

PL 08

National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: The Society of Chief Librarians



INTRODUCTION

The Society of Chief Librarians (Wales) is an association made up of the head librarian (or equivalent) of each public library authority in Wales. As an organization we provide a professional viewpoint on key issues relating to public libraries in Wales. Our aim is *“to influence the statutory, financial and the decisions which relate to the effectiveness of public library services, and take a leading role in the national development of public library services”*

1. 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

1.1 In relation to libraries the following are highlighted within the Programme:

- Strengthening regional collaboration among publically funding libraries
- Performance in the Welsh Public Library standards and performance indicators which monitor local authorities' efforts to meet national standards of service delivery and their statutory duties under the Public Libraries Act.
- CyMAL Community Learning Libraries grant funding programme, which supports local authorities to improve, modernise and develop local libraries in order to provide maximum benefit to residents through attracting increased visitors and use.

1.2 Specifically, the Welsh Government measures for libraries are:

- visitor numbers, to reflect access and participation, and
- number of libraries refurbished under the grant scheme.

1.3 The Welsh Government has made good progress towards achieving these:

- Library visitor numbers per head of population in Wales have been consistently higher than those in England, and continue to increase, rising by 11% since 2002/3, and reversing the English trend (Wales 13.25million 2002/3, 14.72m 2011/12, England 323m 2002/3, 306m 2011/12).
- Grant funding:
 - Library refurbishments: Investment in libraries through CyMAL grant funding contributes to these visitor levels. The Community Learning Libraries programme has provided invaluable support to local authorities to develop library services to better meet the need of residents. Over the past 10 years 89 libraries (out of a total of 280 in Wales) have been remodelled as a result of Community Learning Libraries programme funding.

- Inspiring Learning: Grant funding under this framework for 2012 – 2016 has improved opportunities relating to training and development of staff and the provision of learning opportunities for the public through libraries.
- National collaboration: the ability and will within the wider library sector in Wales to work on a national strategic level in order to negotiate the best access and resources for Welsh citizens has been enhanced by funding provided by the Welsh Government and CyMAL's influence. E.g. Wales-wide provision of e-resources (reference materials, ebooks and ezines), book purchasing consortia, the Book Prescription Wales scheme, Wales wide catalogue (librarywales.org website) interlibrary loans arrangements, marketing strategy, campaigns and materials and the current developments towards joint Library Management Systems.
- Regional collaboration: stronger regional groupings of library services in all sectors (public, further and higher education, health, special) have developed with Welsh Government support, and again provide a more cost effective and sustainable way forward and widen access for all.
- Welsh Public Library Standards performance: the support and funding streams from the Welsh Government have helped library services to make steady improvement in performance, which in turn provides increased benefit to the public in accordance with the statutory duties of authorities.
- The Libraries Inspire Strategic Framework and Delivery Plan: the key actions within this plan helps the public library sector to drive and co-ordinate activities on a national basis. SCL Wales ensures that its Business Plan links with Libraries Inspire and wider UK initiatives.

1.4 SCL Wales believes the Programme for Government has resulted in improvements to library services in Wales and wish for this to continue. However, SCL Wales wishes to express its disappointment that there is very little mention, if at all, of public libraries within the Programme for Government documents despite the fact that public libraries play a key role in relation to Health, Supporting People, Poverty, Education, Learning, Digital Inclusion, Welsh Language and Rural Communities – all key chapters in the Programme for Government Report, June 2013. We strongly believe the role public libraries have to play in relation to key national policy areas should be more widely recognised and acknowledged. During the last four years we have written five reports to Assembly Ministers and distributed to all Assembly Members which explain in more detail the positive impact of public libraries:

- 'Brighter, Bolder, Better' (2009) <http://www.goscl.com/about-the-scl/scl-wales/scl-wales-publications/brighterbolderbettersclwales2009-2/>
- 'Addressing the Digital Divide' (2010). <http://www.goscl.com/about-the-scl/scl-wales/scl-wales-publications/addressingthedigitaldividesclwales2010-2/>.
- The Importance of Reading (2011) http://www.goscl.com/about-the-scl/scl-wales/scl-wales-publications/scl_w_importanceofreadingdec2011-2/

- Public Libraries: Health, Wellbeing and Social Benefits [2012].
<http://www.goscl.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/SCL-Wales-report.pdf>
- We have recently sent you a copy of our report 'Public Libraries: Reducing Child Poverty' [2013].
http://welshlibraries.org/fileadmin/documents/toolkit/Document_Library_NE_W/SCL_WALES/SCLWPUBLICLIBRARIESCHILD%20POVERTY2013.pdf

2. The extent to which the current legislative and policy frameworks are suitable to meet the challenges of local authorities delivering library services in Wales:

2.1 Public library services are a statutory duty under the terms of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 and defined through the Welsh Government's Public Library Standards. This legislation gives the Welsh Government the duty to "*superintend and promote the improvement of the public library service provided by local authorities...and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries conferred upon them as library authorities by or under this Act*".

2.2 The Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) were first developed in 2002, to ensure that local authorities carry out their statutory responsibilities in the delivery of the core library service, and are now in the 4th framework to March 2014. There is no doubt that the WPLS have made a significant contribution to the consistency and quality of library services across Wales, and this is evidenced by very high public satisfaction levels with library services nationally.

2.3 Welsh Government and local authority agendas necessarily focus on the same aim – improving outcomes for the residents of Wales – and their legislative and policy frameworks are geared to support delivery of this aim. Library services have a crucial role to play in this delivery, as outlined by the Minister, John Griffiths, in his statement on libraries on 3rd December which recognized that libraries "*are at the heart*" of the Welsh Government agenda. We warmly welcome his intention to "*ensure that people benefit from a strong, resilient library service, responsive to public need, well managed, demonstrating financial efficiency and professionally run*". SCL Wales believes strongly that library services should be managed and staffed by suitable qualified and trained local authority staff and that this ensures complicity with their statutory duties.

Library services across Wales, are instrumental in the delivery of outcomes that are closely linked to other key local and national policy agendas; these include health and wellbeing, poverty, education and skills, growth and sustainable jobs, digital and social inclusion, equality, safer communities, access to democratic processes, and the promotion of the Welsh language and culture. In effect, library services can provide a great deal of support to local authorities in the delivery of current legislative agendas and policies.

2.4 However, there are wide range challenges that face local authorities in the delivery of these valuable services and not least of these is the significant reduction in library service budgets. How these challenges are being tackled will be evident in the responses you will have received from individual local authorities.

3. How well prepared the Welsh Government and local authorities are to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on library service:

3.1 The Society of Chief Librarians (Wales) has attempted to assist Welsh Government and local authorities to mitigate the impact of expenditure cuts on library services as far as possible. This has been a matter for discussion between CyMAL and the SCL (Wales) as part of the agenda of the 'Libraries Inspire' Advisory Group for the last three years. As the strategic development framework for Welsh libraries 2012-16 'Libraries Inspire' includes a recommendation for sustainable models of service delivery. Much has already been achieved during this and preceding frameworks, to enable library services to continue to impact positively on the leisure, wellbeing, health, employment, and educational aspects of people's lives with decreasing resources. As detailed above many collaborative arrangements are already in place.

3.2 SCL Wales Members work closely together to share experiences and expertise in order to share good practice, improve services and also in recent years to try to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts. We believe that cuts to public libraries are not only a local issue but also one that has national significance for the whole of Wales. The public library model is in essence a cooperative one involving other library authorities and library sectors.

3.3 Library authorities are required to be 'efficient' as part of their statutory duty and in the opinion of SCL Wales already offer a best value model. It must also be stated that library services are not expensive services to deliver. In terms of total local authority budgets they represent less than 1% of the total expenditure. Welsh public library authorities have had the lowest per capita spend on services across the UK for many years before the devolution of powers to Welsh Government.

4. Options for improving the financial sustainability of library services, including alternative models of provision:

4.1 Service reviews are underway locally and regionally. Information from these will inform the Committee separately. In addition individual local authorities may have their own viewpoints based on review findings.

4.2 Build on existing regional and national partnerships to improve outcomes for users and attract new users of public libraries.

4.3 Regional/national procurement processes, leading to economies of scale and provision of best value through efficiency savings.

4.4 SCL Wales is not against the closure of libraries where those service points have been assessed as being no longer viable, a thorough impact assessment has been carried out and consultation has taken place with the local community. Provision must reflect a rounded vision of the whole library service. Councils have a legal obligation to have due regard to equalities in the way that the service is being delivered to ensure that there is no adverse impact or barriers to usage for groups protected under the Equality Act 2010.

4.5 SCL Wales welcomes the use of volunteers to enhance service delivery and community support. However, SCL Wales strongly believes that volunteers

cannot be relied upon to provide the core service delivered by trained professionals. SCL Wales and CILIP Cymru (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) endorse the view that volunteers could be used to enhance services provided by staff but not to replace them. Here is our SCL Wales position statement on use of volunteers: <http://www.goscl.com/about-the-scl/scl-wales/scl-wales-publications/sclwales-statement-on-volunteers2013-2/>

4.6 SCL Wales Members strongly believe that a strong, experienced, knowledgeable and suitably qualified workforce is essential to the delivery of effective and efficient services. SCL Wales has prepared a report about library workforce in Wales which was presented to CyMAL in March 2013 <http://www.goscl.com/wpcontent/uploads/2012/03/SCLWalesPublicLibraryWorkforce2013.pdf>. The library sector's response to the transition from printed to digital resources will require careful management to ensure the correct balance between meeting the needs of the 'traditional' library user and future generations of library users.

5. The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales:

5.1 We in particular wish to highlight the contribution of public libraries to:

- 5.1.1 Learning – Libraries support all kinds of informal study and those completing formal qualifications.
- 5.1.2 Reading and literacy – Libraries provide access to a wealth of literature, stories that engage and excite, and books targeted at children, young people and adults with poor literacy levels.
- 5.1.3 Community wellbeing – Libraries are at the centre of local communities providing a meeting place for local groups, provision of community information and a wide range of activities for all ages.
- 5.1.4 Skills and economic regeneration – Libraries help to stimulate the local economy by providing opportunities for skills and workforce development, providing business information and advice and channelling residents to make use of local shops and businesses.
- 5.1.5 Digital inclusion and participation – Libraries support residents to get online through access to free broadband enabled Internet access in their buildings. This includes access to work related information and benefits including Universal Credit and Job Match. (280 libraries in Wales offer free access to IT facilities)
- 5.1.6 Cultural identity – heritage, place and language
- 5.1.7 Health and wellbeing activities and social benefits
- 5.1.8 Knowledge and understanding to those who may be disadvantaged due to economic situation or social backgrounds.

SCL Wales believes that to significantly reduce the number of public libraries would critically undermine the comprehensive infrastructure and the community links that can help to deliver key national agenda strands such as Digital Inclusion, Lifelong Learning and Health and Wellbeing in Wales.

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