



PL 03

National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee)

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: National Federation of Women's Institute

1.0 Background

1.1 The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) is an educational, social, non-party political and non-sectarian organisation. It was established to ensure that women are able to take an effective part in their community, to learn together, widen their horizons, improve and develop the quality of their lives and those of their communities and together influence local, national and international affairs. The WI has an unrivalled reputation as a voice of reason, integrity and intelligence on issues that matter to women and their communities. The WI has an ambitious agenda and has long worked hard to bring women together to make a real impact to improve policy and practice.

1.2 The WI is a grass-roots, member-led organisation and is the largest voluntary women's organisation in the UK with more than 212,000 members in 6,600 WIs. In Wales there are 16,000 members belonging to 13 Federations and over 500 WIs based in local communities across the country. The strength of the WI is its structure that enables it to reach the heart of communities across Wales.

1.3 In 2011, a mandate was passed at NFWI's AGM urging "HM Government to maintain support for local libraries, as an essential educational and information resource" and this led to the Love your Libraries campaign which involved WI members pledging their support for libraries and raising awareness of the importance of libraries to local communities.

2.0 The extent to which progress has been made by the Welsh Government towards achieving its Programme of Government commitments relating to libraries, and how sustainable any progress is in the current climate.

2.1 NFWI-Wales welcomes the commitment provided by the Welsh Government to public libraries. The Welsh Government is taking the lead in the UK by having in place *Libraries Inspire*, the strategic framework for development of library services and also its Welsh Public Libraries Standards Framework for monitoring libraries provision across local authorities.

2.2 NFWI-Wales is concerned that pressure on public funding could impact on the provision of library services in Wales in their current form during the coming years. NFWI-Wales is concerned that with the increasing pressure on local authorities to reduce their budgets, libraries could face the threat of closures, reduced opening hours or reduced staffing. Public libraries benefit the whole community and link in with a number of areas of the Programme of Government from tackling poverty and increasing educational attainment to social inclusion and health and wellbeing.

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

3.1 The Welsh Government must not lower standards and its expectations of local authorities in terms of the delivery of library services in Wales. We do however foresee the need to restructure the delivery of services and believe that a review and adaption of the legislative and policy frameworks in place is needed to ensure that they meet the challenges ahead and support new models of delivery.

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

4.1 Although public libraries are a statutory service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, following the cuts announced in October to local authority budgets, NFWI-Wales is concerned about potential threats through closure of libraries or reductions in current service provision. Local authorities are under huge pressure to prioritise services in order to make savings and we fear that libraries will be services that could be under threat.

4.2 We urge the Welsh Government to reinforce to local authorities the value of public libraries to communities in Wales to ensure that libraries do not suffer as a consequence of public sector cuts. The Welsh Government must not reduce its expectations of local authorities and should continue to monitor changes to library provision as part of the Welsh Public Libraries Standards and to intervene where appropriate.

4.3 As part of the WI's Love your Libraries campaign, at local level WIs called on local authorities to listen to the views of WI members, library users and the community when making decisions about changes. Local authorities must ensure that they undertake a full consultation on any changes they are considering to library provision. Any substantive changes need to be made with due consideration to the needs of the community and library users.

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

5.1 We acknowledge that a change may be necessary in some areas in order to maintain library services by, for example, working in collaboration with other services in the community. Under the current tough economic climate, local authorities must review how libraries and other public services are delivered. Public services can no longer work in isolation; we envisage innovative, joined-up partnership approaches to the delivery of services meeting the needs of communities as the way forward. Models of provision will need to be flexible and responsive to community needs, for example, different approaches may be needed in rural and urban areas.

5.2 NFWI-Wales would like to highlight research that NFWI has nationally undertaken into community-managed libraries in England in the hope that the Welsh Government and local authorities will take the findings of the research on board when considering the way forward in the delivery of the public library services in Wales. In England, the development of community managed libraries is a trend that has emerged in recent years as a response to

significant financial pressures at local authority level. Many councils are increasingly looking at volunteers to avoid closures and plug resource gaps.

5.3 The research report *On Permanent Loan? Community Managed Libraries: The Volunteer Perspective* launched by the NFWI in January 2013 found that with many local authorities having to cut their budgets, an increasing number of libraries in England were being handed over to volunteers to run. The report found that the piecemeal development of community managed libraries, and the inadequate guidance on good practice had resulted in many volunteers receiving a chronic lack of support from local authorities, and facing a range of unrealistic demands. Volunteers were navigating a complex obstacle course of responsibilities and often struggling to discharge these responsibilities effectively, raising questions about the long term sustainability of community managed libraries.

5.4 It was clear from the report that the piecemeal way in which community managed libraries were developing meant that the range of services and books on offer differed widely between libraries. With the number of community managed libraries in England increasing, concern was highlighted that this trend would only intensify with the danger of a two tiered system of library provision emerging.

5.5 The report concluded that while volunteers have an important role to play in public libraries, many communities do not have the capacity or appetite to run services themselves and professional staffing should be at the heart of any library. Volunteers can and do make a tremendous contribution to the library network, however the NFWI does not believe that volunteers are an acceptable alternative to paid library staff. While we are pleased to note that this trend has not arisen in Wales, we feel that it is important to share the findings of the WI report in this inquiry.

6.0 The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales

6.1 Libraries are the hub of local community life and contribute to outcomes across a broad range of policy agendas including lifelong learning, child literacy, wellbeing and digital inclusion.

6.2 Libraries are a 'social good'; in their basic form they provide free opportunities for people to read and learn, and more broadly, they can help to change lives and transform communities.

6.3 Library buildings offer a space for members of the community to meet and socialise and facilitate community engagement providing a gateway for citizens to get involved in community groups and activities. The importance of the physical space offered by library buildings means that while the services they house may be delivered in a different way, the loss of this space means that communities lose the hub that can be the linchpin for local life.

6.4 Many of today's libraries also provide a range of other services beyond book borrowing; acting as information resources and community 'hubs' providing internet access and training to develop IT skills, activities for parents and toddlers, homework clubs, reading groups and local meeting spaces. Through this diverse range of services, libraries can have an impact on all areas of community life.

6.5 Access to libraries and mobile library services play a particularly important role in rural areas. Residents in these areas may lack local community facilities, have limited public transport services which present additional barriers to accessing amenities, and may have already lost other local facilities such as banks and post offices.

6.6 The expertise of professional staff must be at the heart of the modern library service. Staff provide the links between formal library services and the particular needs of their

communities, ensuring that services are responsive and meet the needs of local people. They are a vital source of support, guidance and training to library users, helping direct users to appropriate resources for their needs.

6.7 At the heart of the WI's Love your Libraries campaign is the belief that libraries are an essential resource too important to risk losing. The loss of a library is more than just the loss of a building – libraries are hubs for learning and computer use as well as for social and community life for all sections of society.