

Welsh Public Library Standards – Annual Report 2005/06

- Rhondda Cynon Tâf

Welsh Assembly Government response

The authority has submitted an Annual Report for 2005/06 that complies with the stated requirements in a clear and thorough manner. The Report was approved by the Cabinet/Executive Portfolio member of Rhondda Cynon Taf Council prior to its submission to CyMAL, although it is not known whether the extent of the authority's poor performance was realised by the Cabinet when its approval was granted, and what action could ensue. The Welsh Assembly Government may decide to seek further information on this. The data given in the Annual Report is clear and well presented, and conveys an intention to achieve a considerable number of the Standards by March 2008, although there are a number of areas where the stipulated levels are deemed to be beyond the authority's current resources. The commentary presents a detailed and realistic representation of the situation faced by the library service within the imposed resource limitations, thus facilitating the assessment process.

The assessment process infers that underlying problems relating to the authority's ability to achieve some of the key Standards correlate clearly and directly to a lack of adequate investment of revenue resources in the library service, aggravated by reductions in the book fund in order to meet other local authority costs. There has, however, been some capital investment by the local authority during 2005/06, including a new Bookbus, and refurbishment, redecoration and DDA work to libraries. The purchase of new mobile libraries, and other planned works have also been scheduled for 2006/07 and 2007/08. If this planned expenditure and work is carried out, it should result in the library service being able to meet a number of additional key Standards by March 2008. The authority has also undertaken a review of library opening hours, and has prepared a report, which is currently under consideration. This will be presented to the Cabinet at a later, as yet unspecified date. If these are agreed, there should be a positive impact on the achievement of other critical Standards by March 2008.

It has been decided that unless an authority achieves at least half of the elements of a Standard, it will be deemed not to have met the requirements of that Standard. If half or more of the elements are met, but not the whole Standard, then the authority will be deemed to have partly met a Standard. Therefore, according to our calculations, the authority

- **Meets 3 of the 16 substantive Welsh Public Library Standards on 31 March 2006. Those Standards are numbers 25, 32 and 39.** An increase in the aggregate opening hours (WPLS 25) is a commendable feature of the authority's services. This was achieved partly through the provision of additional services via by the authority's Mobile/housebound service to one of its outreach centres. However, the Report notes that there was no Easter closure during 2005/06, due to Easter falling in April in 2006, so a small decrease in hours is likely in 2006/07. Despite a reduction in expenditure on library materials generally, specific management of the issue has enabled the authority to meet WPLS 39 (expenditure on Welsh language materials). This was achieved through increased partnership working on marketing and promotion of Welsh language materials, as well as its purchase. This a feature of the Standard that is sometimes overlooked.

- **partly meets the requirements of 4 Standards – WPLS 24, 27, 29 and 33.** Future targets for ‘convenient’ library opening hours have not been set, because of the pending review of opening hours. If accepted by the Council, the review might enable the authority to meet this Standard by March 2008 (WPLS 24), and similarly if the network problems are resolved, WPLS 27 could be achieved by the authority in due course. WPLS 29(i) (virtual visits) is also on schedule to be achieved by March 2008. The authority has produced a Lifelong Learning Entitlement Statement for learners in the authority, in line with the requirement of one of the new Standards of the second framework (WPLS 33);
- **is not yet meeting the requirements of 9 Standards – WPLS 26, 28, 30, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38 and 41.** Nevertheless, some of these Standards were missed by just narrow margins, and the authority anticipates that many of them will be met by March 2008. A new Standard for the second framework requires authorities to draw up and issue a Lifelong Learning Entitlement Statement for learners in their community. Rhondda Cynon Taf authority has created a draft statement, which is currently awaiting formal approval. No targets were set for WPLS 26 because of the review of opening hours currently under consideration, which has already been noted. Work on tackling issues relating to ICT access on mobiles has already begun. However, it is noted that the Corporate ICT department has safety and security concerns regarding the use of users’ laptops in libraries. This is not unique to the authority, and CyMAL may offer some advice on this matter in due course. It is acknowledged that corporate policy has to take precedence over meeting the requirement of the Standard (WPLS 28). The authority failed to meet its target for formally qualified staff, (WPLS 34) although the assessment process has noted that a number of staff are currently pursuing professional qualifications. The authority should note, however, that staff must not be counted as qualified until they have successfully completed their course of study. Staffing levels per 1,000 population are below the lowest UK quartile, reflecting the lower staffing levels in Wales as a whole. Expenditure on library materials, due to reductions in the book fund, falls well short of the stipulated level in both elements of WPLS 38, and this shortfall undoubtedly correlates with the failure to meet the requirements of WPLS 30 (supply of requests), WPLS 36 (additions to stock) and WPLS 37 (replenishment of stock), which reported a considerable drop in performance. Further input of resources, as well as the continued investment in capital expenditure by the local authority will be needed to enable the library service to turn around this decline in performance.
- **The remaining 2 Standards – WPLS 35 and 40 – are still under development,** but some work has already been undertaken in both areas.

Performance in the Standards listed in the **Continuing Performance Checklist** has been maintained in WPLS 7, 8 and 9. However, performance fell below the level required by the Standard in WPLS 2 and 3, due to the closure of Mountain Ash Library for three weeks because of flooding, and ongoing mechanical problems of older mobile library vehicles. The replacement of one vehicle, and planned replacement of two more during 2006/07 should see the authority meet the stipulated levels by March 2007.

The authority met approximately half of the internal targets that they set for 2005/06. Many of these, however, were set to maintain the status quo and not as

improvement targets. The rationale supporting new targets in WPLS 30 is not immediately apparent in view of current performances.

The locally designated service priority areas are closely linked to the Standards. The authority's intention to fully meet local performance indicators and all Welsh Public Library Standards relating to ICT based services by March 2008 will not only depend on technical infrastructure problems being resolved, but also on changes of corporate policy. New baselines have been established during 2005/06 for the authority's locally designated service priorities relating to marketing, publicity and promotion of the library service and partnership working, and realistic and measurable targets have been set.

The assessment of the Library Plan for 2005-08 noted that the library service appeared to have identified in general terms what needed to be done to meet the Standards by March 2008, and also identified a range of possible actions to improve its levels of performance. However, it had not yet shown that it had identified and allocated investment in key areas to achieve those improvements. The assessment of the Annual Report for 2004/05, the final year of the first framework of Standards also expressed some concern that the necessary levels of investment for the authority to achieve its own targets and aspirations had not occurred. The lack of commitment by the local authority to invest additional revenue resources in key areas, such as expenditure on acquisitions could result in the library service failing to meet its own targets and failing to make any further headway against the Standards. The commitment to capital expenditure is more apparent and should support strategic aspirations. CyMAL and the Welsh Public Library Standards Reference Group will therefore monitor closely future Annual Reports from Rhondda Cynon Taf to ensure that the progress anticipated from the action implemented by the service is realised.