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Neuadd y Sir / County Hall, Llandrindod, Powys, LD1 5LG

Os yn galw gofynnwch am - If calling please ask for
Lisa Richards

Ffôn / Tel: 01597 826371

Ffôn Symudol / Mobile:

Llythyru Electronig / E-mail: lisa.richards@powys.gov.uk

GOVERNANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

Friday, 8th October, 2021

The use of Welsh by participants is welcomed. If you wish to use Welsh please inform us by noon, two working days before the meeting

SUPPLEMENTARY PACK

1.	Y GAER
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To consider the Service Response to SWAP Audit Report. (Pages 3 - 14)

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CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

**Governance and Audit Committee
Friday 8th October 2021**

**REPORT AUTHOR: Nina Davies
Head of Housing & Community Development**

REPORT TITLE: y Gaer Lessons Learnt

REPORT FOR: Service Response to SWAP Audit Report



Light up the Building for the NHS - 23rd March 2021

1. Service Response

- 1.1 y Gaer is an exciting and inspirational cultural development and a major attraction for local people and visitors to Powys. The facility unites the classical Shire Hall (containing the refurbished Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery), its remarkable Victorian court room, alongside a new Brecon Library, education rooms and opening soon, a café. These complementary elements are harmonised in a bold architectural development blending old and new, fully accessible and welcoming to all.

- 1.2 Housing & Community Development deliver library, museum, art and cultural offers from y Gaer, with the building maintenance overseen by Property Services under Corporate Landlord.
- 1.3 The Housing & Community Development Service welcome the SWAP Audit and accept the findings of such. This report provides a response for information and consideration.
- 1.4 The construction project was large and complex, with additional challenges from the extended time period. Combining new build with the refurbishment of a listed building was ambitious. The service has no current plans to take on another project of this scale, however, is keen to learn the lessons from the y Gaer project. It is important that these lessons are considered across Powys County Council as there were multiple services involved throughout.
- 1.5 The Service take on board the comments around project management, and over recent years has invested in training officers in formal project and programme management. The y Gaer project was challenging for all involved, however, the result has been a facility that Powys can be proud of.
- 1.6 The reduction in the availability of revenue budget meant that the addition of partners had to be considered towards the end of the project. By working with Brecon Town Council, the facility is now able to open on Sundays. The Service is also in final negotiations over the NPTC(G) occupying space within the building, which would see y Gaer open 7 days a week with a café.
- 1.7 The Service wishes to note its thanks to the stakeholders and volunteers. Their support during both the construction and operational phases has been invaluable and we look forward to continuing to work together in the future to extend and improve the offer from this iconic facility.

2. Background

- 2.1 y Gaer in Brecon has been the culmination of over 15 years of project planning and development, involving many officers, Members, external contractors and stakeholders. Over this period the purpose and focus of the project changed several times, including expectations around costs and how finance, particularly grant funding, would be secured to fund the scheme as it evolved.
- 2.2 In 2003 the Council acknowledged that the Brecknock Museum, which occupied the Shire Hall, was in a poor state of repair. The Grade II* listed building was constructed in 1842 and was originally an assize court. It is widely acknowledged as one of the most important buildings in Brecon.

- 2.3 In 2006 the Council began the process of preparing for a large Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) application, with the aim of restoring and enhancing the Shire Hall for the Brecknock Museum and Gallery. Whilst the preparation for the HLF bid was progressing, the Council also undertook to complete the “forward roof” project in 2007. This involved removing the first-floor offices and storerooms and replacing them with what is now known as the Brycheiniog gallery. This was urgent and necessary works to address the roof, which was leaking. With no certainty the HLF grant would be secured, and with the decision some years off, these critical works were completed.
- 2.4 In 2009 the HLF grant for the Shire Hall restoration was rejected, and the Council was tasked with securing a co-location partner to enhance community involvement and engagement, and to add value to the project. At this point Brecon Library was added to the scheme, as it was housed in a Council building in Ship Street, Brecon that was in a poor state of repair.
- 2.5 Between 2010 and 2013 the Council developed the second HLF application, which then included Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery, and Brecon Library.
- 2.6 In support of the scheme, it was proposed that a LABV (local asset backed vehicle) was created involving the sale of buildings in Brecon, that were surplus to requirement, which when sold would help fund the museum and library development. Eventually the LABV was abandoned, and no property sales in Brecon contributed to the overall funding of the scheme. A contributory factor was the listing of the library building in Ship Street in 2011, which prevented that building being demolished and the land developed as part of the LABV.
- 2.7 In 2013 the Council was awarded a £2.5m HLF grant for the museum and library development. Around this time, the architects who had been appointed to design plans for the Shire Hall restoration and new-build library, were tasked with investigating options to incorporate the Regimental Museum and Powys Archives into the scheme.
- 2.8 The Regimental Museum occupies a site at Brecon Barracks and at the time Trustees were investigating alternative location options. Powys Archives were also appraising options for a new home following an inspection of premises in 2011 by the National Archives, which deemed the accommodation as unfit for archive collections and public access.
- 2.9 Eventually plans to include the Regimental Museum and Powys Archives were abandoned and the scheme continued from 2013 with Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery, and Brecon Library.

- 2.10 By 2013 the project had a complex and convoluted history, and having defeated significant hurdles, there was a collective determination by officers, Members and stakeholders to:
- Restore the Shire Hall, a Grade II* listed building for the museum and art gallery
 - Re-house Brecon Library which was located in Ship Street
 - Co-locate the two services and benefit from potential efficiencies of co-location
 - Realise the benefits of joint service delivery for residents and visitors to the town by housing the museum and library in one facility with a café and shop.
 - Complete a major scheme that would contribute to the economic regeneration of Brecon.
- 2.11 In May 2016 the Council proceeded to contract. Due to costs, the design was subject to a value engineering exercise, and the footprint of the new-build element reduced, and other elements of restoration reduced or removed.
- 2.12 There are a number of contributing factors which made the y Gaer project complex and challenging:
- The extended timeframe over which the project was developed and delivered. The pace of project progress was impacted by budget constraint requirements alongside the increasing project costs.
 - The timeframe and changes to service staff structures meant that continuity by officers with a knowledge of the project was difficult to sustain.
 - External factors including escalating construction and material costs; the discovery of asbestos in the museum building; changes in the economy (recession; Council budget reductions).

3. Overview of y Gaer Operational Phase

- 3.1 y Gaer held its soft opening on Thursday 5th December 2019. A number of small events were held in the opening weeks for volunteers, supporters and local funding partners, along with guided tours of the museum and library for Local Community Groups, County Councillors and Town Councillors. Within the first two weeks, 6 local schools were invited for introductory sessions with 200 participants attending.
- 3.2 An official opening ceremony has been delayed due to Covid restrictions but discussions are now starting over a potential event.
- 3.3 The first temporary exhibition within the Sir John Lloyd Gallery was titled *Nordic Connections in Watercolour* – and displayed works from the Royal Watercolour Society for Wales and the Nordic Watercolour

Society. Two watercolours by Prince Charles were loaned from Clarence House. This exhibition ran until the first lockdown.

3.4 Visitor numbers for the first 3 months reached 10,000 (December 2019-March 2020).

3.5 The Brecon Ukulele group played carols in the Atrium for visitors in December 2019.



3.6 A gaggle of Mari Lwyd's and handlers danced at y Gaer at the start of their tour of the town in January 2020.



3.7 On 24th January 2020, BBC Radio Wales – Country Focus – Rural Museums - recorded a walk through with the Senior Curator.

3.8 The St. David's Jambori was hosted by y Gaer in February 2020.



- 3.9 y Gaer was closed to the public on March 21st 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The building went into full lockdown and was managed remotely from home, with support from local staff, maintaining and testing environmental conditions and security standards. Staff were redeployed or furloughed, with a skeleton crew left to maintain an online presence and safeguard the building.
- 3.10 Early in the pandemic the curatorial team engaged with ArtUK and the Guardian Newspaper to create an y Gaer collection art quiz for National newspaper.
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/apr/22/great-british-art-quiz-y-gaer-museum-art-gallery-and-library-brecon-wales>
- 3.11 In June 2020 the Order and Collect system was created and launched for Library customers across Powys, with the y Gaer team packing and quarantining books for customers to either collect or have delivered by staff and volunteers. Order and Collect is still being maintained at y Gaer and levels of use remain high and trusted.
- 3.12 y Gaer reopened its doors to the public on Friday 31st July 2020, with the implementation of a one-way system, and perspex barriers to protect staff. Due to the number of redeployed, shielding and furloughed staff, along with the pressures of new services such as Order and Collect and reduced footfall, previous opening hours were reduced to 10am-4pm Tuesday / Thursday / Friday and Saturday.
- 3.13 y Gaer responded to the Covid restrictions, in a number of ways including moving its normal in-house activities online (for instance VE Day celebrations; Libraries Week, Museums Festival and Christmas events). This movement was facilitated by some external grants. The Art Fund and Federation of Museums Wales provided £1,000 which supported the purchase of video blogging equipment for y Gaer.
- 3.14 Funding was received from the Federation of Museums Wales for 100 Craft Resource Packs for Halloween, and Brecon Town Council for children's Christmas activities, this time with 200 special

resources bags created and collected from y Gaer. Both packs were supported by online videos created to let participants craft from home.

- 3.15 The y Gaer team worked with volunteers to create the 12 Days of Christmas activities, these included a series of short films produced and posted on social media – Story Time with Volunteers recorded their interpretation of books and objects from the y Gaer museum and library collections. Whilst staff created Adult and Children’s quizzes with a festive theme and more crafting activities to do at home during the third lockdown.
- 3.16 In 2020 the y Gaer Facebook reach increased to an average of 35,000+ people. The most viewed video for that period was Storytime with Andrew, our regular in-person Storytime volunteer (87% of viewers were women aged 35-44, so the target mum age), followed by the Christmas ‘fun in a bag’ video and then the ‘Frightfully Fun’ Halloween quiz. In addition to the videos, posts about activities like the children’s Christmas quiz and promoting craft activities reached between 3,000-4,000 people, with engagement peaking over the school holidays at Christmas.
- 3.17 The y Gaer website launched at the turn of the year <https://www.ygaerpowys.org.uk/> and continues to develop.
- 3.18 Across 2020 the y Gaer team and colleagues across Powys Cultural Services focused on grant funding opportunities. They were awarded £17,000 from Welsh Government (WG) Cultural Resilience Fund, for resources to improve physical access to services, including remote environmental monitoring, pest surveys, helping care for our collections, and more blogging equipment to allow the creation of high-quality videos and blogs. Close to £100,000 was received from WG Cultural Recovery Fund, to support Powys Cultural Services towards digital transformation, which has included the creation of virtual tours of cultural facilities; a digital strategy to support digital transformation; and a new cultural services website.
- 3.19 Visitor numbers from June to December 2020 reached 5400, this included periods of non-browsing (Order and Collect only) and museum closures due to lockdown restrictions.

4. 2021 Operational Update

- 4.1 The New Year saw y Gaer open for Order and Collect only until browsing was again allowed from the 27th March 2021. The Museum reopened on the 18th May 2021, when the lockdown restrictions allowed. Visitor numbers have steadily risen and by September 2021 y Gaer had 12,274 visitors through the doors.

- 4.2 With support from the Brecon Town Council, y Gaer's opening hours were increased from the 6th June to include Sundays 10am-4pm, meaning y Gaer was open to the public 5 days a week for the first time. In June and July Sundays were averaging 50 visitors, however, numbers across August to September have increased to an average of 95 per day.
- 4.3 Whilst visitors and customers have not been allowed onsite, staff have continued to develop skills in digital content creation and delivery, video editing and marketing. A member of y Gaer staff was also trained as a census support team for the county, working from y Gaer to assist with the completion of 2021 census form.
- 4.4 Schools have attended the Victorian Classroom activity and Canal workshops, in partnership with the Canal and River Trust. Classes remained in their bubbles and areas were cleaned down in between sessions. Discussions are progressing with Brecon High School regarding changes to the National Curriculum and its interaction with heritage.

5. International Partnerships

- 5.1 In 2020 a community display case was introduced in partnership with the Town Council to display ceremonial objects from the French Gouesnou Twinning Association. Discussions are now underway to add a second display case to display cultural objects collected by the American Saline Twinning Association.
- 5.2 Discussions are in progress to develop shared education and craft resources with another international partner, the German Urgeschichtliches Museum in Blaubeuren. The aim is to be pooling resources later in the year to share with families here and in Germany.

6. y Gaer Volunteers

- 6.1 In the late spring of 2021, y Gaer was once again able to welcome volunteers into support roles. At the launch there were 71 active volunteers, supporting gallery invigilation, education activities and Library tasks. Before volunteers could return to service, all those available were re-inducted and tasked with completing mandatory e-learning courses.
- 6.2 Gallery invigilators also attended fire Marshall training onsite. There are currently 40 active volunteers supporting the library and galleries, as well as a new group of volunteers who are helping maintain the y Gaer gardens. Their contribution is greatly valued.



Volunteers, staff and the Rich Brothers discuss the gardens June 2021

7. Social Media 2021

- 7.1 During the first quarter of 2021, the most viewed video was Valentine's Day crafts for children, which reached 3,400 people, followed by a video about the lovespoon collection. Social media reach was up 35.5% from the previous quarter. Anecdotally, there has been a lot of feedback about people appreciating being able to enjoy the collections while they could not visit.



Easter Bag contents, to take away for home crafting

- 7.2 In the second quarter of 2021, the most viewed videos were on the Reading Well collection, Volunteers Week and *Adelina at Easter* videos, filmed in both Welsh and English language versions. The

most shared and commented post was promoting the first in-person craft session since the beginning of the pandemic. Anecdotally people have fed back that they're enjoying online activities like the (countywide) monthly Lego challenge but are excited to be back on site, staff are fielding a lot of enquiries about when in person events will be restarting.

8. Current and Future Planning

- 8.1 Staff successfully applied for four Kickstart placements, of which two of the four apprenticeships will be based at y Gaer.
- 8.2 The first Temporary Exhibition within the Sir John Lloyd Gallery, after lockdown, *Roger Cecil (1942 – 2015) - A Secret Artist*, opened on the 3rd July and is a retrospective of the artist's work. This is a selling exhibition and has already attracted a great deal of interest from the public.
- 8.3 The exhibition programme has been developed for the next 3 years, with some of the previously cancelled exhibitions re-scheduled. The next exhibition will be with Pip Woolf – A matter of Identity – work created studying people living with dementia. The exhibition will run from December 2021 until February 2022.



Roger Cecil - A Secret Artist Exhibition



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