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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Bridgend County Borough Council

Inquiry into Public Libraries – Submission on behalf of Bridgend County Borough Council

The National Assembly for Wales' Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee<<http://www.senedd.assemblywales.org/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=226>> is to undertake a short inquiry into public libraries in Wales. To assist with its inquiry, the Committee would welcome your views on:

- *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. In general there has been significant progress made by successive Welsh Governments in achieving strategic commitments set out for library services in Wales.
 - Welsh Government through CyMAL has provided a national direction yet has allowed this to manifest itself naturally through a range of local models and solutions. This approach is welcome.
 - The Community learning libraries funding has been instrumental in ensuring libraries become fit-for-purpose, inviting spaces that are relevant to the 21st Century. Our evidence suggests that investing in the space and technology has a direct impact on user figures and visits. E.g. new facilities at Garw Valley Life Centre demonstrate a 16% uplift on issues. Recently opened Bridgend Library shows a 48% increase in issues compared with December 2012 – both are integrated facilities.
 - Libraries are one of the few services that are fairly generic in their basic delivery requirements and as such lend themselves to some all-Wales initiatives. The e-books catalogue and Books on Prescription schemes are examples where central investment has paid dividends across Wales.
 - Sustaining progress will be a challenge and Welsh Government need to consider funding further into those re-developed facilities and services than looking to fund more i.e. consolidate the modern estate. With growing pressure from the Kindle market etc., increasing funding to e-book availability may also be preferable to physical, bricks and mortar developments.

- Despite the abundance of evidence surrounding the benefit of libraries to the literacy agenda more is required at a national level to persuade schools and the learning sector to exploit libraries as learning resources.
 - *The extent to which the current legislative and policy frameworks are suitable to meet the challenges facing local authorities delivering library services in Wales*
2. There are two key legislative and policy frameworks that merit discussion:
- The 1964 Museums and Libraries Act
 - Welsh Public Library Standards
- To a degree neither the legislative act nor the WPLS are suitable to meet the future challenges faced by local authorities in the delivery of library services. The Act is half a century old and while it clearly makes it a statutory obligation to provide ‘a comprehensive and efficient library service’ it remains undefined and open to interpretation. People’s habits, behaviours and mobility has progressed significantly in 50 years and therefore its definition today might not represent or, might engender a different landscape of service points and accessibility to that envisaged 50 years ago.
 - Without a clear definition of what constitutes an acceptable level of statutory service, libraries will inevitably fall onto the menu of services where a reduction in provision can be tolerated and imposed. Having said this, defining a de minimis level can have the same effect, indeed may be more detrimental than the status quo.
 - The WPLS have no doubt provided a framework for improvement whereby local authorities focused their attention on the library service beyond the traditional national indicators. With input from service professionals and chief officers there has been a sense of ownership and pragmatism around the WPLS which, when supported by the Community Learning Libraries capital injections, has resulted in a dynamic relationship between Welsh Government and local authorities to improve provision.
 - From here on in however, input based indicators and standards will become less relevant. An emphasis needs to be placed on developing better outcomes. Certainly any indicators that crudely measure resources as a barometer of ‘good’ services are misplaced. Bridgend CBC has, for example, replaced two old libraries with bigger and better facilities with longer opening hours yet also reducing annual revenue cost. The development of new partnership or collaborative models will also render such a framework irrelevant less relevant.
 - There is a need for an agreed policy framework but one that has synergy to other policy areas and is sensitive to the financial climate faced by local authorities.

- *How well-prepared the Welsh Government and local authorities are to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on library services*
3. It is difficult to gauge the readiness of Welsh Government and other local authorities to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on libraries. The Minister to his credit has extolled the virtues of different models of service delivery, integrated and co-location of services, and partnership. It will be for each local authority to each decide upon their own model. Bridgend has, since 2010 adopted a principle of co-location as its preferred model – a policy decision that has improved libraries for customers while also creating necessary operational efficiencies. A successful partnership with GLL and Halo Leisure to manage and operate sports facilities has also resulted in a greater confidence that other options exist beyond service rationalisation and closures.

The gravity of the financial settlements will ultimately preside over the longer term design of library services and perhaps a clear statement on expectation from Welsh Government will ensure a more consistent approach across Wales.

It is worth noting that other cuts also impact on library services and their ability to maintain momentum e.g. less ICT support and development at a time when e-access should be at the forefront of service delivery.

- *Options for improving the financial sustainability of library services, including alternative models of provision*
4. Examples have been given in the above section as to options for service delivery. Any all-Wales solutions should be properly tested to ensure that better procurement and systems cannot be achieved through other delivery vehicles.
- *The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales.*
5. There is a wealth of evidence that supports the role of libraries as places of learning and inspiration. They are playing an increasing role in digital inclusion and access to on-line information.

Other more traditional services such as the mobile library must also be considered to enhance service reach but combined with newer models of home delivery and 'click & collect' services which emulated successful retail approaches.

The ethos of the public library has not, and should not change but the effort to change perceptions of libraries should continue. Inevitably not all communities will have their own libraries and to some extent where they continue to exist they must be considered fit-for-purpose or else options explored for area based provision where better facilities and a greater availability of resources allows for increased participation and opportunities.

Bridgend County Borough Council would welcome the opportunity to continue to work at a professional and political level to ensure that the public library service is modernised and can continue to play such an important role in today's changing society.

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