

Consultation Response

Inquiry into Public Libraries in Wales

National Assembly for Wales Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

17 January 2014

Introduction

1. Age Cymru is the leading charity working to improve the lives of all older people in Wales. We believe older people should be able to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, have adequate income, access to high quality services and the opportunity to shape their own future. We seek to provide a strong voice for all older people in Wales and to raise awareness of the issues of importance to them.
2. We are pleased to respond to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee's inquiry into public libraries in Wales. We believe that older people, wherever they live, should have good access to services and amenities that promote their health and wellbeing, and enable them to live fulfilled and independent lives for as long as possible.
- **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;**
3. The Programme for Government makes references to maintaining free admission to the National Library of Wales, widening access to libraries, strengthening regional collaboration in the delivery of library services and ensuring that local authorities meet national standards of library provision. We note that the number of visits to libraries is monitored, and that the number of people visiting libraries has risen, although we are not aware of any specific targets. The Programme for Government has made limited commitments in terms of protecting the continuity of the extent of public library services.
4. We welcome the capital funding invested via the Welsh Government's Community Learning Libraries Programme to modernise selected public libraries in Wales, and the continued investment in the Programme in 2014/15, although we note a reduction in the funding available for 2014/15. We note that the number of libraries refurbished is

monitored. We welcome the free IT facilities made available in over 280 libraries in Wales.

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

5. Under the Public Libraries and Museum Act 1964, libraries are a statutory service that local authorities in Wales are obliged to provide.¹
6. We welcome the Welsh Government's framework 'Libraries Inspire 2012-2016' which seeks to enhance library services in Wales for the benefit of everyone; one of the priorities of the framework is to aim to develop new innovative, sustainable and collaborative models of service delivery.
7. We welcome the recognition in the 'Libraries Inspire' framework of the importance of libraries in introducing older people to digital technologies (Skills for life 1.7.4), and the importance of activities and projects within public libraries to help to support older people to live independent lives (2.3 Promoting well-being).

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

8. We have serious concerns about how well-prepared the Welsh Government and local authorities are to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on library services. Regardless of the commitments made, for example, under the Programme for Government and the 'Libraries Inspire' framework, library services are under threat of closure across Wales, for example, Rhondda Cynon Taf,² Wrexham,³ Merthyr Tydfil,⁴ Ceredigion.⁵ Given the spending challenges facing Welsh local authorities we are concerned that this will simply represent the tip of the iceberg.
9. Cuts in library services would lead to an increase in isolation and loneliness for older people, and affect their ability to participate fully in society. A reduction in library services would impact on older people's ability to engage in social, cultural and educational activities (e.g. lifelong learning), and may inhibit the learning of new skills such as digital technology.

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

¹ Memorandum from the Welsh Assembly Government. Constitutional Law: Devolution, Wales. Proposal for a Legislative Competence Order on Culture and other fields. June 2009. <http://www.assemblywales.org/lco-ld7557-em-e.pdf>

² WalesOnline (15/01/14) RCT Cuts: 'We fear for future of the Valleys' <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/rct-cuts-we-fear-future-6507527>

³ BBC News North East Wales (14/01/14) Brymbo and Gresford libraries closer to shutting in Wrexham cuts. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-north-east-wales-25731827>

⁴ 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>

⁵ BBC Wales News (14/01/14) Volunteer plan to avoid closure of Tregaron library <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-25727142>

10. We feel it is essential to maintain library services in both urban and rural/deep rural areas. In the event that libraries are under threat of closure, particularly in rural/deep rural areas, we would urge that consideration is given to providing / extending mobile library services. We also welcome initiatives where housebound people and carers can register for books to be taken to their homes.
11. In terms of improving the financial sustainability of library services, neighbouring local authorities may wish to consider exploring the feasibility of combining some of their mobile library services.
12. We also believe it is important that local authorities consult with local communities regarding proposed changes in the delivery of public library services. Given the obligation on local authorities to provide services we believe it is essential that libraries or library services are accessible to people. Depending on geography, centralised provision may not meet the test of accessibility.

- **The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales**

13. The decline in local services over the past few decades has caused problems for many older people, particularly those who face additional barriers such as declining mobility, poor health, low incomes or limited social contact. This decline has been characterised by closures of libraries, along with local shops, banks, post offices, pubs, day centres, etc.
14. Public spaces such as libraries where people can meet and take part in community activities are vitally important. Such opportunities are greatly valued by many older people and can help to prevent isolation, loneliness and health decline. Increasing opportunities to take part locally can do much to boost independence and combat loneliness.
15. Later life should represent a time of enjoyment and fulfilment when people are able to participate in the community, learn new skills or take up new activities. The Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023 underlines the importance of older people being full participants in society. However, many older people come up against barriers that prevent their participation, and what should be an enjoyable stage of life can become a time of loneliness and isolation.
16. Enabling social interaction and the capacity for older people to take part in activities such as lifelong learning is central to promoting positive mental health and can help to reduce the need for intensive health and social care support. Research from NIACE⁶ provides evidence of the importance of learning for older people, reporting that there are real benefits in terms not only of personal enjoyment, but also for physical and mental health, social engagement and ability to manage their lives.

⁶ Age Cymru (2013) EnvisAGE No.10. Active ageing in Wales. Article by Stephen McNair 'How important is learning for older people?', <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/cymru/professional-resources/envisage/>

17. Libraries are an important educational resource, and are vitally important as places where older people can access computer technology, and therefore have an important role in promoting digital inclusion. The Cross Party Group on Older People and Ageing (November 2012) discussed digital inclusion and barriers to digital inclusion experienced by older people. Evidence heard by members of the Group strongly indicated the value of Skype, as well as social networking sites such as Facebook, in transforming some older people's ability to speak with family members on a regular basis. However, some local authorities in Wales often restrict access to social media sites on public computers as a result of local authority policies. We would welcome further development in this area to encourage consistency across all local authorities to support access to social media sites on computers in public libraries.

We hope these comments are useful and would be more than happy to provide further information if required.