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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Carmarthenshire County Council

Thank you for the opportunity to respond re: the Inquiry into Public libraries.

- ***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;***

Public libraries are a powerful resource and important in addressing a number of the priorities set out in the Welsh Government's "Programme for Government", including Health, Supporting People, Poverty, Rural Communities and Education all of which have an impact on the delivery of library services within the communities they serve. As part of the wider Society of Chief Librarians, Carmarthenshire Library Service is able to contribute to discussions and various publications which have been published around these areas of work.

Welsh public libraries address poverty by tackling the digital divide, providing access to the internet with trained staff delivering advice and guidance, and helping people develop vital information literacy skills. They will also 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. These and other aspects of the service are planned, shaped and delivered by skilled and knowledgeable professional library staff.

Additionally libraries play 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.

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 PI's 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.

These capital funding streams have allowed for 4 refurbishments to take place in Carmarthenshire namely at Burry Port and Llandeilo community branch libraries and at Carmarthen regional library where 2 such funding applications have been successful.

In addition authority capital funding has enabled the refurbishment and development of Llanelli Library which has enabled Carmarthenshire to report above the Welsh average in terms of WPLPI 1 and 4 (use and issues).

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

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 may be found at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/75>

The service also has further regulation via Welsh Government through the Welsh Public Library Standards. The current framework may be found at <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/drah/publications/110223wpls2101112en.pdf>

The service sees itself as a direct front line service and supports most of the authority's corporate strategies directly or indirectly. The service has elements of many of the larger service areas such as Leisure, Education & Social Services. Any reductions in the library provision will need to be managed within the broader context of the 1964 Act and reported via WPLS accordingly.

WPLS reporting – A new "Quality Framework for libraries" is currently under development for 2014 onwards, where a more outcome based impact perspective approach is expected to be developed, demonstrating the wider contribution and value of public libraries and allowing for greater reconfiguration along more innovative lines within local authorities. Based on the current WPLS scheme (ending 2013) it is anticipated that some of the proposals contained herein would impact on standards achievement however the impact on future standards cannot currently be anticipated.

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

Carmarthenshire County Library Services has been tasked with finding £479k of savings in the 2014/15 and 2015/16 financial years. Of these savings circa £204k will be delivered through managerial efficiencies.

A service review is currently underway looking at public library provisions across Carmarthenshire. It is intended that the review will outline a new direction for the Service against a background of significant cuts to local authority budgets.

Library services are continually changing to meet the needs of a developing service, which has led to a need to review the pattern of service delivery. Stronger community participation and widening the appeal are essential for the Service to prosper. In order to meet the efficiency, some service provision will inevitably be affected. It is expected that these efficiencies will impact on the following areas: Community Library services, Mobile Library Services, Staffing Structures.

The review proposes that there are a number of libraries that are not viable in terms of public usage and of cost effectiveness, size and are no longer fit for purpose. Some of our libraries now only serve a very small number of borrowers and as such, the case for maintaining a static service point is questionable. Currently there are 18 static service points with 5 mobile library units operating within Carmarthenshire.

In addition to the 3 main regional Libraries, the review highlights an additional 5 centres of excellence being supported, along with a fleet of 2 mobile libraries. Of the remaining branch libraries, it is envisaged that 6 will be negotiated as “alternative methods/forms of service delivery”, with 2 being offered back to the schools service. Alongside the rationalisation of service points within the county, the library service is currently undergoing a full staff structure review, with first phase managerial stages on target to be completed by December 2013, with the full structure expected to be in place by the 31st March 2014.

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

In order to mitigate the impact of public sector funding reductions Carmarthenshire Library Service will support a programme of change and develop a service that responds to the wider agenda for efficiencies and service challenges ahead, the current service review will have to determine whether to continue to support resources in services that are identified as not fit for purpose and inefficient in terms of hourly costs and performance. The “Alternative Methods/Forms of Service Delivery” should enable resources to be applied where performance and service levels can best deliver as “Centres of Excellence”.

Alternative Methods/Forms of Service Delivery for consideration:

- **Volunteer run libraries**

The use of volunteers in libraries has become prominent in the last couple of years. Currently one Community library is operated by volunteers within the county. This could be further explored/extended within Carmarthenshire and where implemented would be supported and managed by professional Library Service, providing professional support, stocks of books and non book materials along with IT support to small community based libraries run by volunteers from within the community.

- **Community councils**

In a number of authorities, community councils have contributed towards library provision. Working in partnership, community councils often provide accommodation and staffing, while the county council provide book stock and professional support for these small community based libraries. Pontyberem library goes a long way towards this route with the Community Council funding the building and staffing costs.

- **Relocation of existing libraries**

Across the Principality libraries are being relocated within other local authority buildings such as Leisure Centres, Community Centres and Civic Centres all having been used with varying degrees of success. Where practical, shared premises and staffing will be considered with other departments/organisations within Carmarthenshire; offering extended library provision. Such a move would bring savings from having shared premises but investment would be needed to fund any such relocations. A good example of shared services can be seen at “Y Gat” St Clears.

- **Enhanced housebound services**

The current housebound delivery service provides a tailored service specific to the requirements of the individual members with stock carefully selected by professional staff and delivered to borrowers' homes by library staff. Many current users in more remote locations could be transferred to the home delivery service, which would work in partnership with the Mobile library service. In adopting this approach consideration should be given to the use of volunteers and the establishment of partnerships with existing providers e.g. social services to deliver these extended services.

- **Deposit collections**

The library service already supplies a number of large deposit collections of books to day centres, nursing homes and hospitals, Stock is changed on a regular basis and selected by professional library staff. Providing there are suitable community venues this is a model that can be replicated. Costs for this would be met within existing budget providing there was no staffing or building cost to the Service. This option is currently being explored at Kidwelly. (Gwenllian Centre)

- **Mobile library service**

By streamlining our static branch library service with an adapted mobile library service, this will facilitate 'community' stops of between 1 to 3 hours per visit replacing the present traditional 'silver service' door to door type mobile stop approach of between 5 and 30 minutes. This would require significant changes to the existing mobile schedule, with a possible reduction in fleet from 5 to 2 vehicles. The costs of running this streamlined extended service and staffing would be within the existing budget, no extra costs would be incurred. Some precedence for using the mobile library as a replacement to static libraries exists as there are a number of locations on the current schedule which are served by longer 'community' stops.

- **Trust Status**

In considering trust status it is important to consider the distinction between libraries *by themselves* and in the trust with other organisations like museums, leisure centres etc. Charging facilities like leisure centres can bolster revenue streams. The benefits of Trust Status can be limiting if libraries go into them without revenue-generating partners, as libraries have few meaningful self-generating income streams which means that, whilst we would lose valuable public money by being a trust, we would conversely not benefit from exemption from business rates in the same way a theatre, leisure centre or attractions would.

If adopted any of these alternatives forms of service delivery would come with a considerable amount of planning and preparation as to ensure that the replacement service meets with community needs. Along with this, the need to continually assess performance against delivery will be paramount. (WPLS/CIPFA and Service Review Group)

These measures will enable the authority to provide a modern fit for purpose library service which will be sustainable and reflective of the requirements of the authorities Forward Financial Plan.

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

Libraries are a cultural asset and a deposit of social and cultural history. There is a value in terms of the 'cultural' investment made by the County of Carmarthenshire in cultural institutions such as its libraries, museums, theatres and archives services which is difficult to pin down in monetary terms but is reflected in terms of quality of life, educational and inspirational opportunities for the individual. Libraries are also non elitist institutions providing access to culture and the arts to all.

Library-professional literature also offers many studies that clearly indicate that the public libraries have a very positive effect – economically and culturally – in the local communities which they serve. Here we can speak in terms of effects at the individual level and effects in relation to local communities and trade and industry.

The effects are often outlined and can be categorised by:

- Increased quality of life and access to culture and art
- Equality and free access to information resources and contribution to community cohesion
- Improved personal development and recreational activities
- Community wellbeing, Libraries are at the centre of local communities, they encourage less social isolation and a social space for all
- Foster a knowledge and key understanding of disadvantaged groups due to economic or social backgrounds
- Cultural identity, heritage, place and language
- Health and wellbeing, activities and a mix of social benefits
- Education, public information and business information
- Learning, where all formal and informal study is supported
- Reading and literacy, providing a wealth of literature targeted at all groups

- Digital inclusion and participation for all
- Commercial and economic effects, including workforce development, business information resulting in increased tax base, channelling commercial growth within an area etc.