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The Service User Perspective – the Library Service – **Conwy County Borough Council**

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Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised Sabel Wiliam, Charlotte Owen, Andy Bruce, Gwilym Bury and Jeremy Evans directed by Huw Rees.

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Summary report

- 1 When using library services, as for many local government services, users do not have a choice of service provider. As there is no alternative service provider, the ability of service users to influence services relies on ‘voice’ rather than ‘choice’. This means that ensuring the views of service users are heard is important when designing and delivering services and interventions aimed at meeting people’s needs.
- 2 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places a requirement on local authorities and other public bodies to have regard for the sustainable development principle and the five ways of working that define it. ‘Involvement’ is one of the five ways of working identified in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- 3 The Welsh Government’s Local Government White Paper also highlights the importance of working in partnership with citizens:

‘We want to develop a more equal partnership with citizens. The role of public services should be to support people to live independent lives and to seek to de-escalate demand, intervening only when necessary and only for as long as required. In doing so, the focus inevitably shifts to prevention and a public service that is able to put more effort into helping people to avoid crisis, rather than one which is focused on supporting people in crisis. This is about creating prudent public services for the future.’¹
- 4 In 2017-18, the Wales Audit Office completed work to understand the ‘service user perspective’ at every council within Wales. We followed a broadly similar approach at each council but agreed the specific focus and approach to the work individually. In Conwy County Borough Council (the Council) we reviewed the library service. In particular, whether the Council was using the experiences and aspirations of service users to inform the design and delivery of services.
- 5 Although we could not speak with all library users, we surveyed a sample of service users, in January 2018, to help us understand their perspective. We spoke to 50 people during visits to Conwy area library, Llanfairfechan community library, and the mobile library in Deganwy.
- 6 This information, as well as data on performance and service standards, informed our discussions with the Council. These discussions took place during January and February 2018. This helped us understand the Council’s rationale for the changes to the library service, and how the Council approaches and responds to the needs and expectations of service users.
- 7 We found that **most service users are happy with the quality and accessibility of their local library, and the Council makes good use of the views of people to modernise the service.** We came to this conclusion because:

¹ Welsh Government, **White Paper Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed**, January 2017.

- the Council makes good use of the views of people to modernise the library service;
- the Council has improved standards and service users are very satisfied with the quality of the library service; and
- People can access library services easily.

Proposals for improvement

- 8 There are no proposals for improvement.

Detailed report

Most service users are happy with the quality and accessibility of their local library, and the Council makes good use of the views of people to modernise the service

The Council makes good use of the views of people to modernise the library service

- 9 The Council engaged widely with stakeholders on its library modernisation programme and there is evidence of the library service adapting its proposals in response to feedback. For example, in 2011, the Council consulted on proposed changes to the library service, using the results to help shape its library modernisation strategy. Stakeholder feedback also prompted the Council to reconsider proposals to close a number of small libraries in the county and, after researching alternative options, the Council transferred five small libraries to the community.
- 10 More recently, the Council has engaged extensively on a proposed new Culture Hub in Conwy. The consultation process used a variety of methods to target a diverse range of people, including youth groups and people with protected characteristics and access issues. Because of the feedback received, the Council altered the design of the proposed new building and is using suggestions from the public to develop the types of activities that will take place in the Hub. The Council shared the results of the consultation, and its response to the issues raised, in a Culture Hub newsletter. Future editions of the newsletter will continue to update interested parties on recent developments to the Culture Hub.
- 11 The Council also engages with library users on an ongoing basis. Following a review of usage patterns, the library service consulted users on proposed changes to opening hours, with library users able to vote for their preferred option. The library service also surveys its users every three years to gain feedback on performance, and insight into the priorities of library users².
- 12 The library staff we spoke to have a good understanding of the needs of library users. Through their daily interactions with users, staff receive regular feedback and opinions. This provides a useful and informal conduit of information between library users and the service and complements the comments boxes available in libraries and the online comments facility on the Council website. We saw examples of the library service responding positively to requests from users; amending mobile library stop locations, for example. Library staff also attend local

² The survey is undertaken as part of the requirements of the Welsh Public Library Standards.

events to promote the library service and speak to members of the public, including non-library users.

The Council has improved standards and service users are very satisfied with the quality of the library service

- 13 The Council's library modernisation programme has successfully raised standards and the Welsh Government has endorsed the quality of the library service in Conwy. The Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) measure the performance of library services across Wales. In 2010-11, they described the Council's performance against the standards as weak, prompting the Council's modernisation strategy. However, the latest WPLS annual report³ states that the Council is meeting all the core entitlements and is currently the only council in Wales to achieve all of the quality indicators with targets.
- 14 Our survey with service users also showed that people are very satisfied with the quality of the library service:
 - One hundred per cent of the people we spoke to were happy with the library services that they use; and
 - Fifty-six per cent of the people we spoke to thought that the library service was the same as it was three years ago. Thirty per cent thought it was better whilst 10% thought it was worse.
- 15 The people we spoke to value the library service highly and many commented on the high level of customer service provided by library staff. Other frequently praised aspects of the library service include the book ordering facility and the online provision. Although some users we spoke to had seen their local library close and replaced with the mobile library service, they commented that they were grateful to still have a good local service.
- 16 Most of the people we spoke to thought that their local library service was as good as, or better than, it was three years ago. Ten per cent of people thought that the service had declined; this was often attributed to a reduced choice of books at community libraries and where a static library had been replaced by the mobile library. Although many of these people preferred the opportunity to browse a wider range of books, most were aware of, and made use of, the book ordering service.
- 17 Many library users spoke positively of the increased number of activities available at community libraries. A number of community groups now use the library buildings out of hours and many of the people we spoke to in Llanfairfechan view the library as a key community hub. The involvement of local people on the library committee also appears to have strengthened links between the library and the

³ [Welsh Government, **Welsh Public Library Standards 2014-17: Conwy County Borough Council Annual Assessment Report 2016-17**, October 2017](#)

local community. However, some committee members told us that they could improve out-of-hours use of the library space with further support from the Council.

- 18 The results of our survey are in line with the Council's most recent survey of library users.⁴ The survey found that 96% of adults found the overall service good or very good and 91% of children ranked the library 7 or above on a scale of 1-10. Ninety-seven per cent of adults rated the customer care provided at libraries as good or very good and 86% considered the choice of books in the library as good or very good.

People can access library services easily

- 19 Most of the people we spoke to felt they could access the services they needed. Ninety-four per cent of the library users we spoke to told us that library-opening hours are convenient for them. However, many commented that they would prefer longer opening hours. It should also be noted that a large number of the people we spoke to were retired: views on opening hours may differ amongst users who can only access libraries at evenings and weekends.
- 20 The Council's most recent Welsh Public Library Standard return shows that 89% of Conwy's residents live within three miles of a static library or quarter of a mile of a mobile library stop. The mobile library service supplements the static libraries and ensures that residents in rural areas can access the library service locally. A home library service is also available for people with mobility problems or long-term illness who would otherwise have difficulty accessing the library service. The Council recognises how important the mobile and home library services are to users, in particular the social interaction opportunities they provide to more isolated members of the population. As a result, the library service is looking at ways it can make these services more sustainable in the long term by exploring alternative funding model options with partners.
- 21 Many of the library users we spoke to value the library service's online facilities. Library users can manage their accounts, browse the library catalogue and order books online for collection at their local or mobile library. Users can also access a range of online books and magazines and these services were well publicised in the libraries that we visited.
- 22 The Council recognises the potential for co-locating services so that libraries become 'one stop shops' where people can access a range of information and learning and social opportunities. This approach is already in place at Colwyn Bay area library: staff from Coleg Llandrillo and the Council's Revenues and Benefits department share the space with the library service, providing access to digital skills training and advice and support on benefits. In addition to providing additional services to existing library users, these services are also attracting non-library

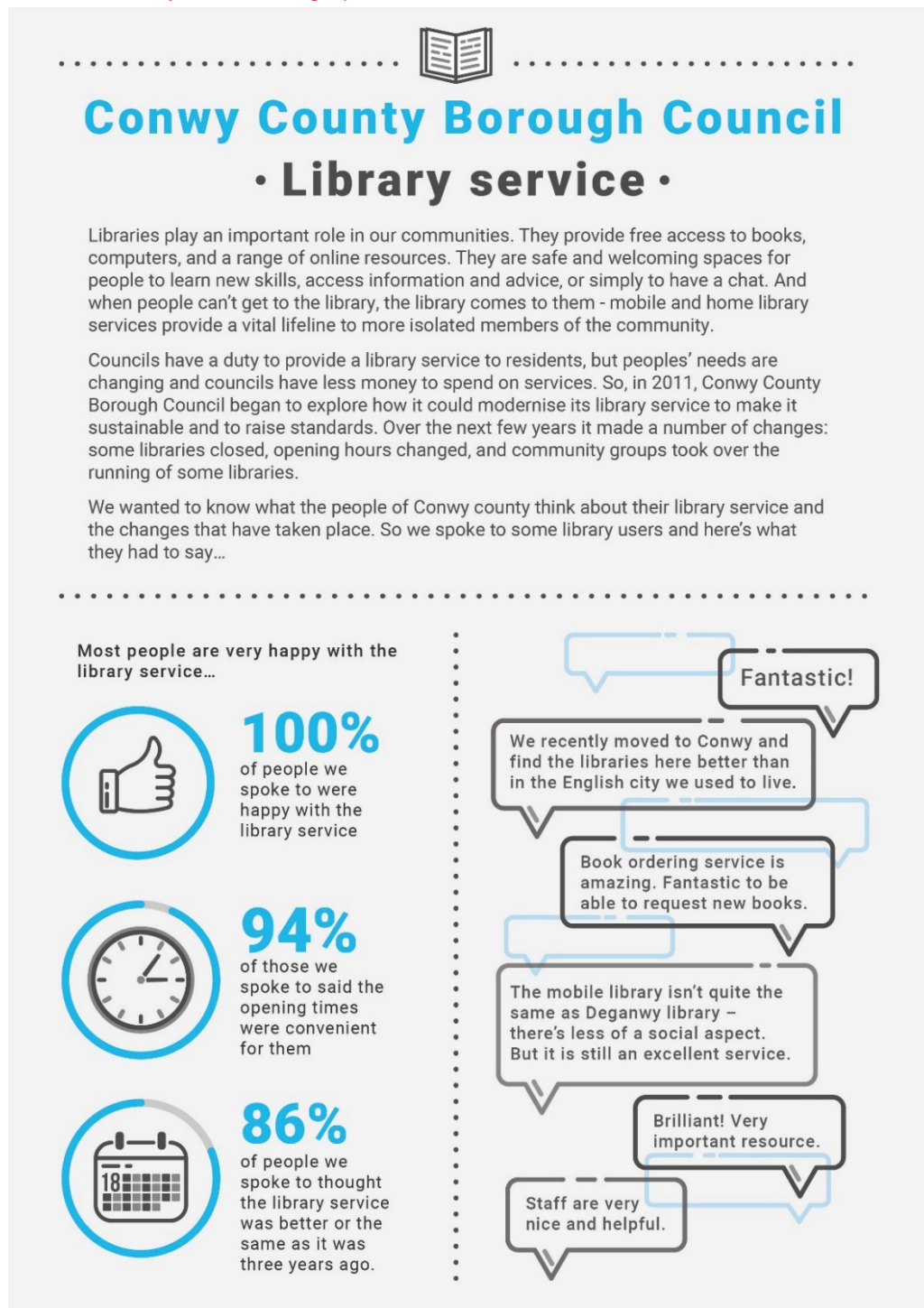
⁴ The Council surveyed library users in 2015-16 and received 1816 responses from adults and 456 from children.

users into the library building. Library staff told us that this exposure to the library and the resources available had prompted some people to join. Following the success of this approach, the Council is exploring further service co-location and integration opportunities.

Appendix 1

Infographic summarising the key findings from the completed surveys

Exhibit 1: library service infographic



It was clear from the conversations we had that people value the libraries and the service they receive...

I like being able to access more than books at the library. I can buy garden recycling bags, do photocopying etc

Lots more activities at the library now. Always something going on, e.g. book club.

Having the mobile library stop nearby is great. I tell my neighbours about it and have put a poster in the local shop to encourage more people to use it.

The older people of the village rely on the library service.

Nice warm space to sit.

Important to keep library open for the community.

Really important service that offers so much - often things that are difficult to quantify or apply monetary value to.

Although we saw evidence of the Council consulting with people on changes to the library service, most users we spoke to had not been asked for their views. As a result, most were unsure whether the Council listens to and acts on what people say about the library service...



32%

of people we spoke to said that the Council had asked them for their views on the library service in the last three years.

Most people we spoke to weren't sure if the Council listens to and acts on what they say about the library service - 56% said they didn't know when asked about their local library and 70% were unsure when it come to the overall library service in the county.

I suspect they do what they can given the financial cuts.



Read the full report on Conwy County Borough Council's library service on our website: www.audit.wales

This survey was delivered by Wales Audit staff during January 2018 in Conwy area library, Llanfairfechan community library and the mobile library in Deganwy. We spoke to 50 library users.

Wales Audit Office
24 Cathedral Road
Cardiff CF11 9LJ

Tel: 029 2032 0500

Fax: 029 2032 0600

Textphone.: 029 2032 0660

E-mail: info@audit.wales

Website: www.audit.wales

Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru
24 Heol y Gadeirlan
Caerdydd CF11 9LJ

Ffôn: 029 2032 0500

Ffacs: 029 2032 0600

Ffôn testun: 029 2032 0660

E-bost: post@archwilio.cymru

Gwefan: www.archwilio.cymru