

Merthyr Tydfil Public Libraries – Future Direction

The year has been a very mixed one for staff and customers at Merthyr Tydfil Public Libraries, with lockdowns, restrictions and easings and then further lockdowns.

At the time of the initial lockdown, it was hard to imagine the extended period that it would entail. During the early days of lockdown, there was a period of ‘downtime’ while everyone waited for things to get back to ‘normal’. As time moved on and it became more obvious that there would be an extended period of lockdown, staff mobilised and began to develop online content. However, the understanding we have of the demographic which we serve gave us a lot of food for thought around the difficulties being presented to families and individuals who were struggling without physical access to services, and the ability to access online content without the help of the library service.

With the restrictions in place however, there was little choice. Staff (who had not been furloughed) created a range of videos aimed at families and children and created more content for social media as well. Working across the organisation and incorporating and developing content alongside colleagues in the Museum service and creating a Youtube channel and new social media accounts.

As the year has progressed, we have very much steered away from some of the language being used, around opportunities. We must never forget that the COVID-19 pandemic is a tragedy, however, it has happened and we are still in the midst of it. Staff are currently still partly furloughed, as we move towards alert level 0. In some ways this does limit the creative thinking that will be incredibly important in the reimagining that will be required around public library services, however it also provides a step by step and staggered approach to helping staff get back into work after the turbulent year they have had.

We are still now looking towards trying to reimagine what will be a quality service moving forward as public confidence begins to grow again due to the vaccination roll out. We are currently working on plans to develop further online content, but operating in the area that we do where there are high levels of functional illiteracy as well as issues around information literacy this is a difficult task.

We have little information at the moment around the confidence that consumers will have in services like Libraries, as although we have always been those trusted, safe spaces, COVID-19 adds a completely new dimension to what the public will want from their Libraries of the future. We have used the downtime to try to assess the undoubted changing patterns of behaviour we are likely to see.

The world is a different place now and the plans and developments that were in place around children and young people and skills building, although still very relevant, now have to be fully re-examined and developed in line with the ‘new normal’.

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Operational issues in one of our shared service points is currently making a return to more normal operations difficult as the centre which houses the main sports provision and a Library hub is now a vaccine centre. This means there will be a delay in reinstating services here for some time yet as discussion goes on around an extension to allow booster vaccination roll-out. Extended periods of closure and poor winter weather have also impacted massively on one of the buildings and there is current work going on to assess the viability of reopening at another building to ensure the service isn't lost to an area.

This, coupled with uncertainty around future funding and the impact on public spending that will likely come as a result of COVID-19, gives a degree of uncertainty that will need working through before any firm direction can be set.