

SUBJECT: Libraries and Community Learning during Coronavirus

MEETING: Adults Select Committee

DATE: 16th March 2021

DIVISIONS/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide the committee with an overview of how libraries and community education have operated during the pandemic.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The committee is invited to use the information to understand how services have been delivered over the past twelve months and ensure that any lessons learnt are used to inform future service delivery and contribute to the well-being of adults in Monmouthshire.

3. KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 Libraries and Community Education provide people with access to information, culture, a variety of courses and the opportunity to learn new skills and meet new people. They are places of ambition and learning that make a considerable contribution to prosperity and well-being in Monmouthshire.
- 3.2 The impact of the pandemic means it has not been possible to deliver these services in the conventional sense over the last year. This paper gives some context and basic information and will be supplemented by input from the Managers for each service at the committee. This will enable members to understand more about how these services have evolved to meet needs during this period and how this has led to opportunities that may be retained beyond the current restrictions.
- 3.3 Both services sit within Monmouthshire Community Hubs. This approach has enabled the authority to maintain a local service offer in our largest towns by delivering economies of scale in buildings, utilities and staffing costs. This paper is not focused on the entirety of the hub offer which sits within the remit of Strong Communities Select Committee.
- 3.4 The Community Hubs Manager (North) hold the strategic lead for the library service across the whole county, while the Community Hubs Manager (South) has the lead for community education. From March 2020 both services were initially required to close and staff were re-deployed into priority services including providing support to shielded people, operating Test, Trace and Protect service, business support grants and bolstering call-handling capacity in the council's contact centre.

Libraries

- 3.5 The library service was required to close between March and May under the stay at home restrictions. Following a change in the Regulations in May it became possible to offer a 'click and collect' offer and this was introduced from all sites from the end of June. Initial scientific advice suggested that the virus could survive on paper for up to 72 hours and so strict measures were introduced in place to quarantine books along with the introduction of a self-service booking form and the ability to reserve a collection slot via the contact centre.
- 3.6 We are keen to explore whether the request and collect service should be maintained in the long-term alongside the regular offer to maximise convenience for busy library users. This would mirror the rise in the popularity of collection lockers for goods delivered from on-line retailers.
- 3.7 The service has run a number of live story-telling and rhyme-time sessions on social media channels. While aimed at children these are also expected to benefit young parents.
- 3.8 During this time Abergavenny library re-located to the newly refurbished mezzanine level at the town hall. Readers were welcomed back through the doors at all sites when we were able to re-open the service for browsing between September and December, although there were restrictions in place at this time.
- 3.9 The latest data from the Wales public library standards, covering the period 2017-20 is about to be released by Welsh Government. Library membership has increased by 11% from 42,092 to 46,922 over this period. However, the county falls short against a number of standards including expenditure on the service and number of staff employed. Monmouthshire also fails to achieve the standard for the percentage of people who live within 2.5 miles of their nearest library. These are all areas that a rural authority, with our level of resources, will always struggle to attain.
- 3.10 We have seen an increase in the popularity of e-books and magazines during lockdown, both can be accessed via <https://www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/community-hubs-and-libraries/digital-downloads/>. This reflects a long-term trend with downloads increasing from 23,340 to 56,195 between 2017 and 2020. We have also maintained the home delivery service provides a personalised service for the most vulnerable in our communities.

Community Education

- 3.11 Monmouthshire's Community Education offer is divided into two distinct parts. The accredited learning offer is delivered as part of a franchise agreement with Coleg Gwent. The 'leisure' offer comprises a wide range of non-accredited including photography, pottery and cooking with your child. The service budget is made up of fees from learners and grant income from both Coleg Gwent and Welsh Government.
- 3.12 All courses were paused in March 2020 with two weeks of the term remaining. Some were concluded through digital and socially distanced delivery during the autumn.

During the pandemic, the service has launched more online courses and has secured grant funding to purchase a number of chromebooks and portable wi-fi devices which can be loaned to people without access to the internet to enable them to participate. A list of on-line courses is available at <https://www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/online-courses/>

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

4.1 This paper is not seeking a decision and does not require a full impact evaluation.

5. REASONS:

5.1 To ensure that lessons are learnt from how services have been delivered during the coronavirus pandemic to contribute to an efficient and effective services that maximizes well-being for adults in Monmouthshire

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

6.1 There are no specific resource implications arising from this report.

7. AUTHOR:

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