive. It is important that the means for accessing library services is kept under review given the diverse ways people want to access services including digital. The services rank first for customer satisfaction including choice of books, customer care and IT facilities but within a context where Bridgend is 17th for total expenditure, 14th for virtual visits, but 4th for active borrowers. There is an opportunity as we emerge from the pandemic to review the best use of resources to provide a modern library service. *"Bridgend has continued to see an increase in the number of active borrowers, alongside an increase in library membership. The positive impact of a variety of partnerships and the pro-active use of social media to engage new members has resulted in an increased level of children's book issues which are now above the median level."*
- 4.11 It has previously been reported to Cabinet; in January 2018, that to meet the outcomes required by the Council, whilst reducing the Council management fee, the Awen Cultural Trust may need to review the methods of delivering the library service in a way that might not meet the short term requirements of the standards but will improve impact and support what customers want. This approach, established in 2016/17 and approved by Cabinet, continues to provide a strategic focus for the development of the library service and to encourage an innovative response.

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

- 5.1 There is no effect upon policy framework and procedure rules.

6. Equality Act 2010 implications

- 6.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales, the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

- 7.1 The implementation of the duties and responsibilities under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWBA) supports the promotion of two of the seven goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 within the County

Borough of Bridgend. By promoting an environment that maximises people's physical and mental wellbeing and by supporting children, young people, adults and their carers and families, to fulfil their potential no matter what their circumstances, the wellbeing goals of a 'healthier and more equal Bridgend' and Wales are supported.

- 7.2 The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides the basis for driving a different kind of public service in Wales, with five ways of working to guide how the Authority should work to deliver wellbeing outcomes for people.
- 7.3 The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales has identified the importance of ensuring continued free access to libraries and museums to support local communities to access the variety of cultural opportunities and activities on offer to them in these spaces. Awen have introduced the removal of library fines to support the building of better relationships with service users.
- 7.4 In the 'Art of the Possible' (2019) the Commissioner's Office identifies that libraries are now acting as community hubs, hosting choirs, family activities, compare classes and social events. They identify the opportunities that exist to implement simple changes such as encouraging staff to make use of their free library card and providing accessible information on what libraries offer.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 There have been additional savings of £150,000 applicable to the management fee payable to Awen since 2019 which may impact on availability of services and accessibility for the public to library and related services.
- 8.2 The impact of the pandemic on future library operations and implications for service costs is yet to be fully known and it is important that the learning from the pandemic is captured to inform future planning and delivery.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 Cabinet is recommended to:
- Consider and note the content of the report and **Appendix 1** recognising a positive year of progress against the Welsh Public Library Standards;
 - Note that a further report will be submitted to Cabinet on making best use of resources to support library operations linked to Covid-19 recovery planning, including future venue availability and alternative approaches to delivering services.

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June 2021

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Background documents:

None