

Committee Clerk
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

16 January 2014

PL 13

National Assembly for Wales
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
Inquiry into: Public Libraries
Response from: Stuart Cliffe

Dear Sir,

Inquiry into Public Libraries

The Committee has requested the views of individuals and organisations on specific matters in respect of its enquiry into public libraries in Wales. A survey has also been published online via the website SurveyMonkey.

I have contributed to the online survey though it should be noted that one question which asks for the reasons for visits to the library is limited to three answers only (I initially chose five); and the question asking for “ways in which the service could be improved” required that I picked an answer with which I did not agree (I didn’t want any of them) despite my providing an alternative option in ‘other’. I was not allowed to proceed without choosing one of the tickbox options presented. Whilst there was a comments area for ‘other’, there was no specific tickbox for it.

The results of the online survey therefore may be influenced by these limitations.

I was also unaware of this Inquiry until I saw the recent issue of Newport Matters on Monday 13 January. The deadline for submissions is 17 January so this is a necessarily short and probably incomplete submission.

My response on the points listed is attached.

Yours sincerely

Stuart Cliffe

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. Welsh Government has been extremely active in promoting and supporting library services and has maintained a high level of quality and availability throughout a difficult period.
- 1.2. Although moderate savings have to be made for the foreseeable future it would be a tragedy – and a waste of previous investment - to dismantle or damage existing services to the extent that the service might never recover.
- 1.3. A restructuring of services to stay within budget should not exclude such measures as -
 - 1.3.1. possible development of new methods to service existing customers
 - 1.3.2. maintenance of a safe working environment for staff (especially single individuals working in situations where boisterous activity by borrowers needs to be controlled)*
 - 1.3.3. use of local volunteers where possible

* I'm personally aware of one young lady working alone in a local library who has been confronted by groups of unruly teens. She has -so far- managed to eject them without serious incident.

2. The extent to which the current legislative and policy frameworks are suitable to meet the challenges facing local authorities delivering library services in Wales;

- 2.1. Welsh Government has a substantial advantage in managing its assistance to local authorities – there are relatively few in Wales.
- 2.2. With a small number there should be the possibility for real economies if there is
 - 2.2.1. co-operation between local authority library services
 - 2.2.2. shared best practice and close collaboration between services
 - 2.2.3. a culture which encourages innovation and experiment
- 2.3. Local authorities may however take the view that the easy way to achieve savings is to close branches, and the legislative and policy framework must be robust enough to support local communities in finding ways to maintain existing services where a suitable case can be made for doing so.

3. How well-prepared the Welsh Government and local authorities are to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on library services;

- 3.1. I suspect the impact of public sector cuts will be to close libraries and throw the cost of remaining services onto volunteers and local communities.
- 3.2. No matter what consultation is employed, the ultimate argument could be “not in budget” although there are clear alternatives to simply cutting back.
- 3.3. Welsh Government and local authorities must be prepared to demonstrate that they have explored all options, especially since there are alternative models available.
- 3.4. Local Authorities should be conducting their own consultations to ensure that local residents affected by potential cuts have a chance to suggest alternative models of provision.

- 3.5. Welsh Government should be conducting a more in depth consultation with both residents and Local Authorities to identify possible economies with shared resourcing

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

- 4.1. The current major expense items are Staff, Premises, Systems and Books
- 4.2. Existing library services have not been substantially altered for a long time
- 4.3. Premises are substantially underused – in that foot traffic is light and most areas are empty for a substantial portion of the day.
- 4.4. Detailed recommendations are outside the scope of this short note, but would include
 - 4.4.1. Streamlining the purchase of fiction and possibly other literature through more efficient and focussed use of online facilities.
 - 4.4.2. Better forecasting of purchasing through feedback from current and advance reservations
 - 4.4.3. Shared resources between local authorities – using the existing book ‘bank’ to satisfy requests, and all reservation data to feed order planning.
 - 4.4.4. Offering facilities to local business for sponsorship of services and meeting/ conference facilities (at a commercial rate)
 - 4.4.5. Offering teleconference facilities to business – libraries are well placed to act as a network connecting between centres with better technology than most small businesses could afford.
 - 4.4.6. Organising business networking meetings – filling early morning or evening slots with small gatherings to encourage local business
 - 4.4.7. Reducing the physical size of libraries – shelf displays are often unnecessary where borrowers can browse from home or use library equipment to do so. The spare space could be used for storage or let or sold off or used for meetings/ conferences as above.
 - 4.4.8. Maintaining existing experienced staff as far as possible – their expertise is essential.
 - 4.4.9. Hiring out such expertise for research, or for education.
 - 4.4.10. Involving authors and publishers and internet service providers in day to day operations – smartphone apps already exist to scan book details and check for author details, but libraries can only recommend that software to customers. It would be far more efficient to be part of the network and provide the local service environment to support internet features.

5. The contemporary and community role of public libraries in Wales.

- 5.1. UK Government is moving further in encouragement of an ‘online’ society with the Department of Work and Pensions’ “Universal Credit” widely applicable in 2017
- 5.2. Smartphone apps are becoming more and more widely available and used
- 5.3. There is a real danger of a two-speed society with offline individuals unable to share in the same services and rewards as online contemporaries.
- 5.4. The community as a whole is becoming older, and there are more individuals with more leisure time.
- 5.5. Many businesses – particularly small businesses – are struggling and need to collaborate and share resources to succeed.
- 5.6. Libraries can support and educate the community, help to inform and entertain, and can support both the local and national economy by encouraging business start-ups and providing the shared services that they need.
- 5.7. Libraries are not just useful, they’re essential; a resource that should not be easily dismissed or abandoned.