

Ministerial Foreword

The year 2021/22 saw public libraries in Wales recovering from the disruption of the pandemic. As public confidence grew in going into public spaces, libraries were able to resume more of their on-site services. However, for varied reasons, the speed of the resumption of services has varied between authorities. Consequently, the extent to which services and user numbers have recovered is uneven and I did not consider that it was appropriate to ask services to report against the full framework of Welsh Public Library Standards.

This report represents a more focussed data collection exercise. Services have reported their performance against the Core Indicators of service provision as specified in Framework 6 of the Welsh Public Library Standards. The remainder of the report focusses on qualitative data collection. From the information which has been provided, I am pleased to see that as the pandemic receded, public libraries continued to support their local communities and contribute to Welsh Government priorities especially in relation to health and well-being.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Evans". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line under the 's'.

Rebecca Evans MS

Minister for Finance and Local Government

Overview

For the period 2021/22, all services:

- reported on the 12 Core Entitlements of the WPLS (Table 1 summarises the extent to which all authorities met the Core Entitlements).
- reported their progress against six quality indicators of the WPLS (instead of the full 16), but they have not been tested on whether they met or failed to meet those quality indicators;
- provided a report of their strategic narrative and future direction;
- provided case studies showing the impact of the library services on their communities; and
- were invited to provide digital data. This requested information on 'Click and Collect', services; number of online sessions held; and the number of individuals who took part in online sessions.

This year's individual service reports are based on independent assessments of this information. In addition to the individual service reports, the independent assessors have provided a summary of the overall 'headlines' for the period 2021/22:

Library use

- Active borrower numbers, having fallen almost universally during the first year of the pandemic began to recover. Nonetheless, speed of recovery varies greatly. In 2020/21 numbers fell in all services except one. In 2021/2022, these figures increased across Wales, with only three services not seeing an increase. The rises ranged from 7% to 172% but all remained below pre-pandemic levels.
- Adult issue numbers follow a similar pattern to active borrowers but again with wide variation between services. Between 2020/2021 numbers fell in all services, but in 2021/2022 have risen everywhere. The rises ranged from 43% to 600%, but only one service has returned to pre-pandemic levels.
- The pattern for children's issue is similar but with even greater variation. In 2020/21 numbers fell in all services, but in 2021/22 numbers rose everywhere. The rises ranged from 85% to 1,700%, but only two services have returned to pre-pandemic levels.
- Total e-issues have increased 212% on pre-pandemic levels. Overall, however there is an 88% decrease in e-issues between 2021-22 and the previous year perhaps as users were more able to access physical library stock. Six services have seen an increase in figures between 2020-21 and 2021-22 but remainder have decreased.

Wider themes

- The wide variation seen in the data on borrower numbers and issues is reflected more broadly in this year's reports, which show some library services recovering and thriving, others are continuing to find it more difficult more to emerge from the impact of the pandemic.
- The support for Welsh language was noticeably strong across many services.

- Hub models (co-locating libraries with other services) have been introduced in several services. The impact of this model of delivery needs to be monitored.
- National initiatives had wide take-up and appeared to have been well received, for example the Welsh Government-funded Winter of Wellbeing.
- Open Plus/Open+ models (enabling card-entry access outside of staffed hours) are increasingly being adopted either to extend opening hours, or to replace staffed hours.
- There were examples of new initiatives being launched over the year, even among services which were struggling with resources and staffing. Examples include the introduction of Borrowbox (e-Book and e-Audio), Makerspaces, 'library of things' (equipment lending), and initiatives to measure social value.
- The removal of fines, either permanently or as a pilot, seems to be a growing pattern, with the aim typically being to increase library use and reach new users.
- Some services were able to review their overall purpose and goals and published these as new strategies in the reporting period, but many are relying on work done pre-pandemic.
- Some services lacked current information on needs of residents and users, often because the pandemic had made it difficult to conduct user surveys. Wider data gathering about the needs of residents who do not currently use libraries is an area of weakness in some services.

Table 1

Core Entitlement	Fully met	Partially	Not met
1 Libraries in Wales will be free to join and open to all.	22	0	0
2 Libraries in Wales will ensure friendly, knowledgeable and qualified staff are on hand to help.	22	0	0
3 Libraries in Wales will provide access to a range of services, activities and high-quality resources in a range of formats to support learning, personal well-being and development, community participation, and culture and recreation.	22	0	0
4 Libraries in Wales will provide appropriate services, facilities and information resources for individuals and groups with special needs.	21	1	0
5 Libraries will provide appropriate safe, attractive and accessible physical spaces with suitable staffed opening hours.	21	1	0
6 Libraries in Wales will lend books for free and deliver free access to information, including online information resources available 24 hours a day.	20	2	0
7 Libraries in Wales will provide free use of the Internet and computers, including Wi-Fi.	21	0	1
8 Libraries in Wales will provide access to services, cultural activities and high-quality resources in the Welsh language.	22	0	0
9 Libraries in Wales will work in partnership to share catalogues and facilitate access to the resources of all Welsh libraries.	22	0	0
10 Libraries in Wales will work with a range of partners to promote and deliver services to new and diverse audiences, enabling more people to benefit from their services.	22	0	0
11 Libraries in Wales will regularly consult users to gather their views on the service and information about their changing needs.	17	4	1
12 Libraries in Wales will provide access to the library service's strategy, policies, objectives and vision, in print and online, in a range of languages appropriate for the community.	15	4	3