

Library and council office visits surge in West Lothian after Covid disruption

More than a million visits were made to council services including libraries and partnership centres in West Lothian in the first full year since the Covid lockdown.

Ralph Bell, the Customer and Community Services Manager, gave the council's performance committee an overview of the areas of front-facing council services which are returning to normal after two and half years of disruption through the Covid lockdown. The services represented include libraries, partnership centres, community centres, registrars and the museum service and customer inquiry service.

Mr Bell said: "Across the service areas in the last financial year we have had over one million visits."

He added that with more than a million visits there had only been 43 service complaints, 22 of which were not upheld.

Mr Bell said: "Considering the footfall it is a good reflection on our front-line officers and customer satisfaction results."

Most frontfacing services such as community and partnerships centres run six or seven days a week, including the libraries. West Lothian maintains 14 libraries across the county, many now operate as part of the redesigned partnership centres.

Many councils across Scotland have been forced to cut library services to the bone and the reduction in some standalone libraries such as West Calder was suggested in 2023 for

potential budget savings.

Mr Bell said that digital innovation had helped maintain the library service through the pandemic and the services digital lending had flourished during lockdown.

Actual book issues have still to rise to pre-pandemic issues but library visits alone for the last year were around the 450,000 mark.

"It's been a slow return to pre pandemic levels," Mr Bell told the committee.

Mr Bell said that the library service had developed to operate interactive reading and learning sessions as well as accommodating groups such as Lego clubs.

Customer self-help programmes developed during the pandemic had also become popular. The self service kiosk in the libraries sees more than 70 per cent of the book issues.

A "concierge" digital system in place, developed by front-line staff in the community centres, allows users to see what space is booked and to make or alter bookings.

Mr Bell acknowledged that the staff sickness absence target of four per cent was hard to meet but levels had been under that for the last three months of 2023.

While staff sickness absence appeared almost double the four per cent target, the actual figures were minuscule, according to Cllr Carl John who praised the staff in customer and community services for their work in 2023.

The SNP councillor told the meeting of the performance committee: "Looking at the figures there's only 173 days lost out of 2,500. That's minuscule, but shows up as being quite a high percentage because one or two long term absences can skew the figures."

Responding to Councillor John's comments Mr Bell told the committee: "Eighty per cent of our absences are long term absences and we work our way through the attendance at work policies to address these issues."

A review panel of the service made recommendations for how the service should develop in the next two years.

The review panel, staffed by council officers, suggests

that services should continue to explore options to promote further use of libraries and community hubs within the community.

The panel also encouraged the service to continue to explore opportunities to engage more with communities, identifying needs and wants of existing and potential customers.

It has also been suggested that the service continue to identify opportunities to improve employee satisfaction and morale, specifically in development opportunities and employee involvement.

Chairing the committee depute Provost Peter Heggie said: "The library service is one our constituents value, so thank you to your team."

by Stuart Somerville Local Democracy Reporter



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