



Councillor Elliott King
Cabinet Member for Culture,
Human Rights and Equalities

To: *Please ask for:* Overview & Scrutiny
Gofynnwch am:
Direct Line: 01792 636292
Llinell Uniongyrochol:
e-Mail: scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk
e-Bost:
Date: 31 October 2023
Dyddiad:

BY EMAIL

Summary: This is a letter from the Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Culture, Human Rights and Equalities. The letter concerns the meeting held on 17 October 2023 and the Welsh Public Library Standards Annual Performance Report. A response is required by 21 November 2023.

Dear Councillor King,

On the 17 October, the Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel met to discuss the Welsh Public Library Standards Annual Performance Report. The Panel are grateful to you, Karen Gibbins, Library Services Manager and Bethan Lee, Principal Librarian, for attending to discuss and answer questions.

We were pleased to hear about the hard work and post covid recovery of local library services with many of us sharing our praise, support, and positive experiences. We heard that despite an increase, libraries have still not reached post covid levels of use. We asked how long it might take to get back to pre-covid levels of usage and since the meeting, officers have shared with us usage data from the last 3 years. We heard that there is a trend to remove library book fines across Wales but in Swansea there is a large income pressure from the fines budget of about £50,000 and without an ability to offset that, fines in Swansea were reintroduced in April 2023.

The update highlighted some excellent work in Swansea libraries including engagement with the Good Things Foundation which gives members of the community data and devices, Education Programmes for Patients, which provides learning programmes to citizens managing chronic illnesses supported by longer book loans, the reservations service, warm spaces, and provision of period products.

We heard that results of the customer satisfaction survey were high with 95% saying the library has made a difference and 99% saying the library services is either good or very good. It was noted that the children's survey has received a lower completion

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rate. We suggested working with schools to support completion of the questionnaire when school groups visit.

The decline in PC use was noted with more users bringing their own devices and using Wi-Fi. This has led to a new printing service, allowing customers to print from a personal mobile device. While we support this new service, those of us who regularly use the libraries had not seen this advertised in library spaces and would encourage further advertisement.

We did note the report mentions there is an insufficient level of qualified staff according to the Welsh Government. In Swansea there are a limited number of jobs requiring library qualifications and therefore limited incentives for staff to gain qualifications in addition to a small training budget. Library services are going to look at apprenticeships going forward to resolve this in the longer term. We also added that from Panel Members experience in higher education, due to voluntary exit schemes there could be an increase in qualified librarians coming to the jobs market soon.

We were interested to know the usage of borrow box and whether levels had maintained since the pandemic. We are grateful to officers for sending us the usage data after the meeting. When asked about provision for those with hearing impairments, officers informed us that audio books work with hearing aids and if the hearing aid works with Bluetooth.

We noticed in the report that Central Library has applied for library of sanctuary status. We asked what this entailed and how this was assessed. The officer informed us that the submission has gone in with assessment due on the 31st of October with the aim of demonstrating a safe space for people regardless of country of origin. This includes adding to collections in languages used in Swansea other than English and Welsh. We were interested to explore diversity within the library service and officers reported this can be demonstrated by ensuring representation of authors who are from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, LGBTQIA plus and neurodiverse communities. They have also been reviewing older collections that may contain contentious or anti diverse messages. We were interested to know how an increase in use of the Welsh language across services has been measured and were informed this is demonstrated by making sure all published documents are bilingual as well as an increase in Welsh speakers amongst staff with rhyme times and children's activities provided in Welsh.

Regarding the move to Y Storfa, the officer reported that a Welsh Government grant of £300,000 will be used to provide library shelving and digital equipment. We queried the condition of several buildings with need of investment or renewal. Officers informed us that an audit of building conditions has been carried out. You added that there is a specific capital programme around the renewal replacement of libraries and that work is being considered as part of the wider work around the community hubs model.

We were interested to know more about introducing library services to children through engagement in schools. Officers reported there are good relationships between schools and libraries however schools within walking distance can benefit more than schools further away who rely on paying for transport to visit a library. In this case videos about library services can be sent to show in schools. Engagement with

secondary schools is generally harder. We are familiar with a scheme where a library has lent textbooks to schools and wondered this could be widened. Officers felt that in smaller libraries there may not be enough copies and wish to encourage lending directly to children rather than via the school, but many libraries do have good relationships with their local schools and would wish to help where possible.

We asked if there are plans for a Library of Things in Swansea and were informed that this sits with the poverty prevention team. It is unlikely there would be space in Y Storfa for this. You have offered to take this question back to poverty prevention and we would appreciate a written response regarding this.

We raised the issue of shared workspaces becoming a need and that libraries could be a potential location for this. You felt there was scope to explore this idea within the mapping exercise around Community hubs.

We expressed concern regarding the growth of the open plus card entry access system allowing for extended opening hours or to replace staff hours. Although the officer reported there was no plans to use open plus in Swansea there are considerations to trial self-service times in library spaces potentially in Y Storfa where spaces are monitored by security or other hub staff when library staff are not available. This would allow the library to be open 7 days a week. We were concerned that library spaces are not always easy to supervise, and the lack of library staff could encourage anti-social behaviour.

Your Response

We welcome your comments on any of the issues raised and request a formal response by 21 November in regards to the following –

- Response from the Poverty Prevention team regarding development of a Library of Things.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Chris Holley

Convener, Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel

✉ cllr.chris.holley@swansea.gov.uk