

Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee: inquiry into the impact of funding reductions for culture and sport

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Welsh Local Government Association - The Voice of Welsh Councils

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) is a politically led cross party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level.

We represent the interests of local government and promote local democracy in Wales.

The 22 councils in Wales are our members and the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities are associate members.

We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally.

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their council through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows communities to thrive.

Our ultimate goal is to promote, protect, support and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

We'll achieve our vision by

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce



Response

This response has been informed by views from Chief Leisure Officers and Chief Culture and Libraries Officers across the 22 councils in Wales.

For context, local government funding (adjusted for inflation) in Wales has decreased by 12% between 2009-2010 and 2023-2024. Consequently, local government's spending on 'culture and recreation' and 'libraries' has fallen by 33% and 43% respectively between 2009-10 and 2021-22¹. Local government in Wales is facing a £432 million funding gap². This is in addition to the funding cuts to the Arts Council for Wales and Sport Wales, which have a direct impact on leisure and culture trusts where they are managing leisure and culture in partnership with councils in Wales.

What impacts has reduced funding had on your organisation and sector so far?

- A reduction in the investment by Councils due to their reduced Revenue Support Grant (RSG) block grant and unprecedented pressures on health and social care budgets are compounding the problem for non-statutory services such as Leisure and Culture. Cost of living pressures and increased energy costs have also created a perfect storm for the sector.
- Reductions in real terms to budgets from the Welsh Government which come through Sport Wales, Regional Sports Partnerships and Health - for example the Active Young People area, Free Swimming, the 60+ programme, National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS) and Play Grants which fund holiday projects for children and young people.
- Lack of medium-term financing arrangements is also a challenge. This often leads to high staff turnover and a loss of expertise and a reduction in capacity with short term contracts and 12-week redundancy notice periods meaning projects struggle to deliver fully and consistently. This is exacerbated when trying to recruit bilingual Professional Practice Officers to NERS Teams or swimming instructors and pool operators in more rural areas. Annual financial offers only and come very late in the previous financial year. Staff turnover each time reduces the level of service for vulnerable residents, as a period of recruiting (which can typically take 3 months in a council setting) and retraining new staff is required.

¹ Welsh Local Government Association. Resourcing local services 2024-25. An outlook of the pressures faced by local services. Available at:

<https://www.wlga.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=62&mid=665&fileid=3988>

² Welsh Local Government Association. February 2024. £25 million welcomed by local government, but sustainable long-term funding needed. Available at: <https://www.wlga.wales/25-million-welcomed-by-local-government-but-sustainable-long-term-funding-needed>



- Reductions in opening hours meaning less access to facilities and less access to activities and events that contribute to positive mental health, lifelong learning opportunities or simply help reduce social isolation.
- Having to increase fees and charges when there is already a cost-of-living crisis.
- Having to reduce provision or end it completely, particularly schemes that have been funded under the soon-to-end Shared Prosperity Fund.
- Staffing reductions. Staff have been cut or reduced and not replaced. This has an impact on staff morale, retention and recruitment. The loss of technical expertise / professional staff is a particular problem, for example, in theatre/archives.
- Added pressure on creaking infrastructure and a challenge to maintain existing (built and outdoor) facilities to an acceptable standard (particularly challenging on listed buildings in Cultural sector). Inability to maintain or modernise ageing buildings - repairs and maintenance costs have significantly increased - and reduction in councils' ability to meet any unforeseen costs. Reductions to capital budgets mean only urgent works are possible.
- Inability to invest in new equipment or adopt new technology.
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- Reduced budgets for hosting activities and marketing and communications affecting councils' ability to attract audiences and visitors in certain locations.

What measures have you taken in light of it, such as changing what you do and how you do it?

- Keeping opening hours under review - opening earlier and closing earlier in response to user demand.
- Increasing user fees - this is particularly tricky with cost-of-living pressures on the tipping point of excessive charges leading to non-engagement and thus a potential downward spiral in income.
- Not replacing council officers and instead commissioning external partners to lead on programmes on a council's behalf.
- Looking for alternative funding sources such as grants and partnerships with businesses.



- Reinventing the ways in which services operate in order to sustain them whilst simultaneously reducing spending, for example moving to multi-use buildings that house not just libraries but other local services.
- Introduced energy efficiency measures - for example solar panels on facility roofs - and invested in green technology where possible.
- Greater collaboration with other sectors / partners / departments.
- Greater reliance on the voluntary sector and external funding.

To what extent will these impacts be irreversible (e.g. venues closing, or specialist skills being lost rather than a temporary restriction in activities)?

- Fee inflation will drive users away; facilities which have committed to being affordable are finding themselves in a position where they have no choice but to increase costs, with a knock-on effect on the community organisations seeking to use them.
- Staff turnover and loss of key skills and capacity - impact on succession planning with sector-wide staffing shortages becoming more apparent in some areas, for example theatre technicians.
- Long term impact on the condition of facilities and equipment due to the inability to invest adequately in their maintenance and replacement.
- Reductions in opening hours can have a particular impact in rural areas if local facilities are not open to the same level. This can have a knock-on effect with cancelled memberships, which in turn reduces income.

What interventions would you like to see from the Welsh Government, beyond increased funding?

- Greater national recognition of the preventative role the sector plays in terms of health and social care, and its contribution to the economy. Encourage early intervention with culture and leisure/sports activities as a cheaper and better option than waiting until more expensive, specialist, intervention is needed.
- A commitment to medium term funding arrangements for all grants in the field, for example and minimum of three years to provide job security for the workforce / reduce turnover / loss of experience and waste of resources.



- Developing social prescribing. Collaborate to establish an additional Practice Referral Program for non-chronic conditions. Several councils have piloted work which suggests that such an intervention can be financially self-sustaining if it receives input from the health sector in terms of referrals. It can be a very valuable preventative intervention and reduce demand on the health sector while making leisure facilities more self-sustaining.
- Allow councils to align NERS user fees with local pricing structures, which in turn makes the scheme more viable and allows for greater throughput of clients who in turn potentially become ongoing users of leisure centres.
- Give consideration to reducing or removing the NDR paid on council leisure buildings in the same way as every charitable trust and outsourced leisure service benefits.
- Give consideration to the lowering of energy tariffs for organisations whose main aim is the maintenance and improvement of people's physical or mental well-being.
- Increased flexibility for local approaches to achieving national priorities rather than blanket policies / approaches.

To what extent do the impacts you describe fall differently on people with protected characteristics and people of a lower socioeconomic status?

- Reductions in services and fee increases impact on all groups' ability to take part in leisure or cultural activities. But there is a disproportionate impact on people with protected characteristics and those of a lower socioeconomic status.
- Low-income households suffer as fees increase to address the financial gap. Children from low-income households are often completely dependent on school swimming in order to learn to swim. If their school does not prioritise that, the risk of them not being able to swim increases significantly.
- Families and schools, in particular in rural areas, also suffer due to a reduction in service in other areas, for example lack of public transport to be able to reach leisure facilities. Residents in rural areas are affected because the cost of providing facilities is higher and there is limited alternative private sector presence.
- Older and vulnerable adults affected by a lack of capacity within the NERS (or other referral scheme). This group often do not have the skills or confidence to practice independently so access to the scheme means they have a real



opportunity to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing and, in many cases, be able to live independently longer.

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