

Inquiry into Public Libraries: Response by Conwy County Borough Council

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the National Assembly of Wales's inquiry into public libraries in Wales. Libraries make a significant contribution to so many government agendas and enjoy such public support that we have tried to summarise the main areas and illustrate where possible with examples from Conwy County Borough Council.

A. 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

With regard to libraries, the following are included within the Programme for Government.

1. Culture and Heritage

Indicator: TR011 9(b) No. of visits to heritage sites, local and national museums and libraries:

- 1.1. Visits to libraries in Wales are consistently higher than visits to libraries in England and the trend in Wales is towards further increases, rising by 11% since 2002/3, and reversing the English trend (Wales 13.25million 2002/3, 14.72m 2011/12, England 323m 2002/3, 306m 2011/12).
- 1.2. In Conwy County Borough Council, comparing 2012/13 with 2002/03, there is a 6% increase over all libraries, a 13.5% increase at the larger (area) and 3.5% decrease at the smaller (community) libraries. The decline in visits in person to a number of the Community Libraries is being addressed through Conwy's Library Modernisation Strategy (see par. 10).

2. Indicator: TR030 No. of libraries refurbished through the CyMAL Community Learning Libraries Programme

- 2.1. Since 2006, considerable work has been undertaken on modernising library buildings in Conwy with grant funding from CyMAL's Community Learning Libraries Scheme. Colwyn Bay was refurbished in 2007-8; Abergele Library in 2008-9; and Llandudno Library in 2010-11 with match funding of £100,000 from Conwy's Local Community Regeneration Provision.
- 2.2. We hope that this funding will continue beyond 2014/15 so that we can continue with this programme as the increased investment has enabled the Service to increase the number of visits by providing a modern and inviting environment; provide a flexible space for community activities; increase the number of items borrowed; enhance existing learning provision; harness technological developments for customer benefit including the provision of Wi-Fi.

3. Additional Commitments added

Action 12/011: Ensure the Heritage department engages with other Welsh Government departments to put creativity at the heart of the Arts, Creative Industries, Digitalisation and Social Well-being agenda.

- 3.1. Although libraries are not mentioned in this action, significant work is being undertaken in library services with regard to Health and Wellbeing.
'Reading it keeps me structured when my mental health starts to decrease'
'Reading makes me feel better when I'm down'
- 3.2. The bibliotherapeutic role of libraries and its contribution to the health and wellbeing of individuals is increasingly being identified and advocated. Bibliotherapy is broadly defined as the therapeutic use of books and reading to aid people's wellbeing. This can take many forms, namely self-help books, reading groups, reading for pleasure. Studies

have shown that bibliotherapy or self-health can be as effective as seeing a psychologist.

3.3. Currently in Conwy almost 100 individuals meet on a monthly basis as part of a programme of library led reading group sessions. The demand for reading group sessions supported by library staff exceeds demand with some groups having waiting lists. With further funding additional groups could be established. In addition, the library service also supports a further 20 self-led reading groups within the community by providing books and guidance.

4. Action 12/034 (2012): Strengthen regional collaboration in the delivery of library, museum and archive services and ensure that local authorities meet national standards of public library provision.

4.1. Collaboration

A large amount of work is being undertaken on a national and regional basis including the provision of e-books and magazines; joint procurement of books and Book Prescription Wales.

4.2. Regionally, Conwy Library Service has been part of the TalNet joint bibliographic unit, sharing resources and a Library Management System with Anglesey, and Gwynedd since 1996, and is actively involved in the establishment of a national Library Management System with representation on the project working group.

4.3. The TalNet partnership provides bibliographic services to an FE partner, and is part of the LINC y Gogledd reciprocal borrowing scheme, across public, FE and HE libraries in North Wales.

Conwy Library Service is also part of Estyn Allan; a reader development network which is made up of all 6 north Wales library authorities.

4.4. Other Programme for Government Commitments

We should like to highlight the significant role that libraries play in many of the other Programme for Government commitments, e.g. with regard to the Welsh Government's commitment to Tackling Poverty and Education and Learning.

4.5. Tackling Poverty

"The library is very valuable to me. I am unemployed and it allows me to look for jobs, very poor cannot afford the internet." PLUS survey 2012

Libraries in Conwy are contributing extensively towards the Tackling Poverty Action Plan including:

4.6. Preventing Poverty/ Giving children the best start in life

- Through the gifting of Bookstart, Booktouch and Bookshine packs; supporting literacy, working with schools; delivering story times, and the Letterbox club for looked after children; Homework support and Summer Reading Challenge for 4-11 year olds.

4.7. Helping people out of poverty / Information and skills

- Lifelong learning opportunities, Basic skills support, and IT skills development; using technology to attract excluded groups; providing access to the digital economy, employment opportunities; supporting Information literacy, and access to Council Information and services.

- Libraries are supportive reading environments where children and adults gain positive attitudes to reading.

4.8. Mitigating the impact of poverty / Promoting health and wellbeing

Reducing social isolation through e.g. Home library service, Shared Reading Groups; *“The talking books are a godsend to me. Just listening to them feels like company to me, as it can be very lonely when you are stuck in alone. Sometimes the library lady is the only person I see each month and I really look forward to her visits. Long may the service continue!”*

Home and Mobile Library Service Consultation 2013

- Providing social cohesion and community empowerment; developing partnerships with e.g. Conwy Community Big Voice, Gingerbread, Youth Justice, CAIS, British Red Cross, Mencap Cymru, Deaf blind Cymru, Age Concern...
- Identity, culture and language, local and family history

4.9. Libraries actively contribute to the Welsh Government’s Digital Inclusion Delivery Plan as well as the Tackling Poverty Action Plan. Working collaboratively with Communities 2.0, DWP and Job Centre Plus partners to better co-ordinate at a strategic level digital inclusion support for those who need ICT skills to access Universal Jobs match, claim Job Seekers Allowance; to progress towards and within the jobs market.

4.10. Libraries support financial inclusion, working collaboratively across the authority and with local service providers to identify and map current provision and support available for those affected by the changes in Welfare Reform, to aid effective signposting to appropriate provision, whilst identifying gaps in provision.

B. Extent to which current legislative and policy frameworks are suitable to meet the challenges facing local authorities delivering library services in Wales.

5. Libraries are a statutory duty under The Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964 which requires local government to provide a comprehensive and efficient public library service. Ensuring compliance with the Act is the responsibility of the Secretary of State.
6. The Act does not provide a definition of a ‘comprehensive and efficient public library service’. In Wales, this is the role of the WPLS, which provides a set of standards and performance indicators to ensure that there is compliance with the act. The Standards have led to significantly improved library services in Wales.
7. However, we would welcome clarity about the status of the WPLS following the Minister’s response to questions in the Assembly on 3rd December 2013 regarding the Standards, ie *‘Those standards are an important part of the picture, but, of course, they are not statutory in terms of the statutory requirements on local authorities.* In the current financial climate, local authorities could choose to opt out of the WPLS and provide local interpretations of the Act, a situation which prevailed before the WPLS.
8. The Welsh Public Library Standards and Conwy
In 2010/11, the authority only met 6 out of 14 of the WPLS. In a letter to Conwy’s Acting Chief Executive, CyMAL stated that *“The authority’s current performance is among the weakest in Wales – this is primarily attributable to continuing resource limitations and the need for corporate direction in planning for the future of the service. The service itself continues to effect change and improvement within this*

context, but overall has been able to achieve only limited progress over the course of the Third Framework. Firm decisions and corporate commitment are required to enable the service to move forward'.

9. This became a driver for the development and implementation of a Strategy, approved by Cabinet on 13 December 2011, for Modernising Conwy's Library Service.

10. Strategy for Modernising Conwy's Library Service

The Strategy proposes:

Area Libraries

5 area libraries: at Abergele, Colwyn Bay, Llandudno and Llanrwst together with a new / refurbished area library for Llandudno Junction, Deganwy and Conwy. The service to be enhanced and tailored to meet local needs and opening hours to be extended. Staffing levels, technology and book stock within these 5 facilities together with the Mobile Library and Home Library will enable the Service to meet 8 of the 9 Welsh Public Library Standards.

Community Libraries

Community Libraries to be established in partnership with community and town councils or community groups at Kinmel Bay, Cerrigydrudion, Penmaenmawr, Llanfairfechan and Penrhyn Bay. The Library Service will provide 15 hours of staff time, 3,000 books and 4 PCs.

Mobile and Home Library Service

The Mobile Library routes and the Home Library to be reviewed to ensure that services are delivered to people living in rural and urban deprivation.

Since the Strategy has been approved, the authority has made significant progress on meeting the WPLS, with the result that the authority received positive feedback from CyMAL to the 2012/13 Annual WPLS Return.

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

11. Much work is being undertaken on regional and national collaborations to deliver efficient services. The all Wales Library Management System is currently being procured by the new Welsh Government National Government Service. However, there are many longstanding partnerships already in place, such as the TalNet partnership, LINC y Gogledd and Estyn Allan.
12. Locally, Conwy has been working on a programme of modernisation for a number of years see details above. This has led to service budgets being largely protected in 2013/14 and 2014/15 and additional funds being made available from the local authority's capital funds towards the library book fund. However, the authority is unable to provide this protection in 2015/16. Evaluation of the new library opening hours will be undertaken this year and proposals to reduce opening hours in the Conwy's libraries may be made, based on patterns of use.

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

13. As part of the Modernising Libraries Strategy, Conwy has been working to establish a community library model. Community libraries, the majority of which have been run by volunteers, have been established by a number of authorities in England. Many of these have failed, due partly to a lack of ongoing support and guidance.

14. With funding from CyMAL under the Inspiring Learning Grant Scheme, a Community Library Development Officer post was established to develop community libraries in Conwy. This post has assisted in the creation of steering groups in all five areas; development of project plans with each group; completion of Service Level Agreements and creation of robust business plans. The project end date is March 2015 and the groups are at varying stages of progress. Partnerships formed with a range of organisations as part of the project, eg Police, Town and Community Councils and Citizen's Advice Bureau, means that a range of provision will be available in community libraries in addition to library services.
15. It is our view that this model provides a coherent approach to rationalising services and a realistic opportunity for communities to be an integral part of retaining and indeed enhancing resources. However, it does require a lot of time to ensure that the model is sustainable in the future.
16. The use of volunteers has increased significantly in many services in England. Working with Corporate HR, Conwy has produced a volunteering policy and role descriptions, to be used at both area and community libraries, to provide added-value but not to undertake core library duties. Issues with regard to the use of volunteers include availability, turnaround of individuals and the hidden costs of engaging with volunteers.

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

17. As previously mentioned, libraries play a key role in numerous agendas. In addition to partnerships already mentioned, a significant amount of partnership work is being undertaken with public, private and community groups. For example within Conwy:
 - Work is on-going with Betsi Cadwaladr Health Care Trust to explore closer working links between Libraries and public health, Conwy Libraries are in partnership with The Readers Organisation a national charitable social enterprise committed to community and personal learning and wellbeing, and one of the senior Library Manager team is a member of the Operational Steering Group for the Macmillan Health and Wellbeing Information and Support Libraries Project.
 - Extensive partnerships have been established and enhanced with Communities First, Conwy Big Voice and the Youth Justice Service amongst others. These mean that we have established our status at the forefront of providing and discussing provision best suited to addressing poverty and related issues. We support young offenders who need to make better use of their spare time, improve employment prospects and become job ready. Those who struggle to identify and access appropriate services are signposted and additional services established based on research conducted within our spaces.
18. The concern for Conwy as for other library authorities is that the level of cuts proposed to local authority budgets will have a major effect on the ability of library services to contribute to these agendas.