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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Monmouthshire County Council



**Monmouthshire County Council's response to
The National Assembly for Wales' Communities, Equality and Local Government
Committee's request for views on public libraries**

- 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** In relation to libraries the following are highlighted within the Programme:
- Strengthening regional collaboration among publicly funded libraries.
 - Performance in the Welsh Public Library standards and performance indicators which monitor local authorities' efforts to meet national standards of service delivery and their statutory duties under the Public Libraries Act.
- 1.2** CyMAL Community Learning Libraries grant funding programme, supports local authorities to improve, modernise and develop local libraries in order to provide maximum benefit to residents through attracting increased visitors and use. Specifically, the Welsh Government measures for libraries are a) visitor numbers, to reflect access and participation, and b) number of libraries refurbished under the grant scheme. The Welsh Government has made good progress towards achieving these. Library visitor numbers per head of population in Wales have been consistently higher than those in England, and continue to increase, 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).
- 1.3** Elected members and officers recognise that Monmouthshire libraries play a key role in relation to Health; Supporting People; Poverty; Education and Rural Communities i.e. the major themes/chapters in the Programme for Government. There is great value in the partnership approach that has been developed between local and central government investment in improvements to public library services. The refurbishment of Monmouth and Chepstow libraries, made possible as a result of funding awarded from the CyMAL Community Learning Programme has made a much valued difference to local people's lives in Monmouthshire.

"I can't do without my books and I can't afford to buy them"
Gilwern Library customer comment

"It's all about creating an environment where people are comfortable talking about these things. Without the support through Macmillan, I wouldn't have passed on information to my cell-mate or even talked about these things."
Usk Prison Library

"We particularly appreciate the children's section. Bringing my daughter here every week from the earliest age sets the foundation for her to want to read and enjoy books"
Chepstow Library

"It is my magic carpet...you can never be blue with a library behind you!"
Abergavenny Library

- 1.4 The strength of South East Wales regional partnership working to sustain library services has delivered considerable advantages. The 10 library authorities within the region have maintained aspects of shared working post 1996 Local Government Reorganisation e.g. SET staff training and development group and more recently initiating and delivering priorities within the 3 year Regional Reading Strategy. These are just two examples that have been achieved by collaborating on submission of bids for various amounts of external funding. Grants from Welsh Government Inspiring Learning stream have enabled service improvements to take place at individual authority, regional and national levels.
- 1.5 Monmouthshire, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Newport and Torfaen have worked closely over the last two years developing a single Results Based Accountability scorecard to measure the performance of library services across the five counties and identify collaborative actions to improve performance. This partnership approach will undoubtedly help, as we respond to recommendations in the soon to be published 'Williams Report'.

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 and local authority agendas focus on the same aim – improving outcomes for residents of Wales – and therefore legislative and policy frameworks are geared to support delivery of this aim. Library services have a crucial role to play in this delivery, as outlined by the Minister, John Griffiths, in his statement on libraries on 3rd December 2013:

“In our Programme for Government, we rightly focus on tackling poverty and stimulating jobs and growth. Libraries are at the heart of this agenda. I intend to ensure that people all over Wales benefit from a strong, resilient library service, responsive to public need, well managed, demonstrating financial efficiency and professionally run. The people of Wales fought hard to establish a free library service; we must ensure that those values continue to underpin the library service of the future.”

- 2.2. As budget discussions progress, questions are being asked about exactly which elements of public library services are statutory responsibilities for local authorities within the broader definition of a comprehensive and efficient service referred to within the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. The act 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”. Welsh Government guidance on expectations would help to clarify responsibilities.
- 2.3. The current 'Libraries Inspire' strategy and previous strategies from 2002 have undoubtedly enabled public libraries across Wales to develop and improve. Welsh Public Library Standards provide a mechanism for measuring a “comprehensive and efficient service” ensuring that local authorities carry out their statutory responsibilities in the delivery of the core library service. This is evidenced within local Service Improvement Plans and Annual Library Reports to Welsh Government. Monitoring Monmouthshire Libraries' performance against set standards and indicators highlights an inconsistent pattern of improvements. More evaluation and analysis needs to be done to establish reasons for this.
- 2.4. As the authority strives to find ways to make savings; generate income; make improvements and invest in priority/front facing public services, elected members and senior officers remain optimistic that the library service will, in partnership with others, deliver on council priorities ensuring that targets will be met.
- 2.5. One area of concern is our ability to meet Framework 4 Standard 8. Monmouthshire achieves 8 (iii), the service falls short of reaching the remaining 2 out of 3 requirements. 8 (i) total staffing establishment levels shall not fall below 0.37 per 1,000 resident population - Monmouthshire currently has 0.34 per 1,000. 8 (ii) – Library authorities shall ensure that at least 23% of total staff shall be formally qualified in library and information studies/science. Monmouthshire has 20.3% (including the part time prison librarian who has no public library responsibilities). Achieving this standard will be further affected if the Corporate Proposal Mandate investigating combining libraries and one stop shop goes ahead in its present format. Quarter 3 reporting on the Library Service Improvement Plan will include an updated risk analysis.

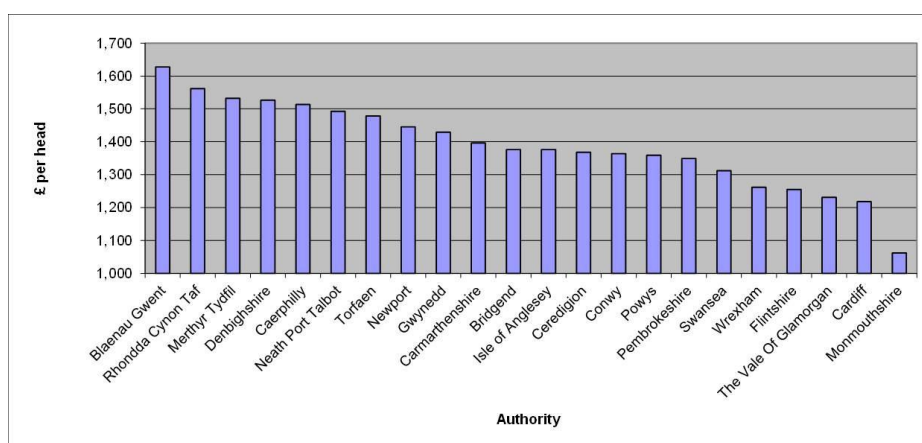
“In addition to carrying out their ‘traditional’ duties (which are of increased importance in a time of ‘austerity’) libraries are becoming increasingly important as a means for accessing information about, and applying for, benefits, particularly for many of the most vulnerable applicants. Applications for universal credit will have to be made online. There are still many people who do not have access to the internet at home and do not have the skills to complete online documentation, particularly given the complex nature of benefit applications. These vulnerable people will need not only access to computers in libraries but also staff assistance. It is therefore important not only that local libraries remain open but also that they have adequate staff to assist people as necessary”.

Caldicot Library

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

- 3.1. Acknowledging the huge challenges and taking into account the diminishing availability of public funding, our continuing partnership approach to service provision will be vital.

Revenue Support Grant per capita awarded to each local authority 2014/15



- 3.2 Building on improving ways of working by designing services around people, to help them live their own lives, forms a core part of Monmouthshire’s [‘Your County Your Way’](#).
- 3.3 In October 2013 elected members and officers consulted people throughout the county via a number of public meetings. As the council needs to save £9 million this coming year and £23 million over the next few years, views were sought on which services were important to individuals and local communities. These views have influenced budget preparations.
- 3.4 Following the feedback received, budget plans have been drawn up. There will be a second round of budget consultation meetings in January 2014. These will share information about ideas subsequently being put in place, and seek more detailed public views. One of the questions at these sessions will ask for views on the idea to include charging non-members to use the Internet/computers in libraries.
- 3.5 As part of the Your County, Your Way, Innovation Programme, designed to mitigate the impact of public sector cuts on local authority services, a small number of library staff took part in the intensive authority wide Intrapreneur School during 2014 and have been sharing and adopting new methodologies from this into existing working practices.
- 3.6 In October 2014, DNA, an external company, started work with library staff. This ramped up the existing focus on empowering frontline staff to contribute ideas to help find savings, generate income and make improvements. An evaluation of the impact that this work has had on staff, service delivery, savings and income generation will start in January 2014.

3.7 People in Monmouthshire are aware of the public survey being carried out as part of the National Assembly for Wales' short inquiry into public libraries in Wales and the accompanying Written Statement by the Welsh Government and proposed Review of Public Libraries to be completed by June 2014. CyMAL's role in extending the national debate on public libraries in addition to the support provided to local authorities would add consistency of approach across the country.

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

- 4.1** Greater co-operation between existing service providers and cross sector partners will improve outcomes for citizens. Working in partnership to offer library facilities from co-located service points and making asset savings by closing individual buildings, improves value for money from existing premises, whilst maximising the footfall for the benefit of all partners.
- 4.2** Further use of volunteers can enhance service delivery and add value. Keeping a watching brief on progress being made on this across the border, in Wales there is recognition that volunteers cannot be relied upon to provide the core service delivered by trained professionals. Increased costs in terms of recruitment, support, training and management are all determining factors in considering increased use of volunteers. Welsh Government, CyMAL, Society of Chief Librarians Wales (SCL) and CILIP Wales (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) all endorse the view that volunteers should be used to enhance services, not to replace them.
- 4.3** Monmouthshire are using the Arts Council England and Local Government: 'Community libraries, learning from experience - Summary briefing for local authorities' document published in January 2013 as we investigate alternative models of provision in Gilwern and Usk.
- 4.4** Library staff are investigating social enterprise models.

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

- 5.1** At current public consultation meetings the Leader and Chief Executive are stressing that the council is not looking to close any libraries in Monmouthshire but to work with others to sustain and improve the service. Elected members and officers recognise and value the contribution local public libraries make to key areas.
- 5.2** Learning - in supporting all kinds of informal study and learning and providing help for those completing formal qualifications.

"You helped me enormously, far more than I expected"
Monmouth Library

- 5.3** Reading and literacy - free access to a wealth of literature, stories that engage and excite, and books targeted at children, young people and adults (including those with poor literacy levels), e.g. Bookstart; weekly baby and toddler story and rhyme-times, developing opportunities to deliver improved and co-ordinated approach to schools and students with the local Schools Library Service, Six Book Challenge, annual themed Summer Reading Challenges, programmes of author visits and other holiday activities and events.

"Baby Rhyme-time saved my life!!"
Gilwern Library

"I love my library because I can read new books and the people are very friendly"
Joshua age 4 – Abergavenny Library

- 5.4** Community wellbeing - libraries are at the centre of local communities providing public spaces that are safe, neutral and welcoming for people - a meeting place for local groups; provision of community information and a wide range of activities and events for all ages.

"I can read the paper, have a chat, see my friends and choose my books"
Gilwern Library

"They are friendly, thoughtful and more helpful than they need to be. I always walk out feeling far better than when I walked in."
Abergavenny Library

- 5.5 CIPFA public library user surveys undertaken, on a three yearly basis to enable library authorities to comply with Welsh Government's annual reporting requirements, highlights the substantial value customers place on their local library. Both the adult and children and young people's surveys are due to be completed in 2014.
- 5.6 Skills and economic regeneration – libraries help to stimulate the local economy by providing opportunities for skills and workforce development. Channelling residents to make use of local shops and businesses. Evaluation of CyMAL's 'Libraries for Life' Strategy in 2011 concluded that for every £1 invested in a refurbished public library in one South Wales authority, £3.24 was returned to the community.
- 5.7 Government and democratic processes - providing information about and access to Welsh Government and local council and councillors via details of consultation and committee meetings, agendas and minutes.
- 5.8 Digital inclusion and participation – supporting residents to get online using free broadband enabled internet access in all libraries. This includes 'Get Monmouthshire Online' aiming to increase people's awareness of work related information and benefits including Universal Credit and Job Match.

On writing a CV: "That is really helpful; I was panicking as I need it tomorrow"
Usk Library

- 5.9 Cultural identity – heritage, place and language. In recent years local libraries and museums have provided opportunities to combine together to improve our reach into the community e.g. Monmouthpedia and CLOCH projects.

"Chepstow library is attractive and friendly. The main asset is however, the staff, who go to great lengths to ensure that needs are met – they respond to all requests and enquiries. For me it has become the cultural focus"
Chepstow Library

- 5.10 Health and wellbeing activities encouraging citizen's to 'help themselves' fits in particularly well with Monmouthshire's Adult Social Care and Health Service '[Designing our services around People](#)' where we talk directly to people and put their ideas into action.

"The library is my lifesaver. The people who work here are marvellous. My husband died a year ago. The kindness and helpfulness of the staff have helped me through my grief. I read about three books a week"
Caldicot Library

The Book Prescription Wales partnership with local GP's; Monmouthshire's Macmillan project and partnership with the [Health Promotion Library/Public Health Wales](#) (pages 36 and 37) all link with this approach; Reading groups throughout the county take place in libraries and also in community settings.

- 5.11 Library services are free at point of delivery and offer equality and inclusiveness to all ages and abilities. The Society of Chief Librarians (Wales) has recently produced a report looking at the contribution of public libraries across the country in combatting child poverty. Knowledge and understanding of those who may be disadvantaged due to economic situations or social backgrounds e.g. Partnership work with Monmouthshire's Befriending Team to combat loneliness and isolation.

"The bookman is a lifeline for me. I look forward to each visit"

"A wonderful service for me. I am 95 and I love my books"

"This Service must continue for people like me who love reading but can't get out"
Home Delivery

January 2014