

Committee: **Partnership Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **22nd February 2024**

Report Subject: **Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) Annual Return 2022/23**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr Sue Edmunds, Cabinet Member for Education**

Report Submitted by: **Jo Sims, Service Manager – Young People and Partnerships**
Tracy Jones, Aneurin Leisure Trust

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	12.02.24	14.02.24			22.02.24	10.04.24		

1. **Purpose of the Report**
 - 1.1 The purpose of this report is to consider the report submitted to the Culture Division of Welsh Government with respect to the sixth year of the Sixth Assessment Framework for the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) return 2022/23. The sixth framework of Welsh Public Library Standards 'Connected and Ambitious Libraries' was set to expire in 2020 and a new framework created. However, due to the impact of the pandemic the development of the seventh framework has been delayed and the sixth framework is being extended until 2025.
2. **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 fourth year that this report has been submitted since this arrangement and the first to the Partnership Scrutiny. Public libraries are a statutory service as laid out in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. Since 2002, 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 This report has been prepared based on information provided by Blaenau Gwent's annual return, case studies and narrative report submitted to the Culture Division of Welsh Government in June 2023. This was submitted through the Aneurin Leisure Trust.

- 2.4 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. For this return, only one impact statement was required, as opposed to four case studies in previous years. It was also the return of full reporting of all data relating to quality indicators, since the pandemic.
- 2.5 Blaenau Gwent's Library annual return highlights the following performance against the WPLS:
- Blaenau Gwent continues to achieve all 12 core entitlements.
 - The service achieved 7 quality indicators in full and 2 in part. The remaining target was not met.
 - WPLSQ1 1 and 2 Customer Surveys:
The service performs well in this area and customer service feed-back remains consistently high.
100% of adults experience the library as a safe and inclusive place.
The average rating out of 10 awarded by children using the library is 10.
 - WPLSQ1 3 Support for Individual Development :
This is a target indicator, which has been met in full. This relates to the provision of a wide range of support services in all libraries, e.g ICT provision, training opportunities and reader development activities.
 - WPLSQ1 4 Support for Health and Wellbeing:
This is a target indicator which has been met in full and the service is clearly making efforts to support customers' wellbeing through a variety of activities and other provision.
 - WPLSQ1 5 User Training:
98% of attendees said that that attendance helped them achieve their goals. This year has seen an increasing number of new partners using libraries to engage with the community. This has enabled the service to deliver new activities to new audiences.
 - WPLSQI 6 User Attendances at Library Events:
1,629 events were delivered over 22/23.
 - WPLSQ1 7 Location of Service Points:
This is a target indicator and has been fully met.
98% of the population of Blaenau Gwent are within 2.5 miles of their nearest library. This demonstrates that the service has excellent reach into local communities.
 - WPLSQI 8 Library Use:
There has been a 32% increase in adult book borrowing.
There has been a 115% increase in junior book borrowing.

There has been a 33% increase in BorrowBox usage, which is the highest increase in Wales (e-books and e-audio)

- **WPLSQ1 9 Up to date and Appropriate Reading Materials:**
This target indicator has not been met. Only 12 services across Wales met this target. Despite not meeting this target, 90% of customers think the choice of books is very good. The total spend on book stock was £64,144 with an increase in spend on Welsh and Junior. The spend for 21/22 was £63,921. To meet this target the service would need to spend approx. £147,000
- **WPLSQI 10 Welsh Language Resources:**
The target indicator has been met with 6% of the book fund being spent on Welsh materials.
- **WPLSQI 11 On-line Access:**
This target indicator has been met in full. The service has 64 public access machines, with 11,352 hours of usage over 22/23.
- **WPLSQI 12 Supply of Requests**
This target has been partially met. This is due to requests from the regional inter lending scheme, Books4U not being included. If the Books4U requests were included, the service reports that the target of 15 days would have been met. It should also be noted that this quality indicator has been removed for future reporting. We met the 7 days target, with 67% of titles being supplied within 7 days. Only narrowly missed the target for 15 days, with 77% of titles being supplied within that timeframe.
- **WPLSQI 13 Staffing Levels and Qualifications:**
This target has been partially met. The service has 14.4 FTE, to meet the staffing target, the service would need 25 FTE. However, the service meets the target relating to staff training and has a suitably qualified head of library services. It should be noted that no service in Wales met this target in full.
- **WPLSQI 14 Operational Expenditure:**
The service's operational expenditure is above the median for Wales.
- **WPLSQI 15 Cost per Visit:**
The cost per visit is £4.28. This compares with the highest being £6.22 and the lowest 0.41p. It should be noted this indicator has been removed for future reporting.
- **WPLSQI 16 Opening Hours:**
The service did not report any unstaffed opening hours, unplanned closures of static service points or missed home delivery visits.

- 2.6 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.
- 2.7 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.
- 2.8 Importantly, the return indicates that overall Blaenau Gwent has improved its performance in relation to performance and spend on stock.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

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

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

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

4. **Evidence of how 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.

4.4 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**

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

5.1.1 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 2022/23 the Trust spent £64,144 a further increase exceeding the original agreement.

5.1.2 Furthermore, the Trust continues to invest on a pan Wales level in Borrow box to increase the availability of e-books and e-audio. 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 established 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***

5.4.1 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.

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

6. ***Supporting Evidence***

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

6.1.1 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 sixth year of the sixth framework. Key highlights include:

- Customer feedback remains consistently high. Customers of Blaenau Gwent Libraries clearly value their service.
- 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. The service clearly makes efforts to engage with communities in innovative ways to respond to changing needs.
- The service is carrying no vacancies, for the first time in many years, this is viewed as hugely positive by Welsh Government
- The service has a strong digital offer. There are good levels of IT provision, above the median for Wales. IT usage has increased month on month. The launch of the data sim scheme has enhanced the service to digitally excluded residents.
- The service has adapted to the needs of local communities. By delivering a more holistic service, the social value and community support role has been clearly demonstrated through a comprehensive narrative and impact statement.
- The service has demonstrated impact in supporting users through the cost- of- living crisis. The warm spaces campaign continues to be

popular, new partners, e.g CAB and many new anti-poverty initiatives have been delivered.

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 evolved to become the 'go-to' community venue for a wide range of services. Over the year, there has been an increasing number of partner organisations accessing libraries, to engage with the community. The service is viewed as the public face of the council, through the successful establishment of the community hubs. There are also close working links with all other council departments, particularly Education, Social Services and Regeneration.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

N/a

6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment***

N/A

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

Performance reports related to the Leisure Trust are monitored through the Leisure and Libraries Strategic Group, Partnership Scrutiny Committee, the Executive and Council.

Background Documents / Electronic Links

- *Appendix 1 –Welsh Govt. Assessment report 22/23*
- *Appendix 2 – Welsh Public Library Standards Data 22/23*
- *Appendix 3 – Impact Statement, Narrative and Future Direction 22/23*