

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
MUNICIPAL YEAR 2015-16**

**PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY,
COMMUNITIES AND PROSPERITY
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

15th February 2016

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF
EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING**

Agenda Item No. 5
RHONDDA CYNON TAF'S MOBILE LIBRARY SERVICE

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of the report is to provide information to the Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee on the performance of the Library Service's Mobile Libraries.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Committee:

- 2.1 Consider whether they wish to scrutinise in greater depth any matters contained in the report.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Rhondda Cynon Taf's Library Mobile Service consists of 4 vehicles and 3 full-time and 3 part-time staff. The service cost is approximately £148,000 per year for the staff and vehicles (depending on fluctuating costs for fuel). The service delivers books and information to residents across Rhondda Cynon Taf on a 2 weekly rota. All four mobile libraries visit locations between 9.00 a.m. and 4.30 p.m. for fifteen minute stops. Longer 2 hour stops are evening only and are provided by two mobile libraries, one in the north of the county and the other in the south of the county and the service runs till 7.30 p.m. The

latter provision was introduced in June 2014 in order to mitigate the impact of static library closures.

- 3.2 Mobile libraries are limited in respect of the amount of books and materials that they can carry but, for residents who cannot visit their nearest static library, they are a vital source for accessing books, information and recycling bags. In addition, residents can order the books they wish to be delivered by the mobile service either through email or by telephone so that they are not limited to the choice of books available on the vehicle.
- 3.3 There are currently 510 stops. Rotas are assessed on a regular basis to identify 'dead stops' (stops where there are no visitors over a period of time) and routes are changed as required to try to boost usage but also at the request of customers and Elected Members who feel there is a need for the service in a particular street or area. It should be noted however that there are some streets that cannot be accessed due to the location of traffic calming measures (specifically 'speed bumps') as these cause significant damage to the underside of vehicles. In addition in some areas, the narrowness of streets along with dual-side on-street parking makes it difficult for vehicles to drive down them.

It should be noted that prior to a change in any mobile route that the streets to be visited are leafleted and all changes are highlighted on the Council website. Regular users of the service will be informed of any changes that affect them (for example, parking the vehicle in the next street as opposed to on their doorstep).

- 3.4 According to the Welsh Public Library Standards, mobile libraries should have wi-fi and access to computers or other electronic devices. However there are challenges in achieving this - in particular the lack of ability to be able to pick up wi-fi in parts of the county. The Council's ICT service has assessed the situation and advised that there is no reliable means of ensuring consistent access to the internet on the vehicles. The limited time available on most stops also predisposes against investment in this equipment. Consequently there are no current plans to install electronic devices onto the mobile libraries. It is recognised that this will affect the Library Service's ability to meet one of the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLSQI 10).
- 3.5 Despite a number of limitations (as identified above) the mobile library service is of vital importance to residents who find visiting static libraries challenging due to disabilities, ill-health or transport issues. For some people it is a means by which the Council can support their well-being and reduce their social isolation and it complements the Council's Tackling Poverty plans.

- 3.6 It is important to note that in addition to the mobile library service, the Council operates a Housebound Service for residents who are unable to leave their homes due to serious health and disability issues. There are currently 229 residents who receive this service across the county and there were no changes made to this service in 2014 and no changes are planned for delivery in the immediate future. In order to benefit from this service, an assessment of an individual's eligibility is undertaken by a Housebound Service staff member who visits the applicant in their home. If the person is deemed to qualify then arrangements are made to include visits from the Housebound Librarian – one visit each month. If they do not, then they are advised to use the mobile library service.
- 3.7 Finally there is a Deposit Collection Service which provides books with a 3 monthly refresh for 27 locations. These locations include residential homes, sheltered accommodation complexes and any other publicly accessible facility that indicates they would like to make books available to users.
- 3.8 The data provided in this report relates only to the mobile library service and does not include data on the Housebound Service.

4. ANALYSIS OF USAGE

- 4.1 Mobile library visitor numbers are estimations of visits through the sampling of specific weeks as there is no people counter facility on mobile vehicles. (This differs in relation to arrangements in static libraries where people counters have been located at the entrances of each facility in order to capture visitor numbers.)
- 4.2 With regard to book issues on mobiles the system depends on the use of a lap-top, the data from which is uploaded onto the Library Service's Talis system at the end of each week. This process is reliant on the lap-top working consistently and there have been a few periods when technical faults have resulted in issue data being lost. Nevertheless there are trends evident over the longer period that are useful for forward planning purposes.
- 4.3 Table 1 below provides a comparison of visitor numbers to mobiles over the 2013-15 periods. It should be noted that an additional mobile service was available from June 2014 onwards and at the same time 13 static libraries were closed.

Table 1 – Visitor numbers to mobile vehicles

Quarter	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Quarter 1	3,972	5,280	5,730
Quarter 2	4,602	5,994	5,244
Quarter 3	4,068	5,178	4,650
Quarter 4	3,882	5,118	N/A
Total annual visits	16,524	21,570	N/A

4.4 The mobile book issues for 2013/15 are included at Appendix 1 and are recorded on a monthly basis with book issues indicated against each route. As mentioned earlier there are four vehicles (W1 – Rhondda; W2 – Taff; E1 – Cynon; E2 – Cynon & Rhondda). Issues are also recorded against the evening and Saturday service (E3/W3 – evening service; E3/W3 – Saturdays) so that the service can monitor which routes are most popular or least cost effective.

4.5 Analysis of the issues highlights that the evening and weekend services perform consistently less well than the day-time service and in the 10 months between July 2014 and April 2015 Saturday services averaged a monthly book issue of 123 books, evenings 238, Taff area mobile 1,000, Rhondda area mobile 1,530, Cynon/Rhondda mobile 795 and Cynon mobile 1,915.

In the year 2013/14 there was no evening or Saturday service and average book issues for the same 10 month period (July 2013-April 2014) were Taff 887, Rhondda 1,386, Cynon/Rhondda 1,290 and Cynon 1,467.

In addition a more detailed analysis of key areas in the county has shown that there has been no usage of the evening service at all. This is true for example for Rhydyfelin area despite the stopping points being varied in an attempt to attract customers.

4.6 At a time when local authorities are required to make best use of scarce resources some of the usage figures for the mobile libraries over an extended period of time suggests that there are reductions that could be made to the service without having a major impact on residents who benefit most from it.

- 4.7 No other library authority in Wales offers a 2 weekly service. Seven local authority areas offer a 3 weekly service, four offer a monthly service and a further eight do not offer a mobile service at all. (www.welshlibraries.org)
- 4.8 The post of Senior Officer Specialist and Community Services which is responsible for mobile provision, the housebound service and projects related to people with disabilities or access issues is currently vacant as the incumbent left in September 2015 to take up a new post. This post will not be filled and will be regarded as an efficiency with key duties being redistributed among other officers as required.

5. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

- 5.1 The financial performance of the Library Service has been set out at Table 2 below (taking into account the £800,000 budget saving required from the agreed service change implemented in June 2014).

Table 2 – Financial Performance of the Library Service 2014/15 and 2015/16

Financial Year	Total Revenue Budget (£k)	Final Outturn/Projected Outturn (£k)	Over/Under Spend (£k)	Further information
2014/15 final outturn	2,570	2,571	1	As reported to Cabinet 23 rd July 2015
2015/16 projected outturn (as at 30 th September 2015)	2,301	2,301	0	As reported to Cabinet 24 th November 2015

- 5.2 For Members' information the agreed service change implemented in June 2014 did not comprise of budget savings in respect of the mobile library service.

6. PROPOSED SERVICE CHANGES 2015-16

- 6.1 As Members are aware Cabinet at its meeting on 4th February 2016 considered a further change proposal in respect of the Library Service that, if delivered, would realise savings of £327,000 in a full year. The decision notice of the meeting can be viewed by accessing the following link:

- 6.2 With specific regard to the Mobile Service (within the overall service change proposal) Cabinet agreed (subject to the Council's agreed call-in procedure) to '*Reduce the Mobile Libraries form 3 to 4 , retaining a 2 weekly rota.*'
- 6.3 On the basis of the usage data it is considered that a reduction from 4 to 3 vehicles would have little (if any) impact on residents who currently benefit from the service as two weekly rotas would be maintained. Re-structuring the service around fewer mobiles would enable costs to be reduced by £37,000 per year without impacting to any great extent on residents who benefit from the service.
- 6.4 Feedback from the public consultation events held and the Library Service's meetings with some community groups indicates that a reduction in the mobile service was regarded preferable by many to some of the other options for change. However it should be noted that the people who attended these meetings were all users of static libraries and they did not depend on the mobile service.
- 6.5 In addition, the Service Change Consultation Report prepared by the Council's Consultation Team and reported to Cabinet on 4th February 2016 indicated that of the 1,632 written views provided by residents, 62.1% were in favour of reducing the number of mobile libraries from 4 to 3 with 29.4% rejecting this proposal and a further 8.5% indicating they had no opinion for or against the proposal. All mobile libraries included copies of the consultation documents and feedback questionnaires to ensure that users of the service had an opportunity to engage with the consultation. However it is recognised that in general the service needs to engage more effectively with these users as they are not included as a matter of course in the same type of customer satisfaction surveys that static library users engage in.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The mobile library service plays a valuable part in ensuring that residents who are unable to visit a static library can access books, information and recycling bags. Despite efforts to promote the service, usage of the service has not improved significantly over the past year even though 13 libraries were closed in June 2014. The rearrangement of mobile library routes and the creation of a role for an additional driver enabled the service to provide an evening/weekend service and longer stops. This was seen as a means of mitigating any adverse effect on areas where static libraries were closed.

However this has not attracted significant numbers of users and in some areas none at all.

- 7.2 At a time when all Library Services across Wales have been faced with funding reductions, difficult decisions have had to be made. In Rhondda Cynon Taf the approach of the Library Service has been to try to ensure that there remains as comprehensive a service as possible with a 'mixed' service that includes static libraries, mobile provision, a housebound service for residents who cannot leave their homes, deposit collections for key facilities (such as sheltered accommodation complexes), a Reference and Local Studies service and a Schools Library Service. Although it is recognised that aspects of this provision can be reduced, it is deemed preferable to removing elements altogether (which has been the approach in some counties). Accordingly, after taking account of service data it is considered that there is insufficient use made of the current mobile service at weekends and evenings and that a restructure is achievable with limited adverse impact on residents.

Appendix 1

Mobile Monthly Issues – January 2013 to December 2013												
	January 2013	February 2013	March 2013	April 2013	May 2013	June 2013	July 2013	August 2013	September 2013	October 2013	November 2013	December 2013
E1	106	974	1201	1683	1636	1430	1678	1671	1169	1827	1437	1155
E2	92	15	45	45	176	871	1768	1221	1188	1612	1366	934
W1	1108	1248	1405	1237	1285	850	1171	1156	1515	1661	1441	1263
W2	687	896	746	969	957	835	1005	977	902	894	946	663

Mobile Monthly Issues – January 2014 to December 2014												
	January 2014	February 2014	March 2014	April 2014	May 2014	June 2014	July 2014	August 2014	September 2014	October 2014	November 2014	December 2014
E1	1384	1265	1469	1623	1424	1566	1634	1517	1907	2966	2836	1817
E2	1192	1092	1160	1370	1093	1288	305	58	36	76	64	639
W1	1384	1448	1325	1502	1338	1356	1288	1465	1807	1821	1251	1105
W2	932	911	805	836	945	971	978	980	1067	553	876	687
E3/W3 evenings							214	320	193	210	212	180
E3/W3 Saturdays							120	162	108	144	181	151

Mobile Monthly Issues – January 2015 to December 2015												
	January 2015	February 2015	March 2015	April 2015	May 2015	June 2015	July 2015	August 2015	September 2015	October 2015	November 2015	December 2015
E1	1575	1406	1499	434	44	68	703	1130	1672	1538	1607	1241
E2	1367	1325	1363	1431	1168	1500	1202	1328	1315	1362	1256	1086
W1	1657	162	1660	1735	1336	1718	1613	1578	1618	1569	1624	1340
W2	1013	984	1159	803	694	941	889	939	904	925	842	627
E3/W3 evenings	182	294	320	252	367	303	338	341	265	250	272	195
E3/W3 Saturdays	45	111	91	113	231	160	175	130	94	198	150	129

W1 (Rhondda)
W2 (Taff)
E1 (Cynon)
E2 (Cynon & Rhondda)
E3/W3 Evenings/weekends

- Low figures for E2 during July – December reflect ongoing problems with laptop