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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: UNISON Wales

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UNISON recently undertook a comprehensive survey of its library members in order to document the impact upon the public library service since the Coalition Government came to power in Westminster in 2010 and to give a detailed picture of the range of services they provide.

<https://www.unison.org.uk/upload/sharepoint/On%20line%20Catalogue/21589.pdf>

The survey, completed by library workers in every council across Wales and the UK as a whole, formed the basis of a report written by Steve Davies from Cardiff University entitled "The public library service under attack: how cuts are putting individuals and communities at risk and damaging local businesses and economies".

The library service in Wales has thus far not been subject to the same degree of cuts endured by in parts of England and Scotland but it is clear that the service is still under strain. Whilst there have not yet been widespread closures to library buildings in Wales the service is still being hurt by reductions in mobile libraries (*see figures below*); in staff numbers and opening hours of static libraries.

Mobile libraries are in fact disappearing at rapid rate. Many mobiles generally visit the most isolated communities and many the most deprived.

Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy figures

	2007/8	2012/13	Change
Static libraries open 10+hours/week	274	269	- 2%
Mobile Libraries	64	38	- 41%

Projections for 2014/15 and into the future are also bleak for the future of library services, with reports from around Wales suggesting that static libraries will face the brunt of planned budget cuts e.g. Anglesey planning 60% cuts in this area of expenditure; RCT planning to close 14 of its 26 libraries across the county; Ceredigion planning to close New Quay's library; Vale of Glamorgan planning library closures...etc

In addition, 61% of members have reported a decrease in the number of full time posts in their library with 55% reporting a decrease in part time posts. 36% of respondents also reported a decrease in library opening hours.

Staff terms and conditions are also suffering with a marked decrease in the amount of training available to staff and a marked increase in stress levels amongst staff.

This is clearly not just a problem for library workers but also for the people in the local community who are increasingly being denied access to a high quality public service.

Libraries have always been a very popular and important part of public service provision. In recent years the variety and numbers of services they have provided have rapidly increased. There is still a relatively popular perception that libraries just stock books but they provide activities like after school homework clubs, support for people with dementia, outreach work in schools, business start up and social enterprise projects, CV writing and job searching support, IT training to name but a few.

Many of these activities take on an increased level of importance in times of economic hardship. For instance, libraries provide significant amounts of help for people looking for work and also provide people with free internet use. With an increased shift to accessing key services, benefits and job services online libraries play a key role in help the most vulnerable people in our society gain access.

A well resourced and funded public library service can also play a key role in actively supporting the work of other public services. For instance, a large contributory factor for more demands on social services is the widespread presence of loneliness amongst elderly people. Libraries can help to reduce isolation in local communities via their home library services and through a range of activities in library buildings.

A comprehensive branch of local libraries can also serve the purpose of allowing key information to reach members of the local community and they can also provide an important social glue for local communities. This sort of work can be best achieved where the local council maintains direct control of its library service and ensures that it is funded well.

There has been a significant rise in the use of volunteers in library services which can contribute to the undermining of a high quality public service. In England there has been a move by some councils to have libraries that are community run and rely on the use of volunteers. This is a wholly unsustainable model and goes against the statutory requirement for councils to provide a "comprehensive and efficient" service as part of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. UNISON would be strongly against the promotion of community run libraries in Wales and maintain that library services are most effective when run directly by democratically accountable local councils.

UNISON is also strongly against the use of private companies to run library services; a model of provision which has also begun to creep into parts of England. Carillion, a company most commonly associated with the construction industry, has recently taken over the running of the library service for four Greater London councils. One of its first moves was to inform significant numbers of library workers that their jobs were at risk. UNISON calls for a strong rejection of the use of profit seeking companies to run library services in Wales.

UNISON library members are overwhelmingly committed to the idea that the public library service is best run as a publicly funded service directly provided by the local authority. We hope that the Welsh Government will support this notion and ensure that library services in Wales are not only protected but that their potential to play a larger and key role in supporting our communities is recognised.