

BLAENAU GWENT

Overview and Location

Blaenau Gwent library services are delivered by the Aneurin Leisure Trust. The service includes 6 branches with 98% of the residents living within 2.5 miles of a branch.

Library service performance

Blaenau Gwent provided evidence that they fully met all 12 of the Core Entitlements.

Core entitlement	Service self-assessment	Independent assessment
1 Libraries in Wales will be free to join and open to all.	Fully met	Fully met
2 Libraries in Wales will ensure friendly, knowledgeable and qualified staff are on hand to help.	Fully met	Fully met
3 Libraries in Wales will provide access to a range of services, activities and high quality resources in a range of formats to support learning, personal well-being and development, community participation, and culture and recreation.	Fully met	Fully met
4 Libraries in Wales will provide appropriate services, facilities and information resources for individuals and groups with special needs.	Fully met	Fully met
5 Libraries will provide appropriate safe, attractive and accessible physical spaces with suitable staffed opening hours.	Fully met	Fully met
6 Libraries in Wales will lend books for free and deliver free access to information, including online information resources available 24 hours a day.	Fully met	Fully met
7 Libraries in Wales will provide free use of the Internet and computers, including Wi-Fi.	Fully met	Fully met
8 Libraries in Wales will provide access to services, cultural activities and high quality resources in the Welsh language.	Fully met	Fully met
9 Libraries in Wales will work in partnership to share catalogues and facilitate access to the resources of all Welsh libraries.	Fully met	Fully met
10 Libraries in Wales will work with a range of partners to promote and deliver services to new and diverse audiences, enabling more people to benefit from their services.	Fully met	Fully met
11 Libraries in Wales will regularly consult users to gather their views on the service and information about their changing needs.	Fully met	Fully met
12 Libraries in Wales will provide access to the library service's strategy, policies, objectives and vision, in print and online, in a range of languages appropriate for the community.	Fully met	Fully met
Total - fully met	12	12
Total - partially met	0	0
Total - not met	0	0

Library use

Over the reporting year, the service had 31 active borrowers per 1,000 population, representing a 7% increase from the previous year. Adults book issues increased by 108% to 662 issues per 1,000 population, while children's book issues increased by 309% to 94 issues per 1,000 population. Click and collect orders saw a reduction but customers still use the service. Blaenau Gwent also offers a home delivery service which includes books as well as specially designed equipment for the visually impaired.

Blaenau Gwent engaged in the process of re-instating services from pre-pandemic, ensuring that there was constant risk assessment approved by the local authority health and safety department. This has meant that the service has been able to return to pre-pandemic delivery.

Materials, Welsh Language and Overall spend

Blaenau Gwent provides a range of different services, from health and wellbeing to life-long learning. Staff are regularly updated on new resources and opportunities at meetings. Although Blaenau Gwent ranks in the bottom quartile for materials spending per 1,000 population, the total materials expenditure increased over the year, 17% of budget being spent on children's materials. This budget for children's books is in the middle of services nationally.

In terms of Welsh language, Blaenau Gwent ranks in the top quartile for spending per 1,000 Welsh speakers. They also rank in the middle for the number of Welsh language issues and saw a ten-fold increase from 250 to 2,643 issues from the previous year.

In terms of outreach, they provide a home delivery service for residents that are unable to access the static libraries.

Staffing

The total number of staff has remained the same since 2021. There is only one professional member of staff and job descriptions have been reviewed to create a new professional post. The new post holder is working towards a MCLIP qualification, and the operational manager already has a MCLIP qualification. The last customer survey in 2019 showed that all customer satisfaction rates were above 90% and 98% of adults thought that the library is good or very good. The next customer survey is planned for 2022/23.

Highlights

The most significant development has been the merger of the council's community hubs into libraries which has greatly increased footfall into all libraries and led to a major expansion of partnership initiatives. For example, the Regeneration Department of Blaenau Gwent Council has promoted local projects, funded digital screens for all libraries and have involved the service in the "Shop Local" promotion.

Other highlights include:

- The library service further developed a scheme to support communities in every library which was originally launched in June 2021. The libraries worked closely with the council to provide face-to-face support to people with council related queries, Blue-badge applications, and cost of living rebate schemes.
- In October 2021, a sports library project was launched in libraries open 30+ hours per week, where users could loan a range of sporting equipment from the library free of charge.

- Since September 2021, a range of activities have been re-introduced including Baby Yoga, Creative Writing Group, Inside Out Group (art for mental health) and many others.
- The service has worked with the Local health Board to provide mental health services in which individuals can collect resource packs, as well as being part of the home delivery service.
- The “Winter of Wellbeing” programme provided a range of free events for families, and the service delivered 29 events attended by 152 parents and 596 young people, allowing for re-engagement with young people in Blaenau Gwent post-pandemic.

Digital data

Blaenau Gwent provided digital data including click and collect statistics. As pandemic restrictions eased Blaenau Gwent saw a reduction in use of their “Call and Collect” services by 58% however they state that people still enjoy the service for a variety of reasons, and they also provide home delivery service. Data on online sessions and individuals participating was not collected for 2022 but the service states that customers were asking for the return of in-person events. Some services remained online such as arts and crafts and “Baby Yoga”. On their website, Blaenau Gwent offers a range of services including e-books through Borrowbox, online study resource and lists of the activities they provide.

Future plans

One of the main future plans of the service is the relocation of Abertillery Library to a new location as the project was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The service will also work to deliver local and national agendas, and community support remains a strong part of the service. With many staff due to retire, the service is planning a large recruitment drive which would see a replacement of half the workforce. It will be working with staff to use this recruitment as an opportunity to develop the service and seek grants from the Skills Priority Funding stream to recruit two new library development officers. Residents have been requesting earlier opening times for the libraries open part-time. They have been unable to do this yet, but are aiming to do so. Health and wellbeing will be embedded in the range of services that the libraries are providing and they remain committed to their ethos of creating positive impacts through physical and mental health.

Case studies

Blaenau Gwent/ Awen Leisure Trust provided four extensive case studies accompanied by many pictures to illustrate the good work the service is doing. Two of the case studies are outlined below.

Case Study 1 - Long Covid Sufferer

Janet joined the library in May 2021. Janet explained to the staff that she was suffering from long Covid and as a result it has affected her ability to read. Janet used to be an avid reader, reading a couple of books a week. Long Covid has left Janet unable to focus on the words, very similar to Dyslexia. Library staff recommended stock to help Janet, starting with adult learner titles and progressing to Quick Reads. Janet has praised the library service for helping her recovery with a range of support.

‘When I first joined the library, I could only read a page or two of a book. Having the right type of book, has built my confidence, and got my brain back into reading. At the start I couldn’t focus or remember the words. Nearly a year on, I am enjoying the Quick Reads, I think I have read most of them now. I am going to move onto light paperback novels soon, that is going to be such big achievement for me’

Library staff also helped Janet set up Borrowbox on her iPad. Janet finds following instructions difficult and has poor memory. Library staff designed a simple user guide to help Janet log onto Borrowbox in simple steps. From time to time, Janet has needed to bring her iPad into the library, for further help in how to access the app. Staff have demonstrated the Dyslexia friendly accessibility features of BorrowBox, including altering the font style, font size, margins and background. Janet has discovered the sepia background has been particularly helpful in making reading easier for her. Janet has also benefitted from listening to many e-audio titles, which have aided her long Covid recovery, as she suffers from insomnia and anxiety, since her diagnosis.

‘Borrowbox has been really helpful. Being able to listen to books, at my own pace has really helped with my brain fog and has helped build my concentration and helps me relax at the same time. I’ve listened to self-help books to help manage stress and anxiety and in the evenings, I listen to historical novels, they help get me off to sleep. I often wake through-out the night, so I start listening again and they help me drift off again, I find them very soothing’

‘I’ve not been able to return to work since having long Covid. My local library has been invaluable to me over the year. From helping me get back into reading, helping my mental health and by just having somewhere I can easily walk to and have a friendly chat, all so helpful to getting me back on the road to full recovery’

Case study 2 - Impact of Library Services on a New Family

In April 21, a new family moved into the area. They visited the library, initially to find out more about the services within the community. We were able to help them with several enquiries, from how to register with a GP, how to order recycling bins and information on local schools and playgroups. Following this, the whole family joined the library and all family members have participated in library events and services over the year. The father, Dave, has joined the job club and attends the weekly sessions in the library. The mother, Emma, has participated in a range of library sessions, including creative writing and family history events. The children of varying ages have attended the WOW events and their teenage son, Ethan, has really embraced the digital services, including Libby and Borrowbox. He has also recently registered to use Theory Test on-line. The family are regularly giving feed-back to staff on their appreciation of the service. When the family first moved to the area, they enquired at the library about litter picking, as it very noticeable to them, having moved from a rural area, that some areas in Blaenau Gwent have problems with litter. Staff promoted the KeepWalesTidy scheme to them and as a result they have now become litter picking champions, doing regular weekly litter picks, as a family.

‘The library has helped us settle into Ebbw Vale. We have had so much help, with so many things. I am amazed at all the extra things on offer. Money has been tight, so having free events has been great. It has helped us feel part of the community, we have all made new friends. As a family we are keen to learn Welsh, the library has helped us with books for the children and language courses for myself and my husband. The bilingual picture books have been helpful, for all of us. We have borrowed litter picking equipment, sports equipment, and a tablet! I feel very fortunate to have a library on our doorstep which offers so much’