PL 22

National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

1. 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 Strengthening Regional Collaboration

The South East Wales region, of which Merthyr Tydfil is a member, has worked collaboratively together, with Welsh Government support, to create a strong partnership which has helped to shape a regional Reading Strategy and also to recognise and provide training opportunities across the region. This is vitally important to ensure that staff are properly trained and skilled to provide the changing face of Library services in the 21st Century. In addition, partnership schemes such as the Books4U scheme which enables much more inter-lending between services results in better service provision for the users of Welsh Public Libraries across Wales.

However, Libraries within Wales do not only work collaboratively on a regional basis, national collaborative projects such as Book Prescription Wales, purchasing consortia and e-resources all enhance the provision in Wales and help to equip Wales with a strong and resilient public library service. This must be attributed to the Welsh Government commitment to ensuring that the people of Wales benefit from strong public services and a testament to the public library staff and authorities who demonstrate the commitment to ensuring that the collaboration agenda is taken seriously and acted upon. The benefits from this are seen both from an authority perspective and also from the user experiences and services provided to them.

Economies of scale that this type of approach provides must be the way forward for Library authorities and delivers best value across the whole of Wales but equally importantly at a local level.

The values shown through regional and national collaboration is further extended when combined with local partnerships, co-location of service points and collaborative working across departments. Examples within Merthyr Tydfil include a new static service point in a local leisure centre, use of Libraries to provide drop-in Benefits services, van permits and many other services to outlying areas.

1.2 Performance In the Welsh Public Library Standards and Performance Indicators

The Welsh Public Library Standards and performance indicators have helped Merthyr Tydfil to ensure that the Library works towards a steady improvement in Library services. Each of the successive frameworks have seen improvements over the framework period of three years. For example, at the start of the 4th Framework, Merthyr Tydfil Public Libraries achieved six of the nine standards and partially achieved the other three. In 2012, Merthyr Tydfil achieved seven of the nine standards with a partial achievement of the remaining two and is looking to further improve this in the final year of this framework.

The Welsh Public Library Standards have certainly, within this authority, led to improvements in service and provide a valuable tool to measure performance against. There is a danger that withdrawal of the measure that the WPLS creates would result in a myriad of different interpretations of the 1964 Act and would result in very subjective service provisions across Wales. The Standards encourage high quality library provision across the whole of Wales and at a local level. As people move, live or work in different areas of Wales they have a confidence that they will still have access to similar services. The term 'postcode lottery' is often banded about in relation to services to the public. This cannot be said for public library services who are working, via the WPLS, to provide comparative levels of service throughout Wales.

Performance indicators sometimes appear to have little correlation to the standard in real terms however, and despite achieving seven of the nine standards, this authority still remains at one of the lowest performers

against these PIs, especially in relation to monetary inputs. However, this authority takes the view that despite having less than many in relation to monetary values attributed to the PIs, the authority maintains a performance seen by the public above the Welsh average.

1.3 Community Learning Libraries Grant Programme

Without a doubt the Community Learning Libraries Grant Programme has delivered a modernisation programme for Libraries which would be beyond the reach of many local authorities to fund. At a local level, Merthyr Tydfil Libraries have benefitted three times from this grant fund, a further fourth application will be made this year for the final static library service point and the improvements made via this scheme to service delivery have been excellent.

Improvements made at one of the branch libraries have improved access, allowed space for community and class use, improved the overall appearance and allowed activities and community engagement work to take place, enhancing the services the Library is able to provide.

Improvements at the main Library have resulted in increased visitors, increased membership and increased borrowing. Library membership between 2011/12 and 2012/13 have risen from 1560 to 2370 which is a increase of over 50%. The refurbishments have also helped to attract new age groups and users whose perceptions of the services offered have changed. The refurbishments have also helped to provide space and facilities that allow far more partnership working, as well as providing opportunities for other community groups to use the facilities.

1.4 Welsh Government Measures

The measures contained within the Programme for Government relate directly to the areas discussed above and the grant monies and other support received via CyMAL and the Welsh Government in general allow us to show the impacts the grant monies have.

While the environment and demographic in which Merthyr Tydfil Libraries operates is a challenging one, which provides a number of significant issues in delivering literacy based activities (low literacy levels, poverty etc) the benefits of the grant monies is clearly seen.

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

The statutory nature of public library services is defined via the Welsh Public Library Standards and governed by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964.

Libraries play a key role in delivering and supporting the Programme for Government key chapters, however there is little mention of them in the main document. There are a number of key documents which have been produced by SCL Wales highlighting the role Libraries play in the following key areas:

- Health
- Supporting People
- Poverty
- Education
- Learning
- Digital Inclusion
- Welsh Language
- Rural communities

There often appears to be a tendency to overlook the impacts that Library services have on the lives of the people of Wales and the impacts on specific agendas, locally and nationally, even to the point of the statutory nature sometimes being overlooked.

There is support within Merthyr Tydfil for the Library service however, the budget reductions currently facing local authorities are large and there is going to be an impact on Library services. The requirements to do things differently, to do different things and to streamline services are here and services have to react to this.

The actual challenges facing the service are highlighted below:

- Cost – buildings, vehicles, stock and staff are the main expenditure with very little fat anywhere else to cut. Income generation is limited as the provision of the free library service as highlighted in the Welsh Governments statement of citizens entitlements maintains the ethos of free provision. However, working with a wide range of partners to deliver different services via public library buildings, such as Benefits, Citizens Advice, Adult Community Learning and many others increases the cost effectiveness of running these buildings as they truly do offer more than just a Library service.
- Ensuring people understand what the service can offer – while this has improved especially since refurbishments, there is still an outdated view amongst some who do not understand what a modern Library service is. There is still work to do to reach many people who currently don't use services. Marketing of services has benefitted from the collaborative approach from the all Wales Library Marketing Strategy of CyMAL's Libraries Inspire Programme. These promotional activities would not be cost effective for individual authorities but nationally work very well.
- Development of modern technologies and e-resources – there are cost implications in ensuring that we provide modern up to date facilities and services for users. Again, ensuring that as an authority we fully engage with national and regional collaborative projects allows the service to provide the most cost effective way of providing the service.
- Local environment and demographics – the current environment in which the service operates in Merthyr Tydfil is a challenging one and there are many competing priorities for funding. For example, where the priority is about creating healthy, active individuals, the focus is entirely on what leisure services can provide. However, Library services contribute highly to this agenda as they are able to provide access to information about staying healthy, signpost to the right place to find out more information, work with others to get the message across to wider audiences and provide access to service such as the Books on Prescription scheme.

As highlighted above the legislation and policies are important in ensuring that consistency of service provision is upheld throughout Wales.
However, there seem to be little sanction against poor performance in relation to the WPLS and associated PIs. If these standards are to be the interpretation of the Act, there should be further commitment by the Welsh Government to actively support authorities to deliver against them as there is a danger they will become an onerous paper exercise, with little real value to the people of Wales.
As the financial climate changes and more and more pressures are put on Local Authorities to make changes to services to the public, address alternative service delivery methods, withdraw and cut services, the Welsh Public Library Standards are even more important in providing a baseline level of service that must be delivered. It can often be forgotten that Libraries are a statutory service and as such have a legal responsibility to deliver 'comprehensive and efficient' services.
In reality there has to be a line drawn somewhere about minimum levels of investment, but the inherent danger with that is this gives no scope for improvement or striving to increase performance. However, an acceptance that lowest levels may be the only option to maintain current services may be the only way forward in the current economic climate. Again however, this would put more pressure to ensure that there are sanctions against not meeting the lowest levels in order to ensure services are maintained through this period.

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

As an authority, Merthyr Tydfil is committed to ensuring that impacts on the public are mitigated against as far as is practicable. However, competing demands within the authority will undoubtedly impact on this commitment. Hard and difficult choices have to made and faced head on.
The strong tradition of collaborative working in the South East also helps to ensure that there are cost effective ways of delivering services and helps to mitigate cuts to services on a local level.

Grant funding streams via the Welsh Government will be more important as we move forward in the current economic climate. However, it is recognised that this is no substitute for appropriate investment on a local level.

Libraries have operated similar services for many years and for many while the pace of technological change has been great, changing practices, policies and procedures as well as motivating staff to 'come along for the ride' have been at a much slower pace. The current climate will see services having to adapt and change to deliver the traditional and less traditional services in new and innovative ways. For many years, services may have hidden behind the statutory nature of services, however this is no longer valid. The definitions of comprehensive and efficient have to change to take account of changing technologies and this is a challenge for both government to monitor and individual authorities to deliver.

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

There is potential to reduce the number of authorities across Wales and there is possibly economies of scale in management roles. However, with the current WPLS returns showing vacancies and reductions in professional staff this may not bring about any large scale savings.
Merthyr Tydfil has restructured and worked hard towards improving the level of frontline service delivery, protect those already in employment and ensure that although small in number (only 4), managers and professional staff are well trained and well qualified for the roles they have to do.
In addition, use of volunteers helps to add value to the basic service and with a volunteer policy and procedures in place MTPLS is recruiting, training and using volunteers to help with added value activities. In addition, we recognise that the use of volunteers adds value not only to our service but to the wider community around us, helping people to develop new skills in a safe and welcoming environment.
The use of volunteers cannot be relied upon to deliver statutory services and the issues that have presented themselves in the local area in relation to recruiting, retaining and training suitable volunteers have been quite high in number. However, the service is committed to ensuring that appropriate resources are put into this, while ensuring that we take account of the statutory obligations we have as well. The service recognises the added cost implications of using volunteers which is often overlooked, such as training, recruitment and management of the volunteers in addition to the added complications of access to IT systems etc.
Trust status is an option being explored however this is not without its issues and would need careful consideration. There have been recent breakdowns of trusts, for example Hounslow.

5.0 The contemporary and community role of public libraries

The public library service is probably unique in its ability to to make a strong and positive contribution to so many areas of community life. Indeed, this is also true of its ability to contribute to so many local and national agendas.

5.1 Tackling poverty

Equality and inclusiveness form the bedrock of public library services. Access to quality information, plus internet access and access to new technologies means that services are available to everyone. Well trained and knowledgeable staff are also on hand to ensure that everyone who needs to access the services is able to. The Society of Chief Librarians has produced a report with contributions from all authorities across Wales detailing the impact of public Libraries on the poverty agenda, in particular the impact on combating child poverty.

5.2 Regeneration, jobs and growth

Job seekers are strongly supported by libraries in Merthyr Tydfil with strong links with Job Centre Plus, work clubs, job clubs, CV writing, interview skills and other activities forming a large part of the day to day provision. Merthyr Tydfil is an area where poverty, poor literacy skills and social problems resulting from drink and drugs are rife. This presents added challenges to working with local communities. The poverty in the area means that demand for computer use and help from trained staff is now at a premium, with computer classes and job clubs happening at each Library at least 10 times per week over different sessions. Before tackling issues of IT

skills, there are often basic skills issues to tackle and to this end MTPLS work with a variety of providers, such as Com 2.0, Communities First, JCP and various other agencies to provide the right service. Having Libraries in various areas brings people into the town centres and as one Library borrower recently commented *'the library is the lifeblood of Merthyr'.*

There is also an ambassador role to play for Library staff, whose skills in information retrieval help to signpost residents and visitors to the wealth of opportunities around them, including areas of local interest.

5.3 Health and Well Being Agendas

Reading and use of libraries promotes healthy minds, while social interaction helps to promote healthy bodies. As well as this generic benefit to users which can be seen through comments such as *'I don't know what I would do without the friendship I have found in the Bookclubs (in the library)'* highlighting this, specific schemes such as Book Prescription Wales, the Children and Families Bibliotherapy scheme, Reading Aloud sessions for mental health patients and the homeless and other health related promotions such as the National 'Get Reading, Get Better, Get Libraries' campaign contribute to this wider agenda within Merthyr Tydfil.

5.4 Literacy

Libraries have a fundamental role to play in improving literacy. At MTPLS this begins at an early age with the delivery of the national Bookstart scheme, via our health partners. Story and Rhyme sessions, advice for parents and carers, Summer Reading Challenges for the whole family, Six Book Challenge for emergent adult readers, Reading Aloud sessions and other initiatives such as 'Wimpy Kid Reading Marathon' for local schools. This is in addition to supporting school and 'private' book clubs with loans of suitable stock. A recent comment from a teacher showed the impact of reading on her class where she stated that at wet play time *'I was amazed to find a group of boys sitting quietly in amongst the other children running around, avidly reading and discussing the Wimpy Kid title they were reading'.*

5.5 Learning For Life & Skills Development

Libraries are neutral spaces. Unless attending a formal class in a library space, libraries do not measure or test and thus provide the perfect place for those not yet ready for formal learning to 'dip their toe in'. Libraries support informal learners of all ages, backgrounds and ethnicities with access to materials and facilities. Libraries support those in formal education with access to computer and internet facilities, stock to support their chosen courses and friendly, knowledgeable staff able to signpost to the right information. Homework clubs and afterschool clubs also play a part in the provision offered.

Staff deliver ICT training for beginners, information literacy sessions for users of all ages and help to develop local studies research skills for those looking into local, family or house histories. The Library service is actively involved in the Merthyr Learning Festival and has played an active role in delivering various sessions during Adult Learners Week.

5.6 Safe Communities

The Libraries in Merthyr Tydfil offer a safe, neutral and welcoming space for users of all ages. In addition to having a safe, welcoming environment to access, MTPLS plays an important role acting as a drop in space for users to speak to police and other agencies including Victim Support who can offer specialist advice and support to those who need it.

5.7 Digital Agenda

Through provision of quality ICT facilities, including wi-fi, MTPLS actively helps and supports users of the service to get online. Libraries offer help and support to those not confident about accessing material and

information online as well as offering support to those using Universal Job Match and Universal Benefit to access vital information.

In Wales as a whole, only 52% of people living in social housing had access to the internet at home. Without access to a strong and resilient public library service these digitally excluded individuals will continue to fall further behind and the gaps between the haves and have-nots will get larger. In an area of multiple deprivation such as Merthyr it is vital to ensure access.

5.8 Access to Government and the democratic process

The Library service provides minutes and information about local and national government and are focal points for the display of public consultations, enabling residents to access relevant information and participate in consultation processes.