

Preparation of a Libraries and Information Service Strategy for Torfaen

Draft Final report presented to **Torfaen County Borough Council** by **Arad Research**

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1. Introduction and background

Torfaen County Borough Council appointed Arad Research to undertake the preparation of a new strategy for the modelling and delivery of the Torfaen Library and Information Service, including undertaking research and consultations. This is the first strategy that has been developed for Torfaen Libraries and Information Service and is intended to provide a structure and focus for its delivery over the next five years.

1.1 Methodology

Arad has developed a mixed-methods approach to the study involving desk research, consultations with a range of key stakeholders and working with Torfaen's Library and Information Service to develop and analyse a survey of residents regarding the future of the service in the borough.

1.2 Desk research

The desk research focused on ensuring that the strategy is informed by, and aligns with, local and national policies and priorities. Arad reviewed a range of documents including A clean and green Torfaen; Raising Educational Attainment; and Support for Torfaen's Most Vulnerable Residents along with Torfaen's Corporate Plan 3 (CP3). The desk research considered national policies and standards, including 'Connected and Ambitious Libraries';¹ and 'Libraries Inspire';² and the 'Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015' as well as the analysis and research undertaken by the Library and Information Service, which was presented to the Scrutiny Committee in January 2017 and is enclosed in Annex 1.

1.3 Public survey

Arad worked with Torfaen Library and Information Service to design and analyse a comprehensive survey of Torfaen residents. Paper and online copies were distributed to library users and community groups across the borough. Efforts were made to also engage with non-users of the service. The public survey received 1,484 responses.

Key themes that were explored in this public consultation process included:

Type of library services - Priority services that Torfaen residents value or expect to be delivered from local libraries.

Access – when, and how, local residents want to access and use the services available in the libraries.

Other services – what other services the residents would like to see from their local library facilities.

¹ Connected and Ambitious Libraries: The sixth quality framework of Welsh Public Library Standards 2017-2020 <http://gov.wales/docs/drah/publications/170331-connected-and-ambitious-libraries-en.pdf>

² Libraries Inspire: The strategic development framework for Welsh libraries 2012 -2016 <http://gov.wales/docs/drah/publications/111104librariesinspireen.pdf>

1.4 Interviews with stakeholders

Arad undertook telephone and face to face interviews a range of key stakeholders from Torfaen Council including the Leader, Cabinet and Scrutiny Members and senior staff from a range of departments; Torfaen Library and Information Service staff; library representatives from neighbouring local authorities, a representative from MALD and third sector organisations. The interviews and subsequent analysis and reporting were guided by a number of key themes including:

Delivery:

How can current library services be delivered more efficiently while at the same time meeting the needs of the local population?

What additional public services could be delivered and located alongside the library services

Additional revenue generation:

What opportunities are there to increase income generation through the library services e.g. hosting services delivered by external organisations for a rental fee.

Governance and partnership

What governance and partnership structures could be considered e.g. joint delivery of library services with neighbouring local authorities?

1.5 Background context

The Torfaen Library and Information Service is based within the Economy, Enterprise and Environment Services of Torfaen County Borough Council, which currently manages three Libraries operating in Cwmbran, Pontypool and Blaenavon. Torfaen is seeking to develop an innovative, sustainable model for the library services in the borough; one which operates at lower cost and delivers, if possible, greater impact. It will cover the period going forward from April 2018 until 2023.

Services are delivered in line with the statutory obligation under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide “comprehensive and efficient public Library Services for all persons desirous to make use thereof, having regard to”:

- What is provided in terms of materials, resources and activities
- What is done to encourage use by children and adults

Services are also delivered in line with Connected and ambitious: the sixth quality framework of Welsh Public Library Standards 2017-20. Welsh Government first introduced a framework of standards for the delivery of library services in Wales in 2003 and each library authority has an obligation to report on their current performance in relation to these standards and entitlements in July every year.

The Library and Information Service aims to meet customers’ needs regarding information; lifelong learning; cultural enrichment; and personal enjoyment. The Library and Information

Service in Torfaen delivers a broad range of community/information support services long with the well understood 'book loaning' service. They include:

- Free PC and internet access for all
- Support for Job Seekers (including access to Websites, help to navigate websites and to develop the necessary IT skills)
- Support for Universal Credit claimants upon roll out locally (including access to Websites, help to navigate websites and to develop the necessary IT skills, decoding and interpretation for Plain English)
- Basic IT Skills/information Literacy drop- in sessions for over 16s in all libraries (Includes use of tablets and e readers etc.)
- Free print outs and photocopying for Job Seekers (within reasonable use)
- Health and Well Being Information and Support Service for people living with long term illnesses and chronic conditions.
- Books on Prescription (Prescribed by participating GPs and based on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy)
- Multi agency health events
- Library@Home service (for housebound individuals across the borough)
- Therapeutic shared reading groups in partnership with a range of charities
- Monthly saving money online sessions
- One to one shared reading. (Weekly sessions delivered by volunteers to housebound individuals in their homes)
- Family History sessions at Blaenavon Library (jointly delivered by library staff and volunteers from the Cordell Museum) and another at Cwmbran Library in partnership with Gwent Archives
- Every Child a Library Member (Project to enroll every year 4 pupil in Torfaen as a library member) Involves school groups visiting the library, borrowing books and receiving a free book bag
- Bookstart and Bookstart Bookcrawl; Baby rhyme times; Language and Play; Under-fives Storytime's; School holiday story and craft sessions for primary age children; Story and Lego sessions

In considering library service options going forward, it is also important to note that the library service has undergone continued service changes. Over the past four years the library service has reduced its budget by £315,000 (a 26% decrease) through previous service reductions including the closure of one library and 2 mobile libraries. The costs reductions achieved were through using the Council's building stock more efficiently, reduced maintenance costs, employee costs, building running costs, tax, rents and rates.

The most recent Council efficiency measures undertaken in 2015/16 of the Library and Information service was the Blaenavon library co-locating with the World Heritage Centre, TIC and Customer Services and by Customer Services co-locating within the Cwmbran Library.

According to the Annual Assessment Report 2016-17 for Welsh Public Library Standards Torfaen met all of the 18 core entitlements in full. Of the 7 quality indicators which have targets, Torfaen achieved 2 indicators in full, 3 in part and failed to achieve 2. The report outlines that 'Torfaen shows good evidence of impact of its library service. The excellent engagement shows particular strength in areas of health and wellbeing and outreach. However, continued low levels of staffing and investment are having a negative impact and any future budget cuts will further damage a service currently in a somewhat fragile state.'

On 1st March 2016 all budget savings proposals for the 2017/2018 financial year were agreed by Torfaen County Borough Council. One of the measures agreed was a review of the Council's Library and Information Service with a saving mitigation measure of £250,000. Following this decision an extensive programme of desk research was undertaken to review the options to meet the required budget savings.

A summary of the options is as follows:

1. Shared Premises with Adult Education Services.
2. Closure of One Library.
3. Reduce 'book loaning' service in all Libraries via self-service facilities – Two options:
 - a. Reduce book loaning services via self-service facilities in all three libraries to 3 days a week.
 - b. Reduce book loaning services via self-service facilities in Blaenavon and Pontypool libraries to 2½ days a week and reduce Cwmbran to 4 days a week.

The desk research provided answers to the following questions which were asked by committee members in relation to the options outlined above:

1. A breakdown of library costs of each individual library.
2. Opening hours and the effects of any reductions on the service.
3. An analysis of the significant changes introduced at Blaenavon and Cwmbran.
4. An understanding of whether the number of visits are physical or virtual visits.
5. An updated trend report on the number of visits per 1,000 population (as previously provided in Jun 2015) for each library.
6. Background information and analysis on the reasoning behind the options presented.
7. An analysis of library opening times in Torfaen compared to other libraries across the country – (Manchester, Newcastle, Hampshire and Greater Gwent).
8. Reasons why the libraries are open at certain times.
9. Any consultation response would be useful in making decisions/recommendations around the report presented.
10. Details around the lease of Cwmbran library.
11. Details on ownership/responsibility of buildings used.
12. Numbers of staff and volunteers.
13. Detail around numbers/data of volunteers and activity, including case studies– community access and cultural activity – how that is equated and measured.
14. Information on the use of vending machines in libraries.
15. The basic cost of opening each library on a daily basis – overheads to include staff, heating, lighting, lease costs, etc.
16. Statistics on user groups - percentage of library users in age groups.
17. Research information and feedback on other local authorities.
18. Detail on the range of innovation ideas explored.
19. Customer survey feedback.

2. Research findings: the evidence base

This section summarises the findings from the evidence base which informed the development of the strategy presented in section 3 of this report. The evidence base included interviews with stakeholders, group discussions with Torfaen libraries' staff and a public consultation in the form of a survey. The findings in this section are summarised under the following themes:

- Library sites in Torfaen;
- Co-location of services;
- Developing and building on services;
- Revenue generation;
- Links to other libraries in Wales / Welsh Government guidelines;
- Resources; and
- Staff / Volunteering arrangements

2.1 Library sites in Torfaen

Torfaen libraries and information service is delivered across three library sites in Torfaen – Cwmbran, Blaenavon, and Pontypool. The evidence base suggests the importance of each of these three current sites in delivering a quality libraries and information service across Torfaen. Interviews with stakeholders and staff indicated significant support for the continuation of this model. This view was echoed by respondents to the public engagement exercise:

“Do not close existing libraries! If necessary, keep all branches open but reduce hours of opening. Then if financial circumstances improve opening hours can be increased. A library closure will never be reversed.” **Member of the public**

Stakeholders and staff noted that place-based libraries are still very important for the local communities they serve. This was also reflected in the feedback from the public survey. Additionally, there was consensus that the current sites are optimally based for public transport and ease of access for all cohort groups of users. Several stakeholders noted that current town centre locations remain 'essential' and that these could be capitalised on for the delivery of other Council and citizen-based services through co-location.

Responses to the public engagement exercise indicates that members of the public find it beneficial to be able to access the services across the three different library sites. Member of the public find this particularly useful when they would like to reserve a book held by another site or when one library is closed, they can visit one of the other sites.

*“cross site reservations - *excellent* service to be able to collect a reserved book held by another site.”* **Member of the public**

Comments from staff indicated the need for more joined up working between the three library sites, so that the three sites come together as one service rather than being viewed as three separate services across Torfaen.

The strategy outlined in section 3 therefore takes the continuation of library and information services in the 3 current sites of Blaenavon, Cwmbran and Pontypool as a starting point. While financial constraints are recognised there is overwhelming stakeholder and public support for the continuation of this model. This would provide Torfaen with the structures and locations to retain libraries at the centre of its communities, meet statutory obligations and provide a focus for delivering the new strategy.

2.2 Co-location of services

The potential for co-location of services with libraries was a key focus for stakeholders. This links to wider debates relating to the future of the Torfaen Council estate, the ongoing service review and delivery of quality and efficient services to citizens in the context of reduced financial settlements. Stakeholders considered that libraries can play an important role in the drive towards more effective understanding and use of Council services because as trusted institutions, libraries provide a 'first access point for citizens' and are central locations. This is supported by responses to the public engagement exercise as 99.2% of respondents indicated that the library is a safe place to visit and 90.2% said it is an inclusive place to visit.

All three Torfaen libraries were considered by stakeholders to act as community hubs and this was considered a further opportunity to co-locate services and to engage with all members of their respective communities. Torfaen libraries thus represent an opportunity for good synergies with other customer facing services and this is a key focus of the strategy.

"It's a non-threatening place to get information - you don't feel you're in a Council building. It's for people who don't know how to access information, who often don't have a support network or don't have resources." **Stakeholder**

This is a process that has already been started within the library and information services in Torfaen. Blaenavon currently operates in a co-location setting with Customer Services within the UNESCO World Heritage site; while Cwmbran has led on the co-location of some services e.g. Customer Services and Credit Union. This co-location is also reported to have produced cost savings. Stakeholders considered that there was potential to further deliver on this as part of the wider service review as well as contributing to addressing 'referral fatigue' amongst citizens.

Responses to the public engagement exercise indicates the appreciation of other services co-locating within the libraries, such as Customer Services in Cwmbran library. Furthermore, some members of the public suggested that more council / public services

should be delivered in the libraries. However, some comments from members of the public suggested they were less welcoming of the idea of co-location. These comments tended to relate to either the lack of space available or that introducing more services could detract from the main services that a library should offer.

“Cwmbran Library already shares its space with another Council Department. Don't think there is room for anything else” **Member of the public**

“I believe in keeping the Library as a Library and not try to mix too many functions and services.” **Member of the public**

For some stakeholders within the Council, the three libraries offer a mechanism to deliver corporate and welfare plans linked to CP3, expanded to include other relevant partners relating to the education / job creation / digital agenda. Examples included the provision of social housing information, activities relating to Torfaen's 50+ Strategy and wider Council and neighbourhood services information. For these stakeholders, consideration of new roles for libraries need to be part of the wider council policies relating to developing quality and accessible services linked to citizen need, as well as responsibilities relating to risk and costs sharing.

“This links to the wider change management process – how does Torfaen do customer services, where do they overlap, how can we be resilient and sustain services?” **Stakeholder**

Despite the potential for co-location several staff and stakeholders noted that space is at a premium in the current sites so this may limit the opportunity to further co-locate services. There were suggestions that relocation of many customer facing Council services, including libraries, into one building (within each of the three towns) could provide a longer term solution for a central point. There was, however, acknowledgement that this would require major capital investment, placing libraries in the context of wider strategic plans for town centre development across Torfaen.

Taking these views into account the strategy therefore focuses on making the most of the current three sites and current services while exploring the potential for delivering other customer focused services in line with CP3 aims.

2.3 Developing and building on services

Although there is recognition from stakeholders, staff and the public that the libraries first and foremost service is book lending, this is not the only service that can be, and is, offered.

“It's not all what the library is about, but it is a major part of it.” **Member of staff**

Stakeholders, staff and the public suggested a range of other services that Torfaen libraries could offer, or in some cases continue to offer as part of a more embedded approach,

including Universal Credit advice (which already takes place in Cwmbran library), mental and physical health customer care e.g. the Stroke Association and citizens advice. Members of the public specifically commented on the “excellent range of services on offer”. This view was echoed by stakeholders who praised Torfaen libraries’ contribution to the economic future and infrastructure of towns, health and wellbeing, addressing poverty, digital skills and access to digital services, education and sustainable living.

“The library service has gone way beyond books. There’s so many computer services offered and so many groups meet here now. It’s just changed beyond recognition.” Stakeholder

Library and information service staff reported that wider national issues such as the focus on health and wellbeing agenda, through the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, is raising their profile. They considered that this has the potential to allow Torfaen to meet its CP3 obligations, notably relating to supporting the needs of Torfaen’s most vulnerable citizens and enhancing educational outcomes.

The Health and Wellbeing Information and Support Service in Cwmbran is reportedly well utilised and considered an innovative model at an all-Wales level. 76.9% of respondents to the public engagement exercise thought this service is either a very important (51.6%) or fairly important (25.3%) and 76.7% of respondents recognised that they have found helpful information for health and wellbeing at the library. Furthermore, the service has enabled good links to be developed with the community and encouraged potential new users into the premises.

“Torfaen does elements very well e.g. health and wellbeing and their commitment to supporting their communities – they have a huge impact on them. They have also developed strong partnerships and outreach programmes, their project with the Wellcome Trust is a good example.” Stakeholder

Some stakeholders noted the complementarity between Adult Community Learning (ACL) and services offered by libraries and the potential for resource sharing regarding promoting and supporting skills and employability, vulnerable people, adult learning, digital literacy and progression of individuals into employment.

Libraries are considered to already effectively provide employment support for individuals e.g. Job Clubs, CV writing, with many examples given already of the informal support staff provide to job seekers. 76.6% of respondents to the public engagement exercise were of the opinion that support for job seekers with IT and access is either a very important (59.7%) or fairly important (16.9%) service currently offered by the libraries. Moreover, stakeholders suggested that this employment support could be part of a more formalised approach, again linking to the aims of CP3.

Torfaen libraries put a strong focus on providing services for children. Staff recognised the importance of these services and, in particular, the libraries’ existing links with schools. This is further illustrated by responses to the public engagement exercise: 86.4% of respondents said the ‘Every Child a Library Member’ scheme is either a very important (73.3%) or fairly

important (13.1%) service and 86% said the school visits for storytelling and library skills is either a very important (70.4%) or fairly important (15.6%) service the library offers.

Services and events for children, such as rhyme time, craft sessions and the reading challenge are valued by a large proportion of the public who responded to the public engagement exercise. 86.3% of respondents said the Summer Reading Challenge is either very important (70.9%) or fairly important (15.4%) and 83% said the children's story and craft sessions in school holidays are either very important (62.5%) or fairly important (20.5%). Furthermore, members of the public indicated that the libraries have particularly helped their child enjoy books and stories more (93.2%), read better (75.4%) and learn and find things out (72.8%). Some members of the public suggested that the libraries could offer more of these services for children.

Group activities and events currently offered by the libraries are also appreciated by the public. 78.5% of respondents thought the reading groups for adults are either very important (55.3%) or fairly important (23.2%) and 69.1% thought the social activities like Knit and Natter and Lego clubs are either very important (43.3%) or fairly important (25.8%). These services are seen as offering members of the public the opportunity to take part in social activities, which can be important in reducing social isolation and improving wellbeing, particularly for vulnerable people.

Services currently offered by the libraries which were viewed as less important by the public include DVDs (32.7% said it is very important and 26.3% said it is fairly important) and online magazines (31.1% said it is very important and 23.7% said it is fairly important). This suggests there could be scope to prioritise other services discussed in this section over and above DVDs and online magazines.

Better promotion of the services on offer was a key message that emerged from the public engagement exercise. Many respondents commented that they were not aware of some of the services the libraries offer. This suggests the need to increase public awareness of the libraries' broad range of services. Respondents to the public engagement exercise suggested advertising approaches such as social media and posters.

The continuation and, where possible, expansion of the services discussed in this section, through other funding sources or partnership, is therefore a key element of the new strategy. The strategy also commits to better engagement with Torfaen residents and working with partners to raise awareness of the wide range of activities and services on offer.

2.4 Revenue generation

Whilst there was general agreement amongst stakeholders and staff that all possibilities should be explored for library service to generate revenue it was also acknowledged that there may be limited future opportunities for this. Stakeholders and staff acknowledged a previous focus on this and placed this drive to generate income in the context of funding issues across all public and third sector organisations and the lack of facilities and space within all three libraries to generate significant further income.

Stakeholders and staff did nonetheless outline a range of potential funding opportunities to be explored. These include further focus on promoting fee earning services and organisations' payments for their meetings and events. Other suggestions for income generation included working with voluntary groups to access funding e.g. Big Lottery Fund, actively seeking new funding sources such as the successful bid for Wellcome Trust funding (Torfaen is currently the only library authority in Wales to receive this).

The Strategy supports renewed focus for revenue generation and provides some further action point to this regard. Nevertheless, there has to be a recognition of the limitations of library and information services to generate revenue and that other forms of project-based funding may be a more sustainable and realistic option.

2.5 Links to other libraries / Welsh Government guidelines

Torfaen libraries already work effectively within national guidelines and systems to deliver better access to books and sustain a balanced book stock e.g. the Welsh Book Purchasing Consortium. These types of initiatives are considered by staff to already be saving local authorities such as Torfaen money and time and offering an enhanced service. Torfaen libraries are also key members of initiatives such as Books for You across south east Wales and have Unity UK membership and interlibrary loan systems.

"We are very much joined up with Welsh libraries and national libraries for loans across the UK. If anyone wants a book, there's not many titles we can't get hold of one way or another." **Member of staff**

These initiatives provide Torfaen with closer links to other libraries and enable Torfaen libraries to deliver a higher quality book borrowing service, with a greater selection of books available to borrow. This is valued by members of the public with one individual specifically commenting, *"The requesting books from other authorities in the area is excellent."* Neighbouring library services also highlighted the quality of partnerships that exist between different authorities and the emphasis that is placed on working together to improve library services for all citizens.

The strategy therefore places continuing engagement with local, regional and national partnerships to sustain and enhance library services for Torfaen residents as paramount. These have the ongoing potential to reduce some service costs while providing the opportunity to share good practice and enhance services. Stakeholders also pointed to opportunities to work with service users and Community Councils and the voluntary sector to form a 'Friends of the Library Group' as part of this partnership approach.

2.6 Resources

When considering current services and resources of the Torfaen Libraries, stakeholder and staff aired a range of views. All of these individuals acknowledged the financial pressures that the Council is currently under and some stakeholders expressed doubt as to whether

all the services delivered across the three library sites currently can be sustained on a reduced budget. Others expressed concerns about cuts that will have a negative impact on the quality and breadth of the personal service that libraries provide and notably on some of the most vulnerable groups who engage with the services.

2.6.1 Book stock

Staff outlined that libraries need a balanced and up to date stock and noted that Torfaen already has one of the lowest in Wales, a figure confirmed in the most recent Annual Assessment Report 2016-17. Staff and stakeholders pointed to the risks associated with this issue over the medium term, highlighting recent studies pointing to a drop in customer usage frequency. Staff also highlighted the importance of maintaining a quality, relevant and accessible service, with a broad range of stock, noting that 'people will keep coming if things are up to date'.

Responses to the public engagement exercise demonstrate the importance of Torfaen libraries book borrowing service. 93.4% of respondents said the book borrowing service is very important and a further 5.2% said it was fairly important. In terms of the public's opinion of the choice of books in the libraries, 72.2% thought it was very good, 23.2% thought it was fairly good, 4.4% said it was OK and less than 1% fairly poor or very poor. While these responses suggest that the public are currently happy with range and quality of the offer there were a number of additional qualitative comments suggesting that this could be improved.

2.6.2 Opening hours

Torfaen libraries' opening hours are currently the lowest in Wales. However, staff and several stakeholders considered that there is little scope for further reduction if Torfaen aims to remain committed to an efficient, high quality and accessible library and information service. Stakeholders and staff considered therefore that more focus should instead be on ensuring that all three sites have opening hours which complement each other and the needs of their customers. More specifically, it was proposed that at least two out of the three library sites are open on any given day.

From the public engagement exercise, mixed views were identified in relation to the libraries' opening hours. Some members of the public suggested reducing opening hours, whereas others requested an increase in opening hours. However, it appeared that an option of reducing opening hours was slightly more favourable than the closing down of any of the three library sites across Torfaen. A few members of the public further suggested changes to opening hours rather than a reduction or increase and this links to the complementarity of services across the three libraries outlined above.

2.6.3 Technology

Access to computers was seen by staff, stakeholders and the public as an integral part of the libraries' services. The computers within the libraries are well used. This will continue to be the case, particularly with the introduction of Universal Credits.

Access to computers is invaluable, particularly at the moment with the introduction of universal credits and for job searching. Customers can't get this service anywhere else in the town centre. A lot of people don't have access to a computer at home.

Member of staff

Responses to the public engagement exercise indicated that 83.1% of respondents thought that access to computers is either a very important (63.8%) or fairly important (19.3%) service that the libraries offer. Additionally, members of the public indicated that they value the IT support provided by library staff, with one individual commenting, *"Giving assistance on the computer is so essential for the elderly to keep in touch and sort out technical problems."*

New technologies were considered by a range of stakeholders and staff to have potential to enhance services, providing there is investment to support this process. Torfaen libraries link to Welsh Government support for the National Digital Library and have engaged in the provision of e books and comics as a way of promoting learning and literacy to target groups, particularly young people. IT is also an integral element for provision of other digital social inclusion activities, again aimed at the most vulnerable. Torfaen is considered to be making progress in this area by stakeholders and this is an area identified for further support in the future strategy.

Self-service facilities, which are currently utilised in Blaenavon library, were highlighted as option to be implemented further, as discussed in previous Scrutiny meetings. This model could contribute to extending library opening hours with minimal costs and some stakeholders noted that these facilities have been introduced in other UK libraries, resulting in cost savings.

Some stakeholders and many staff nonetheless emphasised that speaking to library staff is an essential part of the social interaction supported by libraries. Therefore, it was highlighted that self-service options should not be considered as a replacement for effective staffing levels. There was strong agreement, however, that this technology has the potential to enhance some services and make things easier for customers e.g. self-check in and out of books.

"New technologies can be part of any new offer, but roles and responsibilities must be clarified." **Stakeholder**

Mixed views were expressed by respondents to the public engagement exercise in relation to self-service facilities, with some in favour of the idea and others not. This suggests that a self-service facility would be utilised by some members of the public, however others would prefer the face to face interaction with library staff. Comments below from two members of the public demonstrate this point.

"Make it easier to return books by installing a self-service machine which allows people to renew/borrow books by using existing database. This machine can scan the barcode and simply return/renew without the hassle of queuing." **Member of the public**

“It’s nice to talk to someone who is friendly and helpful-not have to fight machines-when you are older.” **Member of the public**

Taking these views relating to library resources and technology into account, the strategy therefore focuses on maintaining a quality and up to date stock where possible and committing to a complementary set of opening hours across the three sites. This may involve some changes to opening times, but this could be offset by the introduction of self-service facilities to support potential late night or weekend opening for book borrowing, which remains the key and most valued service for citizens.

2.7 Staffing and volunteer arrangements

Trained, well qualified library staff are considered by stakeholders and the public to be an integral part of a quality library service, with their expertise reported as being essential to maintain public confidence and use of the service.

In terms of the public’s opinion of the service provided by staff at Torfaen libraries, 92.9% thought it was very good, 5.4% thought it was fairly good, 1.6% said it was OK and less than 1% fairly poor or very poor. Furthermore, many respondents to the public engagement exercise commented on how staff at Torfaen libraries are friendly, helpful, knowledgeable and informative. This was seen as the biggest influence on the public’s positive experiences of library services in Torfaen.

“The library staff are without a doubt one of the jewels of the library system. They go above and beyond to help us in anything we need.” **Member of the public**

Respondents emphasised the importance of being able to get help with enquires, with 93% of respondents indicating that this is either a very important (75%) or fairly important (18%) service that the libraries offer.

“The staff all have great customer service skills and always on hand to advise with book choices etc.” **Member of the public**

For stakeholders with experience of library staffing, a key focus is on ensuring a balance between senior staff, who make strategic decisions, supported by library assistants, who are well trained in customer services. Another focus is ensuring that staff have opportunities to access ongoing CPD. Torfaen library staff noted that front line services are particularly important and are currently at low levels in comparison with other local authorities.

“I don’t think it’s given credit for how skilled a job it is. It’s not just a case of putting books on a shelf and putting them in order, you’ve got to know a little bit about your subject, you’ve got to understand what people want, you’ve got to find it, you’ve got to know the processes. Most of them have a love of literature and information sharing, and I think they are dedicated. I don’t think just anybody could come in and do it.” **Stakeholder**

The use of volunteers to support library services was proposed by several stakeholders and some members of the public. For example, one member of the public suggested to “*make more use of volunteers to check books in and out, delivering reading groups.*” Staff agreed that there are roles for volunteers and they can provide ‘added value; especially for reading schemes, as well as playing an important role in mobile schemes.

Nevertheless, staff highlighted concerns relating to how volunteers will impact on staff morale and the ongoing need for professionalised staff with the confidence to make decisions and provide a good service. If volunteers are to be successfully integrated into library services in Torfaen, staff and some stakeholders considered that there is thus a need to identify what volunteers are required to do in libraries and how to make best use of them.

“They (volunteers) can’t replace librarians but they can enable them to focus on their core roles and help libraries deliver other services. Community Groups can keep libraries going but there is not the same level of professional services and it is essentially just giving out books.” **Stakeholder**

The new strategy emphasises the importance of skilled and qualified staff to deliver library services across the three sites in Torfaen. It also sees a role for volunteers in supporting aspects of the service. There will nonetheless be decisions made about the level of staffing across libraries in light of the financial situation and any changes to opening hours. The strategy endorses a balanced staffing arrangement of front line and senior staff where resources allow.

2.8 Overall conclusions of the research

For stakeholders and staff there was strong awareness of the many challenges facing the Libraries and Information service in Torfaen. There was recognition that it is necessary for any new strategy to develop effective ways of working for the libraries, to identify what they can do differently and how they can most effectively contribute to CP3 and wider national economic, health, education and social policies.

For some stakeholders, the links to CP3 are paramount. They outlined that libraries should be an integral part of a growth plan and any transformational agenda taking place within the county borough of Torfaen. For these stakeholders, the focus is also on added value of libraries to the economic and social progress of the borough, how they serve citizens and how they complement other statutory services.

“The public is very attached to buildings and staff. Libraries should be for everybody. This process is about future proofing them, to support them to deliver services.”
Stakeholder

Future proofing the library service in Torfaen through a new strategy is thus considered the key focus for the Council. For stakeholders, this means that any strategy should take a longer term view of how the service can be sustained to meet ongoing needs and deliver for

all the citizens of the county borough. A clear recognition amongst stakeholders and staff regarding the current financial situation means that there was support for using new technologies to work more efficiently along with partnerships to share services, integrating libraries into Torfaen's customer services across a range of fields such as health, skills, digital and town centre development.

Future proofing Torfaen's libraries also needs a recognition of the front facing nature of their services, the local context and people who use the library. It is about positioning and branding and meeting the priorities of the Council's CP3, making sure it is integrated and aligned with it. For stakeholders, libraries in Torfaen must continue to work locally but consider regional and national options and opportunities for funding from other sources. Libraries can continue to be a force in digital skills, prosperity, health and wellbeing but this requires a viable and quality service and there was strong support across stakeholders, staff and users for any new strategy to support this process.

"I think the public feel that the library belongs to them. And I think they value it...It's one of those things where people never talk about it or appreciate it until they haven't got it."

Stakeholder

3. Torfaen Libraries and Information Service Strategy 2018-2023

Our Vision, Key Principles and Objectives

3.1 Introduction

The Library and Information Service Strategy defines the vision and objectives for Torfaen Library and Information Service to ensure it fulfils its statutory duties and contributes to the Council's Corporate Plan (CP3), particularly with regard to raising educational attainment and supporting Torfaen's most vulnerable residents. It sets out a proactive agenda to ensure the service builds on its recognised strengths and is sustainable in the future, in order to most effectively meet the needs of residents in the context of reduced financial resources.

3.2 Our vision

Our Vision is to provide a proactive, 21st century library and information service that will enhance the lives of Torfaen residents and promote their well-being, by providing the following:

- A service that inspires children, young people and their families to enjoy reading and to develop their knowledge and skills;
- A service that reflects the needs and make-up of Torfaen's communities, providing a range of support services for groups and individuals;
- A service that offers easy access to other public-serving Council services and advice and information for residents;
- A service that makes a real contribution to promoting the health and well-being of residents;
- A service that offers welcoming, safe spaces and provides access to modern facilities and new technologies and supports innovative service delivery;
- A service that is delivered by teams of skilled, professional staff members who will work in partnership with other individuals and organisations to support access to library resources and deliver a wide range of activities and learning opportunities;
- A cost-effective service that is well-used and responsive to changing customers' needs and available technologies and resources.

Fundamental to the service is a commitment to maximise the role of libraries as a focal point for both communities and personal development.

Library services will continue to provide a universal offer and broad range of community/information support services in physical library spaces - at our three current sites in Cwmbran, Pontypool and Blaenavon - and across the full range of digital and virtual platforms.

Where people cannot visit our three sites, we will assist and enable them to access the service in a variety of ways, including providing services online and working in partnership with others to deliver accessible services.

Our libraries and information service will serve all sections of the community, while concentrating resources to where they are most needed and can be most beneficial, including:

- Engaging with disadvantaged communities and people: The Torfaen Library and Information Service will provide information and support to enrich and enhance their quality of life, for example supporting job-seekers in their search for work;
- Both ends of the age spectrum – children and older people: The service will continue to play a key role in supporting children’s first steps in listening to stories and learning to read, to supporting older people in using new technologies and in providing a range of community based “preventative” health and wellbeing services and social interaction opportunities;
- In line with CP3’s commitment to support the most vulnerable in society, the service will continue to provide a safe space to engage with a wide range of community groups and third sector organisations to engage with, and effectively support, these groups.

3.3 Our principles

A core set of principles will underpin the future delivery of public library services. These core principles are as follows:

Providing a high quality service for all that is inspiring and stimulating

We will continue to deliver a high-quality, accessible and family-friendly service ensuring we meet the needs of hard-to-reach, disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals and communities.

Widening participation

We will support the learning needs of adults and children, developing innovative ways to increase take-up of provision for formal and informal learning, skills development and volunteering.

Partnership and collaboration

We will continue to work closely with partners and build relationships with our neighbouring authorities – specifically those in the Cardiff City Region – to achieve economies of scale and maximise funding opportunities.

We will also work closely with other council services to enable libraries to play a key role as neighbourhood and community hubs.

We will continue to work closely with Welsh Government's Museums, Archives and Libraries Division (MALD) to meet statutory guidelines and standards and participate in regional and national library initiatives.

Digital inclusion

We will continue to provide free online access through our computers and other internet devices, free public Wi-Fi IT Skills support through drop in sessions delivered by library staff to contribute to delivering digital inclusion in the communities of Torfaen.

We will ensure that the “digitally excluded” have free and local access to services and ensure that our services keep pace with technological development in information provision, informal learning and leisure opportunities.

We will use technology to help us become more efficient and enhance our service delivery.

Providing an enterprising and sustainable infrastructure

We need to adapt and think beyond previous efficiency approaches to take a more strategic approach to delivering services locally, including:

- Stronger co-ordination and partnership working, particularly where clear economies of scale can be achieved;
- Greater use and application of digital presence and user-friendly technology;
- Future co-location and integration of council and other partner services within the three libraries particularly those services which enhance learning, and skills development and support vulnerable residents;

Our three libraries will be attractive, safe, accessible and fit-for-purpose and be recognised as making a positive contribution to the Council's commitment to town centre regeneration, lifelong learning and healthy communities.

We will continue to adopt a commercial approach to service delivery as well as identifying opportunities to secure additional funding support as part of our goal to develop income generation where possible. Innovation within our services will be a key part of this approach.

Torfaen Library and Information Service: Our Priorities

3.4 Torfaen's three libraries

Torfaen Library and Information Service will continue to be delivered at the three key geographic locations within the borough, namely Blaenavon, Cwmbran and Pontypool.

The library and information service will be delivered by Torfaen Borough Council, but we will continue to explore new partnerships, particularly those which can demonstrate improvements in service delivery and efficiency savings.

Cwmbran Library will continue to be recognised as the borough's strategic library in terms of resources and activities, while Blaenavon and Pontypool will continue to complement Cwmbran's services and serve their local communities.

We will continue to work with other council services and local partners to ensure our libraries play a key role as accessible centres of information and expertise.

Our libraries will be a first port of call for a wider range of customer-facing council services, linked to CP3 aims and objectives and the needs of residents.

We will ensure that the buildings are welcoming, accessible and fit for a wide range of community uses.

We will keep our three libraries at the heart of their communities by continuing to provide the services the public value through events and activities, partnerships with user groups, and links with schools and colleges.

We will ensure that all three of our libraries have opening times which complement each other and the needs of their customers and make our services available to all residents through the week.

We will commit to further develop self-service options beyond Blaenavon and introduce the technology in Cwmbran and Pontypool. Any future revisions in opening hours could focus upon the potential for late evening and weekend opening for book loans, which remains our most valued service.

3.5 Our service and resources

Our services will contribute to the social, educational, cultural and economic well-being of all our communities in Torfaen. We recognise that we face significant challenges in terms of capacity and resources, however we are committed to delivering a service that meets the needs of our residents wherever possible. Our service priorities are therefore as follows:

Strand 1: A resource for everyone

We will continue to build high-quality, varied and up to date collections and book stock for all user groups/ages and ensure customers have access to the latest learning tools.

Through our strategic library in Cwmbran we will continue to provide research and reference resources for customers, linking with other libraries in the borough and south east Wales to enhance these services where possible.

We will provide high quality and relevant programmes and learning opportunities in response to community interests.

We will continue to build on our strengths in providing the youngest residents of Torfaen (and their families) with opportunities to develop their literacy skills, sense of play and love of reading through our activities.

We will explore new technologies to be able to offer an accessible and trusted online presence and be able to provide multiple access modes to services.

We will enable access to a range of online information resources and allow library members to manage their accounts, renew and request titles and to download e-books, e-audio titles and e-magazines.

We aim to support Welsh language initiatives and ensure our service strives to meet customer needs.

Strand 2: Health and well-being

We will continue to build on our strengths in supporting the most vulnerable in Torfaen with advice to manage their own health and wellbeing through the provision of information services in partnership with other organisations.

The service will continue to provide a range of complementary outreach services, notably the Library@Home service. Future discussions will take place with neighbouring authorities to assess whether such provision could be delivered on a collaborative basis.

We will continue to identify opportunities for effective partnership with Adult Community Learning groups and with health and well-being organisations, developing a holistic local approach to learning and mental and physical wellbeing.

Strand 3: Encouraging skills development and economic growth

We will work with other council departments and local job agencies to develop a more formalised approach to supporting job seekers, including regular job clubs, specific digital skills workshops, CV writing and inviting employers to our libraries.

We will identify the information and skills needs of our business community – pre-starts, start-ups and growing businesses – and seek out and build new partnerships with our colleagues in Economic Development and Communities that increase the impact of libraries to support business growth.

The service will continue to assist people, particularly vulnerable groups and job seekers, to get online and be confident in using digital resources.

3.6 Working in partnership

We will work with other Torfaen Council departments, neighbouring library authorities and Welsh Government to maximise opportunities for efficient design and delivery of services and reduce costs.

Torfaen will play an active role in any regional libraries 'working group' to review future collaboration opportunities, share good practice and consider any future opportunities which may arise

Torfaen will continue to play an active role in the All-Wales Book Purchasing consortium; e-lending schemes in partnership with other authorities such as Borrowbox and the Books4U inter-library loan scheme to allow residents better access to books.

We will work with Coleg Gwent to explore resource sharing opportunities offered by the new sixth form campus due to open in Cwmbran in 2020.

We will engage with service users and wider partners such as Community Councils to explore developing a 'Friends of the Library' Group to support revenue generation activities, suitable volunteering schemes and other activities.

We will continue to seek opportunities for partnership with local and national organisations, in a range of fields highlighted by the public as important such as:

- Increasing children's access to and use of libraries;
- Supporting skills, employment and progression opportunities;
- Increasing arts and cultural activity through libraries.

Torfaen libraries will be a part of the all-Wales library management system to promote further efficiencies and be part of national approach to providing services.

3.7 Staffing

Professional, qualified staff are central to the success of the library and information service in Torfaen and we will continue to provide the personal interaction valued by customers.

We will ensure a balanced staffing arrangement of front line and senior staff across all three libraries in Torfaen to ensure the quality and sustainability of the service.

We will seek to ensure that staff are offered continuing professional development opportunities to ensure their skills are as current as possible e.g. digital skills and enable them to progress within their field.

We value our volunteers in supporting some of our services and recognise the need to develop and look after our volunteer base. In collaboration with neighbouring local authorities, we will design a framework for them to effectively perform their roles.

3.8 Revenue generation and resources

We will explore ongoing opportunities for revenue generation and work with other council departments to deliver efficiencies and share resources where opportunities exist.

We will continue to work with partners to identify new project-based funding sources to support and enhance our current provision and develop specific initiatives to engage with our target groups of users.

We will introduce self-service book lending facilities in Cwmbran and Pontypool (to complement the service already delivered at Blaenavon) to promote an innovative, flexible approach to the service most valued by customers. This system will additionally free up staff time to deliver other activities.

3.9 Monitoring and evaluation

We will continue to monitor our performance carefully and will adapt our performance monitoring systems to reflect the changes which are taking place nationally.

We will work in partnership with Welsh Government to assess our performance against national standards and develop action plans to build on success and address weaknesses in our services.

We will continue to use the national performance management framework (Inspiring Learning for All) to measure and understand our performance in the areas of access, resources, quality and efficiency and to compare our performance against other authorities.

We will develop and use SMART targets to ensure improved performance and delivery of services which meet local needs.

3.10 What success will look like in 2023

The service will clearly demonstrate that its activity is aligned to the Torfaen County Borough priorities, with specific reference to CP3 and successor strategies.

The library service will meet all the core entitlements of the Welsh Public Library Standards and the Universal Offer.

The library service will proactively use new technology to enhance the access and experience for our customers now and in the future.

The library and information service will continue to support Torfaen's citizens in their skills, learning and health and wellbeing needs and to be a focal point of local communities.

Professional, qualified staff will continue to play a key role in the delivery of the Library and Information Service.

The Library and Information Service will be resilient and recognised as a service that provides quality, efficiency and accessibility; representing excellent value for money.

The service will work with a range of local and national partners to maximise efficiency, quality and to engage with a wide range of initiatives.

Citizens of Torfaen will continue to value, engage with and take pleasure from their library and information service.

4. Implementation Plan for Torfaen Libraries and Information Service

Activity strands / inputs	Actions	Resources / Partners		Outcomes	Monitoring and Evaluation	SMART targets / timescales
A resource for everyone	<p>Build high-quality and up to date book stock for all user groups/ages</p> <p>Provide research and reference resources for users</p> <p>Provide high quality and relevant learning opportunities in response to community interests.</p> <p>Provide the youngest residents of Torfaen (and their families) with opportunities to develop their literacy skills, sense of play and love of reading</p> <p>Offer an accessible and trusted online presence and resources and multiple access modes to services</p>	<p>Participate in All-Wales Book Purchasing consortium; e-lending schemes with other authorities such as Borrowbox and the Books4U inter-library loan scheme</p> <p>Participate in All-Wales Library Management System (LMS)</p> <p>Work with other libraries in SE Wales to share good practice and consider future opportunities.</p> <p>Participation in regional and national library initiatives</p> <p>Investment in online resources / self-service models</p>	→	<p>Continuation of wide range of learning and community activities in line with user need and resources</p> <p>Increasing children's access to, and use, of libraries and to quality learning materials</p> <p>Supporting sharing of resources and exchange of good practice</p> <p>Increasing arts and cultural activity through libraries.</p> <p>Development of more effective online presence and access to alternative modes to services</p>	<p>Meeting Welsh Public Library Standards and MALD guidelines</p> <p>Continue ongoing monitoring system to assess users' engagement with the library and specific activities and monitor over time</p> <p>Website visits, number of e lenders and self-service users</p>	<p>Report Assessment letter from WG (annual)</p> <p>Meet MALD 18 core entitlements (annual)</p> <p>Items borrowed: 3,300 per 1000 population. Ffynnon Team Plan</p> <p>The percentage of adults who think that the library is "very good" or "good" overall (Annual, indicative)</p> <p>The percentage of children aged 7-16 who think that the library helps them learn and find things out (Annual, indicative)</p> <p>E book loans. Figs supplied by National</p>

		Staff training to support new self-service systems and to ensure stock readiness for changeover		New self-service systems in place in Cwmbran and Pontypool	Reporting to SRS on quality and maintenance of self-service equipment	Library of Wales on behalf of the e-book consortium. (Monthly, indicative)
				Enhanced skills for staff	Staff feedback	Helpdesk call logs Training evaluation forms
Health and wellbeing	Support the most vulnerable in Torfaen with advice to manage their own health and wellbeing Provide a range of complementary outreach services, notably the Library@Home service, and therapeutic shared reading groups with the support of volunteers Develop a holistic local approach to learning and mental and physical wellbeing	Partnerships with Adult Community Learning groups and with health and well-being organisations Working with neighbouring authorities to assess whether such provision could be delivered on a collaborative basis Training for volunteers	→	Development of a holistic health and wellbeing offer across services in Torfaen New partnerships with ACL and health organisations to support offer Enhanced, accessible health and wellbeing services for Torfaen through libraries Opportunities for efficiencies and sharing resources to bid for funding are explored Partnership with other Local Authorities to support volunteering	Meeting goals of Wellbeing of Future Generations Act Number of health practitioners /organisations supporting the scheme Additional funding schemes applied for Framework for volunteers developed with local authorities (2020) Numbers of volunteers (annual)	State of the Nation reporting to Chief Executive (Annual). Health and Well Being Information and Support Officer to collate data. Indicative. Establish baseline data (annual) PID submissions (annual) Dependent upon regional agreement and set up Included in Annual Report to WG

				across learning and health are explored		(Indicative, not numerical target)
	<p>Develop a more formalised approach to supporting job seekers, including job clubs, digital skills workshops, CV writing and inviting employers to libraries.</p> <p>Identify the information and skills needs of Torfaen's business community</p> <p>Assist people, particularly vulnerable groups and job seekers, to get online and be confident in using digital resources.</p>	<p>Work with other council departments and local job agencies to identify need and develop resources to support job seekers</p> <p>Develop new partnerships with local businesses that increase the impact of libraries to support business growth.</p>	→	<p>Joined up services for job seekers</p> <p>Opportunities to engage with employers</p> <p>Skills development for the local population</p> <p>Vulnerable groups access more skills development, progression and job opportunities</p>	<p>Number of employers / employers organisations supporting the scheme (annual)</p> <p>The total number of library service users benefitting from structured or informal user training.</p>	<p>Establish baseline data (2018-2019)</p> <p>Target: 31,500 (annual)</p>
Delivering the Strategy	<p>Torfaen Library and Information Service will continue to be delivered Blaenavon, Cwmbran and Pontypool.</p> <p>The library and information service will be delivered by Torfaen Borough Council</p>	<p>Work with local partners to ensure libraries play a key role as accessible centres of information and expertise</p> <p>Balanced staffing arrangement of front line and senior staff across all three libraries in Torfaen to ensure the quality and</p>		<p>Libraries will be a first port of call for a wider range of customer-facing council services, linked to CP3 aims and customer need.</p> <p>Torfaen libraries are welcoming, accessible and fit for a wide range of community uses.</p>	<p>Develop and use local performance and output measures to ensure improved performance and delivery of services</p> <p>Performance against national standards and MALD core entitlements</p>	<p>Library management team minutes. Monthly</p> <p>Annual Report Assessment letter from WG. (September, annually)</p>

	<p>Cwmbran Library will be borough's strategic library in terms of resources and activities, while Blaenavon and Pontypool will continue to complement Cwmbran's services and serve their local communities.</p>	<p>sustainability of the service.</p> <p>Offer continuing professional development opportunities to ensure skilled staff and progression opportunities</p> <p>Work with other council departments to deliver efficiencies and share resources where opportunities exist.</p>		<p>Improvements in service delivery</p> <p>Develop new project-based funding sources to enhance and add value to existing provision and engage with target groups.</p>	<p>The percentage of staff time spent in training and personal/professional development.</p> <p>New initiatives developed</p> <p>Five year review of Strategy</p>	<p>Target 1%. Annual report to WG.</p> <p>Annual Report Assessment letter from WG. September annually</p> <p>Library Management Team minutes</p> <p>Produce a final report (2023)</p>
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