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The Service User Perspective – the Library Service – **Gwynedd 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 Alan Hughes, Charlotte Owen, 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, which is able to put more effort into helping people to avoid crisis, rather than one that 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 Gwynedd 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 December 2017, to help us understand their perspective. We spoke to 28 people during visits to Bangor and Criccieth libraries and the mobile library in Llanberis.
- 6 This information, as well as data on performance and service standards, informed our discussions with the Council during December 2017. 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 concluded that **while most people we spoke to are satisfied with the quality and accessibility of their library, a lack of coordinated engagement means**

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

that users do not feel as engaged as they could be in shaping the service. We came to this conclusion because:

- Some flaws in the Council's approach to reviewing the library service reduced the effectiveness of its engagement with service users and their ability to contribute to shaping the service;
- most service users we spoke to were satisfied with the service they receive; and
- service users can access the library services effectively but there is potential to improve the range of services offered by the mobile library service.

Proposals for improvement

8 The table below proposes ways in which the Council could improve the effectiveness of its Library Service to make it better placed to meet current and future challenges.

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

Proposals for improvement	
P1	Ensure there are effective arrangements to share information between library-based staff and centrally located library service management.
P2	Communicate the outcomes of future consultations so that service users understand the issues raised and what the Council has done in response.
P3	<p>Improve the level of support provided to users of the mobile library service. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • where possible provide ICT equipment and internet access in mobile libraries to meet the needs of library service users; and • explore how the service might be used to enable rural residents to access other Council services.

Detailed report

While most people we spoke to are satisfied with the quality and accessibility of their library, a lack of coordinated engagement means that users do not feel as engaged as they could be in shaping the service

Some flaws in the Council's approach to reviewing the library service reduced the effectiveness of its engagement with service users and their ability to contribute to shaping the service

- 9 In 2015, the Council produced a libraries strategy containing proposals to close eight small libraries in the county. It aimed to address the recommendations of its earlier review of the library service, and the need to make considerable financial savings. During spring and summer 2015, the Council consulted with library users on the vision and proposals contained in the strategy. The consultation process used a variety of methods to gain the views of a range of library users, including youth groups and the Older People's Council. Because of the feedback received, the Council reconsidered proposals to close eight small libraries in the county. After working with affected communities to find alternative solutions, only four of the eight libraries were closed. Community councils or groups now take an active role in running the remaining community libraries.
- 10 While the consultation on the library service was taking place, the Council also launched its 'Gwynedd Challenge' consultation with county residents. Gwynedd Challenge explained the financial challenges the Council faced and set out a long list of proposed service cuts. A number of these proposed cuts related to the library service. Residents were asked to choose one cut from each section that they did not want the Council to action. However, the timing was unfortunate and led to library users receiving confusing messages; simultaneously asked for their views on the future shape of the library service, and then what aspects of the service should be cut.
- 11 The library staff we spoke to appeared to have an understanding of the needs of library users. Through their daily interactions with users, staff receive regular feedback and opinions. Library users can also share their views using suggestion boxes in libraries and the online comments facility on the Council website. The

library service also surveys its users regularly to gain feedback on performance and insight into the priorities of library users².

- 12 However, it is unclear if there are effective arrangements to share information about service users' feedback between library staff and centrally located service management. For example, some of the staff we spoke to were not aware of the online comments from the website.
- 13 Fifty per cent of the library users we surveyed could remember being asked by the Council for their views on the library service in the last three years. But people were less certain about whether the Council listens to, and acts on, what they say:
 - Thirty-nine per cent of the people we spoke to thought that the Council does not listen and act on what they say about their local library. A further 39% did not know, and 21% felt the Council does listen and act.
 - Thirty-six per cent of the people we spoke to thought that the Council does listen and act on what people say about the overall library service in Gwynedd. Thirty-two per cent thought the Council does not and a further 32% did not know.
- 14 There is, therefore, potential for the library service to do more to communicate the results of its public engagement exercises and explain what it has done, or not been able to do, in response.

Most service users we spoke to were satisfied with the service they receive

- 15 Our survey with service users clearly showed that people are satisfied with the quality of their local library service:
 - Ninety-three per cent of the people we spoke to were happy with the library that they use; and
 - Thirty-six per cent of the people we spoke to thought that the library service was the same as it was three years ago. Twenty-five per cent thought it was better whilst 29% thought it was worse.
- 16 The people we spoke to value the library service highly. Many see it as an essential service and key part of the community. Library users praised the high level of customer service provided by library staff and many commented positively on the book ordering facility. Although some users we spoke to had seen their local library close and replaced with the mobile library service or relocated to a shared community space, they commented that they were grateful to still have a good local service.
- 17 More than half of the people we spoke to thought their local library service was as good as, or better than, it was three years ago. This figure rose to 95% amongst

² Surveys are undertaken as part of the requirements of the Welsh Public Library Standards.

Bangor library users, who commented positively on the refurbished library and improved IT facilities. However, in Llanberis and Criccieth, all the library users we spoke to thought that the service had declined. Although many of these people commented positively on the quality of the service they receive, the library staff in particular, they consider the current arrangements are worse than those previously in place. Reasons cited included the loss of a purpose-built library building with better facilities, and a reduced choice of books. The users we spoke to commented that the book ordering service helps mitigate against the reduced stock levels in their local library.

- 18 The results of our survey are in line with the Council's most recent survey of library users.³ The survey found that 95% of adults rated their library as good or very good, and the children surveyed scored the library 9.3 on a scale of 1-10. One hundred per cent of adults rated the customer care provided at libraries as good or very good, and 89% considered the choice of books and computer facilities in the library as good or very good.

Service users can access the library services effectively, but there is potential to improve the range of services offered by the mobile library service

- 19 Most of the people we spoke to felt they could access the services they needed. Eighty-nine per cent of the library users we spoke to told us that library-opening hours are convenient for them. While, due to our survey times, we spoke to mainly retired service users, the Council undertook a wide consultation on opening hours and open until 6pm on some evenings and Saturday mornings as a result.
- 20 The mobile library service supplements the static libraries and ensures that residents affected by library closures, or living in rural areas, are able to access the library service locally. However, the mobile service currently lacks ICT equipment and Wi-Fi. As a result, rural library users do not have access to the same facilities as those using static libraries. The Council could strengthen the mobile library service by adding ICT functionality for those areas of Gwynedd where it is possible to connect to the internet (mobile broadband or council Wi-Fi hot spot). There is also scope for the Council to explore how the service might be used to enable rural residents to access other council services.
- 21 A home library service is also available for people with mobility problems, long-term illness, or other circumstances, which prevent them from accessing a static or mobile library. The home library service plays a key role that goes beyond delivery of books; it provides lonely and isolated people with the opportunity for social interaction.

³ The Council surveyed library users in October 2016 and March 2017, receiving 2159 responses from adults and 875 from children.

- 22 As part of the recent changes to the library service in Gwynedd, the Council has relocated some libraries to other council buildings. For example, Porthmadog library is now successfully co-located in the local leisure centre. Since the move, library usage has increased. Some of the people we spoke to commented that it is now easier to access the library due to the onsite car park. Library staff recognise that offering other services brings people into the library and provides an opportunity to show non-library users what the library has to offer.
- 23 Our conversations with library users highlighted the many different needs fulfilled by the library. As well as access to books and computer equipment, which some people commented they would not otherwise have, opportunity for social interaction was also important to many of the people we spoke to. For example, chatting with library staff or attending parent and children activities.
- 24 The Council also provides a range of online library 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, audio books and magazines.

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...

The library is an essential service. I have no home computer so rely and depend on the library. It's not a luxury.

Extremely good service – gives access to large amount of knowledge for free.

Although I often buy my own books, I make good use of the library's computers and the community-related information available in the library is very useful.

I like the library service. Staff are very helpful and nice to Welsh language learners like myself.

Libraries are an essential resource

Old people use the library to keep warm and for social interaction as well as getting books

Council should look at other avenues for cuts, not libraries. Very important service for young and old people.

Half of the people we spoke to had been asked for their views on the library service but most don't think that the Council listens to and acts on what they say. Many acknowledged that this was probably due to a lack of money...



50%

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

Only 21% of people thought the Council listened to and acted on what they say about their local library. This rose to 36% when considering the library service as a whole.

I understand the difficult position the Council is in regarding finances

Council has made a few changes in response to people's views.

The Council does listen but not sure it acts on what people say.

It all comes down to finances.



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

This survey was delivered by Wales Audit staff during December 2017 in Bangor and Criccieth libraries and the mobile library in Llanberis. We spoke to 28 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