

PL 28
National Assembly for Wales
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
Inquiry into: Public Libraries
Response from: Welsh Local Government Association

Inquiry into Public Libraries in Wales

17 January 2014



WLGA • CLILC

INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities, the three fire and rescue authorities, are associate members.
2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.
3. The WLGA is guided by a number of key principles, which underpin the work of the Association and have helped to shape the response to the inquiry on Public Libraries in Wales. The WLGA believes that decisions about services should be taken, as close to the point of delivery as possible and that the people and communities using those services should be as engaged as much as possible in their delivery. It is also our belief that local services should be provided within a democratic framework of local accountability.
4. The WLGA recognises that it is the role of the Welsh Government to set the strategic framework and policy direction for services at a national level, and that it is the role of local government to deliver those services taking account of the local circumstances and pressures. It is also recognised that services must be provided within a proportionate but effective regulatory framework to ensure that public resources are used appropriately and that services are delivered effectively and efficiently.
5. The WLGA has consistently argued for an un-hypothecated revenue support grant (RSG) as the best way of funding local government and any new responsibilities or additional burdens placed on local government should be fully costed and appropriately funded.
6. The WLGA recognises that some policy initiatives or strategies need to have funding attached to them for specific periods of time to make sure that they become embedded and are delivered as intended. For this reason, the WLGA, by exception, supports the use of specific grants or the ring fencing of revenue funding for specified purposes on the understanding that funding will eventually return to the RSG.

7. The WLGA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee enquiry on Public Libraries in Wales. In drafting, the response the WLGA has worked in partnership with the Chief Culture and Leisure Officers Wales (CLOW).
8. **Progress 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?**
 - 8.1 As set out in the Libraries Inspire Strategy Public libraries are at the heart of their communities. The very reason for their existence is to inspire and assist people to make a positive difference to their lives. Libraries contribute to the social, educational, cultural and economic wellbeing of the people of Wales.
 - 8.2 Public libraries underpins and is coterminous with the priorities set out in the Welsh Government's "Programme for Government", including Health, Supporting People, Poverty, Rural Communities and Education all of which Libraries have an impact within the communities they serve.
 - 8.3 Traditionally libraries have undertaken and delivered an important role in advancing knowledge by providing access to information, supporting entrepreneurial activity, and inspiring life-long learning and reading for enjoyment. They foster social mobility and strengthen our communities, catering, as they do, for the needs of all parts of society from toddlers and their parents, to students (of all ages) and researchers, from local activists to small businesses, and from the frail and elderly and their carers to hobbyists and creators.
 - 8.4 Significantly over the past decade Public libraries have taken on a more direct role in addressing poverty by tackling the digital divide, providing access to the internet with trained staff delivering advice and guidance, and helping people develop vital information and literacy skills. They have taken on the role of working with Job Centre Plus and more recently, they have become an important community resource in helping people claim Universal Benefit and enabling them to take advantage of a broad range of statutory and voluntary support available in their local community.
 - 8.5 The Programme for Governments commitments to libraries is highlighted mainly by two performance indicators namely:
 1. No. of visitors to heritage sites, local and national museums and libraries.
 2. No. of libraries refurbished via CyMAL Community Learning Libraries Programme.

References to both performance indicators highlights the number of people visiting public libraries through Wales showing an increase overall by 11% in the last 10 years, combined with these statistics the capital funding allocation to public library projects is evident. Each time a Library has been refurbished or replaced there has been a significant increase in the number of users.

The CyMAL capital funding stream and local authority matched funding has resulted in 89 libraries being refurbished or replaced. This number does not include other Libraries that have been improved in each local authority with the use of their own capital funding or through other local initiatives and opportunities.

- 8.6 The Welsh Government Libraries Inspire Strategy describes how we will together maintain and develop new innovative services to meet the needs of the people of Wales over the next 5 years. To do this, we need to work with all types of libraries and their parent bodies, and other relevant organisations.

The priorities of the strategy are to:

- work together to review current models of service delivery in response to the current economic climate, and develop new innovative models of delivery
- develop partnership working in procuring and improving access to resources, including new online services such as e-books
- modernise public library buildings to meet the changing needs of their users
- maximise the contribution of libraries in developing people's skills to help everyone reach their potential, reduce inequality, and improve economic and social well-being
- invest in developing the skills of library staff
- implement a co-ordinated audience development programme across Wales to enrich the lives of individuals and communities
- ensure the provision of a high quality service through initiatives such as the Welsh Public Library Standards.

- 8.7 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. A good example is where Newport, 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 has undertaken a significant amount of work with the Reading Agency to produce a joint Reading Strategy delivered by each authority across the whole region. In addition, the provisions of regional training to ensure library staff are up-to-date and have the relevant.

Skills to support our 21st century library user has been enabled and supported through the CyMAL grants.

8.7 In the North Wales region the priority has been to develop a single Library management system, again with the support of CyMAL

9. **Extent to which the current legislative and policy frameworks are suitable to meet the challenges facing local authorities delivering library services in Wales?**

9.1 The service is a statutory requirement as defined in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, which states:

'It shall be the duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof'

A full copy of the Act maybe found at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/75>

The service has been underpinned and monitored by Welsh Government (CyMAL) through the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS). Although the standards themselves are not statutory, they assist the Welsh Government and local authorities to performance manage the library service and to set clear strategies and action plans to improve services. The Standards have evolved and local authorities are now in the last year of a three year 4th framework.

9.2 The challenges that local authorities face will need be cognoscente of the broader context of the 1964 Act and reported via WPLS accordingly.

9.3 The WLGA is presently working closely with CyMAL and all local authorities to deliver a fit for purpose "Quality 5th framework for libraries ", it has been recognised by all partners that the previous frameworks were extremely effective in making a positive contribution in ensuring a more consistent and better quality of public library service across Wales and raising the standards of libraries. It has been recognised that under the emerging 5th framework that it is necessary to develop a more outcome based set of standards, demonstrating the wider contribution and value that public libraries

make and allowing for greater reconfiguration along more innovative lines within local authorities.

9.4 In the present 4th framework there are 9 standards. The average number of standards achieved is 6. The best performing authorities in 2013 achieved 8 standards. In the standards review for 2012/13 (from the information supplied by local authorities up to 31st March 2013) 6 authorities achieved a higher number of standards than the previous year, 4 achieved a lower number and 12 remained the same. Significantly, where standards were not achieved there were near misses. This is very significant in that library services along with other local authority services have already faced significant budget reductions, but due to good planning, collaboration in sharing best practice, innovative new ways of working and the support of CyMAL there has been no serious deterioration of the service to date. In fact, the review of the information supplied in 2013 pointed to the potential that more standards would be achieved. Possibly 8 authorities will achieve 8 or more and public opinion on the satisfaction with the service will remain high, however there is concern that the gap between higher achieving authorities and others will widen. However, in the context of the latest budget round for 2014/15 this statement may now prove to be overoptimistic.

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

10.1 The Welsh Government through CyMAL are working closely with the WLGA and local authorities to identify and share good practice and innovative new ways of delivering the public library service. Besides the clear identified threat, there is also an opportunity in these difficult financial times to create a library service that is a modern fit for purpose library service which will be sustainable, but which is also adaptive and ready to meet the increasingly rapid changes that are occurring in our society e.g. technological advances

10.2 Assembly members will be aware that the Minister for Culture and Sport, John Griffiths A.M. announced an expert review of the current and future plans by local authorities to deliver public library services in Wales. The review will also be tasked to consider the potential for new delivery models based on partnership working. The WLGA welcomes the review and is looking forward to taking a proactive role in enabling a clear strategy to be developed by the WG and local authorities to move forward with a high quality, professional, sustainable public library service that will continue to deliver for the needs of its communities.

10.3 Local authorities have been and are continuing to look at a wide range of options to deliver new sustainable models of library provision. There are many innovative new developments that are either in place or being put into place, including shared space, community managed and regional library management system. There has also been a root and branch investigation by local authorities on the use made of buildings and the historic nature of provision, which in some cases has been identified, as not fit for purpose and not viable. In many cases, the consultation period has not yet been completed and final decisions made.

10.4 It should also be noted that library services have continually changed to meet the needs of a developing service, e.g. the introduction of IT, the role within job centre plus, Universal credit, shared space and direct delivery of additional local authority customer services etc which has also led to a need to review the pattern of service delivery beyond just that of the financial restraints. Stronger community participation and widening the appeal are essential for the library services to prosper. In order to meet the efficiency, some service provision will inevitably be rationalised.

10.5 The following options are all under consideration as a way of meeting both the financial challenges and identified community needs. These are not exhaustive but do provide the mainframe potentially for the future.

- Greater collaboration with partners, e.g. local authorities, communities, further education, higher education.
- Community managed facilities, volunteers.
- Community councils, area partnerships.
- Relocation of libraries. E.g. shared facilities with customer first, leisure centres, community buildings.
- Deposit collections.
- Greater use of internet ordering, delivery and return.
- Mobile library service, increased/removed where appropriate
- Enhanced housebound service
- Externalising the service potentially with Leisure services and other cultural services

10.6 In order to assist the Minister for Culture and Sport, Welsh Government and local authorities through the review process and the difficult times we are facing the WLGA in partnership with CyMAL, and CCLOW have organised a seminar for the 13th February 2013 at the newly built Library and Community service point in Caerphilly County Borough. The Minister for Sport and Culture, with the WLGA spokesperson

for Heritage and Culture will be the keynote speakers along with other speakers from CyMAL and local authorities to share some of the innovative work being undertaken in Wales with local authority Cabinet members and senior officers and to share sustainable models on the potential way forward.

The Communities Equality and Local Government Committee is welcome on block to the Public Libraries Seminar on the 13th February.

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