

How good is your public library service?

A summary guide to the performance measurement and assessment framework for public libraries in Wales



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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The public library service in Wales

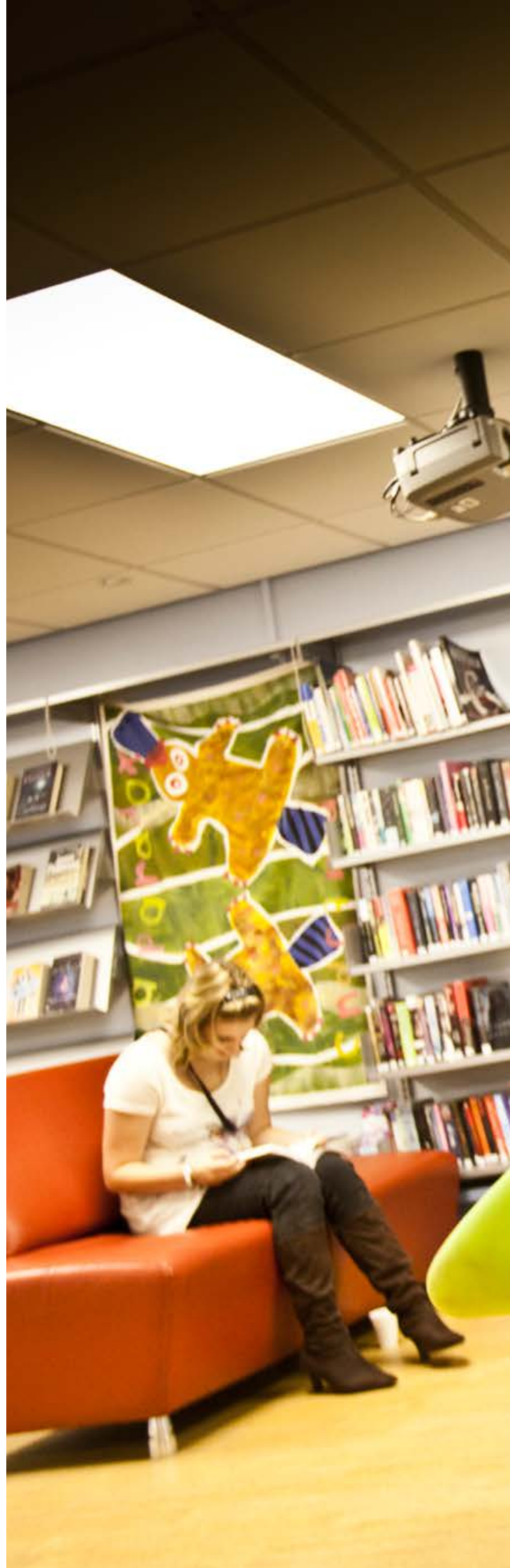
This is a short explanatory guide for local authorities, who have legal and strategic responsibilities for delivering public library services in Wales, and for residents who may be users of library services. It outlines the local authority's responsibilities, and explains how the Welsh Government assesses the performance of library services as part of its on-going programme of improving public services.

Providing a public library service free of charge at the point of use is a long and honourable tradition in Wales. Public libraries promote community-based opportunities and learning of all kinds, encourage social and economic advancement and support a wide variety of group and individual activities. Libraries are relevant to all ages, needs and interests. The library service is one of the most popular and valuable services provided by local authorities, and residents respond vociferously to any decline in the provision and quality of that service.

Core services

The core aspects of a library service are:

- providing suitable and appropriate access to the service (both the buildings and on-line);
- providing services for those in society with particular needs (special materials, special equipment and special delivery services);
- providing a suitable range of reading and information materials in traditional and new formats reflecting community languages and the requirements of different age groups;
- ensuring that levels of investment are adequate in materials, staff and buildings;
- ensuring that responding to users' views and needs is properly reflected in the ways the service is managed and developed.





Measuring quality – how good is your library?

Each library authority in Wales has a statutory duty under the *Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964* to deliver a 'comprehensive and efficient' service to its residents. This can be measured in a number of ways, including feedback from library users – are they getting what they want, within a reasonable time, by the most suitable means and at convenient and accessible service points?

In addition, local authorities and residents must ensure that they are getting good value for money from their services. This can be measured, for example, by comparing performances between authorities. Information such as the number of users and the number of loans, visits and requests made by members of the public is compared in relation to the level of investment made in the service by each local authority.

The quality framework

The Welsh Government has statutory responsibility for the public library service in Wales. It has been gathering information and monitoring performance since 2002, when it issued its first framework of Welsh public library standards. The framework aims to provide a more consistent level of service throughout Wales and identify user entitlements clearly.

Regular reviews of the framework have been undertaken, and the quality indicators updated to reflect changes to the ways in which public library services are used and delivered. The current framework is the fifth, and will apply from April 2014 to March 2017.

Library services contribute to a range of Welsh Government outcomes such as literacy, skills and learning, digital inclusion, poverty, health and well-being. Library provision spans these outcomes, offering a range of services which often support two or more of the outcomes simultaneously. The new quality framework has therefore been themed around four core service aspects:

- customers and communities;
- access for all;
- learning for life; and
- leadership and development.

Each aspect has a number of core entitlements and quality indicators associated with it, and has been linked to wider government agendas. The desired outcome of the fifth framework is that libraries offer all the services and facilities listed as core entitlements. In order to assess the quality of these services and facilities, a range of performance indicators and outcome-based impact measures are described, to show how people are better off as a result of using the library service.

The quality indicators have been defined using statistics already being collected as far as possible, and in accordance with international standards. In some cases (for example, the provision of up-to-date reading material), targets have been set, based on an appropriate comparative level of performance across Wales, which library authorities will be expected to achieve over a three year period. In others (for example, customer satisfaction), targets are not appropriate, and comparison to previous years will monitor improvements in services.

What is expected of library authorities?

Because library services are the responsibility of local authorities, they should reflect local priorities, even though they are delivered within a statutory context. Libraries will not necessarily be able to achieve the top levels of performance in all areas, but are expected to achieve as many of the targets as possible and to seek improvements in those areas where performances are weaker. Authorities should also compare their performances with others in Wales and share best practice in order to bring about improvements.

In addition, local authorities are asked specifically to consider and ensure that their library services contribute fully to the achievement of overall corporate aims, and that they are always linked to various key local, regional and national policy agendas and work programmes.

How is performance assessed?

There are three contributors to the assessment process:

- the public, who respond to user surveys on the basis of their experience of the service, and who should have access to published reports about their library services;
- the library authority, which is required to scrutinise the performances of the library service and consider the assessment provided by the Welsh Government; and
- The Welsh Government.

Library authorities submit an annual return in early summer each year to the Welsh Government, noting performances against the core entitlements and quality indicators for the previous year. The Welsh Government uses a panel of assessors from local government, with the support of other experts, to consider the returns. Library authorities are given written feedback reports containing independent opinion, assessment and advice in the autumn of each year; these reports are also published on the CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales web pages, and are available to members of the public.

What happens next?

Library authorities are asked to consider the feedback reports (according to local 'scrutiny' practices) and to address any weaknesses identified. They can do this by taking steps such as making additional investment, re-directing finance or by adopting more effective and efficient management practices.

If the Welsh Government has concerns about any library service, for example if appropriate action is not taken and quality continues to fall, there are a number of further steps which could be taken:

- An authority that does not perform to a satisfactory level can be offered assistance in the form of advice to carry out an agreed improvement programme.
- Disregarding advice or responding inadequately to the requirements could mean exclusion from the extra funding made available to public library services by the Welsh Government.
- Ultimately, the Welsh Government can remove the power to run a library service from a library authority, for example if performance against the quality indicators remains poor, and public discontent becomes apparent.



What has been the effect of setting standards for library services?

Since 2002, local authorities in Wales have responded to the challenges, and improvements have been recorded in all library services. Some authorities have made more progress than others, according to particular circumstances. It has not been considered necessary to invoke any of the actions noted in the three points above. There have been significant overall improvements in the levels of investment in materials, in the provision of information technology, in buildings and opening hours in many authorities. Many library services have also adopted improved methods of delivering services. Public opinion of library services continues to remain high throughout Wales.

The authorities that have made the most significant progress are those that have increased the levels of investment in their library services, particularly in the purchasing fund for books and information resources and in equipment and buildings, and who have also improved their approach to the management of services. This combination of approaches has had beneficial effects on performances. The challenge for the next three years is not only to maintain levels of service in a climate of public spending cuts, but to continue to improve service quality and the benefits it brings to the people of Wales.



The role of CyMAL: Museums and Archives and Libraries Wales

CyMAL is the Welsh Government's policy division for public library services. It advises the Minister for Culture and Sport on policy matters as well as providing advice and support to the library sector. It provides Welsh Government grant funding to library services for innovative projects, including modernisation of library buildings. It also has a role to support and develop library standards, expertise and skills. CyMAL's staff and representatives also advise local authorities and other interest groups on public library services and on the quality framework of Welsh public library standards.

Further information

Information about the framework of Welsh public library standards is available on the CyMAL web pages:

www.wales.gov.uk/cymal