

A Review of the Library Service Strategy

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

January 2026

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at whether the Council has arrangements to help meet the objectives set out in its new Library Strategy 2025-2030. This included how the strategy supports wider Council policies, how resources are allocated to deliver the strategy and the arrangements the Council has to ensure the library service provides value for money.

Why this is important

- 2 Councils have a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service'.
- 3 Libraries benefit communities and help to support the Council's wider priorities by:
 - providing equal access to information through books, digital resources, and reference materials;
 - promoting social and digital inclusion with computers, internet access, and assistance;
 - creating safe spaces for skill-building and community engagement;
 - supporting education and economic growth by providing resources for job searching and career development; and
 - supporting people's mental health and well-being, making people feel included and connected to their community.
- 4 The Welsh Government has recently developed a new set of library standards, which recognise the central role libraries can play in communities.

- 5 In May 2024, the Council brought the service back in-house. It was previously run by Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Trust. Given the change, having a strategy which reflects community need, is supported by a robust delivery plan and is actively monitored, is key.

What we have found

- 6 Whilst the Council has a new Library Strategy, we have found some shortcomings in its development. There has been limited engagement with both staff and communities. The Council also does not have a delivery plan setting out how it will implement and monitor the strategy. This is crucial given the medium-term financial challenges facing the Council.
- 7 Performance against the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) has improved, but the 2024-25 WPLS report continues to raise concerns about staffing levels, opening hours and impact on service users. It concludes that the service will take a number of years to recover from the challenges it has faced.
- 8 The Council has understandably focused on supporting staff as the service was brought back into the Council's control. Staff were positive about this support.
- 9 We recognise that the Council is in the early stages of taking forward its strategy. We have developed recommendations which are intended to help the Council strengthen its arrangements to support the delivery of the service. We will be looking to see the Council progress these over the next 6-12 months to give us greater confidence that it has arrangements for securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of its resources.

What we recommend

- 10 We have made three recommendations to the Council which focus on developing a delivery plan, monitoring arrangements and addressing capacity challenges.

Our findings

Strategy development

Although the Council approved the strategy for the service, there are shortcomings in how it was developed

- 11 The Council's Library Strategy 2025-2030 meets the Welsh Public Library Standards focusing on nine themes and aiming to empower and support communities.
- 12 We would expect to find that the Council has considered the five ways of working in developing its strategy, to show that it has applied the sustainable development principle. The strategy supports the Council's well-being objectives, but there is limited evidence to suggest that the Council considered local need when developing the strategy. Supporting reports briefly mention a consultation took place but do not show any results or how they were assessed. Involving the community in developing the strategy is important so that the service can reflect local needs.
- 13 The library service led on the development of the strategy. It considered aspects such as digital and the Welsh language in drafting the strategy. However, no other departments were involved in the development of the strategy. By not collaborating with other departments, the strategy may fail to align effectively with broader Council objectives and initiatives. This may result in a lack of coordination between the library service and other Council services, diminishing the potential for collaborative projects and to maximise resources. Wider corporate buy-in and support may also be impacted and present a risk to delivering the objectives in the strategy.

- 14 The Council's constitution states that scrutiny committees are an essential component of local democracy. It goes on to state that they should contribute to the development of Council policies and to the delivery of efficiency and effective services that meet the needs and aspirations of local inhabitants. However, none of the Council's scrutiny committees considered the Council's new Library Strategy before it was agreed by Cabinet in June 2025. This was a missed opportunity to help shape the Council's new strategy.

The Council does not have a delivery plan to support its strategy

- 15 The Council recognises that it needs to develop a delivery plan and gave a commitment to do this when the strategy was presented to Cabinet in June 2025. However, the Council had not progressed this at the time of our review.
- 16 Without a detailed delivery plan, the Council has not identified the capacity, skills and resources needed to deliver its strategy. This poses a risk that the strategy may not be deliverable. Any new initiatives in the strategy are not currently accounted for within the existing budget.
- 17 Whilst the settlement for 2026-27 is likely to be better than the Council originally anticipated, the Council is still facing significant financial challenges over the medium term. Understanding the resources needed to deliver the Library Strategy will be important to help inform future budget setting and decision-making.
- 18 The Council has not set out how it will monitor delivery of its Library Strategy. The Council has identified some high level workforce challenges posing a risk to delivering the strategy, but controls are limited in detail. Some actions are showing as outstanding against their target completion dates. As a result, there is a risk that the strategy may not be implemented as intended, or risks fully mitigated. This raises questions about whether the Council has arrangements to manage its resources economically, efficiently and effectively.

Staffing

The service is dealing with ongoing capacity challenges, but has actively supported staff during the service transition

- 19 Since May 2024, the Council has focussed on bringing the service back in house. Staff we spoke to were positive about how the Council has managed the transition.
- 20 The service currently lacks a Senior Librarian as operational manager. This presents a further risk to the delivery of the strategy as the role is key to developing a delivery plan for the service. The Council has no alternative arrangements to develop this plan, should this vacancy not be filled.
- 21 Despite the absence of a Senior Librarian as their direct line manager, staff are receiving regular one-to-one meetings and have clear development objectives. However, during interviews we found that staff could benefit from greater clarity in their roles and responsibilities. Further discussions on learning needs will ensure staff have the right skills to deliver the ambitions of the strategy.
- 22 Despite staff feeling supported, capacity challenges have meant that staff feel they have an increased workload. They reported taking on additional duties and, in some cases, have worked alone in libraries into the evening. To enhance staff safety, the service has revised its lone working procedures. However, in some instances, this has led to reduced opening hours at usually busy times, which can be disruptive for those using the service. The service has plans to review its structure to help address these issues.
- 23 It is clear library staff care about their communities and work hard to help people. We heard of examples where the service had made a real difference to service users, especially those more vulnerable. Staff make sure the library is a safe and welcoming place where everyone can use the different services on offer.

Service performance

The service has improved its performance against the Welsh Public Library Standards for 2024-25, but some areas of concern remain

24 The [Welsh Public Library Standards \(WPLS\) 2023-24 report](#) on the Council's library service noted that the situation was a serious concern. It identified concerns about reduced funding and its effects on staffing, opening hours, and resources. The report highlights that this would result in a deterioration of the services offered to the local communities. The 2023-24 report noted:

- the Council met 10 of the 13 core entitlements in full and two in part;
- it achieved four of the seven quality indicators in full, one in part and two were not met;
- staffing levels had reduced by nearly a third, meaning the Council had not met the targets for total staff per capita and qualified staff per capita;
- the Council was in the bottom quartile of Welsh councils for performance against the target for up-to-date and appropriate reading material;
- the Council had not provided data on two of the three indicators to assess the impact of library use on people's lives
- 50% of adults surveyed felt that the library had made a difference to their lives.

25 Encouragingly, the [2024-25 Welsh Public Library Standards](#) report shows an improving position:

- 12 of the 13 core entitlements have been met in full and one in part;
- three of the seven quality indicators have been achieved in full, one in part and one has not been met;
- user attendance at library events has increased by over 57%;
- 85% of adults surveyed felt that the library had made a difference to their lives; and

- per capita, the Council book budget has increased, allowing for a broader mix of books, including Welsh language, large print, audio, and reference materials.

26 The report acknowledges the improved staffing position including the appointment of two new full-time posts and one part-time post, and the commitment to support a staff member gain a professional qualification. But the report continues to emphasise some concerns around staffing levels, opening hours and the impact on service delivery. The Council is the lowest ranking council for three of the four adult customer satisfaction measures. Although it has increased its per capita revenue spending by 2%, it is in the bottom quartile compared to other Welsh councils. The 2024-25 report concludes that it will take a number of years for the service to recover from the challenges it has faced. This further reinforces the importance of the Council having a robust delivery plan to support its new strategy.

Recommendations

- 27 The Council is in the early stages of delivering its new Library Strategy. Our review has identified a number of areas for improvement. Our recommendations are intended to help the Council strengthen its arrangements to support the delivery of the service.

- R1** In order to ensure that it can successfully deliver its strategy the Council should:
- 1.1** Review the strategy to ensure it reflects local need and engage other Council services to facilitate corporate ownership and to maximise resources to help deliver Council objectives (**paragraphs 12 and 13**).
 - 1.2** Develop and adopt a delivery plan for the Library Strategy. This plan should include clear milestones, assigned responsibilities, and measurable performance indicators to facilitate accountability and progress tracking (**paragraph 15**).
 - 1.3** Expand risk management arrangements to specifically include risks to delivery and identify how these will be mitigated (**paragraph 18**).
 - 1.4** Review and identify the resources needed and factor these into its medium-term financial planning (**paragraph 17**).

R2 In order to ensure that it has the capacity to deliver on its strategy the Council should:

2.1 Undertake a review of the staffing structure to ensure it is fit for purpose to implement the Library Strategy (**paragraph 22**).

2.2 Identify, and if necessary, address gaps in capacity, skills mix, and succession planning (**paragraph 21**).

R3 The Council should set out how it will monitor delivery of its strategy by:

3.1 Developing and adopting robust arrangements for monitoring the delivery and outcomes of the Library Strategy (**paragraph 18**).

3.2 Introducing a balanced set of metrics beyond statutory standards and ensure regular review and reporting to stakeholders (**paragraph 18**).

Appendices

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

We looked at whether the Council has arrangements in place to help meet the objectives set out in its Library Strategy 2025-2030.

We did not assess arrangements for when the service was managed by Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Trust. Also, we did not review the detailed asset plans for library facilities or co-location approaches. We did our fieldwork during October 2025.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

Our audit explored the following questions:

- Does the Council have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve from its library service?
- Has the Council adequately resourced delivery of the strategy?
- Has the Council developed appropriate measures and monitoring arrangements to ensure effective delivery of its strategy?

Criteria

We drew on the Welsh Public Library Standards and the Well-Being of Future Generations guidance to determine our audit criteria.

Methods

We looked at documents, interviewed officers and members, and analysed data.

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