

Committee: **Education and Learning Scrutiny**  
 Date of meeting: **Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2022**  
 Report Subject: **Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) Annual Return 2020/21**  
 Portfolio Holder: **Cllr. Joanne Collins, Executive Member for Education**  
 Report Submitted by: **Lynn Phillips, Corporate Director of Education**  
**Joanne Sims, Service Manager – Young People and Partnerships**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
✓	24/03/22	02.03.22			15/03/22			

**1. Purpose of the Report**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to consider the report submitted to the Museums, Archives and Libraries Division (MALD) of Welsh Government with respect to the fourth year of the Sixth Assessment Framework for the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) return 2020/21. Previous years' reports have focussed on Welsh Government's feedback to Blaenau Gwent. However, a pan Wales only report is being published this year, and therefore, no Blaenau Gwent specific feedback will be provided. Consequently, this report will focus on the Blaenau Gwent Libraries local update.

**2.0 Scope and Background**

2.1 Aneurin Leisure Trust has been commissioned by Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council to deliver the Library Service as part of their general operations since 2014. In April 2020, the client function for the Leisure Trust moved to the Education Directorate. This is the second year that this report has been submitted to the Education and Learning Scrutiny. Public libraries are a statutory service as laid out in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. For over a decade the Welsh Government has implemented successive assessment frameworks which have helped bring a more consistent level of public library provision across Wales.

2.2 Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 it is a statutory duty for every library authority (Local Authorities) in Wales to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof'.

2.3 The Sixth Assessment Framework for Welsh Public Library Standards Annual Return 2019/20 covers the fourth extended year of a three-year cycle of the new quality framework "**Connected and Ambitious Libraries: The sixth quality framework of Welsh Libraries 2017-20**". It has now been confirmed, however, that the framework will be extended again for another year.

2.4 This report has been prepared based on information provided by Blaenau Gwent's annual return, case studies and narrative report submitted to the

Museums, Archives and Libraries Division of Welsh Government in July 2021. This was submitted through the Aneurin Leisure Trust.

2.5 The sixth framework of Welsh public library standards builds on the developments in the fifth framework. It comprises 12 core entitlements and 16 quality indicators to monitor how well library services realise these benefits for the local community and the people of Wales.

2.6 Blaenau Gwent's Library annual return highlights the following performance against the WPLS:

- Blaenau Gwent continues to achieve all 12 core entitlements.
- 10 of the indicators were removed due to the pandemic and there are only 6 remaining. These include: WPLSQI 7 Location of Service Points, WPLSQI 8 Library Use, WPLSQI 9 Up-to-date and appropriate reading material, WPLSQI 10 Welsh Language Resources, WPLSQI 13 Staffing Levels and Qualifications, WPLSQI 14 Operational Expenditure.
- WPLSQ1 8 Library use:  
The number of external visits to the website reduced dramatically, however, the WPLS do not take into account social media channels but in 2020/21 the library service had a reach of 87,874 via Facebook and received 9,577 Facebook post engagements.
- WPLSQ19 Up to date Reading Equipment:  
Total materials expenditure increased to £62,971, against £51,681 for the previous year. This reflects an increased investment in physical stock plus Borrowbox to meet the needs of the pandemic (Ebooks / Eaudio).
- WPLSQ1 13 Staffing Levels and Qualifications:  
Remained stable (still the lowest in Wales). However, a plan is in place to address this moving forward.
- Library services in Blaenau Gwent are delivered by the Aneurin Leisure Trust on behalf of the local authority, and are a key component in both the Local Authority and Trust's service delivery plans.
- The continued partnership work with key organisations remains a strength of the service and enables Blaenau Gwent to support the needs within communities and deliver appropriate activities e.g. the Community Hubs provision.

2.7 Importantly, the return indicates that overall Blaenau Gwent has improved its performance in this fourth year of the sixth framework.

### 3. **Options for Recommendation**

It is recommended that Members scrutinise the content of the report and consider the following options;

3.1 Option 1 – Members are asked to scrutinise the information detailed within the report and accept the report.

3.2 Option 2 – Members do not accept the report and contribute by making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

4.1 The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 sets out the statutory duties of the public library authorities to 'provide a comprehensive and efficient library service' to their communities.

4.2 The Library Service fully supports Blaenau Gwent's Well-being Plan and also acts as an agency for economic wellbeing in our local communities through supporting learning at all stages of life helping with illiteracy, lack of skills and the digital divide. The Library Service also contributes to a range of Welsh Government outcomes such as literacy, skills and learning, digital inclusion, poverty, health and well-being. Library provision spans these outcomes, offering a range of services which often support two or more of the outcomes simultaneously.

4.3 The Library Service is seen as a key partner in tackling the problems of social isolation, inequality, disadvantage, fractured communities and ill health. The library service acts as a single point of contact for local people to access public services and also gain information on local health issues, providing space for local voluntary organisations to provide advice and information on health and other matters.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

There are no current implications associated with the options proposed in section 3 above

5.1 **Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)**

During the review of the Leisure Trust, the Trust committed to increasing the book fund from £27,000 to circa £43,000 in 2018/19 and be reviewed year on year in order to achieve a more appropriate budget going forward. In 2020/21, the Trust spent £62,971, a further increase exceeding the original agreement.

5.1.1 Furthermore, the Trust has invested on a pan Wales level in Borrow box to increase the availability of eBooks given the current pandemic. This includes spend on Welsh Language books to meet that target.

5.2 **Risk including Mitigating Actions**

There are no risks associated with this report. Regular dialogue through newly established strategic governance arrangements ensures that collectively, between the Council and the Trust, the Library Service is supported to meet the standards required.

5.3 **Legal**

There are no legal issues associated with this report

## 5.4 **Human Resources**

There are no direct staffing issues with respect to Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council in relation to this report. However, the report highlights concern about the level of staffing within the library service.

5.4.1 This will be an area of discussion and monitoring through the new governance arrangements between the Council and the Leisure Trust.

## 6.0 **Supporting Evidence**

### 6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

Blaenau Gwent continues to meet all of the 12 core entitlements in full. The return has highlighted that overall Blaenau Gwent has improved its performance in this fourth year of the sixth framework, with an improvement in Welsh Language resources in 2020/21.

6.1.1 Key developments this year include:

- The Library Service abolished fines on overdue books, assisting towards a more equitable society, removing barriers to engagement.
- Worked in Partnership with 'Good Thing Foundation' to provide on-line and face to face support for the 20/21 Census.
- Partnership with 'We are Digital' to provide face-to-face support to enable clients to access the EU Settlement Scheme.
- Over 640 welfare calls to vulnerable clients, when face-to-face was suspended.
- Call and Collect established in each branch, extremely positive feedback, as reflected in the case studies attached. (Staff choose the books and client collects them from just inside the door).
- Community Loan Scheme expanded into local Children's Mental Health Unit 'Reading Well for Children' collection has been established at the unit, expanding the reach of the service and promoting good mental health (Case study).

6.1.2 Community Hubs have been established through the libraries in partnership with the Council. The impact of this will be reported in the following return in more detail, although initial feedback from the public is extremely positive.

### 6.2 **Expected outcome for the public**

To be able to continue to access a fully accessible and professional library service within the local community.

### 6.3 **Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)**

Local people, groups/agencies and volunteers are engaged through regular customer surveys, in line with the Welsh Public Library Standards (WLPS)

- 6.4 **Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)**  
The library standards will help establish a sustainable model for the Library Service going forward.
- 6.5 **Preventative focus**  
Libraries provide support with many key preventative approaches, such as improving literacy levels for children and young people through early intervention within communities
- 6.6 **Collaboration / partnership working**  
Partnership working with a number of agencies/organisations is embedded in the ethos of the Library Service.
- 6.7 **Integration (across service areas)**  
The library service has close links to Education, Adult and Community Learning and also acts as a direct link to other Council Services through providing the use of ICT to the local community also providing access to third sector organisations. The move of the Leisure Trust to the Education Directorate's portfolio will only strengthen further these links.
- 6.8 **EqIA**  
N/A
7. **Monitoring Arrangements**
- 7.1 Performance reports related to the Leisure Trust are monitored through Strategic Leisure Partnership Board, Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee, the Executive and Council.

**Background Documents /Electronic Links**  
N/A