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National Assembly for Wales

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into: Public Libraries

Response from: Gwynedd Council

*This was received in the medium of Welsh and translated by the Assembly Commission*

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**Inquiry into Public Libraries**

**The Response of Gwynedd 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 Welsh Government commitments in relation to libraries are outlined in the strategic document published by CyMAL – ‘Libraries Inspire: The strategic development framework for Welsh libraries 2012-16’. This document is used to drive and communicate the work of the Public Libraries Service in Gwynedd in parallel with the service’s contribution to the strategic aims of Gwynedd Council.

In particular, progress has been made in the three areas outlined in brief below:-

### **1.1.1 Library Buildings**

Through CyMAL’s Community Learning Libraries grant programme, which supports local authorities to improve, modernise and develop local libraries to provide the greatest benefit to residents by attracting visitors and users, it was possible to renovate library buildings.

- Between 2008 and 2013, 5 libraries were renovated in Gwynedd (Caernarfon, Barmouth, Dolgellau, Nevin and Tywyn) with evidence that the work has contributed to an increase in use, or that numbers have been maintained, over a period of time and has facilitated collaboration with community groups.

### **1.1.2 Library Standards**

Public libraries are a statutory duty, and local authorities are required to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ service. As a devolved field, the level of library service provision has been defined by the Welsh Government since 2002. This is done within the ‘Welsh Public Library Standards’ framework, which is reviewed every three years by

CyMAL on the Welsh Government's behalf in consultation with the sector and the Welsh Local Government Association, amongst others. The current framework will remain in effect until March 2014, and the authority's performance is reported to the Welsh Government on an annual basis, along with an assessment of the authority's progress.

- The latest assessment of Gwynedd's performance against the Welsh Public Library Standards notes that the authority 'is now achieving 8 of the 9 Welsh Public Library Standards... [and] is partly achieving the requirements of [another]'. In comparison, the other authorities in Wales are reaching 6 Standards on average for the period 2012-13; the highest number was 8 and the lowest was 3. Gwynedd's performance is, therefore, above average as compared to the rest of Wales.

### **1.1.3 Collaboration in Partnership**

The support of the Welsh Government through the work of CyMAL is crucial to strengthen regional collaboration among libraries in every sector (public, academic, health and the specialised sector). Particular progress was made by the North Wales Library Partnership in the fields of promoting public access to the resources of every library and improving training opportunities for staff to try and ensure the best possible support for library users:-

- The 'LINC y Gogledd' scheme for borrowing arrangements between libraries in North Wales. There was an increase in the number of applications for resources and feedback from the public on the arrangements is very positive.
- The Partnership arranges a programme for staff across all sectors to develop skills, including a recent programme of information literacy training that contributes to the Welsh Government's digital inclusion agenda.

1.2 With regard to the sustainability of the activity noted above, it is difficult to foresee that there will be any significant increase in the current climate. At best, there will be restriction of the Library Service's budget, with substantial cuts possible.

- There has already been restriction of capital expenditure in relation to libraries, and restriction of the authority's ability to take advantage of the building improvement grant programme. We do not foresee that this situation will improve, but the intention is to improve the provision in one community over the next three years with the development of a new school in Bala.
- Gwynedd's performance in responding to the needs of the Library Standards has consistently been good, with progress made over the period of each framework. However, with the restrictions on the Library Service's budget, there is a strong

possibility that the authority's performance will suffer, impacting on the high satisfaction rates of Service users.

- As budgets shrink, decreased expenditure on staff, particularly professional staff, is likely to impact on the scope and intensity of the regional collaboration work, despite the need for this work being greater. Forming partnerships takes time, but there is also a need to prioritise day-to-day front-line duties.
- Despite the Library Service's contribution to the Council's objectives, the role that public libraries have to play in relation to key local action points is not acknowledged. This role needs to be acknowledged when focusing on local priorities and acknowledged more widely when taking action on national policy areas to raise awareness of the value of public libraries to individuals and local communities.

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 Providing a public library service is a duty on a local authority under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. This legislation places a duty on the Welsh Government to "to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities in... Wales, and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries conferred on them as library authorities by or under this Act [or under the Government of Wales Act 2006]".

2.2 The nature of authorities' provision of services is defined and reviewed under the Welsh Government's Public Library Standards framework, and improvement and promotion are supported via the development strategies, including the current strategy, 'Libraries Inspire'. Certainly, the Libraries Strategy and the Development Strategy have made a significant contribution to the consistency and quality of library services across Wales. This is clear from the high user satisfaction levels regarding public library services.

2.3 A consultation is currently underway for the Standards framework from April 2014 onwards. There is, certainly, a need for an amended framework that defines what is required from local authorities in fulfilling their duties to provide public library services. Indeed, the Welsh Government and individual local authorities could be open to legal challenge if no framework were to emerge after a period of twelve years with provision of this kind in place; we are certain of this.

2.4. It is clear that the new Library Standards framework needs to reflect the current reality with regard to financial circumstances, which is likely to see a significant decrease in public spending. However, there is a significant risk in setting the amended standards so that they fit the expected level of spending, rather than reflecting what is needed to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service. The standards should concentrate more on what library services are expected to deliver for citizens, rather than on inputs into the service, so that there is then freedom for individual authorities to decide on the best way of delivering locally.

- 2.5 The current intention to benchmark based on the lowest quartile could lead to a significant decrease in library staff, lending stock and space available in buildings – elements that are crucial to the quality of library services.
- 2.6 The consultation process on the Standards for 2014-17 has highlighted the need to pay attention to outputs and effects, namely focusing on ensuring that users reap the benefits of using Library Services and on measuring those benefits. It must be noted that the majority of outputs cannot be achieved without the crucial input of staff (including staff to supervise and support any volunteers providing some additional services).
- 2.7 In preparing the finalised Standards framework, it must be ensured that expectations regarding outputs and effects do not appear to be substantial while ‘inputs’, such as spending on resources and staff, are decreased over the coming period. It is highly unlikely that library services can be ‘comprehensive and efficient’, especially if the benchmark for standards is too low. Challenging benchmarks can promote efficiency, assuming that the level of use continues to be the same or increases. However, efficiency does not necessarily promote quality.

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

3.1. Gwynedd is already in the process of completing a full review of Library Services, attempting to develop a pattern and a method of providing the service in future. In trying to mitigate the effects of budget restrictions, the authority intends to look at co-locating libraries, collaborating with communities and supporting work in partnership:-

- A number of libraries in Gwynedd are already co-located with other Council services (for example, Neuadd Dwyfor in Pwllheli) or community organisations (for example, Antur Nantlle in Penygroes). Our intention is to look at other opportunities to co-locate libraries where it is of benefit to the service and the people of Gwynedd.
- In reviewing the Library Service, it was noted that libraries are used by some users within a relatively restricted catchment area. We intend to collaborate with a range of community groups to try and ensure the viability of these libraries by looking at using volunteers. Since 1996, the Service has been working in partnership with authorities in Conwy and Anglesey to provide a Libraries Unit that undertakes and supports a number of libraries’ back-office and computer functions. The intention is to extend this arrangement through collaboration with other authorities in north Wales (see 4.3).

3.2 A library authority is required to be ‘efficient’ as part of its statutory duties, and the Library Service in Gwynedd has been consistently active in ensuring best value and efficiency savings for a number of years. It must be noted that, in terms of the authority’s total budget, the Library Service represents less than 1% of total expenditure.

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

4.1 With the increasing use of the latest technology and an accompanying change in public expectations, the authority needs to be clear about what libraries offer to the people of Gwynedd. As this period of transition unfolds, with *greater provision of virtual resources*, space

in libraries may be released for promotional activities to draw attention to what is available digitally and to facilitate access to this provision.

- 4.2 A report on alternative management structures for library services in the region has been commissioned with funding from CyMAL. The report recommends the creation of a *Regional Library Service in North Wales*. We need to revisit this following the announcement on council reorganisation.
- 4.3 We intend to continue with the integration of the computer system of the North Wales Library Service with a newly developed Library Management System (LMS). We also note that a merged Library Unit can continue as result of creating a regional LMS, and to offer this system to other authorities in Wales. A joint procurement process for LMS is moving forward, and the tender for the first step will be announced soon through the new National Procurement Service for Wales. Financial support for this first step will be co-ordinated by CyMAL on the Welsh Government's behalf, and its implementation will fulfil recommendation 18 of the Simpson report (*Welsh Government, 2011*).

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

- 5.1 In reviewing the Library Service in Gwynedd and planning for the next period, the service is considering the following 'library offers' in four key areas that library users, and our partners, see as being an inextricable part of a modern public library service.

### **5.1.1 The Digital Offer**

- It is acknowledged that the development of digital services, skills and access is a major component of a modern library service, and supports the other elements on offer.

### **5.1.2 The Information Offer**

- Libraries have a role in supporting people in accessing information and services online to assist with essential matters such as careers, employment, health, personal finance and benefits. Assisting people in this regard is central to this offer.

### **5.1.3 The Health and Wellbeing Offer**

- We note the contribution of libraries to the health and wellbeing of local communities, including Books on Prescription for Adults and Children, a Home Service for people with disabilities and vulnerable people and the Macmillan scheme for information and advice on cancer and chronic illness.

- 5.1.4 The Reading Offer:** reading services are offered and promoted in libraries. There is public demand for a *lively and attractive* reading offer, such as reading groups, campaigns and author events. In addition to public engagement opportunities, there is provision for specific audiences such as children and families and the blind and partially blind.

Concluding Remarks

We welcome the interest of the Communities, Equality and Local Government in Wales's Public Library Services. Public libraries have an important role to play in the community, and an important contribution to make to principles of equality – and do so as one of local government's smallest services.