

PL 27

National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Powys County Council

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 The Welsh Government commitments relating to libraries focus on:

- the enrichment of lives through increased participation and widening access;
- targeting low income families and children;
- increasing opportunities for the use of the Welsh language;
- strengthening regional collaboration;
- performance in the Welsh Public Library standards and performance indicators;
- improving, modernising and developing local libraries in order to provide maximum benefit to residents through attracting increased usage.

1.2 The Welsh Government has made good progress towards achieving these commitments:

1.3 **Library visitor numbers** 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). Within Powys, visitor numbers are consistently above the Welsh average per thousand population (Powys 6556 per 000 2010/11, 6418 2011/12, 6612 2012/13. Welsh average 5924, 5884, and 5754 respectively for the same period).

1.4 **Library refurbishments:** Investment in libraries through CyMAL grant funding has undoubtedly contributed to these visitor levels, and to attracting new audiences. In Powys, 4 libraries have been refurbished with support from the Community Learning Libraries programme in the last 5 years, which has provided valuable support to the county council's capital programme, and its ability to develop library services and partnerships to better meet the need of residents. The refurbishment in Ystradgynlais branch in particular shows how partnerships can be developed to offer a wide range of county council and other services from the library, delivering easy access for the public and best value, sustainable service delivery for the county council. The refurbished libraries consistently demonstrated increased usage, in terms of visits and loans.

1.5 **Inspiring Learning:** During 2009-11, Powys received grant funding under the Inspiring Learning funding stream enabled the employment of a project officer to 18 months, to work with Key Stage 2 pupils to improve their information literacy study skills, and to raise awareness of library resources to support them; this project contributed to educational attainment in Powys, which is consistently above the Welsh average.

- 1.6 **National collaboration:** the 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 must be directly attributed to Welsh Government and CyMAL's influence. For example, Wales-wide provision of e-resources (reference materials, ebooks and ezines), purchasing consortia, the Book Prescription Wales scheme, Wales wide catalogue and interlibrary loans arrangements, and the current developments towards joint Library Management Systems in both the higher education and public library sectors. Funding through the marketing strategy of the Libraries Inspire programme shows direct results in library usage in Wales, and enables library services in all sectors across the country to benefit from economies of scale and professional support in the production of marketing materials and promotional campaigns.
- 1.7 **Regional collaboration:** strong regional groupings of library services in all sectors (public, further and higher education, health, National Library) have developed with Welsh Government support, and again provide a more cost effective and sustainable way forward for all. A particular strength is provision of training to ensure staff are up-to-date and with relevant skills to support the 21st century library user.
- 1.8 **Welsh Public Library Standards performance:** the support and funding streams from the Welsh Government have helped Powys Library service to make steady improvement in performance, which in turn provides increased benefit to residents. In 2012-13, Powys fully achieved 7 out of the 9 public library standards, and partially achieved the remaining 2 standards. This achievement is reflected in public satisfaction with the library service, which consistently is at the top in the residents' survey in Powys. There can be no doubt that the Welsh Public Library Standards and associated key indicators have led to the development and provision of high quality, well used library services across Wales in a way that is not evident in England, and to an equality of good service delivery for Welsh residents.
- 1.9 However, the extent to which these improvements are sustainable in Powys will be very dependent on the level of financial pressure on the Council's revenue and capital budgets and the extent to which local communities are prepared to support and engage in the development of alternative delivery models.

1. 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 Welsh Government and local authority agendas focus on the same aim – improving outcomes for residents of Wales – and the legislative and policy frameworks are geared to support delivery of this aim.
- 2.2 The primary legislation relating to library services is the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, which 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”. 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.

- 2.3 Library services in Powys, as 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. However, there is a lack of direct linkage between the legislative and policy frameworks relating to these other agendas which undermines the potential sustainability of library services. For example, there is no statutory requirement for schools and library services to work together to deliver outcomes. In Powys the schools library service is funded by the schools budget, and since there is no statutory basis for this aspect of service delivery the current expectation is that this funding will be cut and the service cease.
- 2.4 The challenges facing Powys in the delivery of library services include;
- Cost – buildings, vehicles, stock, and staff. The cost of maintaining a physical service infrastructure for a very large rural authority such as Powys, which meets the requirements of the WPLS is unsustainable in the current financial climate. The cost of maintaining, repairing and renewing buildings and vehicles is high, whilst maintenance of a free library service as set out in the Welsh Government’s statement of entitlement for citizens, limits income generation.
 - Increasing usage and ensuring relevance to a 21st century society, in order to improve outcomes for as many residents as possible. The pace of technological change is increasing exponentially, online services developing rapidly and there is a growing expectation that library services be delivered online with a substantially reduced physical presence. However, only a minority of book issues are currently conducted online - 0.5% - with only a relatively small number of titles available for e-lending. There will be a considerable time lag before online resources will be able to replicate what is currently offered in physical form but the pressure to reduce space and thereby overheads is becoming ever stronger. In addition, libraries currently offer a wealth of other resources, opportunities, encouragement and support that cannot be replicated online, particularly to children, those on low incomes and older people, many of whom do not have the facilities other than within libraries themselves. There are many citizens who do not have and will never be able to develop the capabilities (e.g. through age or disability related issues), who need to be supported with information and opportunity on an equal footing.
- 2.5 How does the legislation help to meet the challenges?
- 2.6 It is acknowledged that the requirements of the WPLS have been instrumental in developing high quality, accessible library services across Wales. However, a more flexible approach is going to be necessary to support and assist local authorities to develop alternative delivery models which seek to sustain equitable levels of service.
- 2.7 Given the increasing move to online usage, the existing WPLS currently relate strongly to measuring expenditure on, and the condition and level of physical resources and geographical proximity.

- 2.8 The Welsh Government and CyMAL also currently maintains a position that volunteers should not be used to deliver core library services but only to enhance them. The likely scenario within Powys is that unless there is greater use of volunteers as part of implementing alternative delivery models, the service may have to consider reducing opening hours and will have to look at closure of many of its smaller branch libraries.
- 2.9 It is acknowledged that a library service requires a strong professional staff basis, but not all members of library staff are qualified. On this basis, a greater degree of flexibility around the use of volunteers to deliver core services, as long access to professional advice and support, will be required or a greater number of library access points are likely to be closed.
- 2.10 It is recommended that the Welsh Government review its position on the use of volunteers in libraries and consider developing good practice guidelines and support for the development of community led, volunteer schemes which may enable the delivery of library services through alternative models.
- 2.11 It is also strongly recommended that the Welsh Government maintains its programmes of support for;
- Regional and national partnerships which help to deliver services more cost effectively, and benefit from economies of scale and wider training opportunities;
 - Further development of e-resources, to continue to provide best value for money across Wales through a consortium approach beyond the capacity of local authorities to develop and deliver individually;
 - Further development of electronic resources, including access to the library service catalogue available 24/7, and so increase access for those with the facilities and capability to use them;
 - CyMAL's Community Learning Libraries grant scheme, which will continue to be critical to support the development of any further capital improvement schemes;
 - Marketing and promotion - there is a need to raise awareness amongst residents who are not habitual library users, of the benefits that the library service can deliver for them. The national marketing strategy of CyMAL's Libraries Inspire programme, which enables the service to take part in promotional activities on a professional level, which it could not afford in-house, is critical.

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

- 3.1 Cuts in central government and local authority funding and the resultant financial pressures on local authority budgets are acute. Library services cannot be exempt from budget reductions. However, the extent of the reductions will depend on the extent of the budget pressure (Powys has received the lowest budget settlement in Wales) and the political will of the authority.
- 3.2 Libraries are already a best value model, in terms of recycling of resources to maximum benefit. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that it will not be possible to maintain the existing

library service infrastructure in Powys and alternative delivery models will have to be developed.

- 3.3 Flexibility in the next set of WPLS is therefore required to accommodate and support this changed position and to accommodate a variety of new working arrangements for service delivery.

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

- 4.1 **Regional/national collaboration and procurement processes**, as above, leading to economies of scale and provision of best value.

- 4.2 **Potential to move to regional service areas** c.f. education.

- 4.3 Powys is currently approaching the challenges to reducing costs through;

- 4.4 **Co-locations and partnerships.** Locating / co-locating library services with other council and external partners, including within the 3rd sector, to reduce overheads or increase cost effectiveness of buildings. These currently include the delivery of customer services for the council; other organisations and services use local libraries to reach residents, e.g. registrars, trading standards, Careers Wales, Powys Training, police surgeries, local councillor, AM, MP and MEP surgeries. Building on existing partnerships also improve outcomes for customers. Offering more from shared or co-located service points improves value for money from the resources, helps to reduce staffing and overhead costs and maximises usage potential. Increasing partnership working with organisations that help the Council to deliver service enhancements for residents, e.g. working with Twf and Mentrau Iaith help promote the Welsh language to children and families in areas where the service does not have sufficient Welsh speaking staff resources to deliver this itself. Increased opportunity for improved health outcomes come from partnerships with the local MacMillan cancer information service, and the mental health outreach worker within PAVO. Action for Children encourages families to use libraries as part of their delivery of the Incredible Years programmes in Powys, targeting Flying Start areas in particular. Powys Library service is currently involved with public piloting of Health Promotion Wales' new "Add to your Life" 50+ online health check scheme, an example of new preventative medicine schemes, and one of many health information related schemes that the library promotes.

- 4.5 **Volunteers.** Developing volunteer opportunities e.g. in conjunction with the Youth Service's Duke of Edinburgh scheme co-ordinator, as a cost effective method of adding value to core services as well as providing valuable experience for individuals and helping to build resilient communities. Use of volunteers to enhance service delivery and add value

- 4.6 **Digital services.** Developing services to meet the need created by digital reform and the UK government's "digital by default" agenda; the introduction of Job Seekers Online created a surge of demand from libraries to support IT skills for job seekers, a demand that the library service has worked hard to meet, and which has resulted in Powys in a new partnership working with Job Centres Plus and Communities 2.0. A further increase in demand is expected with the introduction of Universal Credit online.

- 4.7 **Increasing/ decreasing mobile services**
- 4.8 **Reducing the number of directly managed libraries** and encouraging communities to take on a more active role in the management and operation of library service points. This could involve Community Asset Transfer – passing libraries to their communities to be run by volunteers, with stock, ICT and training, advice and support provided centrally. There is a danger of overload onto communities, with many council departments currently looking at this option – town and community councils have limited capacity to take on services and find large numbers of volunteers, particularly in a rural area like Powys. This could lead to fragmentation and inequality in service delivery and development across the county, possibly to the detriment of residents in poorer communities
- 4.9 **Other alternative management models – commissioning service delivery from an independent not for profit or commercial organisation.** This could be more problematic for libraries than for leisure centres, because libraries by their very core value, do not generate large financial incomes to be reinvested into the service. A stable revenue stream would still be required to continue to fund the service over time.

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

- 5.1 The public library service is unique in its ability to make a strong and positive contribution to many areas of community life, and to the delivery of both local and national agendas. As important community hubs, libraries contribute to;
- 5.2 **Tackling poverty** – a service which is free at the point of delivery is vital to this Welsh Government priority, to ensure equality and inclusiveness to all ages and abilities.
- 5.3 **Regeneration, jobs and growth** – job seekers are strongly supported by library services across Wales. Libraries bring people into town centres, which benefits local economies.
- 5.4 **Health and wellbeing agendas** – reading and use of libraries stimulates healthy minds, while social interaction protects healthy bodies. As well as this generic benefit to all library users, libraries hold a wealth of health related information, and specific projects such as Book Prescription Wales, the Children and Families Bibliotherapy Scheme, and MacMillan Cancer Information service, are delivered through libraries, to encourage citizens to help themselves – this is preventative intervention at its best.
- 5.5 **Literacy, school improvement and educational attainment** – children who read for pleasure consistently perform better than those who do not. This starts with the delivery of the national Bookstart scheme, gifting book packs to babies at 9 months, in partnership with Powys teaching Local Health Board’s health visitors, who advocate the sharing of books, songs and rhymes with babies as part of the best start in life. Libraries deliver story and rhyme times to encourage parents/carers, and boost their confidence to do this. Partnerships with Language and Play, and Action for Children’s Incredible Years programmes reinforce these messages across the county at pre-school level. Within Powys this is currently followed up at primary school age with literacy promotion through the Bookrunners, and Schools Library Service within the school setting, and the annual Summer Reading Challenge, storytimes and activities during school holidays. In a 2007 study, the

Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that only 14% of variation in individuals' performance is accounted for by school quality. Most variation is explained by other factors, underlining the need to look at the range of children's experiences, inside and outside school, when seeking to raise attainment. In the most recent CIPFA children's Public Library user survey:

- 59% of children in Powys said that libraries had helped them to learn and find things out
- 66% said that the library had helped them to read better
- 41% said that the library has helped them to do better at school
- 95% said that the library has lots of things to interest them

5.6 **Learning for life, skills development** – libraries support informal learners of all ages through provision of materials and facilities. Staff also deliver ICT training for beginners, information literacy sessions, and local studies research skills for those looking into their family tree or house history. The library service plays an active role in Powys Learning festival, and delivers a range of activities for Adult Learners' Week each year. In 2012, 60% of adults responding to the CIPFA Public Library User Survey in Powys, said that the using the library has helped them with study and learning. Access to government and the democratic processes – Powys Library Service provides minutes and information about local and national government, and access to wider Powys county council through delivery of customer services. In addition, public consultations are displayed and promoted, for residents to make their views known

5.7 **Safe communities** – libraries provide a public spaces that are safe, neutral and welcoming for citizens. In the CIPFA children's library user survey, 100% of children said that their Powys library is a safe place where they can go, a view endorsed by adult customers.

5.8 **Digital agenda** – through provision of IT facilities including wi-fi in all libraries, Powys Library service supports inclusion to digital service delivery, and actively helps residents to get on line.