

Additional information for the Petitions Committee

Thank you for considering my petition. When considering the critical situation that has developed in our cultural institutions, I am keen to see a debate about fair funding for these institutions in the Senedd. I think it would be a great help to them if you could call on the Senedd to hold a debate, urgently. Ideally, I would like to see the debate take place before the supplementary budget because there is an opportunity there for transitional money; however, the most important issue is increasing the revenue budget available to these organizations to support jobs and services - that is, the core grant. So it would be useful for the debate to take place in good time for the start of the negotiations for the 2025-26 budget. I would like to call on you to convey this to the Senedd and to give the clear opinion of many of the people of Wales - heard through the petition, in the media and at rallies and events - a chance to be properly considered on the floor of our Senedd.

It came to my attention through the unions that the consequences of losing staff under the Voluntary Departure Schemes have already had a major impact on these organisations. I detail this further below.

National Library of Wales

The National Library holds over 7 million books including important works about Wales / in Welsh and Celtic languages, a large amount of archives detailing famous people in Welsh history but also the everyday lives of people going back to the middle ages, as well as many maps, photos and films. People come from locations across Wales but also from around the world in order to investigate the past and learn lessons for the future. Here is evidence of so much of our history, the good and the bad. According to a tailored review commissioned by the Welsh Government, the Library has been underfunded for years.

In the last budget, the Library had a cut of 10.5% of its core funding, which is £1.3m, on top of a financial deficit of around £1.4m. Following the Welsh Government's decision to fund voluntary departures rather than funding the institution, 24 members of staff have left or are leaving, which is over 10% of the workforce. The voluntary exit plan was carried out so quickly that succession planning was difficult if not impossible. The 24 have therefore taken their skills, expertise and experience with them when leaving. Already, a number of areas have suffered:

The Conservation department has lost around half of their staff. For example, the number of staff working on cleaning and repairing collections entering the Library has gone from 1.2 FEQ to 0.2 FEQ following the voluntary exit plan. This is disastrous in terms of the condition of objects but it also has knock-on effects on the work of the rest of the Library. Another example is the loss of the 2 members of staff who used the expensive machine that creates conservation boxes. This has an impact on the storage of collections because such boxes are essential to ensure the survival of the collections in the coming centuries. Again, it also affects the ability of the rest of the staff to do their work.

In addition to traditional areas of work, there are also impacts on the Library's digital infrastructure. There are a number of platforms that can no longer be maintained due to a lack of resources. The ICT side has been under pressure for some time and staff numbers have reduced significantly. A few years ago, it became apparent that the staff resources were no longer available to maintain the Cymru 1914 website - a digital archive that was extremely important for schools when studying the First World War and Wales. Now, the Library is facing the loss of an interface for buying copies of wills - something that also creates income - because the systems that maintain the service are reaching the end of their life and there are no resources to recreate these systems. One of the ICT departments is down to one person and there are concerns that there will be no capacity or expertise to receive digital materials before long. When considering the cyber attack that destroyed the British Library systems preventing readers from accessing most of the collections, more investment is really needed.

There are also adverse effects on services to the readers, for example because the number of staff working in the reprographics team has halved, with the hours of the reprographics office being reduced as a result. The screen and sound team are also losing their enquiry service.

Staff shortages also affect less visible but still important activities. There had been no stock checking for years until attention was brought to this by the BBC recently but the work has recently begun. Due to a shortage of staff, the work has slowed down significantly. Work like this is important in terms of maintaining the collections and ensuring that the Library's stock is safe and available to readers.

Generally across the Library, reducing staff numbers, getting rid of experience and expertise before there is any chance to run a succession plan, leads to more work going to the remaining staff and important tasks not being carried out. There will be a long-term effect on the collections, on the nation's memory, and the lives of the people of Wales without this changing.

The only way to fill gaps and strengthen the Library's workforce and services again is to increase the core funding that the Welsh Government gives to the Library so that the Library can fill gaps, employ enough staff to run services and rebuild its skills pool.

Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales

Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales holds artefacts, historic buildings and other materials across several sites across Wales. Following a 10.5% cut in their core funding from Government, which is around £3m, on top of a deficit of around £1.5m, 144 staff have / are going on the voluntary departure scheme.

The Museum suffers similar problems to the Library in many areas. The conservation team at Cathays Park report that they are supposed to achieve three times more per person than before; because this is not possible they have to prioritize work. This is likely to lead to permanent damage to important objects and the loss of pieces that tell the history of Wales.

In terms of services to the public, several sites report staff shortages leading to a lack of frontline staff. The majority of the historic buildings in St Fagans are regularly closed or open for less time due to staff shortages and a number of restaurants in the museums have closed. Staff who do curatorial work are often used to fill gaps on the front line, with obvious effects on the extremely important work that takes place behind the scenes.

Big Pit in particular suffers from a lack of guides, with far fewer people having the experience of going down the pit. That is just one example of the cuts denying the people of Wales of the chance to understand their history.

There are also obvious gaps that have opened up in terms of corporate expertise, for example with asbestos and health and safety officers going.

PCS at the Museum feel that not all the results of the voluntary exit scheme have yet emerged but what has been heard so far clearly shows that the core funding needs to be increased in order to provide the service the people of Wales deserve, properly look after collections and rebuild expertise.

Conclusion

I hope that the above offers you detail of what is happening in the Library and Museum as a result of the recent cuts. It is clear that the cuts are going to, or already are, having a detrimental effect in the field of education, in the services they provide to the people of Wales, in the mental health benefits they provide to the public. The collections they host also say so much about the history of Wales, the good and the bad, and its relationship with the wider world, with many lessons that could be learned. At a time when other countries such as Scotland and the Republic of Ireland are increasing their spending on the culture sector, Welsh politicians need to press the Welsh Government to provide adequate funding for our national heritage organisations.

I am urging you to send a strong and clear message to the Welsh Government that there needs to be a debate about this, and urgently.

Thank you very much

Susan Jones-Davies