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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Older Peoples Commissioner



Older People's Commissioner for Wales
Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru

Response from the Older People's Commissioner for Wales

to the

National Assembly for Wales' Inquiry into Public Libraries in Wales

January 2014

For more information regarding this response please contact:

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About the Commissioner

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales is an independent voice and champion for older people across Wales, standing up and speaking out on their behalf. She works to ensure that those who are vulnerable and at risk are kept safe and ensures that all older people have a voice that is heard, that they have choice and control, that they don't feel isolated or discriminated against and that they receive the support and services they need. The Commissioner's work is driven by what older people say matters most to them and their voices are at the heart of all that she does. The Commissioner works to make Wales a good place to grow older - not just for some but for everyone.

The Older People's Commissioner:

- Promotes awareness of the rights and interests of older people in Wales.
- Challenges discrimination against older people in Wales.
- Encourages best practice in the treatment of older people in Wales.
- Reviews the law affecting the interests of older people in Wales.

Inquiry into Public Libraries in Wales

1. As the Older People's Commissioner for Wales I welcome the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into Public Libraries in Wales. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide comments following the closing date for responses. I will respond to the issues outlined by the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee in the consultation letter.
2. As the independent voice and champion for older people, I am keen to look across the work and legislative programmes of all Government departments for reassurance that older people and their issues are adequately reflected and to seek evidence of clear impact on the lives of older people.

The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales

3. Libraries play a huge role in the lives of older people and other age groups across Wales. As the high number of inquiry responses demonstrate, libraries matter to a range of individuals and stakeholders. Libraries give older people physical spaces (particularly important in rural areas with few alternatives) in which to interact in a public realm which is increasingly restricting itself to the internet and online engagement.
4. Libraries play a central role in our communities, and contribute to our social, educational, cultural and economic wellbeing. Libraries help bring people together. The local library provides a social and civic role within communities, contributing towards people's sense of social wellbeing and belonging. 'Bibliotherapy' for example can make a considerable difference to an individual's health and wellbeing.
5. For older people living in poverty, the free resources provided by libraries are indispensable; compared with other cultural facilities, libraries are used by a high percentage of people from deprived

areas. Library users can save on hundreds of pounds by loaning books rather than purchasing them.

6. Wales has a network of public, educational and specialist libraries providing access to a wide range of resources. Libraries are all inclusive; they are open to all members of their communities and are free to join. As outlined in one inquiry response, libraries are a “lifesaver” for older people. Libraries provide a range of services¹ that help maintain the health and wellbeing of older people:

- Providing free internet access and courses e.g. ‘silver surfer’ sessions to assist with e-health literacy, address a lack of IT skills and the digital divide, increase confidence and motivation by providing activities and support to engage with the internet;
- Providing access to high quality resources in a range of formats, including those in the Welsh language;
- Supporting older people to live independent lives and reduce isolation;
- Installing confidence and encourage socialising amongst older people through e.g. shared reading/reading aloud groups
- Providing a network of easily accessible, non-threatening, inclusive environments;
- Libraries are non-medical environments, so there is no stigma attached;
- Providing ‘talking books’, large print books or specialist computer software for those who are visually impaired;
- Providing social and community links to people who may otherwise find it difficult to socialise.

7. Public libraries in Wales have an excellent track record of partnership working, and by helping the burden on social services and NHS care, reducing isolation, empowering people to access free information, and providing social and community links, the benefits of libraries for older people are substantial.

8. Libraries also help engage with hard-to-reach groups in communities. Housebound and home-link library services take books to people who are unable to leave their own homes. The combination of personal contact and reading material addresses

¹ <http://www.goscl.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Wellbeing-in-Libraries1.pdf>

social isolation and contributes to the wellbeing of older people unable to visit their local library.

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

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

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

9. Across the UK, more older people are visiting libraries; 43% of adults aged 65-74 visited the library in 2010/11 compared to 39% in 2009/10². Yet 439 libraries have closed across the UK since 2010, with another 280 under threat³. Visits to libraries in Wales⁴ (13.25 million in 2002/3, 14.72 million in 2011/12) are consistently higher than visits to libraries in England (323 million in 2002/3, 306 million in 2011/12).
10. Despite the increase in visitor figures, and despite being cost efficient venues (libraries cost on average just 5p per person, per day to run⁵), the future of many public libraries across Wales is uncertain. Local authorities across Wales are proposing to close down libraries to make efficiency savings, with many earmarked for closure by March 2014.
11. Research in 2011 showed that 16% of participating local authorities identified libraries and community learning as services with proportionately larger savings targets, with 10% of local authorities identifying libraries as the cultural service that would be most severely affected by budget cuts⁶.

² <http://www.goscl.com/public-libraries-in-waleshealth-wellbeing-and-2/>

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/nov/06/austerity-measures-libraries-vital-needy-people>

⁴ <http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/2013/04/wales-shows-the-way-1-5m-in-library-grants-massively-more-than-english-equivalent.html>

⁵ <http://www.goscl.com/public-libraries-in-waleshealth-wellbeing-and-2/>

⁶ [http://www.poverty.ac.uk/system/files/WP%20Analysis%20No.2%20-%20Local%20Services%20Under%20Siege%20\(Besemer%20%20Bramley%20May%202012\).pdf](http://www.poverty.ac.uk/system/files/WP%20Analysis%20No.2%20-%20Local%20Services%20Under%20Siege%20(Besemer%20%20Bramley%20May%202012).pdf)

12. The proposals to close down libraries are a real concern. Without libraries, older people are at increased risk of loneliness, social isolation and depression. Local authorities have a **statutory duty** however to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964⁷. Should local authorities continue with proposals to close libraries, then they have a legal obligation to provide library services that mean so much to older people and other age groups via other models and approaches.
13. Closing down libraries will make it more difficult to fulfil Welsh Government commitments in the Programme for Government⁸ (widening access to libraries, ensuring that local authorities meet national standards of public library provision) and the Libraries Inspire Strategic Development Framework⁹ (enabling older people to embrace digital technologies and live independent lives through library services).
14. With libraries across Wales scheduled for closure, financial support for library services from the Welsh Government, such as the £2.17 million announcement in April 2013, will take on greater importance. It is crucial that older people continue to benefit from schemes such as the Welsh Government's Community Learning Libraries Programme¹⁰.

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

15. New ways of delivering local library and learning services must be considered in light of the proposals to close down a number of libraries across Wales. Mobile libraries are an option, but may be difficult to access for older people living in sparsely populated areas.
16. Innovation and new cost-efficient approaches from elsewhere should be considered e.g. the Idea Stores¹¹ in Tower Hamlets, London, is a radical rethink of the traditional library concept, whilst the Delft Concept Library in the Netherlands is

⁷ <http://www.assemblywales.org/lco-ld7557-em-e.pdf>

⁸ <http://wales.gov.uk/about/programmeforgov/?lang=en>

⁹ <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/drah/publications/111104librariesinspireen.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://wales.gov.uk/newsroom/cultureandsport/2013/130404libraries/?lang=en>

¹¹ <http://www.ideastore.co.uk/>

described as ‘an entrepreneurial public library’¹². Any new models must have age-friendly infrastructure and facilities, providing ease of access to library services for older people.

Concluding remarks

17. It seems that in an age of austerity, free public libraries are needed more than ever by older people and other age groups. It also seems that with adequate levels of recognition, support and investment, public libraries could do so much more for older people in Wales.
18. I will work with the Welsh Government to protect libraries as vital places for older people to interact, learn new skills, and remain part of the community, and work with local authorities to ensure that the statutory duty to provide library services for older people is complied with. I also look forward to continue working with the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee on my forthcoming report (to be published in February) on the need to protect essential community services, including libraries, for older people in the current economic climate.

¹²http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Envisioning_the_library_of_the_future_phase_1_a_review_of_innovations_in_library_services.pdf