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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Blaenau Gwent Libraries



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Inquiry into Public Libraries in Wales, December 2013

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 aims to increase participation and widen access to library services across Wales. The Welsh Government measures for libraries are visitor figures and the number of libraries refurbished from grant funding. There has been good progress made, with visit figures across Wales bucking the UK national trend.
2. The Community Learning Libraries Grant Funding Programme has provided vital capital investment to local authorities. Four out of six libraries in Blaenau Gwent have benefited from this funding. It has enabled Blaenau Gwent to modernise and develop the library service and has transformed the way we deliver services to the community. As a result of the refurbishments that have taken place, the libraries in Blaenau Gwent are better placed to help the Welsh Government and the local authority deliver key themes and objectives, e.g. the learning agenda. In order for us to continue to improve services to local communities it is vital that further investment is available. Libraries are hubs of the community, the funding therefore not only renews

library buildings and services it also helps to renew and regenerate town centres and community life within Wales. For larger scale projects, the amount of grant funding needs to be increased in order to improve the facilities in these libraries, which are often the main, central libraries. Continued grant funding opportunities will support libraries in the challenging times of austerity.

3. The Welsh Government has been successful in strengthening national collaborative working. It has provided national strategic steer for local authorities to improve access to provision of all Welsh resources, e.g. CatCymru and ezines. The current project of investigating in an all Wales Library Management System is a priority to developing improved access to stock. The Welsh Government's framework *Libraries Inspire: The strategic development framework for Welsh libraries 2012-16* seeks to enhance library services in Wales for the benefit of everyone. It intends to achieve this through partnership working and implementing the initiatives outlined in the annual delivery plans. The marketing team provides vital professional support in the production of marketing materials and provides additional grant funding, e.g. 'Get reading, get better, get libraries') campaign. Blaenau Gwent enrolled over five hundred new members, this autumn, due to funding available through this national campaign. The Welsh Libraries branding and portal has given libraries an identity, sharing promotion and marketing. This has resulted in raising the profile of library services across Wales.
4. The Welsh Government has played a vital role in promoting and supporting regional collaborative working. Blaenau Gwent is a member of the South East Wales group. The Books4U scheme is an example of good practice and is a valuable resource to Blaenau Gwent. The provision of staff training is also an important theme of the SE Wales group. Blaenau Gwent is currently working with the other Greater Gwent authorities in developing a single Results Based Accountability scorecard to benchmark performance between the five authorities and develop actions to improve performance.
5. The most sustainable approach to service delivery across Wales is a strong regional and national commitment to collaborative working. The sharing of resources will provide a cost effective approach for local authorities.

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:

6. Local authorities are legally obliged to abide by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a library service that is 'comprehensive and efficient'. This Law means that public libraries are a statutory service; councils have a legal duty to provide them. This legislation gives 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 way people use libraries is changing, the service has to innovate and adapt to support our changing role. In order to protect public libraries the Act needs to be relevant to modern libraries. It has to be questioned, is the Act still relevant today? A debate, led by Library and Information professionals should focus on the question of what is a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service in the 21st century.

7. In response to the 1964 Act the Welsh Public Library Standards were developed to ensure local authorities fulfill their requirement to the Act. Since 2002 the services of Welsh public libraries have been monitored and evaluated through the framework of the standards, with each framework lasting three years. Currently it is a challenge to preserve the attained standards, with little scope to develop, due to the financial situation of the local authorities. There needs to clear consequences of failure to meet standards. This would reinforce the importance of the WPLS and help guarantee preservation and improvements made to date.

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

8. The Welsh Government must realise that sufficient resources must be allocated to local authorities, not only to maintain but allow future development. This may also mean closer, more clear and transparent communication with local authorities to ensure resources are allocated in a balanced way.

9. Blaenau Gwent continues to investigate alternative ways of delivering more cost effective and efficient services to meet the needs of the community. This includes plans for increasing income levels.
10. Public libraries are working in partnership to share resources and costs. Extending regional procurement procedures and closer collaborative working will mitigate some of the impending budget cuts.

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

11. Volunteers could be used to develop additional services, helping sustain the library and enhance particular projects but not to be used for 'core' service delivery. The use of volunteers would add value to the service, but could not replace library professionals.
12. Formalise existing partnership on a local level, e.g. work with DWP. It is important to acknowledge the strong and beneficial impact that libraries make to local and national priorities. The Digital agenda is a good example of this. Blaenau Gwent is working in partnership with JobCentrePlus to support job-seekers with the Universal Job-match scheme. All libraries in Blaenau Gwent provide weekly work-clubs. This also contributes to the UK government's "digital by default" agenda. Welfare reform will be problematic for the most vulnerable members of our community, without the support of local libraries.
13. The sharing of premises can provide financial rewards. Delivering from shared or co-located service points is cost effective and has a positive impact on WPLS and performance indicators, e.g. visitor figures.
14. Community Asset Transfer is a short term financial situation in which could lead to a negative impact on the long term quality of the service provided by the library. Enthusiastic volunteers can provide a good service, but without library professionals the service would lead to inequality in service delivery and poor customer satisfaction, with a detrimental effect on WPLS
15. It has been agreed in principle that the Leisure department in Blaenau Gwent, including the whole library service will become a Trust status, by a proposed date of June 2014.

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

16. Libraries play a vital role in supporting the community. They provide valuable, multipurpose, community spaces, with something for everyone. They are the heartbeat of the community. Libraries, now more than ever, play a key role in the delivery of adult community learning, community engagement and social inclusion. They enable people of all ages to prosper in the information society, particularly through life-long learning developments. The Six Book Challenge has been particularly successful in Blaenau Gwent, with the highest participant figures in Wales. This project targets reluctant readers, through an out-reach programme of activities.
17. Libraries build Safer, stronger, sustainable communities. They provide informal, neutral. They bring people of all ages, genders, and beliefs and together in neutral, informal environments. Libraries help to create and sustain a vibrant economy. Planners and developers recognise this unifying role and many have put a public library at the centre of new build and regeneration projects.
18. They contribute to tackling poverty by providing a free at point of delivery service. Libraries provide access to leisure and education opportunities for children and young people who may not be able to afford them otherwise, e.g. Summer Reading Challenge and TeenQuest
19. Libraries play an important role in promoting literacy by providing resources and activities that support the enjoyment of books and reading e.g. Bookstart and Rhyme Time. . Blaenau Gwent operates a successful Schools Library service, providing all schools in the borough with a range of stock.
20. Libraries contribute to the Health and Wellbeing agenda, providing social benefits, through reading groups, events and activities. Reading has a positive effect on mental health, particularly in reducing stress. All libraries provide a wide range of health related information. Examples of projects in Blaenau Gwent, - Macmillan, Shared Reading Group, Books on Prescription and Carers Groups.
21. They contribute to the Digital agenda, by providing free IT provision and support for all. They provide vital access to e-Government, e.g. Gov.uk. Blaenau Gwent Libraries actively promotes the advantages of being on-line through various projects, e.g. Get Blaenau-Gwent On-line, Digital Fridays and Digital Friends.

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