



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Neath Port Talbot Annual Report 2013-14

Maintaining a Valued Service: The Fourth Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards

The year under review is the third, and final, year under the Welsh Government's fourth framework of Welsh Public Library Standards. The framework was operational for the three-year period from April 2011 to March 2014; its focus was on the maintenance of core library services in what was recognised as a challenging period for the public sector. Although the benchmarks and Standards set reflected a more limited approach than in previous frameworks, as indicated in the reports for the first two years of this framework, the Welsh Government was still seeking reassurance that Welsh library authorities were endeavouring to carry out their statutory responsibilities in the delivery of the core library service.

The requirements

Under the fourth framework of library standards, Welsh public library authorities were required to submit an Annual Return - reporting on performance against the framework's 9 Welsh Public Library Standards and 8 Welsh Public Library Performance Indicators. For the 2013-14 year, the authorities were asked to submit their returns by the end of May 2014, earlier than in previous years, in order to facilitate the work of the Public Libraries Review Panel established by the then Minister for Culture and Sport. The Welsh Government is grateful for the co-operation of Welsh library authorities in this regard. The Annual Returns were considered by a panel of assessors, including a peer review reference group, drawn from senior service managers in the sector, assisted by independent external expertise.

The authority's Annual Return for 2013-14, which was submitted by the authority in accordance with the stipulated requirements, has now been considered by the assessors.

This report - issued by CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales, the division of the Welsh Government with responsibility for administering the framework - represents the considered view of the assessors on the authority's performance in 2013-14.

The authority's scrutiny of performance and its response to the Welsh Government's previous assessment

The Annual Return indicates the detailed nature of the authority's scrutiny and consideration of the Welsh Government's previous report. It was discussed at various levels: initially with the Cabinet Member and Head of Service, then within the senior management team, and again at the appropriate Scrutiny Committee. Subsequently an action plan was drawn up by the County Librarian in order to respond to the issues raised by the assessors in their report. In addition a proposed reduction in the service's materials

fund was reconsidered as it was recognised that it would have a negative effect on the authority's work to achieve more of the Standards. A similar level of spending reductions was achieved by other means. The authority was also able to continue to increase its allocation to the materials fund in accordance with an agreement between itself and CyMAL arrived at some years ago. The library service continued to prioritise spending on materials for young users and added to the budget for Welsh language materials, and in both areas the impact was entirely beneficial and fully justified by user response.

This detailed approach to the scrutiny of reports and the subsequent formulation of an action plan to address issues raised by the assessors is commended as excellent practice. The regular review of performances within the service itself is also having a beneficial effect.

Evidence of service planning

Nevertheless, it is clear that this is a period of substantial change within the service, and even though no changes were made to the pattern and nature of provision during 2013-14, a number of major decisions were made during the year concerning future provision, the impact of which raises a number of issues. The authority has decided on a community provision model for a number of its service points, a model whose track record is largely unproven. As a result, the authority will have to consider which aspects of the service it will be able to include and report as part and parcel of its provision of a statutory service in future. The Welsh Government will be issuing guidance on the matter in due course following the deliberations of its Library Review Expert Panel. Defining the service could have major implications for the calculation of performance levels in future in very many of the Standards and Performance Indicators.

On a more micro management level, the authority has also taken various decisions regarding the manner in which it will draw on additional authority staffing expertise in future to compensate for past losses in the library service, but also to secure benefits from closer collaboration. It has also decided on operational matters such as improving the WiFi provision to make it more accessible and compatible with other learning and educational services. Future planning of this nature is encouraging and entirely appropriate as a method of meeting substantial challenges, but again, defining services and responsibility, as well as disaggregating expenditure and budgets for reporting and assessment purposes, could have major implications in future.

The Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS)

The authority's performance against the Welsh Public Library Standards during 2013-14 has been assessed as follows. The authority:

- Is achieving 7 of the 9 Welsh Public Library Standards. This is the same as in 2012-13, and is one more than in 2011-12, but there are changes within performance levels within certain Standards, usually for the better, which is a commendable performance overall.

In WPLS 1 (location of service points and access to them) provision remained the same, but as noted above, it will have changed significantly from April 2014, both within the authority itself and in terms of ceasing collaboration with a neighbouring authority. In WPLS 2 (services to users with special needs), provision remains at a very commendable level, characterised by collaboration with other corporate departments and external organisations and agencies. No changes were made to provision in WPLS 3 (opening

hours and delivery of scheduled services), so the authority continues to meet the requirements of the Standard up to March 2014.

ICT provision continues to remain within the requirements of the Standard (WPLS 4), and it is noted that the provision of WiFi facilities within all libraries will be further enhanced and developed.

Annual acquisitions of library materials (WPLS 5) have met the stipulated requirements both for adults and children in 2013-14 and throughout the framework, highlighting the value of a consistent and adequate budget allocation. Improved levels of expenditure on materials have also enabled the authority to meet the requirements of WPLS 7 (delivery of user requests), with performances improving consistently in respect of the most demanding target (section (a)) over the lifetime of the fourth framework.

The authority also meets all the requirements of WPLS 9 (buildings and space), and even though the surveys and audits of the buildings took place in 2010, the assessors decided to award the Standard in its entirety as they took place within the timescale indicated by the Standard. Under its new community library model the authority may have to calculate its space performance on a different basis in future, and there could be a significant decline in provision as a result.

- Is partly achieving the requirements of 1 Standard.

There has been a gradual and significant improvement in performance in WPLS 6 (annual expenditure on books and materials) throughout the fourth framework to the extent that the majority of the requirements are now being met. This can be directly attributed to increased allocations to the book fund and the protection and prioritisation accorded to the fund. However, the problems caused by historically low allocations cannot be solved immediately, and past shortcomings in investment levels are still affecting two performances in this Standard. The average overall expenditure on materials for adults falls below the target set in section 6(a), and historically low expenditure on Welsh language materials has also reduced the overall average performance in section (ii) (b). Both performances have improved, indeed as the Annual Return points out, the performance in section 6(a) indicates that the service has achieved this target for the very first time since the introduction of the assessment frameworks in 2002. This is a considerable achievement. It is also good to note that additional expenditure on Welsh language material has been followed by a significant increase in its use, which belies the often quoted excuse for lack of expenditure on such material, namely that there is no demand for it in many public libraries in Wales. The authority is to be commended for its work in this regard.

- Is failing to achieve the requirements of the remaining Standard (WPLS 8 staffing).

Both performances within this Standard fall some way below the targets set, and even though the Annual Return indicates how the authority is seeking to address the issue by adopting some innovative means to add some staffing capacity, involving collaboration and sharing resources, it is unlikely that the situation can be improved substantially, bearing in mind the financial challenges that lie ahead.

Overall

For the purpose of comparing performances with that of other Welsh public library

authorities, the average number of Standards being met by all authorities in 2013-14 was 6.5, the highest number achieved was 9, and the lowest 4. Neath Port Talbot's performance is therefore above average when compared with others in Wales.

The Welsh Public Library Performance Indicators (WPLPI)

The framework also asked library authorities to report against 8 Performance Indicators: many of these were comparable with figures reported under the third assessment framework (2008-11), and it was therefore possible for authorities to identify certain trends in service performances. The following table lists the authority's reported performances alongside Welsh average performances.

WPLPI	Authority Performance	Welsh average
1. Use (physical/virtual visits, attendance at events) of service (per 1,000 population)	6902	5635
2. User satisfaction levels		
(i) % of users who are 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the library service	99%	96%
(ii) % of adults who think the choice of books is 'very good', 'good', or 'adequate'	97%	96%
(iii) % of users under 16 who think the choice of books is 'very good', 'good', or 'adequate'	95%	98%
3. % take-up of public access PCs	48%	41%
4. Annual issues (per 1,000 population)	4194	4424
5. % of total authority library expenditure spent on the purchase of library stock	10.47%	12.90%
6. % of total authority revenue expenditure spent on the public library service	0.54%	0.90%
7. The % of total authority capital allocations expended on public library facilities in this year	Nil	0.56%
8. Net expenditure on public library provision (per 1,000 population)	£18,967	£16,341

These are encouraging performances on the whole. The total of visits to the authority's libraries has increased slightly (WPLPI 1) as has computer use (WPLPI 3) - attributed to ensuring that the facilities are modern and reliable, and issues are also on the increase (WPLPI 4), reversing both local and national trends. The service is probably correct in its view that this can be attributed to increased level of expenditure on library materials, particularly for young users and Welsh speakers. This provides more than adequate justification for the management's action plans.

Some of the financial performances convey a slightly different message in the data returned for WPLPI 5 to 8, where slight decreases are apparent. However, the Annual Return seeks to explain that accounting methods and expenditure levels in other parts of the authority tend to hide the fact that allocations and expenditure for the library service during the year have remained broadly the same compared to 2012-13.

Concluding remarks

Taking all the evidence into consideration, with a consistent total of Standards being achieved and better performances reported under many of the Indicators, it would appear that the authority is now providing its statutory library service in a more efficient and

effective manner.

It has certainly applied itself conscientiously and effectively to the challenge posed by the fourth assessment framework. Having identified the performance areas in need of attention, its subsequent action plans appear to have brought about the anticipated benefits, and overall the performance is commendable.

Only time will tell whether its more recent major decisions will have such beneficial outcomes.