

Welsh Public Library Standards 2017-2020: Blaenau Gwent (Aneurin Leisure Trust)

Annual Assessment Report 2019/20

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

1 Executive summary

Blaenau Gwent met all of the 12 core entitlements in full.

Of the 9 quality indicators which have targets, Blaenau Gwent achieved 7 in full, 1 in part and did not achieve 1.

Library services in Blaenau Gwent are delivered by the Aneurin Leisure Trust on behalf of the local authority, and are noted as a key component in both the local authority and Trust's service delivery plans. The service continues to be reliant on staff from other areas of the Trust, council and partner organisations to help deliver services. The future resilience of the service remains a concern. 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 staff within the service remain a strength with a strong focus on staff training, reflected by the fact that 99% of customers think the standard of customer care is good or very good although staffing levels remain critically low. The service scores well for impact and making a difference to people's lives. It is pleasing to see the modest increase in book fund, led to an increase in loans and active borrowers and the percentage reporting that they felt the choice of books was good or very good. The impact of the new review undertaken in 2019 is not clear, but it is essential in any future planning that staffing and resources levels are appropriate to ensure the service is able to meet its statutory duties.

- The percentage of adults who experience the library as an enjoyable safe and inclusive space remains high.
- There has been a dramatic increase in electronic downloads, which has increased by 130%, only some of which can partly be attributed to the impact of Covid-19 in the last couple of weeks and month of the reporting period.
- Aggregate annual opening hours have increased by 20% since 2018/19, but remain below the median in Wales.
- Overall staff numbers have decreased slightly in 2019/20 and it is noted that this is as a result of accommodating staff requests for flexible retirement. The overall target for staff per capita is not achieved and remains amongst the lowest in Wales and a cause of concern.
- The service launched 'fines free' in March 2020 and this new approach to borrowing has the potential to remove barriers and increase membership and positively impact on a more equal Wales.

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. The assessment has been limited to some degree by the fact that local authorities were only asked to comment on any changes to the previous year's return, alongside additional commentary on of partially/not met core entitlements.

2.1 Core entitlements

Blaenau Gwent continues to meet all 12 of the Core Entitlements in full.

2.2 Quality indicators with targets

There are 16 quality indicators (QIs), of which ten have constituent targets. Due to the impact of Covid-19, three quality indicators have been removed for the 2019/20 reporting year, five, six and fifteen, of which number six had a constituent target. Of the **nine** remaining targets for 2019-20, Blaenau Gwent achieved 7 in full, 1 in part and did not achieve 1 of the indicators.

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 scheme	√	
iii) Designated health & well-being collection	√	
iv) Information about healthy lifestyles and behaviours	√	
v) Signposting to health & well-being services	√	
QI 7 Location of service points	√	Met in full
QI 9 Up-to-date and appropriate reading material		Not met
Acquisitions per capita	x	
<u>or</u> Materials spend per capita	x	
QI 10 Welsh Language Resources		Met in full
% of material budget spent on Welsh	√	
<u>or</u> 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		Met in full
a) % of requests satisfied within 7 days	√	
b) % of requests satisfied within 15 days	√	
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	√	
QI 16 Opening hours per capita	√	Met in full

Blaenau Gwent has maintained its performance in this third year of the sixth framework, with an improvement in Welsh Language resources in 2019/20.

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 are only required to carry out user surveys for QI 1 once over the three-year period of the framework. However, this measure has been affected by Covid-19 and some authority plans to undertake a survey in the first quarter of 2020 were cancelled. The summary figures (lowest, median and highest) are therefore based on those authorities indicating they completed their user survey during framework 6. Rankings reflect the numbers of authorities, where 1 is the highest scoring authority.

Blaenau Gwent completed both its adult and children's user surveys in November 2019.

Performance indicator		Rank	Lowest	Median	Highest
Q1 1 Making a difference					
b) % of young people who think that the library helps them learn and find things out:	94%	=5/19	60%	89%	97%
e) % of adults who think that the library has made a difference to their lives:	99%	1/19	41%	85%	99%

Authorities are also asked to provide up to four case studies describing the impact which the library service has had on an individual or on a group of individuals during the year. Blaenau Gwent provided four such case studies, alongside wider feedback from users:

- Visually Impaired Group – An art session for visually impaired members. This activity was organised in response to customer feedback from home delivery customers. This was a successful event resulting in a positive impact on the wellbeing of those involved.
- Toddler Group at Ebbw Vale Library – these sessions encourage children and families of all ages to join in a story session in the library. These sessions help foster a love of books and reading. These free sessions also provide parents with a range of techniques to encourage reading at home.
- Support for digitally excluded residents – libraries play a very important role in supporting those individuals who are digitally excluded. This initiative demonstrates how libraries support the needs of their communities by reducing social inequalities and providing support for the most vulnerable in a variety of areas, ranging from bus pass applications to housing benefit.
- Jobseeker gaining employment – Blaina Library offers a job club on a regular basis. A library member considers that the library supported his job search which resulted in him finding employment. The library service plays a key role in enabling people to find appropriate jobs and learning opportunities, in a relaxed and friendly environment.

2.4 Quality indicators and benchmarks

Whilst Covid-19 restrictions remain challenging to all library services in Wales, staff resilience, professionalism and care for the community they serve has been outstanding. Although digital services have increased, we know from evidence provided that customers are missing their library services. They are missing the staff, browsing the shelves, IT provision, community spaces and groups such as knit and knatter. The importance of the library as a physical place and the impact on the wellbeing of their customers through interaction with library staff cannot be underestimated.

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 2019/20. 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 to some authorities. Figures from the first and second years of the sixth framework or relevant previous surveys have also been included for comparison. Indicators 'per capita' are calculated per 1,000 population unless otherwise noted.

Performance indicator	Rank	Lowest	Median	Highest	2017/18	
QI 1 Making a difference					[Framework 5]	
a) % of adults who think that using the library has helped them develop new skills	91%	=2/18	25%	75%	94%	90%
c) health and well-being	70%	9/19	38%	69%	96%	94%
d) enjoyable, safe and inclusive	99%	=2/19	90%	96%	100%	98%
QI 2 Customer satisfaction					[Framework 6]	
a) 'very good' or 'good' choice of books	91%	=7/18	78%	91%	99%	88%
b) 'very good' or 'good' customer care	99%	=3/18	88%	97%	100%	99%
c) 'very good' or 'good' IT facilities	91%	=5/17	65%	85%	99%	N/A
d) 'very good' or 'good' overall	98%	=5/18	85%	96%	100%	98%
e) users aged 16 & under rating out of ten	9.3	= 7/19	8.0	9.1	9.5	9.4
QI 8 Library use ¹						
a) visits per capita	4380	5/22	2429	3987	6874	4234
b) virtual visits per capita	395	19/22	239	909	2131	353
c) active borrowers per capita	86	20/22	78	145	244	80
QI 10 Welsh issues per capita ²	311	22/22	311	680	1468	95
QI 11 Online access						
b) Computers per 10,000	9	11/22	4	9	14	9
c) % of available time used by the public	35%	4/22	14%	30%	64%	33%
QI 14 Operational expenditure						
a) total expenditure per capita	£8,513	18/22	£7,260	£12,448	£23,333	£8,610
b) % on staff,	69%	7/22	48%	61%	76%	73%
% on information resources	9%	=18/22	5%	13%	22%	8%
% on equipment and buildings	6%	10/22	0%	8%	28%	8%
% on other operational costs	16%	=11/22	1%	18%	35%	11%
c) capital expenditure per capita	£0	22/22	£0	£1,567	£13,027	£0
QI 16 Opening hours ³						
(iii) a) % hours unplanned closure of static service points	0.00%	=1/22	0.00%	0.23%	3.96%	0.00%
b) % mobile stops / home deliveries missed	0.00%	=1/22	0.00%	1.07%	5.41%	0.00%

¹ figures for co-located services are marked with an asterisk; performances for these services are likely to reflect higher footfall, and will not therefore be directly comparable with stand-alone library provision ²per 1,000 Welsh speaking resident population

³Rankings here have been reversed, so that 1 is the lowest scoring (best performing) authority

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, and compares this performance with the first and second year of the sixth framework (2017/18 and 2018/19).

3.1 Meeting customer needs (QI 1-5) ⁱ

Blaenau Gwent completed its adult and children's user survey for QI 1 and QI 2 in November 2019. Although there has been a decrease in the ratings for how the service supports health and wellbeing for adults, there has been little change in other areas. The 24% drop in adults "who have found helpful information for health and well-being at the Library" can be attributed to the fact that a dedicated Macmillan Information support officer was based in the Service during the previous framework which is no longer the case,

although the service still has a strong commitment to health and wellbeing. The service continues to provide a wide range of activities for all ages.

3.2 Access and use (QI 6-8) ⁱⁱ

Library usage has also been impacted by the closure of all libraries on March 20th 2020 due to Covid-19. Blaenau Gwent continues to meet the target for easy access to service points. Library usage has steadily increased since 2017/18, and the number of active borrowers has increased by 7% since 2018/19, despite a decrease of 10% in the total number of library members per capita. The service notes that this may be due to a membership data cleanse. An improvement in the materials budget has impacted positively in this area.

As noted in 2018/19, Blaenau Gwent's performance in relation to children's book issues remains amongst the lowest per capita in Wales. While book issues for children have decreased, Blaenau Gwent has continued to see an increase in the number of adult book issues with a 15% increase since 2017/18, possibly from an increase in the book fund.

There has been an increase in electronic downloads, which has increased by 57% since 2018/19, which can partly be attributed to the impact of Covid-19. The increased usage of social media can also be seen as having an impact in this area.

3.3 Facilities and services (QI 9-12) ⁱⁱⁱ

The materials budget has increased slightly in 2019/20, alongside the figure for overall acquisitions, although neither target is met. The return noted that recently acquired stock was due to be added to the system when libraries were shut in March 2020, and as a result this stock did not feature in the reported figures. Blaenau Gwent is one of seventeen authorities who have not met the acquisitions target (QI 9) in 2019/20. The number of Welsh issues per capita have increased considerably since 2018/19, which is a positive development. The levels of investment in the materials budget still remain amongst the lowest in Wales and a cause of concern.

Blaenau Gwent remains at the median level for the number of computer devices available to the public, with recorded ICT usage still amongst the top quartile in Wales.

The service continues to achieve the targets for supply of requests and as a partner in the regional inter-lending Scheme, Books4U, works collaboratively with partners to continue to promote and develop this service to ensure customers are able to access the resources they need.

3.4 Expertise and capacity (QI 13-16) ^{iv}

Overall staff numbers have decreased slightly in 2019/20 and it is noted that this is as a result of accommodating staff requests for flexible retirement. The overall target for staff per capita is not achieved and remains amongst the lowest in Wales. The total number of staff identified as holding recognised qualifications has remained the same and remains an area of concern.

However, there is a comprehensive, uniform offer across all service points, and services are tailored to address the needs within communities.

Total revenue expenditure has gradually increased by just over 3% since 2017/18, with expenditure per capita below the median level. Aggregate annual opening hours have increased by 20% since 2018/19 as home delivery hours have been included and the target has been met, but remains below the median in Wales. Blaenau Gwent did not report any unstaffed opening hours, unplanned closures of static service points or missed home deliveries during 2019/20.

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 well on a range of services relevant to the goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

The Service demonstrated its commitment to a prosperous Wales through its continuing partnership with NatWest Bank, providing users with support with their financial needs. Together with job clubs, there is a pro-active approach to meeting the educational needs of the community. New partners include a local charity, Hospice of the Valleys. This organisation will help the service deliver the health and wellbeing offer in libraries. This initiative, together with dementia cafes and Reading Well for mental health contributes to the achievement of a healthier Wales.

The service's contribution in other areas, including energy and environmental issues, loneliness and social isolation, digital inclusion, and Welsh language and cultural activity are noted as positive indicators of achieving the goals outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

5 Future direction

Reporting on the authority's future direction and plans for the library service over the following year, it is noted that the wider vision for the service is laid out in the Library Strategy (2018-19). A commitment to explore the potential for further co-location of services was highlighted in previous years, but this hasn't been fully realised.

Blaenau Gwent's commitment to partnership working is a key factor in enabling the library service to achieve its vision:

"Improving people's life opportunities, inspiring and enriching lives by providing high quality library services which are relevant and accessible to all".

The service continues to achieve this vision with a variety of initiatives and schemes in place.

Partnership working is a strength of the service, but it is essential that adequate levels of investment enable sufficient capacity to build on these partnership for the benefit of local communities. The beneficial impact on people's lives which the service already achieves could be increased with greater resources. The service launched 'fines free' in March 2020 and this new approach to borrowing has the potential to remove barriers and increase membership and positively impact on a more equal Wales.

6 Conclusion

Library services in Blaenau Gwent are delivered by the Aneurin Leisure Trust on behalf of the local authority, and are noted as a key component in both the local authority and

Trust's service delivery plans. The service continues to be reliant on staff from other areas of the Trust, council and partner organisations to help deliver services. The future resilience of the service remains a concern. 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 staff within the Service remain a strength with a strong focus on staff training, reflected by the fact that 99% of customers think the standard of customer care is good or very good although staffing levels remain critically low. The service scores well for impact and making a difference to people's lives. It is pleasing to see the modest increase in book fund, led to an increase in loans and active borrowers and the percentage reporting that they felt the choice of books was good or very good. The impact of the review undertaken in 2019 is not clear, but it is essential in any future planning that staffing and resource levels are appropriate to ensure the Service is able to meet its statutory duties.

ⁱ Due to Covid-19, local authorities were only asked to report any change in provision since the last reporting year for Q1 3&4

ⁱⁱ Due to Covid-19, Q1 5&6 were removed for the 2019/20 reporting year

ⁱⁱⁱ E-resources purchased through centrally-funded subscriptions have been included in the acquisitions figures for Q1 9 in 2019/20. Each authority has added 201 to their total acquisitions from centrally funded subscriptions. CIPFA Statistics Returns continue to include figures for centrally-procured resources.

^{iv} Due to Covid-19, Q1 15 was removed for the 2019/20 reporting year, alongside training and volunteer hours.