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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: The Carnegie UK Trust

Response to the National Assembly for Wales' Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee consultation on public libraries in Wales

The Carnegie UK Trust welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland by influencing policy and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Trust was established by the Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.

The Trust continued Andrew Carnegie's support for the public library service, funding library buildings, developing new library services and supporting the development of professional courses for librarians. The Trust carried out research in 2011 on the use of public libraries, and public attitudes to libraries. A factsheet containing more detailed results for Wales was produced¹.

Our report *A New Chapter: public library services in the 21st century* made some comparisons between services in different parts of the UK and Ireland. One of the arguments made in the report was that Wales was in a stronger position than the other jurisdictions in having a clear strategy for public libraries in Wales, backed by a strong development body (CyMAL), and capital funding for the library service. The report also commented on the development of a set of entitlements for library users which is a distinct approach in Wales. We argued that the presence of CyMAL as a policy division of the Welsh Assembly Government appeared to have encouraged clear policy development in Wales, unmatched in other jurisdictions. This clear focus and strategic approach may well have contributed to the rise in numbers using public libraries in Wales over the last few years. It has also allowed the service to be marketed in a consistent way – something which is not done in Scotland and England.

In Wales, 37% of the population said that public libraries were essential to their community – the highest response rate of any of the jurisdictions. Only 38% of people in Wales said that public libraries were essential or very important to them personally, a lower percentage than in other jurisdictions. 45% had used a library in the last year, which is a lower level than in Scotland (61%), England (50%) and Republic of Ireland (51%). This relatively low rate of use may reflect historically lower rates of funding, but as already noted, the numbers using public libraries has been rising in recent years in Wales.

1 Progress and sustainability

The Committee asks about 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 <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/2012/a-new-chapter---wales-factsheet>

We make no comment on the extent to which progress has been made in this area, although it is clear that investment in the public library service has continued, and that libraries in Wales continue to contribute to a wide agenda as indicated by the case studies in *The First Incomplete Guide to Wellbeing in Libraries*².

In relation to sustainability, while public library services have experienced significant budget cuts over recent years, the impact to date has been greater in England than in the rest of the UK. It appears likely that Wales and Scotland will experience similar cuts over the next few years, and have not in any sense avoided the difficult decisions faced by local authorities in England.

We believe argue that having CyMAL located within the Welsh Assembly Government is extremely important in creating the connections and partnerships between the library sector and other branches of government which allows libraries to contribute not only to the specific goals set for them, but more broadly to the aims of other government departments.

These structural arrangements will contribute to ensuring the sustainability of progress in this area, because they allow for the encouragement and development of solutions which will be more cost-effective than if local library authorities had to operate without this coordinating and supporting function.

The population and geography of Wales has allowed Welsh libraries to implement some Wales-wide initiatives which will increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the service. For example in Wales ebooks and emagazines are being procured by a consortium of libraries on behalf of all the library services. People can borrow and return books anywhere in Wales – something which only happens in one other library system in the UK – in Northern Ireland.

2 Suitability of current legislative and policy frameworks to meet the challenges facing local authorities

The legislative framework is the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. Wales has been distinct within the UK in having both a clear strategy for public libraries (*Libraries Inspire*), and a set of Welsh Public Library Standards which help determine whether library authorities are meeting their duties under the Act.

The Trust considers that this legislative and policy framework is appropriate and does not impose an undue burden on local authorities.

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

There is a danger that the response to public sector cuts involves incremental reductions in staffing levels and opening hours which are sustainable in the short term, but which in the long term lead to falls in levels of use, which can ultimately be used to justify closing services.

The most effective way to mitigate the impact of cuts is to respond positively to the challenge both in terms of finding ways to do things more effectively and efficiently, but also in terms of demonstrating to other parts of government how libraries can make a positive, cost-effective contribution to achieving their aims.

2

The Welsh Government is in a relatively strong position as a result of the role of CyMAL, which can make the connections between libraries and other service providers, and encourage regional or national responses to issues which are most cost effective when dealt with at those levels.

It is also worth bearing in mind that in times of significant cuts in public spending, when people are also often living on lower incomes or on benefits, there is an increased role for public libraries, for example in providing access to the internet and support for job and benefit applications.

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

The development of alternative models of provision of public services has been one response to funding pressures in both Scotland and England, but is also a feature of the changing relationship between the state and citizens which we have characterised as the 'enabling state'³. In this model, the state has an enabling role, building the capacity of individuals and communities to create improved well-being.

Funding pressures are likely to be particularly severe in Wales with its combination of high levels of poverty and a higher than average proportion of people over the age of 65. Our research with small countries showed that there were four responses to the impending storm of public spending cuts combined with increasing demand for services: re-thinking; reforming; restructuring or retrenching.⁴ We would encourage the first three as positive responses rather than the more negative response of retrenching.

In England there has been a huge growth in community managed libraries involving volunteers in a variety of roles, which can be seen as an example of rethinking and reforming. This has been documented and analysed by Locality in reports for the Arts Council of England⁵. Locality has developed a typology to describe the wide range of approaches taken by different authorities. There can be strong political views on the acceptability of public services being provided in different ways, but it appears inevitable that there will be increasing involvement of communities and volunteers in services which have traditionally been expected to be 'delivered' by the state. There is however, an element of retrenchment in this approach, as it is likely to be associated with a reduction of professional staff, and a reduction in the level of provision.

In Scotland, and to a lesser extent in other jurisdictions, there has been a move towards the creation of arms-length bodies to provide local authority services: an example of restructuring. In Scotland the most common model is a trust for culture and leisure services, and the first one was set up in Glasgow in 2007, as Glasgow Life. These trusts are set up because of tax advantages (they are not liable for VAT). There has been no evaluation of this model, though there are some concerns about their accountability. Glasgow Life is responsible for culture, leisure and sport, including libraries and museums.

In Northern Ireland, the creation of a single library authority, Libraries NI, has been a successful response, involving restructuring, in order to make the system more efficient and sustainable.

³ Sir John Elvidge, *The Enabling State: a discussion paper*, Carnegie UK Trust, 2012; <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/changing-minds/people---place/enabling-state>

⁴ Jennifer Wallace, Megan Mathias and Jenny Brotchie, *Weathering the Storm: a look at small countries' public services in times of austerity*, Carnegie UK Trust, 2013

⁵ Locality, *Community libraries: Learning from experience: summary briefing for local authorities*, ACE, 2013

In Wales there is already a tradition of considering the public library service at local, regional and national level, and this approach is likely to be beneficial as a way of identifying the areas in which services can be most effectively provided or procured on a regional or national basis.

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

The Trust believes that the contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales is the same as in other parts of the UK. Essentially, libraries have a unique potential to contribute to individual and community wellbeing in the four overlapping zones of wellbeing:

- economic wellbeing;
- social wellbeing;
- physical and psychological wellbeing; and
- environmental wellbeing.

There are several domains of wellbeing to which libraries make a direct or indirect contribution. These domains include the following:

- employment and income
- health
- education
- creative or expressive arts activity
- civic engagement
- the local environment.

Libraries constitute a unique network of safe community spaces, accessible to all members of local communities, which could be further developed as the key point of contact between local authorities and their communities, as well as providing space in which other agencies can provide services or facilities for local people. Libraries have a key role in addressing many of the major challenges facing people today, including combatting illiteracy, unemployment and the digital divide.

They have huge potential to contribute in a positive way to the wellbeing of individuals and communities through supporting and promoting creativity, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement. The Trust is funding a project to learn more about libraries' potential to support economic wellbeing through our work on 'Enterprising Libraries'. One of the case studies in the project is in Neath Port Talbot and involves running techclubs for primary school children in the library with the aim of encouraging awareness of and take up of STEM subjects by children, and improving their employment opportunities in the longer term.

Libraries are increasingly important as places which can respond to the needs of particular segments of society, including older people, immigrants, young people not in education or employment, and children. There are many examples in Wales of innovative work contributing directly to wellbeing, whether that is in relation to health, employment, civic engagement or improving the local environment. These are well described in the *The First Incomplete Guide to Wellbeing in Libraries*⁶.

6

It is essential that libraries continue to innovate and develop their role in a way which responds to the needs of the communities in which they are based. We believe that as long as libraries continue to do this, they will continue to be an essential public service, building on their achievements but flexible enough to respond to changing individual and social needs.