

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (Aneurin Leisure Trust)

Overview and location

Blaenau Gwent library services were delivered by the Aneurin Leisure Trust. The service included six branches with 98% of residents living within 2.5 miles of a library.

Library service performance

Blaenau Gwent provided evidence that it had fully met all 12 core entitlements.

Core entitlement	Service self-assessment	Independent assessment
1 Libraries in Wales will be free to join and open to all.	Fully met	Fully met
2 Libraries in Wales will ensure friendly, knowledgeable and qualified staff are on hand to help.	Fully met	Fully met
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.	Fully met	Fully met
4 Libraries in Wales will provide appropriate services, facilities and information resources for individuals and groups with special needs.	Fully met	Fully met
5 Libraries will provide appropriate safe, attractive and accessible physical spaces with suitable staffed opening hours.	Fully met	Fully met
6 Libraries in Wales will lend books for free and deliver free access to information, including online information resources available 24 hours a day.	Fully met	Fully met
7 Libraries in Wales will provide free use of the Internet and computers, including Wi-Fi.	Fully met	Fully met
8 Libraries in Wales will provide access to services, cultural activities and high quality resources in the Welsh language.	Fully met	Fully met
9 Libraries in Wales will work in partnership to share catalogues and facilitate access to the resources of all Welsh libraries.	Fully met	Fully met
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.	Fully met	Fully met
11 Libraries in Wales will regularly consult users to gather their views on the service and information about their changing needs.	Fully met	Fully met

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.	Fully met	Fully met
Total - fully met	12	12
Total - partially met	0	0
Total - not met	0	0

Library use

Over the reporting year, the service had 31 active borrowers per 1,000 population, representing a 7% increase from the previous year. Adult book issues increased by 108% to 662 issues per 1,000 population, while children's book issues increased by 309% to 94 issues per 1,000 population. Click and Collect orders saw a reduction but customers still use the service. Blaenau Gwent also offers a home delivery service which includes books as well as specially designed equipment for the visually impaired.

No customer survey has been conducted since 2019, but one was planned for 2022/23. Blaenau Gwent engaged in the process of reinstating services from pre-pandemic, ensuring that there was constant risk assessment approved by the local authority health and safety department. This has meant that the service has been able to return to pre-pandemic delivery.

Highlights

The most significant development has been the merger of the Council's community hubs into libraries which has greatly increased footfall into all libraries and led to a major expansion of partnership initiatives. For example, the Regeneration Department of Blaenau Gwent Council has promoted local projects, funded digital screens for all libraries and have involved the service in the 'Shop Local' promotion.

Other highlights include:

- The library service has further strengthened partnership work through the provision of community hubs in all libraries, with an increasing range of face-to-face support for residents, including for Blue Badge applications and Cost of Living rebate schemes.
- In October 2021, a sports library project was launched in libraries open 30+ hours per week, where users could loan a range of sporting equipment from the library free of charge.
- Since September 2021, a range of activities have been re-introduced including Baby Yoga, Creative Writing Group, Inside Out Group (art for mental health) and many others.
- The service has worked with the local health board to provide mental health services where individuals can collect resource packs, as well as being part of the home delivery service.
- The 'Winter of Wellbeing' programme provided a range of free events for families, and the service delivered 29 events attended by 152 parents and

596 young people, allowing for re-engagement with young people in Blaenau Gwent post-pandemic.

Materials, Welsh language and overall spend

Blaenau Gwent showed a mixed picture in relation to materials. Although Blaenau Gwent ranked in the bottom quartile for materials spending per 1,000 population, the total materials expenditure increased over the year, 17% of the budget being spent on children's materials. This budget for children's books is in the first quartile of services nationally. In terms of Welsh language, Blaenau Gwent ranks in the top quartile for spending per 1,000 Welsh speakers. It ranked in the second quartile for the number of Welsh language issues and saw over a 1000% increase in Welsh language issues from the previous year.

In terms of outreach, Blaenau Gwent provided a home delivery service for residents who are unable to access the static libraries. Blaenau Gwent also provided a range of different services from health and wellbeing to life-long learning, Staff reported being regularly updated on new resources and opportunities at meetings.

Staffing

The total number of staff has remained the same since 2021. There is only one professional member of staff and job descriptions have been reviewed to create a new professional post. The new post holder is working towards a MCLIP qualification, and the operational manager already has a MCLIP qualification.

Digital data

Blaenau Gwent provided digital data including 'Click and Collect' statistics. As pandemic restrictions eased, Blaenau Gwent saw a reduction in use of their 'Call and Collect' services by 58%. However, they stated that people still enjoy the service for a variety of reasons, and they also provide home delivery service. Data on online sessions and individuals participating was not collected for 2022 but the service states that customers were asking for the return of in-person events. Some services remained online such as arts and crafts and Baby Yoga. On their website, Blaenau Gwent offers a range of services including e-books through Borrowbox, an online study resource and lists of the activities they provide.

Future plans

One of the main future plans of the service is the relocation of Abertillery Library to a new location as the project was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The service will also work to deliver local and national agendas, and community support remains a strong part of the service. With many staff due to retire, the service is planning a large recruitment drive which would see a replacement of half the workforce. It will be working with staff to use this recruitment as an opportunity to develop the service and seek grants from the Skills Priority Funding stream to recruit two new library development officers. Residents have been requesting earlier opening times for the libraries that are open part-time. It has been unable to do this yet, but is aiming to do so. Health and wellbeing will be embedded in the range of services that the libraries are providing, and it asserts that it remains committed to its ethos of creating positive impacts through physical and mental health.

Case studies

Aneurin Leisure Trust provided four case studies to illustrate the positive impact of the service including one on an individual suffering from long covid and one on how use of the library service helped a family new to the area to settle in and feel part of the community.