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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Disability Wales

## **Introduction;**

1. As the national association of disabled people's organisations, Disability Wales strives to achieve equality, rights and independence for all disabled people, regardless of physical, sensory or neurological impairment, learning difficulty or mental health condition. We recognise that many disabled people have different identities and can face multiple-discrimination.
2. The Social Model of Disability is at the core of our value base, recognising that people are disabled more by poor design, inaccessible services and other people's attitudes than by their impairment. We are recognised as the lead organisation in Wales in promoting the understanding, adoption and implementation of the Social Model.
3. Disability Wales (DW) is pleased to respond to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee's inquiry into public libraries in Wales. We believe that disabled people, wherever they live, should have access to services that promote their inclusion in the community and enable them to live fulfilled and independent lives.

## **The extent to which the current legislative and policy frameworks are suitable to meet the challenges facing local authorities delivering library services in Wales;**

1. DW welcomes the Welsh Government's (WG) framework 'Libraries Inspire 2012-2016' which seeks to enhance library services for the benefit of everyone in Wales.

2. In particular, we welcome the recognition of the important part that libraries play in introducing disabled people to digital technologies, activities and projects to support independent living in the community.
3. As the Welsh Government's lead partner in developing its *Framework for Action on Independent Living*, Disability Wales was instrumental in formulating the overarching strategic vision of: '*An enabling society in which disabled children and adults enjoy the right to independent living and social inclusion*'.<sup>1</sup>
4. Independent Living does not mean that disabled people should have to live in isolation, do everything for themselves or be completely independent of services.
5. Independent Living enables disabled people to achieve their own goals and live their own lives in the way that they choose for themselves. Having the same freedom, choice, dignity, control and opportunities as any other citizen – at home, at work and in the community; being fully heard and included in all assessment, planning and decision making processes; and being valued and respected as a unique individual.
6. Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (UNCRDP) is about living independently and being included in the community. It recognises: 'the equal right of all disabled people to live in the community, with choices equal to others, and to full inclusion and participation in the community'.

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

1. Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964), local authorities are required to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient public library service'.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/caecd/publications/120920consultationframework4independentlivingcover.pdf>

2. DW understands that local authorities must find the balance between competing needs for local services, the financial resources available and the general community wellbeing provided by the local library.
3. We are concerned that in spite of attempts to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on library services, there are some which are under threat of closure across Wales; Rhondda Cynon Taff,<sup>2</sup> Wrexham,<sup>3</sup> Merthyr Tydfil and Ceredigion.<sup>4</sup>
4. Whilst recognising that any proposal to close community libraries has been driven by the need to meet budget requirements, the closure of a library is the loss of a major community asset which has a disproportionate effect on the most disadvantaged members of society.
5. It is a significant loss to the community which cannot be entirely and adequately replaced by an alternative or substitute service.
6. Any reduction in library services would lead to an increase in isolation for disabled people and would impact on their ability to engage in social, cultural and community activities. Ultimately, it will affect disabled people's ability to participate fully in society and to live fulfilled and independent lives.
7. It is not only library closures but all budget reductions in library services and their specific impact on disabled people that must be considered. For example, in order to be able to read, visually impaired library users need access to reading material in accessible formats such as braille, large print, giant print, audio and e-books. Research conducted by Loughborough University found that 93% of printed books published in the UK are not accessible to three million people.<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> WalesOnline (15/01/14) RCT Cuts: 'We fear for future of the Valleys'

<sup>3</sup> BBC News North East Wales (14/01/14) Brymbo and Gresford libraries closer to shutting in Wrexham cuts.

<sup>4</sup> WalesOnline (15/01/14) More than 200 jobs under threat at Merthyr council as authority seeks £15.3m savings. <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/more-200-jobs-under-threat-6512405>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcomeds/writev/library/lib043.htm>

1. DW understands that Home Delivery Services may be offered to disabled and older library users as an alternative model of provision.
2. The overarching outcome that the *Framework on Action for Independent Living* aims to achieve is: 'An enabling society in which disabled children and adults enjoy the right to Independent Living and social inclusion'<sup>6</sup>
3. Whilst recognising that for some, a Home Delivery Service will be a vital and most welcome service, it nevertheless removes the freedom, choice and control that is afforded to other citizens, and could lead to disabled people becoming excluded within their communities.

### **The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales;**

1. Welsh Government has recognised the need to address the digital divide and particularly those issues faced by disabled people. Disabled people are one of the identified 'protected characteristics' and work is well underway to tackle the digital exclusion of disabled people in Wales as set out in 'Delivering Digital Inclusion: A Strategic Framework for Wales' (2010).
2. Person centred technology is an important element of the WG's *Framework for Action on Independent Living* and '*Strategic Equality Plan*' 2012-2016 to tackle barriers and support disabled people so that they can live independently and exercise choice and control in their daily lives through technology.<sup>7</sup>
3. The current complex system of working-age benefits and Tax Credits is to be replaced by a new benefit called Universal Credit. This will have a major impact for disabled people and for libraries. Disabled people will be expected to be 'Digital by Default' and being online will not be an option as everyone will be expected to claim via the internet.

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<sup>6</sup> See i

<sup>7</sup> <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/caecd/publications/120405sepfinal.pdf>

4. Disability Wales leads on the *Digital Lives* project under the Communities 2.0 portfolio to support disabled people to develop internet skills and to get them prepared for Universal Credit.
5. This project plays a vital role in raising awareness of the assistive technologies that enable disabled people to get online, increasing disabled people's confidence and knowledge in relation to Information Computer Technology and encouraging disabled people and their organisations to reap the benefits of online services and communication.
6. Without this bespoke intervention there is a risk that disabled people will become further disadvantaged from a financial and digital perspective.
7. During our work, we encounter many disabled people who experience barriers to digital inclusion. For them, libraries are not an indulgence, but the only place they can go to in order to access vital information, claim benefits, search and apply for jobs, and update their skills.
8. According to the Office of National Statistics, in 2013, 3.8 million disabled people over the age of 16 had never accessed the internet. Disabled people are just over three times more likely never to have used the Internet than non-disabled people.<sup>8</sup>
9. The fundamental aims and values underpinning public library services, as set out in the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) remain valid for the 21st century digitally networked world. Far from being obsolete by technology, libraries are an integral part of our communities and an integral part in an enabling society in Wales.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_300874.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_300874.pdf)

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