



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

21st MARCH 2022

RCT LIBRARY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN 2022/25

REPORT OF DIRECTOR - PUBLIC HEALTH, PROTECTION, AND COMMUNITY SERVICES IN DISCUSSIONS WITH CLLR. RHYS LEWIS, CABINET MEMBER FOR CLIMATE CHANGE AND COMMUNITIES

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an opportunity to review the Draft Strategy for Rhondda Cynon Taf's Library Service and its associated Action Plan.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Cabinet:

- 2.1 Notes the content of the report.
- 2.2 Approves the Library Service's proposed Strategy and Action Plan 2022/25.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Core entitlement 12 of the Welsh Public Library Standards requires every library authority in Wales to produce a Strategy and Action Plan that outlines the future development of its public library service. Once approved these documents must be placed on the Council's website so that the public can access them easily.
- 3.2 It is important for the Library Service to have a clear vision, strategy, and plan for the improvement of services that aligns to the Council's Corporate Plan and for residents to have access to this information. This is of particular importance at this time due to the impact Covid has had on the service and on its customers. Footfall has reduced significantly since the pre-Covid period and there will be a need to work with a wider range of partners to develop

further activities and services to attract people back to our venues so that they can benefit from the opportunities available.

- 3.3 Covid has also had a significant impact on the way in which some customers, many of them new members, wish to engage with the service. There has been a 110% increase in the number of downloads of e-books and e-audiobooks and the Strategy and Action Plan indicates how the service will transition to the delivery of blended provision in order to retain new customers who prefer to engage online and attract other residents to this service.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires local authorities to ensure the provision of a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service without specifying what that entails. In Wales the duty 'to superintend and promote the improvement of the public library service provided through local authorities' has been devolved to the relevant Welsh Minister (currently the Minister for Local Government) and since 2002 this duty has been fulfilled through the Welsh Public Library Standards. These standards consist of 12 core entitlements and 15 Quality Indicators.
- 4.2 Core entitlement 12 of the Welsh Public Library Standards requires every local authority in Wales to produce a strategy and action plan that outlines the future development of its public library service. Once approved these documents must be placed on the Council's website so that they can be easily accessible to the public.
- 4.3 Developing a Strategy and Action Plan is also important as it ensures that the library service is aligned to the Council's Corporate Plan and to other local and national strategies so that it supports the wider Council and Welsh Government agenda.
- 4.4 Rhondda Cynon Taf's first Strategy and Action Plan was produced in 2015 and the second in 2019. This third strategy is designed to cover a three-year period and it is especially significant as it comes at the end of a challenging period for public-facing services as a result of the Covid pandemic.
- 4.5 The draft Strategy and Action Plan was reviewed by the Public Service Delivery, Community and Prosperity on 17th February and one amendment has been made to the Action Plan in accordance with the recommendation of the Committee.

5. IMPACT OF THE COVID PANDEMIC ON THE 2019/20 ACTION PLAN

- 5.1 It should be noted that all static and mobile library provision was suspended in March 2020 during the National Lockdown and that library staff were transferred to other duties to support residents. However, static libraries and the @homelibraryservice reopened at the end of June 2020 and delivered its

services in line with Welsh Government guidance at that time. Continuing to provide access to services throughout this period with frequent changes to the guidance as Wales progressed through different Alert Levels was challenging.

5.2 The service adapted its provision to meet the new conditions so that we could continue to support residents to access books and other library services that supported their wellbeing at this difficult time:

- Welsh Government provided additional funds for e-books and e-audiobooks which saw a boost in downloads.
- Ancestry made its database accessible from home for members of the Library Service which resulted in an increase in the number of customers using its databases for family history and other research.
- Story-telling and craft sessions delivered by the Youth Librarian and her team were transferred online.
- Quizzes and other activities using photographs and materials from the service's Local Studies and Photographic Archive collections were placed on the Library Service's Facebook page.
- Colleagues in IT ensured that new members were able for the first time to register online.
- An Order and Collect service was introduced so that customers could order their books online or by phone and pick them up within 15 minutes slots at their nearest library.
- More self-service machines were installed to reduce the risk of virus transmission (funded by Welsh Government).
- The @homelibraryservice was expanded to provide book deliveries to residents who would normally rely on the mobile library service.
- Detailed risk assessments were undertaken, and protective measures implemented to protect customers and staff.

6. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

6.1 Appendix 1 highlights the progress made against the priorities outlined in the 2019-21 Action Plan in more detail, but the following highlights are worthy of note:

- The role played by the Library Service in the development of community hubs -work on Llys Cadwyn (Pontypridd) and Porth Plaza was completed

and both venues played an important role as Community Resilience Hubs supporting residents in their area.

- The capital investment made by the Council and Welsh Government in improving library facilities at Treorchy library in readiness for its launch as a cultural hub in partnership with the Park and Dare Theatre.
- The progress made in use of digital technology – there was a 110% increase in loans of digital materials between April/May 2019 and April/May 2020.
- Significant investment in digital equipment and enhancement of digital skills among staff.
- The success of the service in gaining external funding to enhance the range of opportunities/activities on offer to customers.

6.2 In addition the merging of the One4All service with the Library Service offers further opportunities to enhance the provision of advice and information available to residents.

6.3 A key aim of the 2019-21 Action Plan was to increase visitor numbers to libraries. Unsurprisingly, the National and Local Lockdowns as well as the restrictions placed on browsing, delivery and facilitation of learning and other community-based activities throughout most of 2020 and 2021 has had an adverse effect on visitor numbers resulting in fewer visits to libraries than in 2018/19. This was unavoidable and the new proposed strategy will focus on further developing services that will attract current customers back to libraries and attracting new customers.

7. THE DRAFT LIBRARY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN 2022/25

7.1 The Draft Strategy can be seen at Appendix 2 and the draft Action Plan is at Appendix 3. The Draft Strategy outlines the services currently available and identifies the key priorities proposed for the next 3 years and the outcomes and impact achieving these will have. The Draft Action Plan outlines the actions that will be implemented to ensure that the desired outcomes and impacts are achieved.

7.2 The key priorities proposed for the next three years are:

- Keeping the service relevant in a rapidly changing environment.
- Improving the library experience for all customers.
- Take the opportunities and lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic to inform and shape future provision.

7.3 To achieve these priorities, the service will:

- Further enhance the programme of digitisation of resources and make these available online so that customers can access collections at any time.
- Harness new IT developments to improve the customer experience.
- Blend traditional and digital services by developing a Digital strategy for libraries.
- Build on online delivery of services to children identified during Covid-19 pandemic to strengthen, expand, and increase the reach of these services to families across RCT.
- Ensure that all staff have the skills required to provide a service that remains relevant at a time when innovations in technology and changing patterns of usage are having an impact on how customers want to engage with the service.
- Embed new models of delivery and monitor customer feedback to ensure they achieve their objectives.
- Support the further development of community hubs.
- Ensure that residents have access to a broad range of learning opportunities.
- Work with partners to provide a wider range of information, advice, and support on well-being and health.
- Work with partners and volunteers in the heritage, arts and cultural sectors to develop a range of cultural activities.
- Reflect all communities in the promotion of and engagement with our culture, heritage and local history collections.
- Recognise and promote reading & library use as an essential element in peoples improved mental health and wellbeing.
- Provide opportunities for agencies and partners to work to address poverty & employability initiatives.

7.4 The service will work towards ensuring the following outcomes and impacts:

- People will be able to increase their knowledge/skills having used the library.

- People will be able to take part in reading and other cultural events organised by the library of their choice.
- People will feel part of a community using the library service.
- People will be able to take advantage of the opportunities of the digital world through using the library.
- People will be able to re-engage with reading and visiting the library as a pleasurable leisure activity.
- Personal health and well-being will be enhanced by using the library.
- People can participate more fully in local affairs via the facilities in the library

8. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

8.1 The main findings of the Equality and Socio-economic Duty Impact Assessment are that the Library Service Strategy and Action Plan 2022/25 will have a positive effect and will ensure that libraries:

- Promote inclusivity and diversity.
- Provide a wide range of services to meet the needs of groups that have protected characteristics including access to materials and resources in a range of languages and formats (e.g. braille).
- Improve access to learning and employability support to enhance opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to achieve their potential.
- Facilitate a wide range of cultural and other activities that will promote community cohesion.

Additional consideration will be given to:

- The promotion of libraries as safe spaces for women fleeing from domestic violence and women wishing to breast feed.
- Exploring opportunities to work with Young Carers and Young Carers projects.
- Assessing the potential of providing spaces for individual prayer to widen engagement with people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The full assessment can be seen [HERE](#)

9. WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 A Welsh Language Impact Assessment has been completed and the main findings are that there would be a positive outcome as the proposals outlined in the strategy would create:

- Better opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language by offering greater access to the Welsh language via IT, increased opportunities for volunteering for Welsh language activities and increased numbers of Welsh language sessions being offered within the library service.
- Increased numbers of Welsh speakers via recruitment or upskilling of staff.
- Provide additional opportunities to promote the Welsh Language via the Schools Library service where the new Wales school curriculum and the addition of a Welsh speaking staff member will provide increased opportunities to engage with Welsh Primary Schools.
- Continued opportunities to develop a culture where staff consider the Welsh Language in any work-related decisions and work closely with the Welsh Language Compliance and Policy Officer.

The full impact assessment can be seen [HERE](#)

10. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

10.1 The draft strategy reflects learning gained from the Customer Satisfaction Survey undertaken by the service in 2019 and informal feedback from customers and partners provided to library staff that is fed back through the branch librarians during management and branch meetings that review our services.

10.2 Feedback on the draft strategy and action plan has been provided by the Community Development team and the Arts Service that are closely involved in developments related to community hubs and expansion of the cultural offer within libraries.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

11.1 There are no financial implications aligned to this report. The Library Service is core funded by the Council. However, it applies for external funding to deliver additional activities and to invest in its premises whenever the opportunity arises.

12. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 12.1 The Library Service is a statutory service and governed by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. This places a duty on Library Authorities to provide 'a comprehensive and efficient library service'. The duty to superintend and promote the improvement of public library services has been devolved to the Welsh Government. Since 2002 the performance of all public library services in Wales have been assessed against the Welsh Public Library Standards.
- 12.2 The proposed Strategy and Action Plan is designed to ensure that RCT Library Service continues to meet all 12 core entitlements which form part of the Welsh Public Library Standards and to support continuous improvement of the service's performance against the Quality Indicators.

13. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

- 13.1 The proposal strategy aligns with each of the 3 Council Corporate Priorities:
- Ensuring people are independent, healthy, and successful.
 - Creating places where people are proud to live, work and play.
 - Enabling Prosperity, creating the opportunity for people and businesses to be innovative, entrepreneurial and fulfil their potential and prosper.
- 13.2 Libraries contribute to each of the 7 Well-being Goals by:
- Providing access to a world of lifelong learning through books and online information, free access to the internet and the delivery and facilitation of learning opportunities for people of all ages.
 - Encouraging personal development and offering a range of services and activities that promote social and economic resilience.
 - Working with partners to support wellbeing and reduce social isolation including providing information to support individuals to make informed choices and supporting the Book Prescription Scheme.
 - Providing safe and inclusive facilities and offering support to those who are socially disadvantaged to access provision within their communities that will improve their prospects.
 - Providing places where people can meet and connect with each other and with the services they need locally, including through the development of local hubs.
 - Encouraging and promoting cultural activities for all ages, preserving local collections that safeguard local heritage and ensuring access to materials, and activities in the Welsh language.

- Making efficient use of resources, recycling materials, and working with MALD and other library services in Wales to develop the All-Wales Library Management system and implement good practice that reduces impact on the environment.

13.3 This draft Strategy and Action Plan will continue to place libraries at the heart of their communities and further enhance their contribution to the Council's early intervention and prevention agenda. The service already works in partnership with a wide variety of organisations – public sector, third and voluntary sector, and private sector enterprises. However, the pandemic limited the opportunity to deliver services and customers and many partners proved reluctant to resume normal activities while Wales lived under restrictions. Covid also had an impact on the way some customers preferred to access library services and resulted in new customers being attracted to digital resources and online provision. The lessons learned from Covid, and the feedback provided by residents, has influenced the draft Strategy and Action Plan and this will make the service more resilient and able to support the resilience of individuals and communities in a rapidly changing environment.

14. CONCLUSION

14.1 Library authorities are required to produce a Strategy and Action Plan that will outline the direction of travel for their service and to reflect how they will work towards meeting the core entitlements and quality indicators outlined in the Welsh Government's Sixth Quality Framework for libraries.

14.2 There have been some significant developments and progress made during the past 2 years despite the challenges of providing services during the Covid pandemic. However, the reduction in footfall due to lack of confidence among key groups to return to their previous level of usage is likely to continue for longer than previously anticipated and the proposed strategy for 2022/25 has a focus on further enhancing provision and ensuring access to a wider range of support through collaboration with partner organisations, to attract people to our venues.

14.3 The pandemic has demonstrated that library customers want to borrow and read digital formats and that they expect to borrow these items as easily as they can print formats. These expectations will require us to transition to a service that offers both traditional and digital collections to our customers. The shift to a more blended service will undoubtedly throw up challenges as we look to accommodate both traditional and digital customers within existing budgets.

14.4 If approved the Library Service will work with colleagues in Design and Print to develop an attractive document with photographs that will showcase the investment made in library premises and facilities since 2019 and highlight the

range of activities that customers have engaged in as well as the plans for the next 3 years. This will then be placed on the Council's website.

Other Information:

Relevant Scrutiny Committee

Public Service Delivery, Community and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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