

THE CASE FOR BETTER FUNDING FOR THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF WALES: SUBMISSION BY NATIONAL LIBRARY TRADE UNIONS TO THE SENEDD PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Role of the National Library

The National Library of Wales (NLW) is one of the core symbols of Welsh nationhood. One of six legal deposit libraries in Britain and Ireland, the National Library is the repository of the nation's documentary heritage holding a huge variety of material related to Welsh history and culture including over 6 million books and newspapers, 1,900 cubic meters of archives, 40,000 manuscripts, 1.5 million maps, 950,000 photographs, 60,000 artworks, 7 million feet of film and 150,000 sound recordings. Access to this material is free with a reader's ticket, which is available free to anyone over the age of 16.

As the repository of the nation's documentary heritage, the Library plays an important role in providing access to materials that are vital to understanding Welsh history and culture. By providing free access to this material the Library plays an important social and educational role in providing some of the poorest communities in Wales with access not only to Welsh cultural, political and intellectual traditions, but through its wider legal deposit collections to cultural, political and intellectual traditions from across the world.

Background to the National Library's Financial Crisis

The current financial crisis at the National Library is a direct result of over a decade of underfunding and austerity. As noted in last year's Welsh Government-commissioned Tailored Review of the Library, the Library's budget has fallen 40% in real terms since 2008. This situation has been further exacerbated by the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the Library only receiving £50K in emergency funding once the £200K cut from the Library budget at the start of the pandemic is taken into consideration. The number of staff employed at the Library has also been impacted by this reduction in the budget, falling by 24% between 2008 and 2019, from 290 to 221 (FTE).

Implications of not providing extra funding to the National Library

The first effect of not receiving adequate funding will be that approximately 30 people lose their jobs, that is potentially 30 families losing a, or in some cases their sole, wage-earner. Given the current financial situation these people are unlikely to find other employment and many are likely to be thrown into poverty.

Chronic underfunding of the Library has gradually eaten away at the institutions ability to carry out its work at the same time the volume and breadth of work to be done has increased. This has resulted in the Library trying to spread itself ever more thinly to achieve its aims. The point has now been reached where further cuts will mean that major areas of the Library's work will have to cease altogether.

The Library will lose its dedicated desk and enquires teams, the work will be passed on to other staff in curatorial departments. The result will be an enormous loss of experience and expertise and an increased workload for the staff who are left, who, in many cases, do not have the training or experience to carry out these new tasks.

In addition, the two current reading room services (already cut from 4) are to be amalgamated to just one. This may result in readers having more difficulty accessing some types of material, especially large items. There are also proposals to limit access through a booking system, which would severely curtail the opportunities of ordinary people to view our nation's heritage. This would be a very retrograde step after the Library has spent the last 30 years trying to provide wider access to the people of Wales.

A further effect will be that the curatorial staff will no longer have time to carry out their current duties of acquisition and cataloguing. Acquisitions of analogue materials are to be cut by 40% and much cataloguing work will cease completely. This will result in items which should be preserved for the nation being lost forever and even those items which find safety in the Library will not be available to the public as they are not catalogued. The Library will become a warehouse, its collections untended and ignored.

Much has been made of digital transformation, and that this will make up for loss of access in other areas. However, this is simply not true some 95% of the Library's collections are not digitised and even born-digital items received under Legal Deposit can only be viewed in the Library under current legislation. In order to increase digitisation of analogue collections the Library would require more staff not less and with curatorial staff burdened with the work of the desk and enquiries staff they will not have time to select items for digitisation or prepare the metadata necessary to make digitised items available.

The cuts being faced by the Library are so drastic as to put its future viability in question. The remaining staff will be over-burdened with work, recruiting will remain difficult due to uncompetitive wages, outreach work will lessen and access to collections become more difficult. It is very likely that the new structure will result in a complete collapse in the core functions of the Library in the near future.

Implications for the Ceredigion area

The National Library is one of the few Welsh Government bodies which is situated outside the south-east of Wales and is a major employer in rural Wales. It is also one of the largest workplaces in Wales where Welsh is the main language of the workplace. However, with huge cuts to staff numbers, and with few alternative jobs available in the cultural and heritage sector, it is possible that we will see further rural depopulation, with Welsh-speaking former staff with families moving away, possibly out of Wales altogether. This will

impact negatively on the Welsh Government's target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050, as well as having a large negative impact on the already fragile local economy.

Impact of redundancies on staff

Without an increase in the National Library's revenue budget, staff at the Library are facing the loss of 30 jobs under the restructuring plans put forward by Library management or 13% of the current staffing level (FTE). On top of the 69 jobs lost between 2008 and 2019, these new job losses will mean that the Library will have lost just under a hundred jobs in 13 years. Those whose jobs are now under threat face the prospect of being made unemployed at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The economic impact of the pandemic, as well as the nature of the Covid-19 restrictions, means that these staff face a particularly difficult time finding alternative employment, especially finding similar level jobs in Ceredigion. Being made redundant is distressing even under normal circumstances, facing such a life-changing setback during a global pandemic is unconscionable.

It is clear from the Library's proposed restructuring plans, that the loss of 30 jobs will also increase workloads for the remaining staff as duties such as manning the desks in the reading room, answering enquiries, marketing and education are incorporated into already busy workloads. Morale amongst staff, already at an all-time low, will take another hit as the remaining staff see beloved colleagues, many with many years' service at the Library, being made redundant.

Better funding for the National Library of Wales

The National Library of Wales is at a crossroads. If the proposed cuts to the National Library are pushed through, we are looking at real harm being done to one of Wales' foundational national institutions. Valuable jobs will be lost along with a vast amount of skills, knowledge and experience; access to the Library's physical collections will be restricted; collecting and cataloguing will be increasingly difficult for the remaining staff; the very viability of the Library will be in question. As noted above, the funding of the Library is the crux of the issue. With a fairer, increased and sustainable funding model the National Library, rather than facing an existential crisis, could once again be the thriving national institution that the Welsh public deserve.

The fate of the National Library is an issue of national importance, the number of signatures collected in just under a fortnight attests to its importance to the Welsh people. With its future in question, it is imperative that the Senedd conduct a broad ranging debate on the funding and future of the National Library of Wales before the Welsh Budget for 2021-22 is passed.