

PL 09

National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Newport City Council

**A. The extent to which progress has been made by the Welsh Government towards achieving its Programme for Government commitments relating to libraries, and how sustainable any progress is in the current climate**

1. The Welsh Government has made good progress towards achieving their commitments for heritage and culture relating to the enrichment of lives through increased participation and widening access, targeting low income families and children, and increasing opportunities for the use of the Welsh language in public services. Library visitor numbers in Wales have increased whilst those in England have decreased in recent years.
2. Strengthening regional collaboration is also highlighted and strong regional groupings of library services in all sectors (public, further and higher education, health, National Library) have developed over recent years with Welsh Government support. Newport along with the other Greater Gwent authorities of Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouth and Torfaen have worked particularly closely over the last two years developing a single Results Based Accountability scorecard to measure the performance of library services across the five counties and identify collaborative actions to improve performance. The South East Wales region of which Newport is a member has undertaken a significant amount of work with the Reading Agency to produce a regional Reading Strategy delivered by each authority across the whole region. In addition the provision of regional training to ensure library staff are up-to-date and have the relevant skills to support our 21<sup>st</sup> century library user has been enabled and supported through the CyMAL grants.
3. The Welsh Public Library standards and performance indicators (which ensure that local authorities meet national standards of service delivery) have provided a positive contribution in ensuring a more consistent and better quality of library service across Wales. The CyMAL Community Learning Libraries grant funding programme, which supports local authorities to improve, modernise and develop local libraries has ensured that a number of libraries have been transformed to provide a fit for purpose environment and thereby provide maximum benefit to residents through attracting increased visitors and use.
4. The introduction of the Welsh Public Library standards and performance indicators has helped Newport's Library service to make steady improvement in performance, which in turn provides increased benefit to our residents. In 2011 Newport achieved the full 14 standards of the third framework and currently achieves seven of the nine standards within the fourth framework. It is clear that the Welsh Public Library Standards frameworks and associated key indicators have led to the development

and provision of high quality, well used library services across Wales in a way that is not evident in England, and to an equality of good service delivery for Welsh residents. The ongoing decline in library use in England compared to growth in Wales could result from the focus provided by the Library Standards in Wales and investment in library buildings.

5. The CyMAL Community Learning Libraries grant funding programme has supported local authorities to improve, modernise and develop local libraries in order to provide maximum benefit to residents through attracting increased visitors and widening usage. Specific Welsh Government measures for libraries are visitor numbers, to reflect access and participation, and number of libraries refurbished under the grant scheme. Investment in libraries through CyMAL grant funding undoubtedly contributes to visitor numbers and to attracting new audiences. Newport has benefitted from the Cymal grant to refurbish three libraries and support the creation of a new small library to meet the need of residents in an area of the City previously without static library provision.
6. The further development of collaborative regional library co-operation forms the most sustainable approach for local authorities and citizens in the current climate. This value is maximised when combined with local delivery partnerships and co-location with other local authority or partner services.

**B. The extent to which the current legislative and policy frameworks are suitable to meet the challenges of local authorities delivering library services in Wales:**

7. Welsh Government and local authority agendas rightly focus on the same aim – improving outcomes for residents of Wales – and therefore legislative and policy frameworks are geared to support delivery of this aim. Newport’s aim is ‘to improve people’s lives’ which is aligned to the Welsh Government aim. Library services have a crucial role to play in this delivery, as outlined by the Minister, John Griffiths, in his statement on libraries on 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec:

*“In our Programme for Government, we rightly focus on tackling poverty and stimulating jobs and growth. Libraries are at the heart of this agenda.*

*I intend to ensure that people all over Wales benefit from a strong, resilient library service, responsive to public need, well managed, demonstrating financial efficiency and professionally run. The people of Wales fought hard to establish a free library service; we must ensure that those values continue to underpin the library service of the future.”*

8. The Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964 places the duty on local authorities to provide “comprehensive and efficient public library services” also giving the Welsh Government the duty to “superintend and promote the improvement of the public library service provided by local authorities...and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries conferred upon them as library authorities by or under this Act”. The Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) were first developed in 2002, to provide a mechanism for measuring a “comprehensive and efficient service” ensuring that local authorities carry out their statutory

responsibilities in the delivery of the core library service, and are now in the 4<sup>th</sup> framework. There is no doubt that the WPLS have made a significant contribution to the consistency and quality of library services across Wales, and this is evidenced by very high public satisfaction levels with library services nationally. The standards framework has also resulted in library services across Wales sharing good practice and learning from each other to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of library services across Wales.

9. Library services in Newport, as across Wales, are instrumental in the delivery of outcomes that are closely linked to other key local and national policy agendas; these include health and wellbeing, poverty, education and skills, digital and social inclusion, equality, safer communities, access to democratic processes, and the promotion of the Welsh language. The main challenges facing local authorities in the delivery of these services are;-
10. Cost – buildings, stock, and staff comprise the main expenditure. Ageing buildings in particular are a continual drain on resources, whilst maintenance of a free library service as set out in the Welsh Government’s statement of entitlement for citizens, limits income generation. Newport has the lowest net annual revenue expenditure on public library provision per 1,000 resident population (£11155) across the whole of Wales, significantly below the all Wales average of £16,176. The service provides a completely virtual book borrowing service Book Express providing the opportunity for customers to order their books online and have them delivered through the post. This service provides a cost effective alternative for those people unable to access static libraries. The service uses technology to enable joining the library, reserving and renewing items and payment of fines and charges. We work with a range of organisations and services that use our network of local libraries to reach residents increasing the cost effectiveness of buildings e.g. trading standards, Careers Wales, Community Learning, police surgeries and local councillor surgeries. Book stock is purchased through the Wales Book Purchasing consortium and delivered directly to each site reducing the need for back office support function and enabling all resource to be concentrated on frontline service delivery.
11. Increasing usage and ensuring relevance to a 21<sup>st</sup> century society, in order to improve outcomes for as many residents as possible – despite growing library usage in Wales compared to England, there are still many residents who are not aware of or do not understand the wealth of resources and opportunities made available to them through public libraries. It is recognised that there is a need to raise awareness amongst residents who are not habitual library users, of the benefits that the library service can deliver for them. The all Wales library marketing strategy of CyMAL’s Libraries Inspire programme enables us to take part in promotional activities with professional support, which we could not afford in-house. Social media is also now being successfully used within the service.
12. The development of e-resources, many of which have been procured on a national basis through CyMAL/Welsh Government e.g. e-reference resources and access to a wide collection of e-zines provide opportunity to engage with a different client group. These electronic resources, including access to the library service catalogue, are

available 24/7, increasing access for those with the facilities and capability to use them. However many do not have the facilities other than within libraries themselves, and there are many others who do not have and will never be able to develop the capabilities (e.g. through age or disability related issues), who need to be supported with information and opportunity on an equal footing.

13. Working closely with Job centre Plus we are developing services to meet the need created by digital reform and the UK government's "digital by default" agenda and support the introduction of Universal Credit online.

In effect, library services can provide a great deal of support to local authorities in the delivery of current legislation and policies.

### **C. How well prepared the Welsh Government and local authorities are to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on library services**

14. Library services are not expensive services to deliver in terms of total local authority budgets. Welsh libraries have always had the lowest per capita spend on services across the UK. In 2012/13 in Newport the revenue expenditure on the library service on the library service equated to £11.15 per head of population or 3p per person per day. Nevertheless the service continues to look at new ways of delivering more efficient and effective services to meet the needs of our residents.
15. Local authorities in Gwent are working together to share good practice, resources and deliver joint projects which can be undertaken more efficiently by working collectively. This strong tradition of working collaboratively helps mitigate some of the impact of cuts.
16. There is still a greater need to engage in a meaningful debate and consultation with citizens and stakeholders at a national and local level on the future of library services and options for service delivery with reduced resources. CyMAL could provide a useful role in the national debate as well as support local authorities in structuring the local debate to ensure some consistency of approach across Wales. The debate should ensure resident input into the question of what is a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **D. Options for improving the financial sustainability of library services, including alternative models of provision**

17. The potential to reduce the number of library authorities in Wales cannot be ignored. Regional collaboration can improve service delivery however apart from economies of scale in management and back office function there are few savings to be found on actual frontline service delivery.
18. Continuing to work in partnership to offer library facilities from co-located service points improves the value for money from existing premises while maximising the footfall for the benefit of all partners.

19. Use of volunteers can enhance service delivery and add value. Newport currently has volunteers who deliver the books to housebound customers and are in the process of recruiting volunteers to support the delivery of story times and rhyme times. Welsh Government, CyMAL and CILIP Wales (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) all endorse the view that volunteers should be used to enhance services, not to replace them. The use of volunteers cannot be relied upon to provide the core statutory service delivered by trained professionals. There is a need for trained professionals to recruitment, support, training, and supervision volunteers to ensure that the public are receiving a safe and appropriate service.

**E. The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales:**

*“They (libraries) provide a vital community service for people of all ages and are an essential component of a civilised society. I am determined to work with other bodies to develop a resilient strategic framework for the forward delivery of Welsh library services. We need libraries more than ever to provide opportunities for learning, free access to digital services and places where the whole community can meet in safe public spaces. Knowledge is power and libraries are a tremendous resource for people empowering them and making a real difference to their lives.”* John Griffiths, 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec., 2013

20. The public library service is unique in its ability to make a strong and positive contribution to so many areas of community life, and to the delivery of both local and national agendas. Libraries are community hubs, and nationally achieve more visitors than people attending football matches, cinemas and theatres combined.
21. Tackling poverty – library services are free at the point of delivery and offer equality and inclusiveness to all ages and abilities. The Society of Chief Librarians (Wales) has recently produced a report looking at the contribution of public libraries across the country in combating child poverty
22. Regeneration, jobs and growth – job seekers are strongly supported by library services in Newport and across Wales. Research by Scotinform, when evaluating CyMAL’s Libraries for Life strategy in 2011, concluded that for every £1 invested in a refurbished public library in one South Wales authority, £3.24 was returned to the community.
23. Health and wellbeing agendas – reading and use of libraries stimulates healthy minds, while social interaction protects healthy bodies. In addition libraries hold a wealth of health related information, and specific projects such as Book Prescription Wales, the Children and Families Bibliotherapy Scheme, Read Aloud sessions and MacMillan Cancer Information service, are delivered through libraries. A report by the Society of Chief Librarians (Wales) highlights the exemplary models in practice across the country.
24. Literacy; . Libraries have a fundamental role to play in improving and supporting literacy, examples of work undertaken in Newport include:- delivery of the national Bookstart scheme; regular story and rhyme times; advice to encourage

parents/carers, and boost their confidence to share books with their children; Summer reading Challenge; Six Book Challenge working with Basic Skills students and Read Aloud sessions.

25. Learning for life, skills development – libraries support informal learners of all ages through provision of materials and facilities. Staff also ICT support, information literacy sessions, and local studies research skills for those looking into their family tree or house history. Libraries provide the access to a range of authoritative electronic information resources to support people make informed choices for their daily life
26. Safe communities – libraries provide public spaces that are safe, neutral and welcoming for citizens of all ages. This is reflected in comments from both adults and children in recent CIPFA library user surveys
  - “ really safe and quiet” key stage 2 child*
  - “Lovely staff and environment to bring my child to” Parent of young child*
  - “Library is now a very attractive place to bring your children “. Parent*
  - “Library has been a lifesaver for us older people, staff are very friendly.” Older regular user.*
27. Access to government and the democratic processes;- the library service provides minutes and information about local and national government and are focal points for the display of public consultations enabling residents to make their views known.
28. Digital agenda;- through provision of IT facilities including wi-fi in all Newport libraries to actively help and support residents to get on line. Libraries provide opportunities to help and support those who are not confident to access material and information electronically. There are still a number of individuals who are excluded from digital services because they do not have the infrastructure or skills. In the Wales National Survey, May 2013 25% of households in Newport did not have access to the internet at home. Factors such as deprivation and age impacts access greatly. In Wales, only 31% of over 75s had access at home and only 52% living in social housing have access. Libraries therefore continue to have a major role in tackling issues of digital exclusion.