PL 21
National Assembly for Wales
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
Inquiry into: Public Libraries
Response from: City and County of Swansea

1.0   Progress 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   Firstly the Authority firmly believes the Inquiry should not only focus on direct commitments to libraries in relation to the 'Programme for Government' but widen its scope to look at how libraries support the themes within the original report such as Education, Well-being, Supporting People, Safer Communities, Equality and Tackling Poverty etc. Libraries may not always be direct delivery agents for change in these areas but they do play a valuable supporting role through specific projects or collaborative working with other partners and agencies. Some examples to evidence this can be seen via projects such as Bookstart, Homework clubs and the Summer reading schemes run by the majority of libraries in relation to Education and Literacy support. Other examples such as the provision of Health Information and the current Books on Prescription scheme support well-being. Mobile and Housebound library services allow customers to benefit from a range of services and help breakdown social isolation. This can also be seen by the number of small community groups that are successfully run through libraries such as reading groups, knitting groups, craft clubs, chess clubs etc to name but a few. Many libraries in Swansea hold regular public safety meetings and surgeries such as 'Cuppa with a copper' which support safer communities. The ethos around free lending and access to information for all supports equality and a number of initiatives support the tackling poverty agenda. Many more examples can be found of innovative ways in which public library services support many of the themes in the 'Programme for Governnment' agenda. These a just a few of the many examples that show the contribution libraries make to the wider themes outlined in the Programme.

1.2   With regard to the areas highlighted in the Programme directly associated with libraries, the Authority believes there has been major progress. However it also acknowledges that this progress has been seen over a number of years and may not be as a direct result of the current Programme i.e. it has been driven predominantly in partnership with Welsh Government and the local authority over many years and is seen more of a natural progression of the vision of Welsh Government through CyMAL and a strong commitment from the local authority itself.

1.3   In relation to the specific performance measures within the Programme the number of visits to libraries across Wales has risen over the years however, Swansea is currently seeing a small drop in its visitors which is more in line with the current UK trend. In the main however figures both in Wales and Swansea seem to have bucked the trend when compared to many English authorities. Much of this can be traced to additional capital investment provided by Welsh Government in relation to its Community Learning Libraries funding programme administered via CyMAL and some high profile developments such as the new central libraries at Swansea and Cardiff. This can be evidenced by visitor numbers per head of population in Wales being consistently higher than those in England, and their continuing increase, rising by 11% since 2002/3, and reversing the English trend which continues to decline.(Wales 13.25 million 2002/3, 14.72m 2011/12, England 323m 2002/3, 306m 2011/12).

1.4   Progress has also been made in relation to regional collaboration although this is clearly more effective across libraries than across domains (museums and archives). Again this can be evidenced by an increase in consortium working for stock purchases and for progressing new and innovative services such as e-books, e-magazines and other electronic resources. Further projects such as the expansion of the 'Books for you' service (inter library loans) across all of the South Wales region and similar schemes in North Wales also show further collaboration. Finally the ability to provide specific library related regional training has been very beneficial.

1.5   The Authority believes the regional approach will continue to develop and provide future benefits either through levering additional economies of scale or by continued sharing of best practice. Future projects such as the possibility of developing an all Wales Library Management System and the continuation of an all Wales marketing strategy are key to future success in the current difficult climate all authorities face.

2.0   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   Public library services are a statutory duty under the terms of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 and defined through the Welsh Government's Public Library Standards. This legislation gives the Welsh Government the duty to "superintend and promote the improvement of the public library service provided by local authorities…and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries conferred upon them as library authorities by or under this Act".

2.2   The Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) were first developed in 2002, to ensure that local authorities carry out their statutory responsibilities in the delivery of the core library service, and are now in the 4th framework to March 2014. There is no doubt that the WPLS have made a significant contribution to the consistency and quality of library services across Wales, and this is evidenced by very high public satisfaction levels with library services nationally.

2.3   However, the main Act has not been substantially revised since 1964 and some work around its role especially in relation to the possibility of introducing 'fee based' services may need revising in the current climate. The difficulty lies in interpretation of the Act and what role public libraries have in the 21st Century. Swansea sees its current library service a service that upholds traditional values whilst at the same time introduces innovative services at every opportunity. As previously stated much of the work carried out by library staff is now focused on strategic priorities associated with local or central government challenges and although the traditional services of book loans and information provision is still important so is the way it delivers these services in relation to supporting education, healthy living, social inclusion etc. In effect, library services provide a great deal of support to local authorities / Welsh Government in the delivery of current legislative agendas and policies and directly affect the quality of life of individual users.

2.4   The Authority does have some concerns in relation to the current and future WPLS framework. Although it can be used as a method of tracking progress the Authority does not agree with some definitions, has concerns over methods of data collection and robustness of data and in some cases the importance given to certain Standards. These concerns have been passed to CyMAL and are currently being considered in light of the proposed fifth framework.

2.5   Obviously the main challenge is based primarily on budget reductions not only in libraries but across all public service areas. Although funding from Welsh Government in relation to capital grants is welcome no additional revenue funding has been provided to support

library services over the years. Some authorities such as Swansea have subsidised the development of the service through the delivery of large scale projects such as the Central Library which opened in 2008. However no additional funding has been provided via Welsh Government as in keeping with increased usage over the years. This combined with a variety of new and additional services and the continued drive to work in partnership to support a greater range of initiatives has seen library services increasingly working to maximum capacity on minimal additional resources. Given the current climate authorities are being forced to make difficult decisions and as such library resources are being diminished through reductions in opening hours, staffing, library closures and/or stock reductions.

2.6   Although the Act and Standards are there to support library services if the current drive to reduce costs continues then there is a danger of the legislative framework being ineffective due to the more pragmatic issues of service sustainability.

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

3.1   In terms of how well Welsh Government are situated the Authority would not wish to comment however as previously alluded to if cuts continue then without additional support from Welsh Government further reductions in library service provision seem inevitable. However, there have been some discussions in relation to alternative service models and some progress made through collaborative and regional working that has been successful; Swansea will look to take forward best practice if it is deemed to fit with local needs and priorities.

3.2   The existing library service already works in partnership with a range of council and external organisations and although this does not necessarily provide costs savings it does provide greater access points for services and enables improved outcomes for customers. The library service will continue to investigate this approach in order to help mitigate the impact of service reductions wherever possible. This relates not only to the services libraries currently provide but also in relation to how the service may support other areas within the council that may have challenges due to reduced budgets.

3.3   Overall this is a difficult question to fully answer at this point in time as the Authority is still at an early stage with regards to its budget saving strategy for the next three years. However, the current political steer suggests that the Authority wishes to retain as many service points as possible in an attempt to ensure customers both existing and potential have equitable access to library services. There is a growing understanding of the varied services and associated benefits that libraries provide for their communities. There is also an understanding that libraries are a relatively inexpensive resource based on per 1000 population use and that their full potential has yet to be realised given the changes in technology and the ever increasing need for ICT and knowledge management. Substantial reductions in service points may prove to be a false economy if service users are forced to move to other providers for instance. Based on the current population in Swansea it costs less than 25 pence per person per week to run library services.

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

4.1   It must be realised that libraries in Swansea have over the years become more efficient and effective. This has been evidenced through the addition of new services either via library projects or through partnership working arrangements. The service already supports initiatives through Community First, Job Centre Plus, Communities 2.0, local colleges, youth organisations, Careers Wales etc. Also over the past three to four years savings

through back office reductions, restructures and forced reductions via vacancy monitoring etc have seen the library services budgets reduced in relative terms.

4.2 The service is not complacent and has introduced volunteer support for local study and children's services. This has been done without the loss of professionally paid staff and has only been introduced to provide value added services. The service is also heavily involved with providing work experience for secondary school pupils and for recently qualified professionals. The service is also one of the pilot authorities for the CLOCH project which encourage young men with low or no academic qualifications into the profession.

4.3 The Authority is aware of other options such as Trust Status, Contracted out models and voluntary run services. Again all have inherent challenges and may not be suitable especially in relation to the way services are currently run in Wales. There is a danger that comparisons to English models are simplistic and evidence of success is fairly limited at this stage.

4.4 The Authority is also aware of the forthcoming Williams report which may provide a longer term strategic vision for public services.

4.5 The Authority believes one of the main issues in relation to alternative service provision is timescales. In an ideal world moving to alternative provision whether that be co-location, Trusts etc requires research, planning and implementation phases which in order to be truly effective require time and resource. Unfortunately given the need for immediate savings both of these are in very short supply.

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

5.1 The role of libraries in the 21st Century has been shaped over the last few years through Welsh Government's library strategies the latest being entitled 'Libraries Inspire'. Such strategies suggest that the basic concept of public library provision is still relevant in today's society and the need for free information, leisure reading and supported access to ICT is paramount especially for those of greatest need.

5.2 *"They (libraries) provide a vital community service for people of all ages and are an essential component of a civilised society. I am determined to work with other bodies to develop a resilient strategic framework for the forward delivery of Welsh library services. We need libraries more than ever to provide opportunities for learning, free access to digital services and places where the whole community can meet in safe public spaces. Knowledge is power and libraries are a tremendous resource for people empowering them and making a real difference to their lives."* John Griffiths, 3rd Dec., 2013

5.3 The above statement by the current Minister strengthens the argument for continued community library provision and places firm emphasis on areas of challenge that communities face. Many have already been explored in this document and in the original 'Programme for change' document.

5.4 Swansea Libraries continue to provide traditional library services in conjunction with hybrid services which it sees as part of its core functions. These services support regeneration, growth and jobs; help tackle the poverty agenda by providing services free at the point of delivery and provide a high degree of equality and inclusiveness to the community it serves.

5.5 More traditional roles based around self improvement, education and literacy are still fundamental to service provision and initiatives such as Bookstart, Rhyme and Story Times, the Summer Reading Challenge, Homework Clubs etc are vital to improving literacy, parenting skills and provide motivation and a confidence boost to young and old.

5.6   Skills development and learning for life programmes support both formal and informal education and the drive towards breaking down the digital divide is more important than ever.

5.7   It must also be remembered that libraries have a significant role in promoting culture in its widest sense and also the role it plays as depository of local and community history.

5.8   Finally the library is one of the last bastions of free public space where services can be enjoyed by all and where the whole of the community is welcomed within a safe, neutral space. It is somewhere people can go for unbiased information, a helping hand and is seen by many as a social hub for the community.

5.9   Further evidence of libraries contributions can be found in a series of reports published by the Society of Chief Librarians in Wales. These maybe found at:

o   'Brighter, Bolder, Better'(2009) http://www.goscl.com/about-the-scl/scl-wales/scl-wales-publications/brighterbolderbettersclwales2009-2/

o   'Addressing the Digital Divide' (2010). http://www.goscl.com/about-the-scl/scl-wales/scl-wales-publications/addressingthedigitaldividesclwales2010-2/.

o   The Importance of Reading (2011) http://www.goscl.com/about-the-scl/scl-wales/scl-wales-publications/scl_w_importanceofreadingdec2011-2/

o   Public Libraries: Health, Wellbeing and Social Benefits [2012].   http://www.goscl.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/SCL-Wales-report.pdf

o   'Public Libraries: Reducing Child Poverty' [2013]. http://welshlibraries.org/fileadmin/documents/toolkit/Document_Library_NEW/SCL_WALES/SCLWPUBLICLIBRARIESCHILD%20POVERTY2013.pdf