



## **RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **STRATEGIC CULTURE AND ARTS STEERING GROUP**

**16<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2023**

#### **LIBRARIES SERVICE UPDATE**

### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH, PROTECTION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES IN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH & COMMUNITIES, COUNCILLOR BOB HARRIS**

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#### **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Members of the Strategic Culture and Arts Steering Group on the performance of the Council's Library Service.

#### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Note the content of the report:
- 2.2 Consider whether they wish to scrutinise in greater depth any further matters.

#### **3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1.1 Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons'. The Act does not specify how local authorities should ensure they deliver a modern and efficient Library Service that meets the needs of their communities, except that they should:

- have regard to encouraging both adults and children to make full use of the Library Service;
- Lend books and other printed material free of charge to those who live, work or study in the area.

- 3.1.2 Within Rhondda Cynon Taf the Council's fulfils its statutory duty by providing the following services:

- **3 Area Libraries:** Llys Cadwyn (Pontypridd), Treorchy Cultural Hub, and Aberdare Library, with each open 49 hours a week including a Saturday morning and one late evening every week;
- **10 Branch Libraries:** Rhondda - Porth, Yr Hwb (Ferndale), Tonypany; Cynon – Abercynon, Canolfan Pennar (Mountain Ash) and Hirwaun; Taf - Rhydyfelin, Llantrisant, Pontyclun and Church Village, with each closed 1.5 days every week, with a cluster model ensuring that each area has a library open six days a week;
- An **At Home Library Service**;
- A **Schools Library Service**;
- A **Children and Youth Librarian**;
- A comprehensive **e-library**.
- A **Reference Library and Local Studies Collections**;

#### 4. AREA AND BRANCH LIBRARIES

- 4.1 Our libraries are valuable community spaces which not only loan books but provide many other services such as access to community meeting rooms, IT training, literacy support and cultural events. Dedicated Reference Libraries and Local Studies collections are available at the three Area Libraries with Aberdare holding the Local Studies collection for the Cynon Valley, Llys Cadwyn (Pontypridd) the collection for the Taff area and Treorchy the collection for the Rhondda Valleys. The Library Service has a dedicated reference librarian who visits each Area Library on a rota basis to deal with more in-depth Local Studies enquiries with members of the public being able to book appointments to meet with him. Enquiries are also dealt with via email, phone and letter with Area Library staff dealing with more basic enquiries daily.
- 4.2 11 of our 13 libraries have community meeting rooms which range from small one-to-one facilities to larger rooms able to accommodate 20 - 30 people. As can be seen from the table below we offer a significant number of activities and events, and it is these facilities which community groups and non-profit organisations can use free of charge that allow us to offer such a broad range of activities. This small sample of what we offer shows the diversity of activities and events taking place within libraries:
- Reading Groups
  - Knit and Natter Groups
  - Welsh Language Classes
  - ICT Classes
  - Sign Language Classes
  - Breast Feeding Clinic
  - Essential Skills
  - Lego Clubs
  - Bore Coffi
  - Dementia Café

- Work Clubs
- School Visits
- Baby Massage

4.3 The Library Service offers face to face delivery of the One4all information service at Treorchy Cultural Hub, Aberdare, Llys Cadwyn, Canolfan Pennar, Porth Plaza and a one day outreach service is provided at Pontyclun.

4.3.1 The co-location of Library and One4All Services at Community Resilience Hubs has also led to the provision of other services at these facilities by other services, and other public, private and third sector organisations. For example, the long-term hire of rooms at Aberdare Library and potentially (pending further discussion) Llys Cadwyn by Barclays Bank to offer banking services to the community; the regular provision of Work Clubs and Digital Fridays by the Council’s Employment Skills programme and community classes by the Adult Community Learning Service.

4.4 The Library Service experienced extensive closures during the pandemic and a key priority identified for the service after reopening in 2021/22 was to increase visitor numbers, issues and activity levels to pre-pandemic levels. The tables below illustrate the services progress in achieving this goal with steady progress being made with regard visitor numbers and activity levels. Progress with issues has seen a dip however and this may be due to recent efficiencies which have led to a reduction in our book budget.

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24 (April – September)
Visitor Numbers	727992	711588	11952	376108	607672	328596 (Same period in 2022/23 = 272041)
Issues	420505	538954	98737	314211	348143	191971 (Same period in 2022/23 = 193913)
Activities / Events	5306	6503	Covid	626	4019	2578 (same period in 22/23 = 1621)
Attendees	51396	53047	Covid	4070	35567	25985 (same period in 22/23 = 13887)

## 5. e- Library

5.1 The Covid pandemic led to an increase in electronic engagement, with significant increases being seen in the e-lending of books, audiobooks and magazines. During this period, we substantially increased our spending on e-resources moving funding of materials from physical to digital. Borrowing of e-resources has remained high even after the removal of Covid Restrictions. This trend in e-borrowing can be clearly seen in the following table which shows the number of electronic downloads reported to the Welsh Government as part of our annual return for the Welsh Public Library standards.

<b>Electronic Downloads</b>				
18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23
30,309	48,330	88,289	82,179	67,745

5.2 This sustained interest in e-resources has increased pressure upon our e-lending service with waiting times and reservation numbers for e-stock rising significantly. This has required us to evaluate the use of our book budget, allocating more funds to the acquisition of e-stock. We have also broadened the scope of the collection with the introduction of an e-newspaper lending subscription.

- Borrowbox – Online collection of e-audiobooks and e-books
- uLibrary – Collection of e-audiobooks
- Libby – Collection of e-magazines
- Pressreader – Collection of e-newspapers

5.3 In addition to the e-borrowing services listed above the Library Service also provides access to a range of other digital services including:

- Transparent Language Online – Language learning resource.
- Theory Test Pro – Practise your driving theory test online.
- Ancestry and Find My Past – Family History resources only available in libraries.
- Photographic Archive - A collection of over 22,000 digital images of the people and places of Rhondda Cynon Taf taken from the collections held at RCT Libraries.
- Our Past - A website created using items from Rhondda Cynon Taf's local history collections.

## 6. At Home Library Service

6.1 The 'At Home' service delivers books and other items to residents of Rhondda Cynon Taf who are unable to use a static library. The service is free, and users receive a visit to their home every four weeks. The service can deliver books in ordinary and large print as well as talking books in CD.

6.2 The Covid pandemic forced Library Services to adapt their services to serve the community and in the case of remote services this led to the mobile library service being suspended in March 2020 with staff and resources being transferred to provide an expanded 'At Home' service. The expanded service was able to operate throughout

large periods of the Covid pandemic providing a service to existing 'At Home' and Mobile Library users.

6.3 In 2022 following a re-evaluation of Library remote services and after a public consultation a decision was made to retain the model adopted during the Covid pandemic as it was seen to offer improved levels of service at reduced costs. Approval was given for the following changes:

- To discontinue the Mobile Library Service and to expand the 'At Home' service within existing library service resources to ensure it meets current need. Creating an additional 'At Home' librarian recruited from the existing Mobile Librarians.
- To retain 50% of the mobile library service book budget to ensure the service can continue to provide resources that meet the needs of our 'At Home' service users.

6.4 The following table shows how the 'At Home' service has grown since 2019 both in the number of users and issues.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Users	262	359	491	501
Issues	13219	10582	15515	14756

## 7. Schools Library Service

7.1 The Schools' Library Service offers primary schools a value for money loan and advice service providing a range of up-to-date resources, linked to the national curriculum to encourage all pupils regardless of ability to enjoy reading. Participating schools can make use of the service via a core service subscription or on a pay as you go (PAYG) basis. The following services are offered by the Schools Library Service:

- Project Loans
- Class Reader Sets
- Group Reading Sets
- Block Loans
- Advice, Support and Training

7.2 57 schools are currently signed up for the core service which is an increase of 4 schools on last year. The following table provides a breakdown of the loans issued to schools over the last two years:

	2022		2023	
	Project Loans	Class Readers	Project Loans	Class Readers
Summer Term	126	33	140	27
Autumn Term	131	37	136	51

7.3 Recent changes to the National Curriculum have impacted upon the delivery of the Schools Library service with the old Foundation Phase and Keystage 1 & 2 having been replaced by Progression Steps 1, 2 & 3. This has resulted in a move away from requests for more traditional curriculum topics such as Victorians and Romans to topics such as well-being, feelings, health, empathy, and the expressive arts. There is also much more emphasis on Cynefin, which encompasses local history, geography, nature, and community. Diversity topics now include gender issues, sexuality, and neurodiversity as well as cultural diversity. The topics being asked for have become less easy to predict and as a result the service has begun the process of developing its collection to match these changes although the requirement to do this within budget does mean that this will need to take place over a period of time.

## 8. **Children and Youth Librarian**

8.1 Each Summer the Library Service takes part in the Summer Reading Challenge which is a national reading programme that encourages children to keep reading during the school holidays. This is managed and run by the Children and Youth Librarian and her team. Children can sign up for the challenge at their local library where they are given a collector folder, they set a reading goal for the summer and choose anything they like to read. Each time they return a book to the library they earn a reward until they have met their reading goal. This summer 1041 children took part in the challenge which is more than the 967 that took part in 2019 the last pre-Covid year it was run.

8.2 The Children and Youth Librarian is also responsible for organising and running in-house events whose aim is to instil a love of reading in children and make visiting a library a regular and familiar part of their lives. This year from April to October we have held 69 events which were attended by 1075 children and 657 adults. This includes:

- Stories & crafts at Easter, Summer Holidays & October Half Term. This year was the first year we resumed our full pre-COVID level summer events programme of 3 events per library. Since appointing 2 new staff members in 2022 who are Welsh speaking, we can now deliver our stories & crafts sessions bilingually.
- Monthly Lego Clubs at 4 branches
- Craft workshops at Treorchy, Aberdare & Pontypridd Libraries (2 sessions) in partnership with the Youth Arts Service
- Fun Palace & Food Festival events at Treorchy Library
- Aberdare's 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations
- Visits by local authors Martyn Evans & Megan Matravars

## 9. **Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS)**

9.1 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 and since 2002 this duty has been fulfilled through the Welsh Public Library Standards.

9.2 These standards consist of 12 core entitlements and 15 Quality Indicators. An annual

assessment is undertaken of the performance of each Library Service in Wales against the WPLS. In 2022/23, Rhondda Cynon Taf Library's Service met all 12 core entitlements in full. Of the 9 quality indicators which have targets, Rhondda Cynon Taf achieved 5 in full, 1 in part and failed to achieve 3 (based on the draft 2022/23 report).

- 9.3 One of the Core Entitlements is to '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.' This is available here:  
[LibraryStrategy20222025English.pdf \(rctcbc.gov.uk\)](https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/~/media/117626/117626.pdf)

## 10. Customer Satisfaction Surveys

- 10.1 As part of the WPLS each Library Service in Wales is required to carry out at least one survey each for adults, and children aged under 16 during the three years cycle of the Framework. Rhondda Libraries carried out an adult survey in 2022 and a children's survey in 2023. Some key results from this survey as reported in the 2022/2023 WPLS annual return are:

	Adult	Children
% who think the choice of books is 'Very Good' or 'Good'	94%	81%
% who think the IT facilities are 'Very Good' or 'Good'	83%	54%
% who think the library is 'Very Good' or 'Good'	99%	83%

The full survey results can be seen in Appendix 1.

## 11. Conclusion

- 11.1 RCT council is proud of its Library Service and the manner in which it adapted its services during the Covid pandemic and the hard work it's staff have carried out to return service delivery to pre-pandemic levels after the lifting of Covid restrictions.
- 11.2 It recognises that the Library Service faces a challenging future with funding levels dropping and increasing numbers of people visiting libraries including those in need visiting libraries looking for assistance and advice or to simply keep warm. These challenges may in the short-term lead to a drop in performance against the WPLS and against local targets.
- 11.3 This report informs members of the Strategic Culture and Arts Steering Group on the Library services performance within the Community and Children's Services group.

