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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Isle of Anglesey Library Service

**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 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.
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.
3. The Isle of Anglesey Library Service has made good progress towards achieving these. Library visitor numbers per head of population in Anglesey have risen steadily over the last 5 years. Progress however could be difficult to sustain as staffing levels have fallen year on year which limits the services ability to provide outreach services and proactively engage with citizens who are lapsed or non-users.
4. It seems clear that some key factors influence the library service and its usage. A refurbished library building increases use, not just in the first year, but for several years afterwards, as in the case of Benllech, Menai Bridge and Llangefni libraries.
5. An adequate book fund is also essential to maintain and increase issue figures. A modern library service needs to deliver a range of traditional and new services and should be supported by strong marketing. A rural library needs to be rooted in its community acting as a community hub. Engaging with children and promoting the literacy agenda reaps clear benefits
6. Library refurbishments: One notable success over the past decade has been in attracting external funding from the Community Learning Libraries Grant fund provided by the Welsh Government administered by CyMAL to refurbish Anglesey's libraries; this has resulted in all but 1 of the eligible libraries being provided with modern facilities (c£700,000 in total)
7. Inspiring Learning: Grant funding under this framework has enabled our service to enrol a member of staff on a professional course which feeds into our succession plan.

8. National collaboration: the library sector in Wales has a proven history of working on a national strategic level in order to negotiate the best access and resources for Welsh citizens. Funding provided by the Welsh Government and CyMAL's strategic lead has enabled significant advances in National offers over recent years; Wales-wide provision of e-resources (reference materials, ebooks and ezines), book purchasing consortia, the Book Prescription Wales scheme, Wales wide catalogue, interlibrary loans arrangements, marketing strategy, campaigns and materials and the current developments towards joint Library Management Systems.
9. Regional collaboration: Regional collaboration between library sectors is strong as evidenced by the North Wales Library Partnership, and LINC y Gogledd partnerships. These have developed with Welsh Government support, and again provide opportunities for collaboration and cost efficiencies and aim to widen access for all.

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

10. The 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act requires that each local authority "provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof". As the terms "comprehensive and efficient" are not defined in the Act, WAG introduced the Public Library Standards to define levels of service and to assist the Minister "to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service"
11. Public Library Standards were introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government in April 2002 to indicate minimum levels of library provision and are intended to provide comparative performance measurements to guide service improvements. These minimum levels and comparative performance indicators provide a framework to drive service improvements and guard against falling outcomes and performance. The Standards and their place in the Corporate monitoring framework enable the Library Service to be scrutinised on a high level.
12. Anglesey Library Service, alongside all library services, is 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.

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

13. The most significant issues over the next 5 years appear to be:
  - How to meet the Public Library Standards and other measures of efficient and effective service delivery in the context of public sector cuts.
  - How to ensure that the service contributes to Council and National priorities, in particular improving skills and levels of literacy
  - Whether and how to satisfy increased customer demand (in terms of numbers and range of services) in the context of reduced budgets
  - Whether and how to expand delivery of the service to people, particularly minority groups, who are not currently receiving the service

- How and whether to respond to changing customer demand for more flexible ICT platforms and services and access to social networking tools and online information
- How and whether to manage the asset portfolio within tight budgets and bearing in mind the number of facilities that have been improved with external grants (which potentially could be reclaimed if that library was closed)

14. The CyMAL assessment of the 2012/13 Welsh Public Library Standards states that *'there is little evidence of progress in overall performances and there is some cause for concern that current performances will be difficult to sustain during the final year of the fourth Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards. It appears unlikely that the authority will achieve more Standards before March 2014, and may lose ground in respect of one area (the purchase of books and materials) where levels of investment have been diminishing on a regular basis. It is also possible that this will impact on other related performance areas'*

15. *'There are clear signs of operational difficulties in this area, and the service review currently being undertaken needs to consider this matter very carefully as part of the transformation plan that is to be issued for the service. Lack of human resource capacity could well undermine the authority's service transformation plans and aspirations for its library service. This is a matter drawn to the attention of the authority on previous occasions in the Welsh Government's reports on its library service provision.'*

16. If further substantial financial savings are required the result could be the closure of some libraries, the withdrawal of the mobile library service, the purchase of fewer books and other items and not replacing out-of-date computer equipment. The Authority would find it difficult to maintain the minimum legally-required level of service, and it would probably result in lower levels of customer satisfaction. Effects could be mitigated by consolidating libraries with other Council services in community buildings and/or by expanding the use of the mobile library, or models such as community run facilities. However experience from other Authorities demonstrates that necessary mitigating actions (in order to fulfil our statutory duties) would, in all likelihood, be more expensive than maintaining the current configuration.

### **Options for improving the financial sustainability of library services, including alternative models of provision:**

17. A Service review is ongoing, with all options being considered. In considering the available options for change the Isle of Anglesey Council will be mindful of the following issues:

- Its statutory obligations viz-a-viz the public library service
- The library service's contribution to a range of high-level Corporate and National strategic objectives, namely: literacy, lifelong learning, health & wellbeing, digital inclusion and community capacity
- The library service's potential to make a wider contribution to the attainment of Corporate aims and objectives
- The requirement to adhere to strict public and equality impact assessment consultations in advance of any service reduction decisions
- On-going Regional developments surrounding joint working, North Wales regional management structures and projects such as the All Wales Library Management System project

18. Options for change being considered are outlined below. This is not an exhaustive list but is based on research and models adopted across Britain.

- Maintaining the Current Service
- Reducing the Library Service; Reducing opening hours, Closing some libraries Withdrawing the mobile library service
- Reducing professional and other staffing levels
- Reducing expenditure on library books and other stock (such as audio books and e-books)
- Co-Location
- Collaboration : Local/Regional/National
- Sharing services with other Councils
- External providers / Community-run Facilities / Community Library Access Points

### **The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales:**

19. Increasingly, the public benefit of a modern library service is measured in how it can respond to challenges facing society by providing specific help for disadvantaged individuals. Locally, some recent initiatives have included:

- Book Prescription Wales is a 'bibliotherapy' scheme providing support for people with mental illness
- The Housebound service delivering library books to housebound people
- Enabling digital access by providing ICT taster sessions to help people get online and look for jobs (and very recently, assisting people with online access to Job match forms, a clear portent for the introduction of Welfare Reform in 2013).

20. With regard to new technology, the Service is investing in cost-effective online information resources and access to e-books and e-zines (mostly in collaboration with other library services across Wales). It also provides online resources and computer facilities and supports people to develop their skills to access the digital world.

21. WG's 'Delivering Digital Inclusion: A Strategic Framework for Wales' recognises the role of public libraries in providing online access, developing ICT skills, helping people get back into work, providing access to information and entitlements and enabling people with special needs to get online through adaptive technologies.

22. We also wish to highlight the contribution of public libraries to:

**Learning** – Libraries support all kinds of informal study including basic ICT Taster courses, Digital Literacy and Information Literacy. In partnership with the Lifelong Learning Service we are able to provide distance learning packages for languages (Transparent Languages On-line) to our users. The service also offers support and resources to those completing formal qualifications with local learning providers at all levels.

**Reading and literacy** – **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. Activities undertaken to support the literacy agenda include weekly Rhyme Time sessions, Mother and Baby groups in partnership with Health Visitors and the annual Summer Reading Challenge.

**Community wellbeing** – Libraries are at the centre of local communities providing a neutral meeting place for local groups, provision of community information and a wide range of activities for all ages.

**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. We have 2 Job Clubs which meet weekly to assist people with job searching, developing CV's completing applications and with the use of on-line applications.

**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) Worksheets have been created to assist individuals in getting started with UJC and UJM and courses are available to develop the skills needed by individuals to access these on-line services

**Health and wellbeing** Libraries link directly into Health and Wellbeing agendas. The health benefits of reading alone or in groups are clear. And the opportunities for social interaction provided by library services and activities are far reaching. libraries hold a wealth of health related information, and specific projects such as Book Prescription Wales, the Children and Families Bibliotherapy Scheme, Read Aloud sessions and MacMillan Cancer Information service, are delivered through libraries.

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