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National Assembly for Wales
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
Inquiry into: Public Libraries
Response from: Pembrokeshire County Council

10 January 2013

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Dear Colleague

National Assembly for Wales
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
Inquiry into Public Libraries in Wales, December 2013

Please find below the Pembrokeshire County Council response to the inquiry info Public Libraries in Wales, December 2013:

1.0   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:

1.1   The key means by which Welsh Government has sought to influence and support public libraries has been through:
- The National Library Strategy – *Libraries Inspire*
- A grant programme which supports the delivery of the strategy
- Welsh Public Library Standards

1.2   *Libraries Inspire* has had a positive influence on the direction of Pembrokeshire's Public Library Service. It is one of two key strategic documents (the other being Pembrokeshire's Single Integrated Plan), which the service seeks to deliver against.

1.3   Welsh Government's grants programmes have been a critical ingredient for many public library services in Wales, in helping to realise the vision within Libraries Inspire. In Pembrokeshire, the development of Milford Haven library was made possible, in part, through the Community Learning Libraries grant programme. In the coming years we will be seeking further support from this programme to help us to realise our ambition for a new County Library in Haverfordwest.

1.4 The Welsh Public Library Standards are in principle a positive force for continuous improvement. However, their historic focus on inputs rather than outcomes has to a certain extent acted as a straight-jacket to innovation and change. It is our understanding that the new standards will be more outcome focused and will give authorities greater flexibility to deliver services within a challenging financial context. This will be a welcome improvement.

1.5 Overall, progress in the current climate will be very challenging. The continuation of grant programmes during this period will be a critical factor in stimulating development. In addition, the match funding element required to access grants will be a particular problem over the next few years. This ranges from 10% to 25% currently. A temporary period in which grant schemes offer 100% funding with only an 'in-kind' contribution should be considered by Welsh Government to stimulate development.

2.0 <u>The extent to which the current legislative and policy frameworks are suitable to meet the challenges of local authorities delivering library services in Wales:</u>

2.1 While the *Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964* remains in force, Libraries will remain a statutory service. However, this does not mean that Libraries should be immune from making their contribution to reducing public spending.

2.2 The key means by which the statutory responsibility for Libraries in Wales is measured is through the Welsh Public Library Standards. If the new framework delivers the flexibility and outcome focused approach that has been promised, this will be a useful framework for assisting local authorities to deliver against Statute.

3.0 <u>How well prepared the Welsh Government and local authorities are to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on library services</u>

3.1 It is the scale of the cuts to local authorities that is of key concern. Welsh Government has talked about co-locations, national procurement strategies and similar measures as a means of reducing the costs of delivering library services. In our experience, these measures will only partially meet the level of savings required.

3.2 Closures; reduced opening hours; reduced spend on stock; increased charges, and other measures are all likely outcomes for library services across Wales. The extent of these interventions will grow if further savings in the future are required.

4.0 <u>Options for improving the financial sustainability of library services, including alternative models of provision</u>

4.1 The key means by which some library services in England have sought to reduce their costs, whilst keeping libraries open, is through transfer

(typically of small village libraries) to the third sector. This model has benefits and disadvantages. Evidence to date indicates that it does not work in all communities and that standards of service and sustainability are highly variable. Some Community Managed Libraries have survived over a number of years and appear to be performing well, whilst others have closed within only a few months of opening, and others remain open but with a much reduced quality and breadth of offer. For these reasons, the model may be more viable in some areas than it is in others.

4.2 Similarly, Mobile Library Services are an expensive means of taking resources to communities that cannot access static libraries. Alternative models, such as the engagement of third sector organisations like the Royal Voluntary Service, to deliver housebound library services, should be considered.

4.3 The current draft of the new Welsh Public Library Standards makes it clear that the replacement of staff with volunteers is not acceptable under any circumstances.

4.4 Welsh Government may wish to reconsider this if it is to give local authorities increased flexibility in delivering library services at much reduced cost.

5.0 <u>The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales:</u>

5.1 Public Library services make a huge contribution to key local and national cross-cutting agendas, such as tackling poverty, improving health and wellbeing, creating a digital first society, etc.

5.2 They are used by very large numbers of people from all backgrounds.

5.3 Although tangible book lending trends nationally are in decline, they remain at very high levels, and e-book lending is increasing significantly. Usage of libraries in their broader sense (including access to the internet, community events, etc) is also very high and growing in many areas of Wales.

5.4 The notion that libraries are no-longer relevant in a digital society of e-books and Google is unfounded. Libraries are not, and never have been, about books. They have a lot of books, but they are not **about** books. They are about the provision of information in its widest sense (including information that provides entertainment, such as works of fiction). The traditional format for imparting this information has been the book, but this is changing.

5.5 Books will no doubt have 'a long tail', but over time there will inevitably be a shift towards the provision of e-resources, and libraries need to plan for these changes now.

5.6 The USP of libraries is that they provide a safe, neutral, cost free and welcoming space that brings communities together. There are few other

places in our towns and cities that could make this claim. In an increasingly virtual world, the need for real places that bring people together physically, rather than virtually, will grow. Libraries are uniquely placed to deliver against this need.

Yours sincerely

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