

Welsh Parliament
Inquiry into Local Authority Library and Leisure Services

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Paper 5

Welsh Local Government Association - The Voice of Welsh Councils

We are the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA); a politically led cross-party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level. We represent the interests of local government and promote local democracy in Wales.

The 22 councils in Wales are our members and the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities are associate members.

We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally.

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their council through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows communities to thrive.

Our ultimate goal is to promote, protect, support, and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

We'll achieve our vision by

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce.



Introduction

This is a response from the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

The current state of local authority leisure and library services.

Within the 22 councils there are different arrangements in place for the management of their leisure and library services.

For leisure, there are eight council managed services; eleven managed by trusts; two councils have set up their own Local Authority Trading Companies (LATC), and one council has an arrangement with an operator.

For library, there are eighteen council managed services and four managed by trusts.

There are three trusts that manage both leisure and library services.

Most councils are reporting that there are no immediate major changes planned for their services, although many are facing increasing pressures.

Over the past 13 years, during a prolonged period of austerity, the library services across councils have reduced significantly, and undergone several reviews and restructures to try and find a sustainable model for the long term. For example, in one council, the revenue budget has halved, from £2.4 million in 2013 to £1.2 million today.

Good use is made of any grant funding opportunities in order to develop the service for residents. The support and funding from the Museums, Archives and Libraries division of Welsh Government was well received, particularly during the Covid recovery.

The financial and operational challenges facing local authorities to maintain these vital community services.

Councils leisure and library services are facing increasing pressures. Post-Covid recovery, the cost-of-living crisis and staffing are the main pressures reported.

Most councils have indicated that there will be no closures to their leisure facilities, although many have sighted that their budgets are under severe pressures and are undertaking a review of their services in this financial year with all options being considered. This could lead to difficult decisions being taken in the next financial year.



Rising energy costs are putting significant pressures on revenue budgets.

Community trust operated pools are under increasing pressures due to rising costs and condition of buildings.

One council reported that they are noting the pressure on some of their transferred facilities and small venues where management committees are starting to fold and are impacting on their service delivery.

Many leisure facilities across councils are run by schools facilities. In one council, two swimming pools have now transferred from Education into Leisure facilities as many councils are rationalising across facilities and services.

Grant funding is an additional pressure on these services, as many of the grants (such as National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS)) have not increased their funding for many years (which means councils are picking up the shortfall), and now the additional costs of the current rise of inflation.

Many councils saw an exodus of experienced staff during Covid and Post-Covid. Although, many have recruited new staff, the cost of training new staff has added to the pressures on budgets.

The geographical size of some councils places significantly more challenge on maintaining provision across the council that for an urban borough with good transport links. In one council, the service has reduced so significantly to meet previous budgetary pressures, that it leaves no alternative now but the closure of service points to achieve any further financial reductions, with the loss of wide-ranging benefits to the public. Operationally, the staffing structure is so thin that service delivery is nearly at breaking point, and there is a high risk of temporary closures due to staff sickness. The period ahead will be extremely challenging, and it will be impossible to maintain the current level of service.

The library service suffers from the lack of clear strategy and role for a well-funded public library service at Welsh Government level, despite the invaluable support which public library staff provide for residents and the delivery of other services, in terms of literacy and learning, access to information and support, digital inclusion, access to cultural resources and activities, and critically, health and wellbeing. This lack of national strategy and priority on the benefits of the early preventative work and support provided by libraries to the residents of Wales is naturally carried through into local budgets and plans.

Some councils face huge challenges regarding any capital developments, for example, Ceredigion, due to phosphate levels and the draft TAN15 Flooding guidance.



Local authority arrangements and exit strategies where delivery models utilised are unsuccessful.

In one council, NPT, Celtic Leisure has historically had the management contract for the operation of six leisure centres together with the Gwyn Hall in Neath. The pandemic brought about financial pressures on the company, and they subsequently asked the council for significant financial assistance. As a company with a single operating contract the opportunities to defray some of the costs across multiple sites was not forthcoming, therefore increasing the financial impact beyond what it might have been. This exercise also unearthed some concerns about the Celtic Leisure operation and the council decided to seek market alternatives. Following a procurement exercise whereby a number of operators showed interest the Council determined the most effective way to manage the facilities and maximise the benefit for local people was to in-source, with a date of April 2023 initially being set.

The Ukraine war and subsequent dramatic hike in utility costs has meant this date has been put back to April 2024 with the extra year being used to bring down costs and aid the transition so the impact is lessened for service users and staff. Being ever conscious for Celtic Leisure to maintain its company independence the council will work with them to help manage costs, drive income and set the staffing and leadership structure needed.

In regard to library services, many councils with community libraries or community partnership arrangements which support local libraries see closures as the only option available if they could not find alternative partners to take them on. Their structures and budgets could not support taking delivery back into the service.

One council is currently responding to Audit Wales on their leisure provision and are considering an options appraisal for different operating models as well as the possibility of the service retuning in-house.

How the provision of other services provided by local authorities interact with leisure and library services.

Both the leisure and library facilities in councils interacts very well with a wide range of services on an operational level and works successfully in partnership to deliver many benefits to residents. Over the years, close links with local schools, educational settings and clubs and groups, have been well established in these service areas. The provision of adult learning, early years and most recently the warm hubs, have also enabled these services to remain a central part of the community provision within councils.



There are strong partnerships with local Health Boards for example, in Powys the library service is providing iPad loans to individuals to enable them to take part in health referrals and online therapy sessions with over 500 sessions enabled over the past 6 months.

The National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS) is a Welsh Government funded scheme. The Scheme target clients aged 16 and over who have or are at risk of developing a chronic disease giving them access to high quality supervised exercise programme. It is locally managed and delivered by the leisure services across Wales and the success of the scheme is due to this service working in close partnership with health professionals including GP's, physiotherapists, dieticians, practice nurses and occupational therapists. The health professionals can refer their clients to a variety of programmes which are delivered in leisure facilities as well as out in the community.

Both leisure and library services have worked in collaboration for many years in councils, for example, to offer free family swim vouchers to all children completing the annual summer reading challenge; this is one of a number of joint promotions along the lines of 'healthy minds, healthy bodies'. This encourages residents to be more active mentally and physically.

Arts and culture activities are crucial in the aim of widening engagement within communities through the use of these services. Both leisure venues and libraries are supported by organisations and partners that present and exhibit the arts in all its forms. This support is funded through the Arts Council Wales.

Many facilities in both leisure and libraries have litter picking hubs within their communities, lending out kits to community groups. This is a partnership with Waste and Recycling services and Keep Wales Tidy.

These services host a wide range of displays and activities for other services, e.g., recent drop-in campaigns for Social Care colleagues to recruit carers.

These services also deliver face to face contact and access into council services. As council buildings closed in some towns over the years, libraries and leisure facilities have become the point of contact, especially since post-Covid and the virtual way of working.

However, the central role that these services play in facilitating all of the many provisions in council communities can be poorly recognised and undervalued at times by councils at council wide strategic level and also at a Welsh Government level.

How local authorities use alternative models of service delivery in Wales, and the perceived benefits associated with them.



As referenced earlier, within the 22 councils there are different arrangements in place for the management of their leisure and library services.

Most leisure and culture trusts are non-profit organisations with any profit made reinvested into the services. They are usually governed by Trustees from the local community which enables them to support their community.

For those councils with in-house services core staffing structures within these services are facing significant challenges due to lack of recruitment to vacant posts and the retention of key staff. As referenced, earlier, although, many have recruited new staff, the cost of training new staff has added to the pressures on budgets.

Most councils rely on volunteer opportunities to enable the delivery of more activities and gives the residents a chance to be active in their communities, give back, and possibly learn new skills. However, this is not always a free option, but requires a great deal of time and effort to offer rewarding experiences for volunteers. In some areas it is difficult to recruit volunteers due to volunteer fatigue which can result in a patchy and inequitable offer.

Community facilities run by volunteers enable the smallest of provisions to remain open, and this is especially the case for small libraries. They provide access to books and social interaction for their residents. The quality of the service is variable, and again the amount of training and support required from the library service makes this difficult to sustain.

Community partnerships have been successful and provide clear evidence of consultation and community engagement in co-producing solutions on a local level. Whilst the benefits are that these partnerships have enabled council run services to be retained in the communities, and groups have enhanced local facilities, they can be labour intensive in terms of relationship building and maintenance, monitoring, and reporting on terms of agreements, etc. They are also fragile and could also fold if the partners decide to pull out as they are dependent on individuals within the communities who drive forward the fundraising locally.

Practical partnerships allow councils to deliver more together.

Good practice to ensure sustainability of local leisure and library services for future generations.

Collaboration and joint procurement processes are seen as an effective and more successful way to provide more resources and facilities and has proven to be more sustainable. This is particularly the case when looking at library services. The library management system for Wales and the Welsh purchasing consortium for library stock and e-resources across the Welsh Library authorities has been highly



successful, due mainly to the hard work of the Society of Chief Librarians (Cymru). This has enabled Powys library service to provide more resources and facilities than they could afford. There is a clear argument for a Wales-wide public library service, similar to the Northern Ireland model, with a coherent strategy providing statutory legislation for public libraries, and adequate core funding for staff, training and delivery. Public libraries deliver so many benefits as outlined in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, and these are currently in danger of being lost.

There is also a clear need for a robust framework to measure the social return on investment provided within leisure and library services, in terms of preventative and person-centred approaches and demand on higher cost services such as Social Care and Health services.

It is important to note that leisure and library services should be forward thinking, and looking to develop, rather than sustain, services. Work undertaken on the Cultural Services' Digital Strategy has highlighted the need for financial investment to support changing customer demands and access to lifelong learning in a digitally disrupted society. Priorities will include, (but are not limited to): engaging the public with, and instructing them on, evolving technologies, developing media literacy skills; integrating SMART technologies into buildings to improve access to services as well as making buildings more environmentally sustainable; and upskilling staff so they can harness these technologies to make more activities and services available online, (this is of particular importance in rural councils). A focus on workforce development, and improvements to digital infrastructure and equipment will be critical going forward, so that professional staff have the capabilities and resources to assist communities to live well and independently in the digital age.