

Meeting of:	CABINET
Date of Meeting:	12 MARCH 2024
Report Title:	WELSH PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	CORPORATE DIRECTOR, SOCIAL SERVICES & WELLBEING
Responsible Officer:	ANDREW THOMAS GROUP MANAGER – PREVENTION AND WELLBEING
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	THERE IS NO EFFECT UPON THE POLICY FRAMEWORK OR PROCEDURE RULES
Executive Summary:	<p>The report summarises the performance of library services across Bridgend County Borough as assessed by Welsh Government for the periods 2021-22 and also 2022-23. The reports highlight the way that Welsh Government have applied the standards to local authorities as they have come out of the pandemic. The standards include a range of core entitlements and also quality standards with benchmarked information provided in many instances to compare and contrast performance to that of other local authorities. Within Bridgend, although the library services are operated by Awen, this is on behalf of the Council who hold the statutory duty for supporting a comprehensive and efficient library service. The assessment highlights good areas of performance that are being achieved and also those areas of the standards where they have either not been met in full or met at all. The report is relevant when considering any changes that the Council will be looking to introduce in regard to the provision of library services.</p>

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 periods 2021-22 and 2022-23.
- 1.2 The Council has a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service to meet the needs of all residents in the County Borough.

2. Background

- 2.1 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'.
- 2.2 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 have 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'.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 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. There has been anticipated revision of the WPLS standards, but this has been disrupted via the pandemic to date. 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 performance with others in Wales and share best practice in order to bring about improvements'.
- 2.5 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 to the Museums, Archives and Libraries Division (MALD) of the Welsh Government (more recently renamed the Culture Division of 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.
- 2.6 On 1st October 2015, BCBC transferred the operational management of a range of cultural services including the library services 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 relating to performance in relation to the standards to satisfy itself that the service is meeting the desired outcomes. It should be noted that two library facilities are operated by Halo Leisure at Ogmere and Garw Valleys and with Bridgend Library co-located within Bridgend Life Centre.

- 2.7 It has previously been reported to Cabinet in January 2018, that to meet the outcomes required by 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 always meet the short-term requirements of the standards but will improve local impact and deliver on customer needs. 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.

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 **Appendix 1** is the 2021-22 summary report received from Welsh Government although during this period libraries across Wales were rebuilding usage following the pandemic. BCBC did not receive this report until 2023.
- 3.2 Due to the pandemic the Minister had not sought reporting against the full framework of library standards but rather in regard to the core entitlement indicators of service where Bridgend fully met all 12 entitlements.
- 3.3 Across the County Borough there are 11 libraries as well as a home delivery service and with 99% of residents identified as living within 2.5 miles of a library service which forms a part of the evaluation criteria.
- 3.4 For the 2021-22 reporting period, the service was in the bottom quartile for expenditure on Welsh language resources but in the median rank for issues per 1,000 Welsh speakers and with significant increases in Welsh issues demonstrated. This example highlights how the role of trained library staff can support more prudent investment into resources to meet identifiable community need.
- 3.5 During this period, the service saw a 23% increase in active borrowers with growth evidenced across both children's and adult's issues.
- 3.6 The assessors identified that in 2021-22, Bridgend were in the top quartile for investment into children's resources but were in the second quartile overall regarding material spend. They also noted positive investment into accessible resources for people with visual impairment. It should be noted that when planning services, the focus of investment into resources can vary annually, and usage of resources is a related indicator.
- 3.7 Good practice examples were recognised including covid safe home delivery to the vulnerable, supporting customers with digital literacy and development of new reading groups to rebuild community confidence.
- 3.8 It should be noted that Awen maintained library service operations in line with restrictions throughout the pandemic and offered innovative and flexible responses where safe to do so.
- 3.9 **Appendix 2** is the 2022-23 report from Welsh Government in response to the library self-assessment return regarding Welsh Public Library Standards.

- 3.10 The overall assessment highlights the positive support that libraries are providing local communities across Bridgend: -
- ‘Bridgend continues to display a strong emphasis on library programmes, alongside staff development and continued partnership working with the local community, to ensure the service remains resilient and continues to meet the needs of the community’.
- 3.11 In particular, the assessors recognised the commitment to engage with service users and impact on customer experience: ‘Bridgend’s commitment to community engagement and consultation is a significant strength and customers report high levels of satisfaction with the service’.
- 3.12 In regard to the core entitlements of the WPLS Bridgend once again met all 12 requirements.
- 3.13 In addition to the core entitlements there are 16 quality indicators of which 10 have constituent targets. Of the ten, the assessors identified that Bridgend is achieving 5 in full and 2 in part.
- 3.14 Where the quality indicators have not been met in full, there are appropriate explanations:
- Awen have successfully secured investment to improve library facilities within the year and the related development works will have caused delays at times regarding inter-library loans and response times.
 - Whilst Awen achieved the requirements in regard to qualified staff per capita and service management they did not have sufficient library staffing overall based on WPLS requirements but still delivered positive outcomes for service users.
 - The mapping of library service points and population within 2.5 miles of a library has been identified by Welsh Government as a national issue to resolve for most local authorities.
- 3.15 The two indicators not met are linked to the level of expenditure per capita on resources and more specifically Welsh language resources also. There have been historical reductions in expenditure in this respect and agreed with Cabinet.
- 3.16 The report however states that Bridgend has a strong Welsh language offer in library settings when looking beyond pure expenditure metrics.
- 3.17 Bridgend is also recognised as a top quartile authority in regard to issues of children’s book stock.
- 3.18 Within the customer satisfaction survey conducted, 100% of adult survey respondents rated the standard of customer care and the library overall as good or very good.
- 3.19 The 2022-23 report includes an impact statement on the ‘Books on Wheels’ home delivery service that supports the most vulnerable including carers and those with

greater accessibility needs. This has been a more efficient use of resource than the former mobile library service which was removed in 2019.

3.20 The following table highlights Bridgend’s performance in regard to a range of quality indicators within the WPLS.

QI 2	Very Good/ Good choice of books	99%	1 st
	Very Good/ Good customer care	100%	1 st
	Very Good/ Good IT facilities	99%	1 st
	Very Good/ Good Overall	100%	1 st

QI 8	Active borrowers per capita	106	12 th
	Overall visits per capita	1645	17 th
	Virtual visits per capita	468	14 th

QI 1	Total expenditure per capita	9828	14 th
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QI 15	Net cost per visit	2.88	11 th
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3.21 The report identifies that Bridgend is above the median for the percentage of adults who state that the library has made a difference to their lives.

3.22 Bridgend libraries supported 1,000 adult events and 1,600 children’s events including new social activities and links to the cost-of-living crisis.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

4.1 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.

5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives.

5.1 The provision of library services contributes to the wellbeing of local people and communities in the following ways: -

Involvement The engagement of residents and reviewing their perspectives to improve library services has been recognised as a strength of the Bridgend Library Service.

Long-Term Bridgend has been progressing its longer-term approach to providing library services since the last full review conducted in 2010 and has achieved many of the related objectives. There is an opportunity to develop a new long-term strategy for libraries across Bridgend.

Prevention	Beyond the provision of resources, information and access to ICT for the more vulnerable, libraries provide Council information Points and support the public to engage within their communities.
Integration	Library services connect with other public sector bodies including health, education and social care and the broader third sector.
Collaboration	The library services are part of the broader cultural trust partnership that delivers services on behalf of BCBC and builds broader collaborative work with other stakeholders and investors into Bridgend based opportunities.

5.2 In regard to the Council's wellbeing objectives the library services contribute to the following objectives: -

- A County Borough where we protect our most vulnerable.
- A County Borough with thriving valleys communities.
- A County Borough where we help people meet their potential.
- A County Borough where people feel heard, valued and part of their community.
- A County Borough where we support people to live healthy and happy lives.

5.3 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.

6. Climate Change Implications

6.1 There is no impact or link to Bridgend County Borough Council's climate change aspirations as a result of this report.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1 The partnership agreement between the Council and Awen ensures that appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure the safety and wellbeing of service users and staff.

7.2 The library service ensures that our more vulnerable residents and those requiring connection to information and assistance can be supported by acting as Council Information Points.

7.3 Awen as the Council's delivery partner of library services are actively engaged in the corporate parenting strategy and steering group.

8. Financial Implications

- 8.1 The Council's contribution to the costs of operating library services in Bridgend is integrated into the management fee payable to Awen.
- 8.2 The Council has applied a number of Medium Term Financial Strategy saving requirements from the management fee since 2015 and this will already have seen a reduction in expenditure on resources and availability of services including the closure of the Ty'r Ardd reference library, replacement of the mobile library service with a home delivery service for the more vulnerable and reductions in opening hours at Pyle, Sarn and Y Llynfi.
- 8.3 As the library authority it will be for BCBC to determine any changes in requirements going forward that may be driven by a challenging financial position and to consider the impact on its ability to meet the Welsh Public Library Standards.
- 8.4 Welsh Government have stated in their covering letter for the 2022-23 report: *"Whilst I acknowledge that authorities are having to make difficult decisions, I would request that any budget cuts to library services are not disproportionate. It is a statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' public library service and in Wales that is determined by the WPLS framework"*.
- 8.5 The need to reduce expenditure on library services including the availability of library spaces and related resources has been included in the Council's budget reduction plans and also formed a part of the Council's budget consultation. The Council is working with Awen on the implications to library services relating to reductions in management fee that may apply. These reductions will be a part of the overall management fee that the Council provides to Awen.

9. Recommendation

- 9.1 Cabinet is recommended to: -
 - Consider and note the content of the report and Appendices 1 and 2 recognising the positive work that Bridgend's library services have delivered to date in regard to the Welsh Public Library Standards.

Background documents

None