

Expert Review of Public Libraries in Wales

Call for evidence - Summary of responses

1. Introduction

The then Minister for Natural Resources, Culture and Sport (Minister) announced an Expert review of Public Libraries in Wales in a Written Statement to the National Assembly of Wales. The review was undertaken by a small reference panel (Panel) chaired by Claire Creaser, Director LISU, Loughborough University. The other panel members were Professor Hywel Roberts, Dr Steve Davies, Cardiff University, and Peter Gomer, a Policy Officer at the Welsh Local Government Association.

The Panel issued a call for evidence on 13 May with the closing date for contributions on 20 June 2014. The Panel invited responses to the following questions:

- What services should public libraries provide in the future to meet the changing needs of the people of Wales?
- What should be the roles and functions of the public library workforce in the future?
- How can libraries in Wales work together in the future to offer an efficient and effective library service on a local, regional and national basis.
- Do we require a new legislative framework and/or delivery model for public library services in Wales?
- Any other comments?

The call for evidence was publicised via e-mail and social media to a range of stakeholders. 42 responses were received to the call for evidence from a range of stakeholders:

Sector	Number of responses
National libraries	1
Public libraries / local authorities	6
Public funded bodies	5
Professional associations / groups	5
Third sector / other interest groups	9
Trade unions	1
Library professionals	9
Members of the public	6

The call for evidence was publicised via a press release, e-mail to a range of stakeholders identified in the communication plan, promoted on library discussion lists and social media.

The Panel would like to thank all individuals, institutions and organisation that have taken time to respond to this call for evidence. Your input is invaluable and has been considered as part of the review.

As part of the call for evidence, two regional meetings for public library / local authority representatives were held on 17 and 20 June 2014 in Llanelli and Llandudno Junction respectively. Forty three (43) individuals attended the two events.

In addition, correspondence on public libraries from members of the public and library support groups to the then Minister for Natural Resources, Culture and Sport and CyMAL was summarised and considered by the Panel.

The summary of responses is structured around the main sections of the 5 questions issued by the Panel. A small number of general responses to the call of evidence were received and the comments have been considered under the relevant question.

2. Summary of responses

2.1 What services should public libraries provide in the future to meet the changing needs of the people of Wales?

The majority of responses underlined that public libraries should continue to deliver on their core roles that have been central to their services since their inception over 150 years ago. Public libraries should provide:

- **free local access** to resources and information in various formats to meet the diverse needs of the public
- safe and neutral space at the heart of communities
- knowledgeable staff to assist users
- a range of free activities in libraries and in the communities
- a venue for partners to deliver services.

Members of the public, in particular, underlined the importance of public libraries in developing children's literacy and noted their concerns on the impact of public library closures on children's literacy levels. The need for close co-operation between schools, school library services and public libraries was mentioned.

The main change in the last decade outlined was the increasing provision of free online services, Wi-Fi and assisted access to PCs and the Internet. The need to develop improved online services available 24/7 was highlighted whilst also maintaining the balance with the more traditional library services.

The response clearly indicated that public libraries contribute to local authority and Welsh Government priorities by promoting:

- literacy
- lifelong learning
- information literacy
- digital inclusion
- employment
- social inclusion
- community cohesion
- health and well-being
- Welsh language and literature
- promoting culture and heritage e.g. Local History Collections.

The examples outlined above help tackle poverty and enrich people's lives.

The role of public libraries in providing access and support for people to use services such as Universal Jobmatch and Universal Credit, which will be primarily delivered online, was highlighted.

Concerns were expressed regarding future library service provision in rural areas as a result of the reduction in mobile library service provision.

2.2 What should be the role and functions of the public library workforce in the future?

The responses highlighted the important role of a skilled workforce in delivering the services and activities outlined in 2.1. Respondents highlighted the role of the skilled staff in providing assistance to the public in using computers and the Internet, promoting reading for enjoyment and literacy, signposting and providing information. The increasing role of library staff as educators and engaging with the community was mentioned. The Society of Chief Librarians Wales provided quotes underlining the value library users place on the library staff. However, concern was expressed regarding the current low level of library staffing compared to the Welsh Public Library Standards indicators and the impact that this would have on services.

In order to maintain the skills of library staff, the need to develop a clear career path for staff and a workforce development/training programme was outlined. The continued need for the regional training programme was noted. In particular the need to develop staff's confidence and knowledge in using the latest technology and engaging with the local community was noted.

There was the recognition of the increasing role of volunteers in contributing to the delivery of public library services. The respondents noted that there was a need to develop the contribution of volunteers in a carefully managed way following guidance from organisations such as the Wales Council for Voluntary Action. The preferred model outlined was for volunteers to work in partnership with local authority library services and staff and not to replace public library staff. The need to invest in developing a training programme for volunteer managers and the volunteers themselves was highlighted. Also the potential proactive role of 'Friends of the Library' groups in supporting the delivery of public library services, e.g. raising funding, was mentioned.

2.3 How can libraries in Wales work together in the future to offer an efficient and effective library service on a local, regional and national basis?

The responses highlighted the excellent progress made in Wales in recent years in developing and promoting collaboration between public libraries, other types of libraries and other services including:

- regional partnerships
- national procurement of books and e-resources
- interlending
- audience development
- staff training
- subject / staff specialisation e.g. collections / children's services
- cross-sectoral access agreements to improve public access to collections

- co-location
- literacy agencies
- employment agencies
- lifelong learning agencies
- Communities 2.0.

In addition to developing the above collaboration, the responses also highlighted the need for significant further collaboration to create more sustainable public library services such as developing:

- a library management system for Wales
- shared skills across local authority boundaries
- shared back-office functions
- a digital library / online services
- community managed / supported libraries
- new innovative ways of delivering core services.

2.4 Do we require a new legislative framework and/or delivery model for public library services in Wales?

Respondents emphasised the importance of the statutory nature of public library services. There was support for considering a new library Act for Wales that would need to reflect the more holistic role of public library services in the 21st century. However there was greater support from the public library sector, especially in the seminars, to make the Welsh Public Library Standards statutory guidance to be used alongside the existing 1964 Act to help define a “comprehensive and efficient” public library service. The lack of clarity regarding what is meant by “comprehensive and efficient” was highlighted as an issue especially in planning future service provision especially in these difficult economic times.

Respondents noted that the Welsh Public Library Standards have been an important catalyst for improving and ensuring greater equality of access to public library services across Wales. Respondents also wanted greater clarity regarding any Ministerial intervention as a result of failure to meet the Standards, e.g. if the local authority library service failed to achieve a minimum number of Standards.

Responses showed an increasing support, compared to the Libraries Inspire strategy public consultation, for some form of national public library service for Wales. The range of suggestions included:

- a national public library service for Wales, e.g. similar to Libraries NI in Northern Ireland; or
- a national co-ordinating body with local/regional delivery of public library services.

2.5 Any other comments?

Both the public users and library partner organisations were very complimentary of the services and support provided by public libraries.

Members of the public highlighted the impact of public library closures on their family and community. A range of negative impacts were highlighted included children’s literacy, lifelong

learning, digital inclusion and tackling poverty. The impact of reduced level of mobile library provision in rural areas was also highlighted.

Respondents highlighted that the overall current costs of providing a public library was a very low percentage of overall local authority expenditure and that public library services are already very efficient.

A number of representatives of community groups called for assistance in developing community managed libraries and one called for them to be afforded the same status as local authority managed libraries...

3. Next Steps

The Panel has considered this evidence in preparing their final report presented to the then Minister for Natural Resources, Culture and Sport in August. It is proposed to start implementing aspects of the report as part of the Welsh Government's current library development strategy *Libraries Inspire*. The report will also be published in full in October and CyMAL are inviting comments which will also form part of the development a new library strategy to succeed *Libraries Inspire* in 2016. Please send any comments to Janet Lewis (janet.lewis@wales.gsi.gov.uk) at CyMAL.