

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
EDUCATION, SKILLS AND CULTURE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18th March 2021

REPORT OF HEAD OF TRANSFORMATION
ANDREW THOMAS

MATTER FOR INFORMATION

WARDS AFFECTED: All

Neath Port Talbot Library service – COVID 19 Update

Purpose of the Report

To provide Members with an update on the performance of the Library Service during COVID-19 and outline the support and range of services offered to residents.

Executive Summary

Neath Port Talbot Library Service has adapted and continued to operate during COVID 19, providing residents with a range of on line services and activities in addition to traditional book lending.

Background

On 17th March 2020 all Neath Port Talbot libraries, the mobile library and the home delivery service closed or stopped operating, in line with national restrictions. An overview of how the Service responded and adapted to continue delivering services to the residents of Neath Port Talbot and an assessment of user engagement follows.

Closure and Reopening

During the early stages of closure, a Service Recovery plan was developed in consultation with NPT Health & Safety unit, library staff, Unions, HR and Welsh Government to ensure that the safety of staff and the public would be of primary consideration at all times. Our libraries and mobile services remained closed until 22nd

June when a phased reopening, in line with Welsh Government guidelines, began with a Call and Collect service at Neath, Port Talbot and Pontardawe libraries. The home delivery service to our housebound users also resumed on this date.

Over the next two months Call and Collect services were introduced at Cwmafan and Glynneath libraries on the 27th July, on the Mobile Library on 3rd August and at Baglan, Sandfields and Skewen on the 17th August.

At the next stage in service recovery and in keeping within Welsh Government's revised guidelines Neath, Port Talbot and Pontardawe all reopened to offer limited access to stock and ICT on August 12th. Cwmafan and Glynneath followed on 14th September and Baglan, Sandfields and Skewen on 28th September.

Libraries continued to operate in this way until 21st December when new rules required closure to the public once again, but unlike in the spring of 2020, we have been able to carry on with our Call and Collect service at all our branch and mobile libraries and the Home Delivery Service has also continued to serve its members.

During this period of Call and Collect and restricted access library opening hours have been reduced at all libraries ranging from 16 to 27 hours, maintaining regular opening days and meeting demand. All libraries have been regularly supported and inspected by NPT Health & Safety together with the Health and Safety Executive to ensure full compliance with regulations. Library buildings have also been used to support a number of community initiatives.

Online Services

At the beginning of April the Service developed a programme of online events and activities for both adults and children that has continued to run to the present day. These activities have included live and recorded weekly song and rhyme sessions aimed at the very young, weekly storytimes for primary age children, participation in the Summer Reading Challenge, a programme of Adult Learners Week activities, working alongside National Library of Wales to promote an all Wales online reading group, a programme of events and activities to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day and a series of events to mark World Book Day on 4th

March which included special pre-recorded story sessions for schools. Over the last twelve months the Service has expanded its online presence to now include a YouTube channel in addition to its Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts.

The Library Service now plays a prominent role as a steering group member of the all-Wales Estyn Allan 2021 project, which is delivering high quality digital training skills to library staff across Wales and creating new and innovative digital events and activities.

In addition to the engagement activities outlined above the Service acted as the lead authority in Wales to secure an extra £250,000 funding from Welsh Government to enhance the provision and content of ebooks and other All Wales digital lending services at the start of the pandemic. An evaluation of the take up of e lending service can be found in the *Performance* section below.

Grant funding from Welsh Government has also been achieved to deliver a tablet lending scheme to library members, giving access to online resources with support from library staff. This project is still in its infancy so an evaluation is not yet possible. It is envisaged that the scheme will provide vital access to digital technology and online services for our residents who are unable to use the internet for whatever reason. It will be an essential support to our users where access to the library remains a barrier as we go through 2021.

On March 1st the library service launched PressReader, an online subscription service free to library members, providing access to over 6000 local and international newspapers and magazines.

Staff and Training

Senior library staff were all able to move to home working once libraries closed. Before developing the online programme they provided essential support to our many users and new members who were eager to access our e lending services.

Four members of library staff were redeployed to support the Track and Trace team, three of which have now returned to their substantive post. One other remains as a Team Leader. Other library staff volunteered to help support the communities of Neath Port Talbot with the delivery of food parcels and others supported residents with regular phone calls to library members who were isolated or living alone.

Staff have and are undertaking training to enhance their digital skills in partnership with Digital Communities Wales and as part of Estyn Allan 2020.

Service Developments

As stated in the Library Review of 2019 the Library Service had a number of development plans for 2020-21. The relocation of Library HQ/ELRS from Velindre to Ynsymaerdy was undertaken between August and November 2020. As well as relocating staff over 240,000 items of stock were also successfully transferred.

The new Mobile Library vehicle is now in operation. This allowed us to free up one of our other mobile libraries for use as the Immbulance by the local health board, creating a mobile vaccination centre for Neath Port Talbot.

The Service successfully bid for £45,000 of grant funding from Welsh Government's Cultural Resilience Fund. This funding means that we can plan for reopening and recovery in 2021 and to ensure that libraries are at the forefront of social and economic recovery from COVID-19. Libraries will play a vital role in bringing communities and generations back together and in delivering essential training opportunities to our residents.

Performance

All performance figures are made in comparisons with 2019 data.

The number of visits to made to libraries during the period of restricted access (August 12 to December 21) was 54,063. This is at 26% of what would normally be expected for the same period.

Loans of books at 59,939 is at 39% of 2019 performance. Call and Collect has provided over 4,000 book bags to our members since June. These bags were a popular choice for children during the Summer Reading Challenge and especially during the present lockdown as it provides them with much needed access to books when most were away from the classroom.

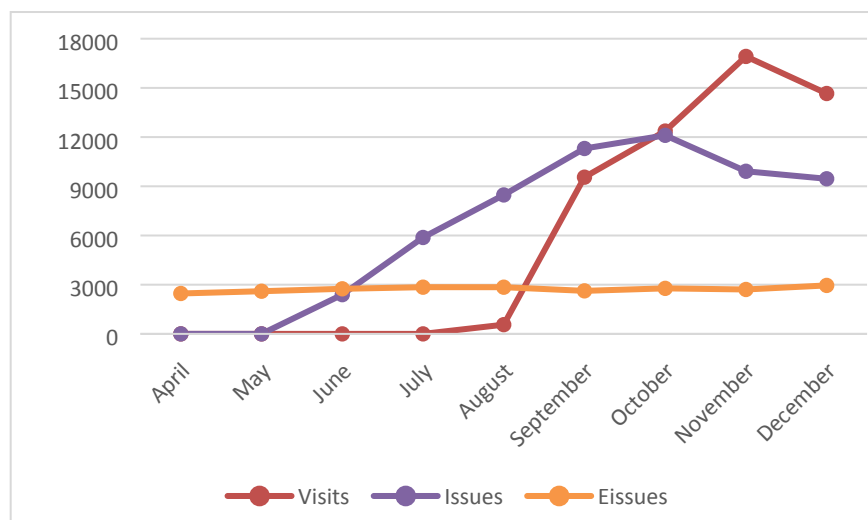
The mobile library has continued to operate since the service resumed in August and its delivery/collection service is running at 45% of its usual performance.

Over the course of the pandemic our e lending services have, as expected, grown quite significantly.

Comparing the period April to November 2020 with the same period in 2019 shows the following:

- Eaudio loans have increased by 128% to 9041
- Ebook loans have increased by 95% to 12577
- The number of active users has increased by 78% to 558

Chart shows the monthly figures in terms of Physical Visits, Physical Issues and E issues from April 2020 to December 2020.



Community Libraries

The library service has continued to provide support to the network of Community libraries by offering advice and guidance on regulations and information on grant funding to support recovery. Blaengwynfi, Briton Ferry and Taibach have all received grants to support service recovery and enhance services.

Financial Impacts:

No Implications

Integrated Impact Assessment:

There is no requirement to undertake an Integrated impact Assessment as this report is for information purposes.

Valleys Communities impacts:

No Implications

Workforce Impacts:

No Implications

Legal Impacts:

No implications

Risk Management Impacts:

No implications

Consultation:

There is no requirement for external consultation on this item to Include the full consultation report as an appendix.

Recommendation:

That the information presented in this Report be noted.

Reasons for Proposed Decision

Matter for information. No decision required.

Appendices

None

List of Background Papers

None

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