

Meeting of:	CABINET
Date of Meeting:	14 MAY 2024
Report Title:	PROPOSED CHANGES IN COUNCIL REQUIREMENTS REGARDING CULTURAL SERVICES
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	CORPORATE DIRECTOR, SOCIAL SERVICES & WELLBEING
Responsible Officer:	ANDREW THOMAS GROUP MANAGER- PREVENTION AND WELLBEING
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	THERE ARE NO CHANGES TO POLICY FRAMEWORK AND PROCEDURE RULES
Executive Summary:	<p>The report provides information on proposed changes in Council requirements to services that are delivered by Awen on the Councils behalf. This report aligns to the required processes within the partnership agreement whereby, having considered a range of options, the Council submits a notice of change to Awen to identify any implications including cost or financial efficiencies that can be delivered from those changes if implemented. The proposed changes that Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) has put forward include the availability and related investment into library services. This can include opening hours of premises but also investment into resources used to run the service. At a National level the Welsh Public Library Standards are used to review service performance by Welsh Government. The proposals have also considered whether the Books on Wheels service that supports home delivery of resources to more vulnerable residents can be sustained when the Council is faced with current financial challenges. The report identifies other areas of potential savings that include the relocation of supported training for adults known to social care to a single site at Bryngarw Park and also the disinvestment into Bridgend Youth Theatre. Due to the libraries having a statutory function the report requires Cabinet approval to commence consultation on initial reductions to services and also the development of the next library plan recognising that a range of developments and changes have taken place since 2010. There will be a need to report back to Cabinet on any outcomes and to seek approval to implement any subsequent proposals.</p>

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The report identifies the proposed reductions in Council investment into a range of cultural services which is delivered through the partnership with Awen Cultural Trust (Awen) and the related reductions in services that will need to be considered in order to achieve the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) budget reduction proposals approved by Council when the budget was approved on the 28th February 2024.
- 1.2 The report seeks Cabinet approval to progress the immediate legal notices to enact contract changes with Awen and to progress the required public consultation and engagement in relation to these identified immediate proposals as well as longer term changes to library service provision.

2. Background

- 2.1 Awen is an independent organisation and registered charity. The partnership between the Council and Awen was established in 2015 along with a legally binding partnership agreement and related conditions on how the partnership should operate. This includes detail on how any changes in requirements would need to be progressed.
- 2.2 The partnership has worked very successfully to date. Services have improved and the financial savings associated with the partnership of over £775,000 have all been implemented and achieved. Since 2015, Awen has established itself as a leading cultural charity and has played a lead role in working with the Council to deliver capital improvements and also to broaden the range of services to reach more people. The Council's approach has been highlighted as best practice and the jointly developed model has been commended by the recent Senedd Committee review of public leisure and library services. Successes include:
 - the delivery of library services that have performed well as evidenced in the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) reviews by Welsh Government achieving the highest customer satisfaction rating in Wales.
 - Awen have progressively gained a number of Welsh Government capital investments to improve local library facilities.
 - redevelopment at Bryngarw Park as part of the Valleys Regional Park with improved facilities and visitor experience
 - a major capital investment programme at Maesteg Town Hall.
 - the proposed redevelopment of the Grand Pavilion is another significant capital project that has secured external investment of £18 million from the Levelling Up Fund .

All of the above and other initiatives have benefited from Awen's ability to attract external funds and re-investing its own resources generated through their business model. Since 2015, Awen has successfully attracted over £1.8m in external funding

and designated a further £400,000 of its own resources to supporting feasibility, design, delivery and the match funding of several projects.

- 2.3 The financial challenges that the Council is now facing has meant that there has been a need for all service areas to identify areas where financial efficiencies can be made, and this has also included cultural services. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2024-25 to 2027-28 approved by Council on 28th February 2024 identifies a further saving in 2024-25 of £360,000 to be made from the Council's contribution to cultural service costs via its management fee. The need to consider reduced support for cultural services including libraries was included in the Council's budget consultation for 2024-25 and 850 respondents were supportive of reductions in this area. The detail of what this might look like locally and in a performance context requires further consideration as it is for the Council to determine where service reductions, if necessary, would be focused.
- 2.4 Within the partnership agreement it is for the Council to inform Awen where it wishes to seek changes or reductions in its service requirements. A change notice is issued to request further information on any implications that can be identified. This process also sets out to identify any costs that cannot be mitigated that may fall to the Council should such change be implemented – these include but are not limited to income loss, redundancy costs etc. Within the partnership agreement Awen are required to make reasonable endeavours to accommodate any changes requested by the Council within the existing operational budgets and to provide evidence that the trust has used reasonable endeavours to minimise any increase in costs and maximise any reduction in costs. The Council issued a change notice to Awen on the 9th February 2024 outlining a range of service reductions and based on responses received from Awen have been considering the implications. There has been ongoing dialogue in accordance with the partnership agreement and in recognition that Awen will have financial pressures of their own beyond the management fee that the Council provides to operate the services within the partnership agreement.
- 2.5 The partnership agreement is specific in regard to responsibilities for library services and recognises that the Council retains a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service with a core library offer that is free at the point of use and open to all. The partnership agreement identifies that the Council also retains statutory duties under the Equality Act 2010 to fully consult with the local community in relation to any potential changes to access to library services, with particular regards to location, opening hours and access for people with disabilities.
- 2.6 In relation to the above, the Council acknowledges that it is fully responsible for determining what is a “comprehensive and efficient” library service and for undertaking any consultation requirement arising from any proposed changes in library service. The Welsh Public Library Standards provide a framework of core entitlements and quality indicators to assist such a review. It is for the Council to ensure that this position is clear in relation to all consultation documents and also for the Council to resource any related consultation or engagement requirements. The Welsh Government use the Welsh Public Library Standards as a framework to measure whether local authorities are fulfilling their obligations against the act.

“The framework also enables me [the Minister] to assess provision and performance of Welsh public library services as part of my statutory duty under the Public Libraries

and Museums Act 1964” Connected and Ambitious Libraries: The sixth quality framework of Welsh Public Library Standards 2017-2020.

- 2.7 Based on the scale of reduction in financial support being proposed there will be implications for future library services and facilities and as such there will be a need for the Council to progress related public consultation on proposed changes.
- 2.8 The last significant library service review was reported to Cabinet on 5th October 2010 although the establishment of the partnership with Awen in 2015 saw a review of the library service specification in terms of service delivery requirements at related facilities. The service has not stood still however and has continued to evolve over the last decade to meet changing local landscapes and customer needs.
- 2.9 The 2010 review had proposed that the physical infrastructure of Bridgend libraries was unfit for purpose and a core statutory model based on 8 static libraries needed to be developed. This would see one library at Bridgend, Porthcawl, Pencoed, Pyle, Ogmere Valley, Garw Valley, Llynfi Valley and Valleys Gateway. The need for improvements in size of some facilities and quality of provision was identified as needed. The categorisation of libraries at the time were primarily based on size as follows – Category 1 (over 1000 sq. m), Category 2 (750-1000 sq. m), Category 3 (500-750 sq. m), Category 4 (250-500 sq. m), Category 5 (100-250 sq. m) and Category 6 (under 100 sq. m). It is generally accepted that the floor space ambitions set out in 2010 are not required to the same scale now as other features will be important in a library setting but the categorisation of libraries may still be useful in any future plan developments.
- 2.10 Since 2010 there have been a number of notable improvements to infrastructure including the relocation of the Bridgend Town Library to enhanced facilities at Bridgend Life Centre, the redevelopment of the new Maesteg library within the renovated Maesteg Town Hall, improvement works at Pencoed, Porthcawl and Pyle libraries supported by Welsh Government, Council and Awen investment, and the relocation of the Pontycymer library to the Garw Valley Leisure Centre. The Ogmere Valley library facility is similarly co-located in the Ogmere Valley Life Centre although the service model differs to the core static libraries.
- 2.11 The Valleys Gateway area was identified as requiring one Category 4 library space and currently has Aberkenfig library (Cat 4) and Sarn library (Cat 6). There is also the Betws library space which is a part time service close by (Cat 6).
- 2.12 The 2010 review identified the potential for extra statutory services to be developed in partnership with local organisations who would be required to provide funding support based on developing related services to meet community needs. This was intended to be promoted to community councils and third sector organisations. To date there has only been St Brides Minor community council that have supported such an arrangement, but this has supported a valued service in a smaller community setting and as part of a broader community hub approach.
- 2.13 Following on from the 2010 review there were library closures at Nantymoel, Blaengarw and Caerau. The mobile library service was curtailed in 2019 following a Cabinet report identifying the high cost of a replacement, purpose-built vehicle. This was replaced by the Books on Wheels service providing home delivery for the more vulnerable. In more recent times, and linked to external funding support, a range of

pop-up library opportunities and related events have also been developing and supporting smaller communities using UK Government Shared Prosperity funding which is short term.

- 2.14 The 2010 review recommended ongoing reinvestment in book stock, ICT provision and also customer service related improvements. The 2022-23 Welsh Government review of library services in Bridgend ranked customer service relating to choice of books, customer care and ICT facilities as first in Wales but with total expenditure per capita on library services ranking 14th. We can conclude that the service delivered by Awen is funded as a mid-quartile service but achieving good outcomes and providing good value.
- 2.15 The 2010 review identified the potential to develop digital approaches to library services that could increase their reach and to also be available for 24 hours a day. The need and demand for digital access saw escalation during the pandemic and Awen have continued to invest in digital resources whilst highlighting that the demand for hard copy resources remains. Digital issues of resources have continued to increase but also come at a cost in order to meet demand.
- 2.16 It should be noted that the Council has for some time utilised its library services to act as Council Information Points and these venues are where many people go to for support in terms of digital access to information and to be connected. In recent times the role of libraries as social spaces that help combat isolation and to serve as warm hubs has been more visible also in regard to the more vulnerable. There are regular programmes supporting children, young people and families including after school support and digital access. The increased role of libraries as information and advice points should be considered as part of the decision-making process. Many services (e.g., blue badge applications, housing benefit forms) are now supported by libraries where front facing Council contact centre roles have reduced or moved to digital channels.
- 2.17 Whilst the Council is now needing to review the level of investment it can sustain in regard to libraries and cultural services it should be noted that the progress that has been made over the past 14 years is evident and the service is not one in decline. Any proposed changes start from a positive position.

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 The value of cultural and library services to local communities is recognised and understood but the financial position that the Council is facing means that financial efficiencies are sought across all areas of service. The Council was proactive in its approach to develop a partnership approach to delivering cultural services and this has already successfully delivered previous savings to the Council and also ensured that much of the risk in operating those services sits outside the Council.
- 3.2 When the Council is looking to reduce its subsidy through the management fee, it is recognised that library services will always require a high level of support due to them being free at the point of service and non-income generating. **Table 1** indicates the library service opening hours currently being operated and service usage.

TABLE 1 – Library Opening Hours and Footfall for 2022-23 and 2023-24

	Weekly Hours	2022-23	2023-24
Bridgend	57	106,172	127,492
Maesteg	41	32,852	37,096
Pencoed	41	19,088	26,620
Porthcawl	41	52,966	52,608
Pyle	51	50,965	64,349
Aberkenfig	38	30,956	24,490
Sarn	30*	5,925	6,125
Betws	17	3,050	2,825
Total	275	301,974	341,605

*Note -Aberkenfig library was closed for an 8-week period for premises works in 2023-24.

*14 hours funded by St. Brides Minor Community Council.

- 3.3 **Table 2** provides some of the headline performance figures for the past two financial years whilst recognising that our library services deliver more support than the presented indicators below.

TABLE 2 – Headline Performance Indicators*		
	2022-23	2023-24
Adult Issues	209,265	207,317
Junior Issues	160,671	154,372
Ebook/Audiobook	51,395	62,200
Adult events attendances	17,551	25,052
Child events attendances	39,401	47,619

* Aberkenfig library was closed for an 8-week period for premises works in 2023-24 resulting in lower issues for the period

- 3.4 There is a 2024-25 MTFS budget reduction proposal relating to the cultural services being delivered on the Councils behalf but also a recognition that there is a need to develop the next longer term plan for library services as the last review was in 2010 and the related consultation and engagement processes will require time to be conducted properly. Based on recent commitments the Council has made regarding capital investments into cultural assets at Maesteg and Porthcawl, a longer term library plan may contribute to a broader cultural strategy that includes other facilities and services in due course. Welsh Government are consulting on a cultural strategy for Wales which would include library and other cultural services.
- 3.5 The opening hours of libraries has been one area that the Council has been considering but based on the premise of trying to keep every library facility open to some extent. This can be more challenging to realise savings but does allow for potential to increase hours where budgets permit should the economic position improve in subsequent years.

- 3.6 The Council has commissioned the initial support needed to commence a review of what the longer-term strategy to deliver a “comprehensive and efficient” library service may look like and this will be followed by a more in-depth review following initial scoping works. This may take time, but the Council will still need to find savings in 2024-25 and an initial reduction in library opening hours will be required across the library estate whilst the longer term position is determined.
- 3.7 Following initial discussions with Awen, one proposal for the shorter term would be to initially reduce total library opening hours by circa 60 hours per week across the library estate whilst recognising the next phase of the review may see more significant changes needed in terms of opening hours or possibly the number of library facilities that the Council can support. The initial reduction in hours alone will not be sufficient to deliver the levels of savings being requested for 2024-25.
- 3.8 The detail as to the specific number of hours of reduction that would apply to each venue would need to be formalised but the indicative reductions are shown in **Table 3**. The proposal also responds to recent User Survey responses which indicates a preference to include lunchtime opening where historically these would be closed across some libraries. These changes would need to be consulted on in regard to the specific locations in addition to the overall availability of access to a library service across Bridgend. The heritage service at Y Llynfi would also reduce by 3 hours. The initial reduction in hours of libraries would create £60-70k of savings in a full year.

TABLE 3	Current Hours	Proposed Hours
Bridgend	57	41.5
Maesteg	41	36.5
Pencoed	41	34
Porthcawl	41	36.5
Pyle	51	34
Aberkenfig	38	34
Sarn	16	16
Betws	17	17

* Note-the Ogmore and Garw libraries are integrated in leisure centre operations. At Sarn, the Councils funding only supports a part time service of 16 hours with 14 additional hours funded by St Brides Minor community council.

- 3.9 The Council would be responsible for leading any agreed consultation process and any subsequent decision making for both the above shorter term proposed changes and anything more fundamental to follow.
- 3.10 The book renewal fund is a part of the partnership agreement and this amounted to £172,000 in 2023-24. The Council is proposing to reduce the contribution by £50,000 in 2024-25 although this position would not be sustainable within any longer-term plan. Awen indicate that to actually meet the WPLS book expenditure targets the fund would need to increase to nearer £320,000 which gives context to the short-term nature of the cut. The budget in Bridgend has been more focused on mid-quartile performance to date but rankings could drop further in year. Awen have highlighted that book prices have increased by 24% over a 7-year period and that investing in digital resources is also more costly due to licensing and renewals. This is a short-term saving that Council may need to make in the absence of other options whilst recognising the need for a more sustainable approach. As with all of these changes,

the partnership agreement with Awen would need to be adjusted to reflect a lower performance ambition against the WPLS Framework.

- 3.11 The Council has also been considering whether it can now afford to sustain the Books on Wheels service. This replaced the mobile library service that operated throughout the Borough. This service currently provides home delivery to 345 households over a 5-week rolling period with an average of 100 people per week supported. The majority of visits are single occupant although the service also supports some care and nursing home residents. Service users are generally referred based on being housebound or having limited mobility. The service also produces targeted resources for customers including audio resources for those with sensory impairment.
- 3.12 The complete removal of this service would potentially create a saving of £66,000 but with the majority of the saving relating to staffing costs. Based on the nature of the service and the characteristics of service users the need for public consultation will apply and potentially the need to mitigate any detriment that is identified within a full equalities impact assessment. The availability of this service was used to mitigate the removal of the mobile library service when it was curtailed.
- 3.13 There may be the potential to introduce a charge for this service by the Council which may help to reduce costs or to identify more community led opportunities to support people at home.
- 3.14 There are further areas of savings being discussed with Awen including a joint approach to the remodelling of the successful B-Leaf and Wood-B trainee support service linked to adult social care. This would potentially require capital improvements and relocating all services on a single site. The Council has been supporting feasibility works on the capital aspects. It is likely that external investment would be required to support any capital works that would be required for any larger capital scheme.
- 3.15 Within the change notice to Awen was a consideration to remove the subsidy value within the management fee supporting the Bridgend Youth Theatre (BYT) programme. Over 100 young people currently benefit from BYT, and it has a long history of supporting young people to participate in the performing arts, learning transferable skills with many often going on to successful careers in the media and creative industries. BYT forms part of Awen's wider strategy to engage young people in creative industries opportunities. The Creative Industries are one of Wales', and Bridgend's, fastest growing sectors and Awen featured BYT and its skills programme as part of the recent Council led Creative Expo event that focused on employment opportunities in the creative arts and cultural sector..
- 3.16 This proposal will produce a saving of £15,000. Should the Council disinvest, then Awen would need to attract corporate or private sponsorship or increase income via fees and charges or other means to sustain the current level of activity and ensure access to all is sustained. In the event this is not deemed to be achievable there is a risk the BYT programme would need to be re-structured, reduced or curtailed. The Council would no longer be supporting or involved in Bridgend Youth Theatre. The Council is faced with difficult decisions as to which services it can afford to support via public subsidy and this may be one area that needs to become self-sustaining.

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. Initial screening shows that a full equality impact assessment will be needed for the proposals set out in this report should they proceed following consultation.

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

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

Involvement - The engagement of residents and utilising their contributions to help shape services as well as developing the cultural third sector and related participation is a positive feature of the local partnership. This has been recognised in the WPLS reports.

Long Term - Bridgend has been progressing its long-term approach to providing library and cultural services since the establishment of the partnership agreement in 2015. In line with Welsh Government plans there is an opportunity to develop a longer-term cultural strategy for Bridgend.

Prevention - The broad range of cultural venues are connecting people to their communities, supporting information advice and assistance and developing social prescribing opportunities in partnership with communities and stakeholders.

Integration - Through the partnership agreement and service development planning there are connections to health, social care, education and broader third sector and community development.

Collaboration - The partnership supports joint planning and development to achieve population level outcomes. Awen have proven successful in relations with external bodies such as Arts Council, Health Board, Heritage Fund and more.

- 5.2 In regard to the Councils wellbeing objectives the cultural range of services and venues 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.

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 services that Awen provide ensure 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 When the partnership with Awen was established in 2015 it delivered early efficiencies of £625,000. The management fee payment was also not index linked for the first three years creating an even greater real terms saving beyond the original £625,000. The savings have been managed to date with little service reduction but a considerable transfer of risk. The current MTFS requirement for 2024-25 is £360,000 and the Council needs to determine the specific areas of reductions in its requirements.
- 8.2 Beyond the £625,000 identified above a further efficiency was agreed with Awen of £150,000 in 2018-19 and related to a community centre hand back, curtailment of the mobile library service, closure of the Ty Ardd reference library and some minor alterations to library hours.
- 8.3 In regard to library hours the Council will need to determine what it can achieve in the short term whilst developing a new plan for a "comprehensive and efficient" library service. The Council's aspiration is to retain all venues to be available in some capacity, but this will restrict the overall savings that can be made due to other fixed costs involved in running buildings. In the budget consultation exercise undertaken as part of the MTFS 2024-25 to 2027-28, the public were in principle supportive of needing to reduce the level of expenditure on library related services. The reduction in hours being proposed in this report would save £60-70,000 in a full year.
- 8.4 In regard to book renewal fund, the Council can request a reduction of £50,000 in expenditure in 2024/25 based on the need to deliver efficiencies in the short term but this is unlikely to be sustainable in the medium term and will need review.
- 8.5 The removal of the books on wheels service would save approximately £65,000 in regard to staffing and vehicle costs but will require consultation with service users and identification of any mitigation that could be considered.

- 8.6 The removal of subsidy in regard to Bridgend Youth Theatre programmes would produce a saving of approximately £15,000 but it may not continue in its current form and potentially need other investments to sustain it and its regional identity.
- 8.7 There are other areas of service that have been reviewed within this report that may be able to be delivered in future financial years, but not in 2024-25, that could contribute to the broader MTFS targets although a more fundamental review of the partnership and the Councils affordability and priorities will be needed in the coming months. An initial exercise has been commissioned to support this process and shaping of the medium to longer term plans and finance position. Awen have committed to evaluating the commercial business cases across its portfolio and how a restructuring of the partnership could enable greater revenue growth linked to longer term management fee stability.
- 8.8 The Council needs to consider the commitments that have been undertaken to invest in Maesteg Town Hall and subsequently the Grand Pavilion and implications regarding the expectations of funders as to how those buildings will operate and levels of subsidy needed to ensure access.. The funding within the current management fee and proposed further reductions may prove challenging.
- 8.9 Once the Council's position is confirmed the change notice will request details of any costs that Awen will incur in delivering the proposals that will need to be evidenced and all efforts made to minimise such costs.
- 8.10 Due to the consultation timeframe, the full £360,000 budget reduction proposal is unlikely to be delivered in full in 2024-25. The Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate will have to identify one-off efficiencies in 2024-25 to mitigate any shortfall in the first instance.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:
- approve the consultation exercises that will be required to take forward changes to the library services as required by the Medium-Term financial strategy and note that a further report will be presented to Cabinet to enable the outcome of the exercises be taken into account when finalising any proposed changes to library services.

Background documents: None