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Venue: National Assembly for Wales

The National Library of Wales: a briefing paper

1 The National Library of Wales: the basics

The *mission* of the National Library, derived from its founding authority, the Royal Charter, is 'to collect, preserve and give access to recorded knowledge, in all documentary forms, with an especial emphasis on the intellectual record of Wales, for the benefit of all engaged in research and learning, or with other information needs'. The Library has an obvious *cultural* role, but is also Wales's pre-eminent *information* institution (in large part because of its 'legal deposit' status in the case of printed material).

The Library's *users* are many and varied. About 70,000 people a year come to its building in Aberystwyth, to study and research, to visit exhibitions, to participate in educational activities, and to attend conferences, seminars and other events. The building is open to all citizens, and the Library's core services are free at the point of use. Many more people experience the Library at a distance: by means of touring exhibitions, but pre-eminently via the internet: 200,000 users a year use the Library's website¹, for information and increasingly for materials (through digitisation).

The Library has five *core functions*: collecting; preserving; giving access and information; publicising and interpreting; and, professional collaboration.

At the heart of the Library are its *collections*, which are unusually wide in the range of media represented: books and other printed material; microforms; manuscripts and archives; maps; pictures and photographs; sound and moving images; and electronic material. (A major review of collections policy is under way.)

The Library was established as a Royal Charter body in 1907. It is also a registered charity. It is *governed* by a Court of Governors and a Council (see 3 below). As an Assembly Sponsored Public Body it is supervised by the National Assembly through a range of mechanisms: the Management Statement and Financial Memorandum; the annual Remit Letter; the annual submission of a three-year Corporate Plan and a one-year Operational Plan; regular meetings with the Minister, the Culture Committee and civil servants; and financial scrutiny by the Assembly and the National Audit Office.

¹ <http://www.llgc.org.uk>

Most of the Library's *income* comes from the National Assembly (£9.3m in 2002-03), supplemented from private funds – the product of gifts and bequests by people feeling a strong affinity with the Library (£1.5m), income from fees and charges, and grants from other bodies. The largest part of *expenditure* is devoted to the 271 staff (= 256 fte); other funds support collection building, capital maintenance and development, and other purposes.

The Library's *staff* includes librarians, archivists, art experts, conservationists, digitisers and other specialists. A major structural reorganisation in 2002 created three main Departments: Collection Services, Public Services and Corporate Services.

Since its major public consultation exercise in 1999 ('Choosing the future'²) the Library has concentrated its *development strategy* on improving access to its building, collections and services: on transforming itself from what was often seen as a remote or elitist resource into one that is relevant, interesting and exciting to many more people, in Wales and throughout the world. This ambition, pursued chiefly through the new visitor centre (the 'Open Library' initiative) and through the development of online electronic services (the 'Digital Library' initiative), meshes with the National Assembly's concerns for social inclusion, educational improvement and ICT development.³

2 Three achievements

2.1 The National Screen and Sound Archive

In April 2001 the National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales (NSSAW) was formed. It was the product of a partnership between the National Library and Sgrîn: Media Agency for Wales. It brought together two previously separate collections, the Library's Sound and Moving Image Collection and Sgrîn's Wales Film and Television Archive. The Library manages the Archive on behalf of both institutions.

NSSAW has gone from strength to strength in its brief life to date. Its rich collection of films, videos, television and radio broadcasts and sound recordings has benefited from organisational integration. More resources have been devoted to their preservation and cataloguing. A website has been developed⁴. Publicity and marketing have also improved markedly. One of the Archive's most important activities - bringing films from the collection for showings in local communities throughout Wales – has been strengthened.

New offices, an information point, and viewing and listening facilities were opened in January 2003, as part of phase 1 of the new visitor centre. They have been very well received. In Spring 2004, the new auditorium will be

² http://www.llgc.org.uk/adrodd/adrodd_s_papymg.pdf

³ For more details see Andrew Green, 'Digital library, open library: developments in the National Library of Wales', *Alexandria*, 14(3), 2002, p. 161-70.

⁴ <http://screenandsound.llgc.org.uk/>

opened, and for the first time group showings of films and other events will be possible in the Library.

2.2 *The visitor centre*

The construction of the new visitor centre⁵ has now reached its half way stage. When complete in January 2004, the centre will change the very nature of the Library. As well as appealing to researchers, students and other individual users of the collections, we shall be able to attract many more school, college and community groups, lifelong learners, tourists, and others interested in the cultural heritage of Wales.

Phase 1 construction was completed last month. A new restaurant, shop, reception area and education rooms are open, and, like the NSSAW accommodation, have proved highly successful. Other areas have yet to be fully fitted out: the 'Peniarth Room' (for substantial temporary exhibitions, and enhanced by electronic 'jukeboxes' and plasma screens), and the 'World of the Book', a display illustrating the development of the printed word in Wales, with as its centrepiece a large working hand press.

At the beginning of January construction work started on Phase 2. As well as the 100-seat auditorium, which will be used by external bodies and community groups as well as by the Library, there will be a jewel-like 'sensitive materials' area for exhibiting hard-to-display items from the collections.

2.3 *Digitisation*

Just as important as improving physical access is developing remote services, especially over the Web. One of the most powerful means of delivering information remotely is by digitisation – the translation of analogue originals into digital copies, directly accessible online, which may make a visit to Aberystwyth redundant. Within three years the Library has built one of the leading digitisation operations in the UK, and mounted on its website⁶ a large and varied array of digitised material – manuscripts, books, photographs, paintings and other items – of use to a wide variety of people, including learners, researchers, and family and local historians.

The Library has also played a leading role in 'Gathering the Jewels'⁷. Financed by the New Opportunities Fund, this cultural digitisation project (2001-03), which is housed in the National Library, is innovative in its all-Wales scale and in its bringing together of almost all the archives, museums and libraries in Wales in a single collaborative venture. The product and aims of 'Gathering the Jewels' will be continued within the new Assembly-funded programme 'Culturenet Cymru', which will also be located in the Library from April 2003.

⁵ http://www.llgc.org.uk/dacy/dacy_s006.htm

⁶ See the 'Digital Mirror' area of the website: http://www.llgc.org.uk/drych/index_s.htm

⁷ <http://www.gtj.org.uk>

The Library's website is also the medium or gateway for other online services, including an enquiry service, catalogues and lists of the collections, a sub-site for schools (about to be launched), and the directory of Wales-related websites 'Wales on the Web'⁸.

3 Two ambitions (and more)

The Library is aware that it has only begun the processes begun four years ago with 'Choosing the Future'. We have plans and ambitions to extend what has been achieved so far, to advance the Library's overall strategy and the Assembly's own objectives.

3.1 The Family and Community History Centre

We know that one of the largest and most active markets the Library has, in Wales and abroad, is that of family and local historians. Outline plans exist for the establishment of a Family and Community History Centre. This would have a twin existence: a real area within the Library, where readers would be able to research, with the assistance of expert staff, using the vast published and unpublished resources available; and a large reservoir of digital archival data, searchable online, based on relevant material in the Library's collections.

A feasibility study is planned, in collaboration with the Wales Tourist Board. No funds have yet been identified to set the Centre in motion (once established it could generate income to support its maintenance and development).

3.2 Electronic publications and archives

There is another category of digital material: 'born digital', which never existed originally in non-digital form. This is now proliferating. Electronic periodicals (and books), databases and websites are being published, often without printed equivalent, by a huge number of bodies and individuals. Unpublished 'electronic archives' are now common. Welsh (and in some cases UK) born-digital material of these kinds needs to be selected, acquired, stored and made available by the Library, if it is to continue to represent the intellectual output of Wales and beyond.

The Library has made a start in this area of digital archiving by acquiring digital publications, archiving websites and devising systems for storing electronic archives. At a UK level, a government-backed private member's bill, currently before Parliament, aims to extend legal deposit to cover non-print (essentially electronic) published material: if this becomes law it will extend significantly the Library's role.

3.3 And many others ...

⁸ <http://www.walesontheweb.org>

There is a large agenda of intentions and ambitions beyond these two. Many of these are contained in the recommendations of the **Quinquennial Review** (2002). Among the plans to be realised during the next period will be:

- reforming the Library's system of governance (Court and Council)
- improving the Library's profile and level of outreach activity
- filling gaps in funding provision, and diversifying sources of income
- introducing a new rolling programme of 'service improvement' (best value) reviews of all activities
- preparing for a new, unified automated system for collections management
- achieving the aims of Culturenet Cymru, Archives Network Wales, Newsplan, Wales on the Web, and other collaborative enterprises in which the Library has a leading part.

4 Three questions

Although the main lines of Library's strategic future may seem reasonably clear, there are still many uncertainties and challenges yet to be faced. Three questions are identified here. They are real and difficult questions for the Library, and are presented to the Committee for its consideration.

Q1 How can the Library do much more to open its resources to users, in Wales and beyond?

We have taken our first steps to extending access, through the visitor centre, the development of digital services, increased exhibition activity, and so on.

But there are - and will be continue to be - severe constraints on what we can do. For example, we cannot lend the majority of our printed material (the legal deposit items), because of our obligation to preserve it. It is unlikely that much born-digital material acquired under extended legal deposit will be viewable outside the building (online). Progress on digitisation is hampered by the fact that rights to reproduce and display in-copyright material on the website are hard to obtain (at least cheaply). We have only one building, in Aberystwyth, and so lack a presence or window on the Library in other parts of Wales. And funding constraints mean that we have not yet found a way of scaling up activities like digitisation, retrospective online catalogue provision, and educational services to the level that we - and our users - would wish.

Ingenuity and perseverance will be needed to overcome these barriers in the years ahead.

Q2 How can the Library best pursue collaboration and partnership with other bodies to mutual advantage?

The Library has always been an instinctive co-operator. Our fifth core function is 'professional collaboration', and links with libraries, archives, museums and other cognate institutions, in Wales and beyond, have been strong.

The establishment of CyMAL: Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales, from April 2004, will mark a watershed in the coordination of policy in these areas. The Library looks forward to working closely with CyMAL (a shared location in Aberystwyth will help). It is likely that our role as a leader will be modified by the advent of CyMAL, but how remains to be seen.

Ways in which we cooperate with our sister organisation, the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, will need to be reviewed.

In recent years links have been made beyond our immediate professional circles. A good example is Cymru'n Creu (from which Culturenet Cymru sprang). However, much work remains to be done to forge effective links with relevant bodies, such as the Welsh Development Agency, ELWa and the Tourist Board.

Other questions include: how do we prioritise between potential collaborators, when our resources are limited? and, in which areas is collaboration likely to be most fruitful?

Q3 How will the Library be able to fund and sustain the kind of extended role its strategy proposes?

It is clear that extra resources will be needed to fund new developments. In addition, existing sources are under pressure. The level of Grant-in-Aid from the National Assembly over the next three years is static or falling in real terms. The Library's private funds have been reduced by expenditure on the visitor centre and stock market falls. Pressure on the Library's pension fund will increase in the years ahead.

The Library is doing its best to attack this problem. The visitor centre and the development of e-commerce facilities should offer opportunities for increased income. A strategy for attracting donations and sponsorship is in preparation, and several specific initiatives are already in operation. We are looking again at trying to secure large-scale grants (eg from Objective One), in collaboration with other organisations.

It is not only a funding challenge. Staff resources are also critical to serving changing demands: existing staff need to be prepared and assisted to take on new roles and work in new ways, and new kinds of staff recruited in areas new to the Library's current collection of skills.

All active organisations find that ambitions outstrip the capacity to sustain them. But we believe that the Library's potential to contribute to Wales's future is so large that both the Library and its sponsors have a duty to search out opportunities to locate enabling resources.

Andrew M.W. Green
Librarian
10 February 2003