

Maintaining a Valued Service

The Fourth Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards

The year under review is the second under the Welsh Government's Fourth Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards. The Framework is operational for a three-year period from April 2011 to March 2014; its focus is on the maintenance of core library services in what is recognised as a challenging period for the public sector. The benchmarks and Standards set by this Framework reflect a more limited approach than in the past as the Welsh Government's assessment for the 2011-12 year indicated, but the Government is still seeking reassurance that Welsh public library authorities are endeavouring to carry out their statutory responsibilities in the delivery of the core library service.¹

The requirements

Welsh public library authorities are 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 – in early summer each year. This is considered by a panel of assessors, including a peer review reference Group, drawn from among senior service managers in the sector, assisted by independent external expertise.

The authority's Annual Return for 2012-13, 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 2012-13.

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

The 2012-13 Annual Return indicates with commendable clarity the manner in which the authority responded to the Welsh Government's report on the authority's work in 2011-12. It gives particular attention to the three main issues identified as needing consideration, namely supporting the completion of the modernisation programme (primarily refurbishing existing buildings but providing new facilities when possible), ensuring adequate levels of future investment in the books and materials fund, and the current levels of professional staffing.

¹ Further information on the Welsh Public Library Standards performance assessment framework is available in the Framework document, *Maintaining a Valued Service*, and its accompanying guide, *How good is your public library service*, which are available online at: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchiveslibraries/cymal/libraries/wpls/wpls201114/?lang=en>

The authority responded by making resources available to the service that should enable it to complete its programme of modernisation by 2014 and by identifying additional funding for new posts within the service (5.2 FTE). It is of course a matter for the authority and the managers of the library service to decide how the posts are designated and deployed, but they should give due regard to any shortfall in respect of the stipulations of the staffing Standard in the Framework (WPLS 8).

The issue of securing higher levels of investment in the materials fund appears to be a matter yet to be fully resolved, but there is reference in the Annual Return to the fact that the authority intends to continue to spend on materials at levels above the minima stipulated by the Standards, subject to any constraints so far unidentified. The Welsh Government would therefore continue to urge the authority to review this matter on a continuing basis so that the new facilities to be opened during 2013 and 2014 are able to offer their communities an appropriate and attractive range of collections and materials that match the quality of the work undertaken on the refurbishment and modernisation of the library buildings.

Evidence of service planning

The Annual Return for 2012-13 underlines the coherence of the approach adopted by the authority and its library service to service planning. The authority has a Five Year Development Plan which comes to an end in 2014, and work is to commence on a future strategy to succeed that Plan during 2013. The authority is also able to point to the manner in which it has delivered its ambitious Development Plan, and the effective manner in which it has funded its key components. Service planning and achieving targets and goals set within that process, work efficiently within the authority.

The Welsh Government's reports on performances are effectively utilised as part of the planning and service delivery processes, and there is a clear link between service and corporate priorities and agendas. There is an equally clear link to primary national and regional agendas, with a strong element of collaboration and co-operation in the delivery of service enhancements.

The Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS)

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

Is currently meeting 6 of the 9 Welsh Public Library Standards – the same level of achievement, and in the same areas of assessment, as in 2011-12. Within the maintenance of the overall level of performance, there are however some changes in respect of performances in certain Standards.

A recent review of the data relating to occupied households confirms that the authority is providing high levels of accessibility to its libraries for its communities (WPLS 1), and even though two libraries were closed during the year under review, the service for the communities affected has either been reinstated or is under consideration at the present time. The authority sustains its impressive list of specialist

services to those users with particular needs (WPLS 2), and it is noted that a review of the provision of assistive technology is under consideration. In WPLS 3 (opening hours) there has been a decline compared to 2011-12, partially as a result of library closures at two locations, but also due to the increase in the authority's population.

In both WPLS 5 (acquisitions) and WPLS 6 (expenditure on stock), while the authority more than meets the minima for performances set by the Standard, and by some margin, a decline in performance has been caused by expenditure reductions. Nevertheless, the authority should meet the target set for March 2014 in terms of the book and materials fund, and should be commended for sustaining its levels of achievement. Performances against WPLS 7 (delivery of requests) have also been maintained.

Is partly meeting the requirements of the remaining 3 Welsh Public Library Standards.

When the authority completes its programme of installing WiFi at its larger service points by the end of 2013, it will meet all the requirements of WPLS 4 (ICT); a welcome development.

In WPLS 8 the position has been affected to an extent by the rise in population within the authority, but professional staffing levels still fall slightly below the stipulated requirements; there is the possibility that the situation could improve by March 2014 should current recruitment and restructuring proposals be implemented.

In WPLS 9 (buildings and space) there has been a small decline in the total aggregate space made available in the libraries due to recent closures. However, the completion of current projects and the reinstatement of services for communities that saw the recent closure of their libraries, should ensure that the authority is very close to the indicative target set for this Standard by March 2014. The quality of provision in terms of developing modern and attractive libraries created as a result of the 10 -year development plan, is to be commended.

For the purpose of comparing performance with that of other Welsh public library authorities, the average number of Standards being met by all authorities in 2012-13 was 6, the highest number achieved was 8, and the lowest 3. Caerphilly's performance is therefore comparable 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 are comparable with figures reported under the third framework (2008-11), and it is therefore possible for authorities to identify certain trends in service performances. In its Annual Return for 2012-13 the authority has provided very clear and helpful self-assessment and analysis of performances. It provides reassurance that the library service has a clear understanding of its performances and of the factors that affect them – both positive and negative.

The following table lists the authority's reported performances alongside Welsh average performances. The authority should reflect on these comparisons, and on the assessors' comments below, in its intended review of services under its scrutiny procedures.

WPLPI		Authority Performance	Welsh Average
1	Use (physical / virtual visits, attendance at events) of service (per 1,000 population)	5012	5754
3	% take-up of public access PCs	23%	40.14%
4	Annual issues (per 1,000 population)	3605	4516
5	% of total authority library expenditure spent on the purchase of library stock	10.73%	13.16%
6	% of total authority revenue expenditure spent on the public library service	1.28%	0.91%
7	% total authority capital allocations spent on public library facilities	4.27%	0.42%
8	Net expenditure on public library provision (per 1,000 population)	£21035	£

Levels of use (WPLPI 1) are significantly higher than 2011-12, which vindicates the authority's development work and the significant levels of investment made in the recent past. Performances against WPLPI 2, which requires surveys to be undertaken during the course of the Framework, will be fully considered in the final year, but it is noted that Caerphilly has completed the necessary surveys. These indicate that public satisfaction is very high, again providing reassurance that the authority's communities are responding to service enhancements and to the additional services developed.

Other performances are however less encouraging – issues are declining for example (WPLPI 4), but it is appropriate that the authority should analyse performances in detail, as there are service points that are improving their performances within this context. Similarly while the use of ICT appears to have remained the same (WPLPI 3), the Annual Return provides a strong and detailed analysis of levels of actual ICT use, showing that use by adults is markedly increasing. The role of the library service is crucial in respect of addressing many of the authority's corporate priorities in this area, as well as of the Welsh Government in addressing digital exclusion.

Expenditure on books and materials as a percentage of total expenditure (WPLPI 5) has fallen slightly, but only because there is substantial additional expenditure overall. That investment is reflected in the higher capital allocations made to the library service (WPLPI 7). The other Performance Indicators relating to expenditure on providing a library service show notable increases – a higher percentage of the authority's revenue expenditure has been allocated to libraries, and there is a significant increase in net expenditure on public library provision (WPLPI 8).

These are highly commendable performances at this time. It is noted however that there was a significantly higher central recharge made on the library service during 2012-13

The manner in which the library service and the authority intends to further investigate and analyse these performances shows an appropriate response to the purpose and value of the Welsh Public Library Performance Indicators.

Concluding remarks

The authority should see much of the impact and outcomes of its Development Plan and sustained investment in library buildings bearing fruit in the next couple of years, and the assessors are of the opinion that the authority could achieve the requirements of most, if not all, of the Welsh Public Library Standards by March 2014. Bearing in mind the circumstances, particularly the financial constraints within which public library authorities are working, that would be a significant achievement.