

# Welsh Public Library Standards Sixth Framework: Blaenau Gwent (Aneurin Leisure Trust)

## Annual Assessment Report 2022/2023

This report has been prepared based on information provided in Blaenau Gwent's annual return, impact statements and narrative report submitted to the Culture Division of the Welsh Government.

### 1. Executive summary

Blaenau Gwent met all of the 12 core entitlements in full. Of the 10 quality indicators which have targets, Blaenau Gwent achieved 7 in full and 2 in part. The remaining target was not met.

Customers of Blaenau Gwent Libraries clearly value their service; customer satisfaction is above the median for most indicators. 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 aware of the need to address issues around active membership and footfall and has funding for two new library development officers to help target this.

The service's annual report highlights several changes in the ways that members of the local community are engaging with libraries, in part likely related to the designation of libraries as 'community hubs'. Specifically, an increasing number of people spending longer periods of time in the library in response to the cost-of-living crisis, and changes in patterns of IT use with more customers bringing their own devices to use in the library.

Whilst the service meets the target for proportional Welsh language spend, the overall level of materials spend is a concern, especially as this has been an ongoing issue for Blaenau Gwent over a number of years. The fact that, for the first time in many years, the service is carrying no vacancies is hugely positive, although it is acknowledged that the service is still unable to meet the per capita staffing and qualified staff targets.

- 100% of adults surveyed said they experience the library as an enjoyable safe and inclusive space (Q11).
- There is a good level of IT provision; Blaenau Gwent is above the median for the number of computer devices available to the public (Q111).
- Although staff per capita remains below the target, for the first time in many years the service is carrying no vacancies (Q113).
- Blaenau Gwent did not report any unstaffed opening hours, unplanned closures of static service points or missed home deliveries (Q116).

## 2. Performance against the standards

The standards framework comprises of core entitlements, quality indicators with targets, quality indicators with benchmarks and impact measures. Section 2 summarises achievements against these areas. A narrative assessment of the authority's performance is provided in Section 3.

### 2.1. Core entitlements

Blaenau Gwent reported meeting all of the 12 Core Entitlements in full through self-assessment, providing detailed and helpful commentary where this varied from previous years. The independent assessor accepts the self-assessment based on assessments made in previous years.

### 2.2. Quality indicators with targets

There are 16 quality indicators (QIs), of which 10 have constituent targets. Of these, Blaenau Gwent is achieving 7 in full and 2 in part. The remaining target was not met.

Quality Indicator	Met?	
QI 3 Support for individual development:		Met in full
a) ICT support	√	
b) Information literacy and skills training	√	
c) E-government support	√	
d) Reader development	√	
QI 4 (a) Support for health and well-being		Met in full
i) Book Prescription Wales scheme	√	
ii) Better with Books/Reading Well scheme	√	
iii) Designated health & well-being collection	√	
iv) Information about healthy lifestyles and behaviours	√	
v) Signposting to health & well-being services	√	
QI 6 all static service points offer events/activities for users with special requirements	√	Met in full
QI 7 Location of service points	√	Met in full
QI 9 Up-to-date and appropriate reading material		Not met
Acquisitions per capita	x	
or Materials spend per capita	x	
QI 10 Welsh Language Resources		Met in full
% of material budget spent on Welsh	√	
or Spend on Welsh per capita	-	
QI 11 Online access:		Met in full
a) i) Public access to Internet	√	
ii) Wi-Fi provision	√	
QI 12 Supply of requests		Partially met
a) % of requests satisfied within 7 days	√	
b) % of requests satisfied within 15 days	x	

Quality Indicator	Met?
QI 13 Staffing levels and qualifications:	Partially met
i) Staff per capita	x
ii) Qualified staff per capita	x
iii) Head of service qualification/training	√
iv) CPD percentage	√
QI 16 Opening hours per capita	√ Met in full

### 2.3. Impact measures

The framework includes three indicators aimed at assessing the impact of library use on people’s lives. These indicators do not have targets, and authorities were only required to carry out user surveys for QI1 once over the original three-year period of the framework (2017-20). The summary figures (lowest, median and highest) are based on all authorities providing data in the 2022-23 return. Rankings reflect the numbers of respondents, where 1 is the highest scoring authority. However, it is important to bear in mind that some authorities have conducted surveys since 2020, whilst others report survey data from before the Covid pandemic. Some responses therefore reflect the situation several years ago, whilst others may have been affected by disruption during the pandemic period. As a result, there are limitations on the extent to which these data might be considered comparable.

Blaenau Gwent completed its adult user survey in March 2023 and its children’s user survey in February 2023.

Performance indicator	Rank	Lowest	Median	Highest	
QI 1 Making a difference					
b) % of young people who think that the library helps them learn and find things out:	94%	4/16	58%	90%	98%
e) % of adults who think that the library has made a difference to their lives:	96%	1/16	41%	86.5%	96%
QI 5 b) % of attendees of training sessions who said that the training had helped them achieve their goals:	98%	=7/17	82%	96%	100%

Authorities are also asked to provide an impact statement describing the impact which the library service has had on an individual or on a group of individuals during the year.

Blaenau Gwent provided an impact statement which referred to the value customers derived from the Warm Spaces initiative and the associated activities which launched in October 2022. Customers struggling to pay their bills valued having a warm, safe and welcoming place to go which fostered companionship and well-being. They also enjoyed participating in activities such as Knit and Natter and Cuppa and Company sessions and benefitted from free access to WiFi and computers. One customer who had lost his job reported that, as well as valuing the warm space, the support he received from the library had contributed to him getting a new job and accommodation and reflected that “*without the library I think I would have ended up on the streets*”.

## 2.4. Quality indicators and benchmarks

The remaining indicators do not have targets but allow services to monitor and benchmark their performance over time, in comparison with other authorities. The following table summarises Blaenau Gwent's position for 2022-23. Ranks are included out of 22, where 1 is the highest, and 22 the lowest scoring authority, unless stated otherwise. Indicators where fewer than 22 authorities supplied data are those where relevant data was not available from some authorities. Indicators 'per capita' are calculated per 1,000 population unless otherwise noted.

Performance indicator		Rank	Lowest	Median	Highest
QI 1 Making a difference					
a) % of adults who think that using the library has helped them develop new skills	70%	8/16	24%	69.5%	90%
c) health and well-being	44%	=12/16	35%	66.5%	94%
d) enjoyable, safe and inclusive	100%	=1/16	93%	97%	100%
QI 2 Customer satisfaction					
a) 'very good' or 'good' choice of books	90%	11/16	80%	91%	99%
b) 'very good' or 'good' customer care	99%	=2/17	92%	98%	100%
c) 'very good' or 'good' IT facilities	85%	9/16	65%	86%	99%
d) 'very good' or 'good' overall	97%	=10/17	94%	98%	100%
e) users aged 16 & under rating out of ten	9.0	=12/16	8.0	9.3	9.7
QI 5 User training					
a) attendances per capita	7	=13/22	1	10.5	222
c) informal training per capita	131	10/19	5	131	424
QI 6 attendances at events per capita	161	13/22	13	165	559
QI 8 Library use					
a) visits per capita	2,084	13/21	781	2,106	4,814
b) virtual visits per capita	175	20/22	124	537.5	7,979
c) active borrowers per capita	79	18/22	43	106.5	167
QI 10 Welsh issues per capita	37	19/22	13	53	864
QI 11 Online access					
a) Computers per 10,000	9.55	6/22	3.32	7.99	16.99
b) % of available time used by the public	11%	=9/19	7%	11%	77%
QI 13 Staffing levels and qualifications <sup>1</sup>					
(v) a) total volunteers	9	-	0	8	256
b) volunteer hours	745	-	0	583.5	14,014
QI 14 Operational expenditure					
a) total expenditure per capita	£10,093	13/21	£6,726	£11,476	£27,330
b) % on staff,	70%	=5/21	46%	64%	78%
% on information resources	9%	=16/21	5%	12%	21%
% on equipment and buildings	3%	=11/21	1%	3%	29%
% on other operational costs;	17%	10/21	1%	15%	35%
c) capital expenditure per capita	£0	=12/21	-£479	£145	£2,865

<sup>1</sup> Following discussion with the peer review group it was decided not to include rankings for volunteers as the implications of volunteer numbers are ambiguous.

Performance indicator		Rank	Lowest	Median	Highest
QI 15 Net cost per visit <sup>2</sup>	£4.28	17/19	£0.41	£2.76	£6.22
QI 16 Opening hours <sup>3</sup>					
(iii) a) % hours unplanned closure of static service points	0%	=1/22	0%	0.05%	0.95%
b) % mobile stops / home deliveries missed	0%	=1/20	0%	0%	3.74%

### 3. Analysis of performance

The core entitlements and quality indicators can be divided into four key areas. This section of the report outlines performance under these areas.

#### 3.1. Meeting customer needs (QI 1-5)

The service performs well with regard to Making a Difference (QI1), with responses above the median for most measures. For Customer Satisfaction (QI2), the service is at or around the median for most measures. Blaenau Gwent reports changing use over the year in response to the cost-of-living crisis, with an increasing number of people spending long periods of time in the library, saving money on energy bills and accessing free services, including refreshments. Although the QI1 indicator for adults finding helpful information for health and wellbeing is below the median, QI4 is met in full and the service is clearly making efforts to support customers' wellbeing through a variety of activities and other provision. Brynmawr and Tredegar Libraries are designated as well-being hubs, and the service provides Cuppa and Company sessions and working in partnership with Aneurin Bevan University Health Board to promote health and well-being activities. 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, including working with 'Business in Focus' to deliver live music workshops.

#### 3.2. Access and use (QI 6-8)

Although Blaenau Gwent is below the median for library visits and active borrowers per capita (QI8), footfall and issues are increasing, indicating that customers are returning following the pandemic. The service notes a trend towards users who may not be active members accessing libraries for information, activities, social events, warm spaces etc. Attendance per capita at events was close to the median (QI6). There was also an increase in the number of community loans and visits to residential homes over the year, as well as an extension of home delivery services. Whilst both adults' and children's issues per capita are below the median for Welsh authorities, over 22/23 the number of BorrowBox borrowers increased by one third. Although virtual visits per capita is below the median (QI8), Blaenau Gwent reports strong engagement with the library's social media presence, particularly Facebook.

#### 3.3. Facilities and services (QI 9-12)

Blaenau Gwent is below the median for materials spend and number of acquisitions per capita, and does not meet the target for this indicator (QI9). However, the service

<sup>2</sup> Rankings here have been reversed, so that 1 is the lowest scoring (best performing) authority.

<sup>3</sup> Rankings here have been reversed, so that 1 is the lowest scoring (best performing) authority.

has improved performance against the Welsh language spend target (QI10) over 22/23; this includes Welsh language learning materials such as board games and study aids. It is anticipated that this will help the service to increase the number of Welsh issues per capita. Although the target for Supply of Requests (QI12) was only 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.

Blaenau Gwent is above the median for the number of computer devices available to the public (QI11) and the service reports that, during 22/23, IT usage has been increasing month on month. However, there has been a change in usage patterns: the number of users has increased, but time spent on PCs is considerably lower as users are accessing machines for different purposes, e.g. checking emails, printing. There is also a marked increase in the number of users bringing in their own devices. Furthermore, the promotion of IT services outside of the building has been extended, including a partnership with the National Databank through the Good Things Foundation to distribute free data sims to people in need. A review of ICT facilities and services is planned for 23/24.

### **3.4. Expertise and capacity (QI 13-16)**

Although the figure for both overall and qualified staff per capita remain below the target (QI13), for the first time in many years the service is carrying no vacancies. The proportion of operational expenditure allocated to staffing is above the median (QI14). Five new members of staff were appointed to permanent positions, with some libraries having a complete new team. Blaenau Gwent reports this has had a positive impact on performance and customer service. Blaenau Gwent did not report any unstaffed opening hours, unplanned closures of static service points or missed home deliveries (QI16).

## **4. Strategic context**

As part of the return, authorities are asked to report on how the library service is contributing to wider Welsh Government priorities and strategic goals. Blaenau Gwent reports on a range of services relevant to the goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, including cohesive communities, health, prosperity, equality and environmental issues. Supporting local residents with the cost-of-living crisis has been a key priority for Blaenau Gwent. With the closure of the main council offices (Civic Centre) and the transition to all face-to-face council enquiries now being delivered at libraries, through the provision of community hubs, library buildings are increasingly seen as the 'go-to' venue for anyone in need, including food bank referrals, fuel vouchers, cost of living advice, period products and warm packs.

Other activities have included a new Citizens Advice Service was with weekly drop-in sessions being delivered in all libraries and the roll-out of the Warm Spaces campaign in all libraries. Support for jobseekers has continued to be a core aspect of library service provision, working closely with colleagues in Adult Community Learning. The service's sim card project, working with The Good Things Foundation and the National Data Bank, helps bridge the digital divide and prevent data poverty within the community.

## 5. Future direction

Reporting on the authority's future direction and plans for the library service over the following year, Blaenau Gwent intends to build upon the success of community hub provision to expand its approach to partnership work. The plan to re-locate Abertillery Library to a new town centre location will be a main focus for the coming year. The service is working closely with the regeneration department to secure additional funding which, if successful, will transform Trinity Chapel, into a modern, vibrant library and community adult education centre. Funding has been secured to recruit two new library development officers from the Skills Priority Funding stream to help target active membership and footfall. In addition, a review of the ICT provision is planned for 23/24, specifically an improved Wi-Fi solution to meet the diverse needs of the community, including streaming, video conferencing etc.

## 6. Conclusion

Customers of Blaenau Gwent Libraries clearly value their service; customer satisfaction is above the median for most indicators. 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 aware of the need to address issues around active membership and footfall and has funding for two new library development officers to help target this.

The service's annual report highlights several changes in the ways that members of the local community are engaging with libraries, in part likely related to the designation of libraries as 'community hubs'. Specifically, an increasing number of people spending longer periods of time in the library in response to the cost-of-living crisis, and changes in patterns of IT use with more customers bringing their own devices to use in the library.

Whilst the service meets the target for proportional Welsh language spend, the overall level of materials spend is a concern, especially as this has been an ongoing issue for Blaenau Gwent over a number of years. The fact that, for the first time in many years, the service is carrying no vacancies is hugely positive, although it is acknowledged that the service is still unable to meet the per capita staffing and qualified staff targets.