

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee CELG(4)-08-14 Paper1

Written Evidence to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee, 13 March 2014 – Inquiry into Public Libraries in Wales

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to set out written evidence on the work of the Welsh Government through CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales division in developing and delivering the national strategy for Welsh libraries. It covers the relationship between CyMAL and other organisations, and the statutory role of the Minister for Culture and Sport under the Public Library and Museums Act 1964.

Background

2. Libraries have a long and valued position in Welsh life and society. Library services are found in all aspects of life - community public libraries, health, school, further and higher education libraries, workplace libraries, prison libraries, and government libraries. The Public Libraries Act 1850 enabled local authorities to establish free libraries for the first time and Welsh councils began to establish local library services from 1861. There are now around 280 community libraries in Wales, together with mobile libraries, housebound services and e-services delivered via the Internet. The delivery of public libraries is subject to the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 which places statutory duties on local authorities and the Welsh Government. In 2011/2012 there were over 14 million visits to public libraries in Wales. Due to increased investment by the Welsh Government, public library usage has increased in Wales since 2002 by 11% compared to a decline in the rest of the UK of 4%. A UK survey by the Carnegie Trust in 2012 identified that 37% of Welsh people thought that libraries were essential to their community, the highest percentage in the UK.

3. All higher and further education institutions in Wales provide library and resource centres in Wales. The Welsh Government has actively encouraged regional partnerships between all types of libraries which, for example, enable library members in Wales to access higher education libraries and have books sent to their local library. This includes the Linc y Gogledd scheme in north Wales, the Books4U service in south east Wales and the SWAMP scheme in south west and mid Wales. The partnerships also deliver regional training and the sharing of best practice in professional areas including information literacy and digital information management.

4. In 1907, the National Library of Wales received its royal charter as one of the UK's 6 copyright libraries which enables it to receive a copy of books published in the UK. This entitlement was extended to e-books in 2013. The Library is now leading on digital information management and delivery for Welsh libraries. This includes a national procurement process for e-resources which has demonstrated tangible savings for Welsh

library services and delivered equality of access across Wales.

5. Since 2004, the Welsh Government through CyMAL has led a strategic approach to library service development in partnership with local authorities the Welsh Local Government Association, and other sectoral organisations. Over £20m has been invested in improving local libraries, delivering national digital services, a national training scheme and encouraging regional partnerships.

Statutory Role of the Minister for Culture and Sport

6. Public library services are regulated by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. This act places a statutory duty on local authorities to provide comprehensive and efficient public library services. The Minister for Culture and Sport superintends the library services provided by local authorities through the Welsh Public Library Standards which were introduced in 2002. Under the Act, the Minister is entitled to instigate an inquiry if it is deemed that a local authority is failing to meet its statutory duties to deliver a comprehensive and efficient service. Ultimately, the Minister may take over the running of the library service if improvements are not achieved.

7. Across the UK, there is no tradition of intervention using the government's statutory powers under legislation. The local authority has the primary duty to ensure that it provides a comprehensive and efficient service. The approach undertaken in Wales is to work with the local authority to improve areas which are identified as weak by the annual Welsh Public Library Standards assessment process. The national strategy for libraries is also an important mechanism to drive an improvement agenda through collaboration and the sharing of best practice.

Welsh Public Library Standards

8. The Minister for Culture and Sport supervises the library services provided by local authorities through the Welsh Public Library Standards and Assessment Framework which is not statutory but does act as guidance for the Minister in carrying out his statutory role. Wales is the only UK nation to have developed a robust and clear performance improvement framework for public libraries which has been regularly reviewed and continues to be implemented.

9. The aims of the Welsh Public Library Standards are to raise the quality and standard of public library services for the people of Wales. The fifth three-year Welsh Public Library Standards and Assessment framework programme will begin on 1 April 2014. This new framework has been developed with the Welsh Local Government Association and local authorities and moves to a more outcomes-based model. Library services are required to consult with their users under the Framework. It acknowledges the difficult financial position of local authorities, but continues to adopt a quality approach in assessing the performance of library services against their statutory duties.

10. Each year every library service submits an Annual Return for the Welsh Public Library Standards. This return assesses the service's performance against the Standards and Indicators for the previous year. A panel comprising of assessors from local government and other experts consider the performances of the services. An annual report based on the information provided in the return is then produced for each local authority and placed on the CyMAL website. The Welsh Public Library Standards do not prescribe

how authorities should provide a library service, rather the outputs and outcomes which should be achieved. The feedback within the Annual Reports therefore reflects the particular context within each library authority.

Role of CyMAL Division

11. CyMAL division was established in April 2004 by the Welsh Government to develop policy on the strategic development of museums, archives and libraries in Wales. In 2007, CyMAL became responsible for sponsoring the National Library of Wales and Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales. Most divisional staff are professionals in the sector's work. In 2005, the first ever national strategy for libraries in the UK was developed by CyMAL in collaboration with the library sector. The current strategy, *Libraries Inspire*, was launched in 2012 and will be completed in 2016. The budget for delivering the national strategy for libraries in 2013/2014 is £0.9m revenue and £1m capital.

Libraries Inspire

12. The *Libraries Inspire* strategy was developed following a full consultation process and is derived from an extensive evidence base. *Libraries Inspire* outlines how the library sector contributes to the delivery of the Welsh Government's Programme for Government strategic objectives. The main indicator in relation to libraries relates to the number of visitors and the progress report also highlights the number of libraries modernised as part of the Community Learning Libraries programme. In addition, libraries provide tangible contributions to other important delivery areas for lifelong learning, social inclusion, poverty, health, digital developments and supporting Welsh culture, heritage and the Welsh language. To meet the challenges of the current economic environment, *Libraries Inspire* encourages the sector to innovate and seek new ways of collaboration, maximising the opportunities provided by new technology. The key objectives are to,

- work together to review current models of service delivery in response to the current economic climate, and develop new innovative models of delivery
- develop partnership working in procuring and improving access to resources, including new online services such as e-books and e-magazines
- modernise public library buildings to meet the changing needs of their users
- maximise the contribution of libraries in developing people's skills to help everyone reach their potential, reduce inequality, and improve economic and social well-being
- invest in developing the skills of library staff
- implement a co-ordinated audience development programme across Wales to enrich the lives of individuals and communities
- ensure the provision of a high quality service through initiatives such as the Welsh Public Library Standards.

13. The strategy is delivered via an annual delivery plan which outlines key performance targets and specific actions for both CyMAL and the sector, working in partnership. An external evaluation will be conducted at the conclusion of the strategy. The independent evaluation of the previous strategy, *Libraries for Life 2008-2011*, concluded that the strategy contributed positively to the development of Welsh libraries and represented good value for money.

Community Learning Libraries Programme

14. Libraries more than ever need to be places of inspiration and aspiration where people can come to access high quality resources, to learn and study, to enjoy, or to take part in activities in a safe relaxing environment. They form a cultural and educational hub in the community.

15. As part of the overall national strategy for libraries, the Programme has refurbished 89 libraries since 2007 with over £12m provided in grants matched by local authority funding. Projects are considered under 2 bands, grants of up to £120,000 and grants of up to £300,000. Following a needs analysis conducted in 2006, the objectives of the Programme were established as to,

- re-establish the public library at the heart of the community
- enable the library service to deliver improved services
- deliver innovative lifelong learning activities
- provide a flexible space for community activities often in partnership with other agencies
- improve access to the building and library resources by disabled users
- harness technological developments, and
- lead to increased use by the community.

Increasingly, more projects are delivering co-located services in the same premises as the library, making it easier for people to access community services in one place and achieving value for money outcomes. An independent evaluation of the programme concluded that:

‘Overall ... the capital investment programme has had a significant impact on the public library service in Wales ...’

CyMAL's Relationship with other Welsh Government Departments and External Bodies

16. Libraries provide important opportunities for the delivery of strategic objectives across government. The 'trusted brand' status and community location enables other government departments and organisations to support people in their communities. From 'Cuppa with a Copper' sessions for the police, health promotion activities with Public Health Wales and Macmillan Cancer Support, 'Digital Friday' sessions with Communities 2.0 to help people get online, homework clubs, reading groups and Technocamps, libraries make a difference. The introduction of Universal Credit and Universal Job Match by the UK government requires claimants to access information online. Free Internet access in all Welsh libraries provides a vital service for people requiring help and also supports advice organisations.

17. Internally, CyMAL works with other Welsh Government departments to identify opportunities for joint delivery. For example, in March 2014, the Minister for Culture and Sport and the Minister for Education and Skills will jointly launch a pilot programme to enable every child in Wales to join their local library. Libraries have a key role to play in supporting formal and informal learning. The OECD has identified informal reading as an important indicator for high performing nations in international benchmarking on childhood literacy. The Welsh Government through CyMAL provides financial support for the Summer Reading Challenge which encourages children to read 6 books during the summer holidays, activities for World Book day and National Libraries Day.

18. In the current digital age, people need to be able to get online to access information, stay in touch and generally benefit from technological developments. *Libraries Inspire* brings together different partners to ensure that help is available. For example, under the national digital strategy, the EU-funded Communities 2.0 Programme has established a successful partnership with local library services and Jobcentre Plus to provide help for people to get online. The higher and further education sectors in Wales have also led an important research initiative to progress information literacy delivered via libraries.

19. A collaboration between CyMAL, the sector and the Department for Health and Social Services developed the highly popular *Books on Prescription Service* to support people with mental health illnesses. This model has subsequently been adopted in the rest of the UK and internationally. A recent collaboration with Macmillan Cancer Support has successfully located Macmillan staff in libraries. The ability of libraries to reach people in their communities and online provides important opportunities for other partners.

20. All of these partnerships aim to increase the usage made of library services. Libraries have always changed to meet the needs of their users and sought ways to attract new users. An important strand of *Libraries Inspire* is to improve public awareness of the benefits of library services and to support library staff in developing audience development strategies. A small dedicated professional marketing team is located at Wrexham County Borough Council to support all Welsh public library services. The strategy includes national campaigns, training in the successful use of social media and innovative retail techniques, the Library Wales website and staff toolkit. More will always need to be done, however, the national strategy has resulted in a more professional approach by library services in attracting and retaining users of all ages.

Expert Review of Welsh Public Library Services

21. The current financial context requires a renewed commitment to ensure that library services deliver relevant and resilient services through collaboration and joint working. There are many excellent examples where this has been achieved under the Welsh Government's national strategy for libraries. However the challenges of the future will require a consideration of alternative service delivery models at the local, regional and national level. Work has already started on identifying what are people's requirements of a public library service, how should existing services adapt to changing needs and available resources? Recent budget planning discussions by local authorities have revealed the extent of the challenge. The people of Wales deserve a coherent and strategic response from the Welsh Government and library service partners.

22. In December 2013, I announced an Expert Review of Welsh Public Library Services to assess the impact of local authority reductions in expenditure on library services on their ability to maintain statutory provision. The Review will also consider potential sustainable models of service delivery identified from research and stakeholder consultation on:

- future trends in public library services
- suitable models of service delivery
- suitable legislative frameworks

I also wrote to all local authority Leaders and Chief Executives reminding them of their statutory responsibilities for public library services in setting their budgets for 2014-15. In February 2014 I met with local authority elected members and officials at a seminar

organised by the WLGA to discuss the future of public library service delivery. The initial findings of the Expert Review Panel will be submitted in July 2014.

23. As outlined in my written statement to members on 3 December 2013, I intend to ensure that people all over Wales benefit from a strong, resilient library service, responsive to public need, well managed, demonstrating financial efficiency and professionally run. These are difficult financial times for local authorities and I acknowledge the intense pressure under which councils are making difficult decisions. My officials are working closely with the Welsh Local Government Association to better understand where we can target support. However in such circumstances it is even more important to provide leadership to strengthen our ability to maintain and develop effective library services.

24. I expect local authorities to consult fully with their communities and conduct impact assessments of any changes to current provision. The people of Wales fought hard to establish a free library service, we must ensure that those values continue to underpin the library service of the future.