

Policy Response



Communities, Equality and Local Government C
CELG(4)-08-14 Paper 3

Inquiry into public libraries in Wales

A response from WCVA

3 March 2014

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Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Response to the inquiry on public libraries in Wales

1. Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) is a registered charity and umbrella body working to support, develop and represent Wales' third sector at UK and national level. We have over 3,350 organisations in direct membership, and are in touch with many more organisations through a wide range of national and local networks. WCVA's mission is to provide excellent support, leadership and an influential voice for the third sector and volunteering in Wales.

2. WCVA is committed to a strong and active third sector building resilient, cohesive and inclusive communities, giving people a stake in their future through their own actions and services, creating a strong, healthy and fair society and demonstrating the value of volunteering and community involvement.

3. We believe that there is an urgent need to transform public services in Wales by treating people and communities as assets and equals in design and delivery; building services around the person and community; unlocking potential resources of time, money and expertise to combine with state funding; using existing state resources to enable and maximise citizen and community action, capital and care. This is why many people are now looking at a different co-produced public service, which places the citizen and community at the centre, with the state as the enabler and facilitator.

4. We welcome the opportunity to offer comments for the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee's inquiry into public libraries in Wales. We have concentrated on the questions pertinent to our role as a representative body for the third sector in Wales.

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

5. There are a number of options for redefining library service provision with communities. We believe it is irresponsible to cut and close. There are alternative models of provision which avoid library cuts or closures, but maximise their resources through co-productive approaches which might include transfer of ownership, reconfiguring services, greater community involvement, and partnering with community groups.

6. The following extract from WCVA's recent position paper *Putting People at the Centre*, (enclosed) set out the different scenarios for two councils who want to cut expenditure on libraries:

"In Council 1 the decision is taken by the Cabinet and the library is closed, with protests and negative publicity which do not alter the decision. Staff are made redundant and there is no longer a service in the area of any sort.

"Council 2 went to the community with its proposals and asked for ideas. The community propose transferring the freehold of the library building to a development trust; and transferring the library service to a nearby community centre with spare capacity, and running it with a mix of residents and a paid co-ordinator. The trust sells the original building and uses the proceeds to establish an endowment to pay towards the co-ordinator. Other ongoing costs are met by a continued revenue grant from the Council that is 80 per cent less than previous expenditure. The service and at least one associated job are maintained."

7. A further example could be -

Council 3 went to the community with its proposals and asked for ideas. The community proposed transferring the freehold of the library building to a newly set up community organisation. The organisation then used the building as security to raise loan finance to pay for upgrading and re-configuring the building. This then meant that the library now become a multi use building able to generate income through activities such as office rental for local private or social enterprises, provision of crèche facilities, room rentals for meetings and outreach learning activities, local tourist information or any other activity that is specific to the locality and can generate income to contribute to the maintaining of the core library activity.

8. Crucially, public bodies should be creating time and space for full consideration of ways in which services can be maintained or reconfigured with the full contribution of citizens and community groups.

9. Between maintaining an existing service and closing it, there are a number of options for alternative models of library service provision, which might include:

- Community management of libraries, through a partnership with Local Authorities
- Transferral of building ownership to trusts
- Greater partnership with town and community councils
- Partnering with local third sector organisations to maximise use of facilities, e.g. co-locating other services and activities within libraries to develop community hubs
- Transferral of library services to other community buildings with spare capacity
- Greater use of volunteers alongside paid staff
- Partner with other delivery organisations to supply books to housebound people
- Extend opening hours (evenings and Sundays) through partnering with community groups and deploying volunteers

10. It would be important that a partnership approach between Local Authorities and communities or community organisations should be established on an equal basis. For example, if a Local Authority transfers library service provision to a community group, it should not be too prescriptive about the requirements of transferred services: communities should have scope to shape services according to their needs and resources.

11. The ability to attract investment into the library once it is not a publicly held asset through various grant schemes, foundations and social investment funds, such as WCVA's Communities Investment Fund, means that altering a library's ability to be more sustainable is possible.

The use of volunteers in libraries

12. Alternative models of library service provision, following co-productive approaches, are likely to involve volunteers and exploration of these is to be encouraged.

13. Guidelines for good practice in working with volunteers can be found by referring to the Investing in Volunteers Standard www.investinginvolunteers.org.uk

14. Care should be taken not to place volunteers in what were previously staff roles. The Wales TUC/WCVA Charter 'A Charter for strengthening relations between paid staff and volunteers', March 2011, sets out principles for working with paid and unpaid staff alongside one another.

15. Volunteers may be involved directly in county library service provision. A volunteering policy is advisable, to set out clearly the principles and practice for volunteer involvement. WCVA is happy to advise on this. It may appropriately be Local Authority wide i.e. relevant to all departments, rather than exclusively for library services

16. Volunteers may also be involved in association with community groups who develop services in partnership with, or complementing and separate from what the Local Authority provides. The Local Authority would not be expected to have responsibility for volunteer policy or management in such cases.

17. Involving volunteers can lead to creative and cost effective ways of delivering services. It is not cost-free however. Volunteer involvement needs to be planned, resourced (training and expenses, for example) and appropriately managed and supported. It often works best where a designated staff member has responsibility and can give adequate time for volunteers.

The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales

18. Public libraries in Wales have a crucial role to play: one which is continuously developing role, and becoming more important than ever. Libraries are important as centres for knowledge and learning; enabling reading for pleasure; providing information about local services; enabling social contact; supporting improved literacy; providing services freely available to all in the community, of all ages; addressing poverty through the provision of free resources and job search; providing warm welcoming environments for people to spend time productively; addressing digital exclusion through the provision of internet access, training and support; providing bibliotherapy for people with mental health problems; and many other functions.

19. When supported, libraries are true enablers: facilities which enable an extensive range of activity that can contribute to community development and cohesion.

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3 March 2014

Attached: *Putting People at the Centre*, WCVA