

Local Authority Library and Leisure Services - Cwmpas Inquiry Response

Cwmpas is a co-operative economic development agency working for positive change in Wales. Our focus is on building a fairer, greener economy and a more equal society, where communities are empowered and people and planet come first.

We deliver a range of services including Social Business Wales, Digital Communities Wales, Communities Creating Homes and Community Shares Wales. In addition, we provide consultancy to a diverse range of clients. Our extensive work supporting communities and social enterprises across the country means we have unique experience and insights into how we can transform the Welsh economy, and the support communities need to lead the way.

In recent years, we have supported communities across Wales to take over management and ownership of key local assets, including within the leisure and libraries sectors. There has been a range of experiences, some which highlight the capacity within communities to save these assets and the benefits that can come these models, and some which highlight the challenges and barriers to this taking place in a successful and sustainable way.

The current state of local authority leisure and library service provision;

As noted in the Committee's introduction to the inquiry, there are several models for delivering these services in Wales, such as social enterprise, cultural trusts, community-led enterprises and LATCs. We have supported communities to save and take over local assets in different ways across the country. In a recent report, Community Leisure UK outlined that "Leisure and culture trusts operate public leisure services in 50% of all local authorities in Wales, and manage libraries in four local authority areas. They also operate parks and playgrounds, theatres, town halls and cultural centres. Collectively, they manage 115 physical buildings in communities across nearly every region in Wales, welcome over 16.6 million visits a year, and have a combined workforce of over 3000 people."¹

How local authorities use alternative models of service delivery in Wales, and the perceived benefits associated with them;

When managed effectively in a way that develops these services and facilities as community assets, alternative models of service delivery can provide essential services and create considerable social value. These are outlined below:

Social enterprise and community-led ownership benefits

The social enterprise model creates multi-faceted benefits for communities beyond the delivery of community-based services. Our 2022 Mapping exercise has found that social enterprises across Wales produce significant social value, including improving health and well-being, supporting vulnerable people and addressing social exclusion, creating employment opportunities and providing access to services. It also found that 66% of social

¹ <https://communityleisureuk.org/work/latest-sector-landscape-reports/>

enterprises pay the UK Living Wage to all staff - considerably higher than the wider private sector.

The triple bottom line is crucial to the impact of the social enterprise model. It means that social enterprises re-invest their profits in a social or environmental mission, and prioritise making a positive impact in their communities and to the mission to combat climate change to at least the same extent as financial considerations. The social enterprise model facilitates the innovation and responsiveness of the private sector while taking the focus away from solely delivering money to stakeholders, and can be key to the development of vibrant, thriving communities.

Anchored in communities

Community-led ownership structures anchor management of assets in local communities, meaning decisions are made by those who are affected most. The "Understanding a maturing community shares market"² report explored the impact of community shares as a sustainable financing option, and found it to be an innovative, accessible investment model that has become a popular approach to raising finance. It is unique to co-operative and community benefit societies – businesses owned and run by local communities across the UK. By investing, individuals can support business and organisations important to themselves and their communities and become co-owners of the business in the process. The report found that these organisations have a 92% survival rate after 5 years, demonstrating the long-term impact and sustainability of this model of delivery.³

Community wealth building

It is also vital that we see these assets as being crucial to the wider economy. A significant, positive example of this in Wales is Awen Cultural Trust⁴ in Bridgend, which was established in 2015 as a charitable organisation with objectives to enhance cultural opportunities in Bridgend and the wider region. The people involved were highly-skilled and experienced in the cultural sector, and have made a significant impact between 2015 and 2023. Financially, the Trust has been successful, and have been able to invest £5.4m in delivering their charitable activities.

Between 2022-23, 1,908 library events have taken place aimed at improving social, digital and economic inclusion, well-being and community engagement. They develop new ideas, through innovative collaborations and partnerships. The year before, in 2021-22, 206,426 people visited the library. Awen Cultural Trust states that, "Ensuring everyone has equal access to the power and pleasure of reading, information and ideas, experiencing new ideas, getting lost in wonderful stories, meeting new people, while at the same time providing a sense of place," is central to their work.

These assets can also be crucial to wider social missions, such as fighting against digital exclusion. 28,048 hours of PC access have been provided to users by Awen Cultural Trust,

² <https://plunkett.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/community-shares-report-2020-FINAL.pdf>

³ <https://plunkett.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/community-shares-report-2020-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.awen-wales.com/our-impact/our-outcomes/>

helping individuals to gain information important to their everyday lives, including education, work and social networks, as well as increasing employability through improved digital skills training and support.

Public health/Social prescribing

Public Health Wales have made clear that the cost-of-living crisis is having a profound impact on public health.⁵ It is vital that we see community-based library and leisure services as key assets in this context. These buildings can be community hubs, engaging and bringing communities together, reducing social isolation and improving mental health and well-being. Removing these assets and services from communities can have a profound impact on an already dangerous and worsening public health crisis, and ensuring a consistent and sustainable delivery of library and leisure services can be a key preventative measure and investment for our health and care services. This is highly relevant to the Welsh Government's exploration of social prescribing and the development of a social prescribing framework for Wales. For social prescribing to have the most impact possible across the country, it is essential that the delivery of community-based services and activities are sustainable. Social enterprise and community-led management of these assets is a potential way of ensuring that this sustainable delivery is possible.

Good practice to ensure sustainability of local leisure and library services for future generations.

Different models and contexts have taught us different lessons. It is important to note the context to the Awen Cultural Trust case study – the people involved in starting the Trust and building it from the ground-up had an extremely high level of knowledge, skills, expertise, and a supportive policy and political context, with a very positive relationship with the Local Authority. In contrast, other examples of communities coming together to run key local assets that were highly valued by local people have seen communities have to come together in an emergency capacity. These assets were previously often either failing commercially or under threat of closure due to budget cuts within local authorities at a time of austerity. This process is highly demanding of individuals' time, needs high levels of skill and capacity, often involves considerable financial commitments and even taking on serious liabilities.

We must not presume that community ownership is an easy answer to budgetary pressures within local authorities. To maximise the benefits of community ownership and management, this must be facilitated in a way that nurtures and supports community groups within a wider framework of community wealth building. Specialist support for community groups, as well as networks to promote best practice, would be essential to developing this form of public service delivery across Wales in a sustainable way. The best examples of this across Wales are when local authorities, other public bodies, or key institutions such as housing associations have taken a leadership role, facilitating communities to develop their own role in a sustainable and proportionate way.

⁵ <https://phw.nhs.wales/news/cost-of-living-crisis-a-public-health-emergency/>