

Welsh Government response to the Senedd Local Government and Housing report on local authority library and leisure services

Recommendation 1

The Welsh Government explores whether it should strengthen the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to protect libraries from closure.

Response: Accept in principle

The Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) requires local authorities to provide ‘a comprehensive and efficient’ library service to anyone who wishes to use a library. The relevant Welsh Minister has a responsibility to ‘superintend’ and promote the improvement of library services. This responsibility is currently discharged through a set of detailed Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) which do not constrain the ability of local authorities to design and deliver a library service which meets community needs.

The Welsh Government will explore this recommendation further and provide an update to the Committee in due course.

Recommendation 2

The Welsh Government proceeds with its work on the Welsh Public Library Standards framework as a matter of urgency and that it updates the Committee on the timescales for introduction of the framework.

Response: Accept

Work on the 7th Welsh Public Library Framework is about to commence, and it will be implemented from 1 April 2025. Updates on progress can be provided to the Committee.

Recommendation 3

The Welsh Government updates the Committee on progress in developing a new Culture Strategy for Wales and provides clarification on how the strategy will dovetail with the library standards framework. It should also clarify arrangements for collaborative working and streamlining Ministerial responsibilities in relation to library services and culture.

Response: Accept

The draft Culture Strategy acknowledges the importance of fulfilling statutory responsibilities where they exist in the culture sector, and the importance of professional standards to maintain service quality. The draft Culture Strategy and the

7th WPLS Framework are being developed along similar timelines and there is therefore an opportunity to ensure that the role of the WPLS in supporting our libraries is reflected in the Culture Strategy.

The distribution of ministerial responsibilities is a matter for the First Minister.

Recommendation 4

The Welsh Government should review the effectiveness of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 in ensuring the provision of public leisure services in Wales. It should share its findings with the Committee.

Response: Reject

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is not designed to ensure the provision of public leisure services in Wales.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 gives a legally-binding common purpose – the seven well-being goals – for national government, local authorities, local health boards and other specified public authorities in Wales. It requires those named public authorities to deliver a public service that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Act sets out the ways in which those public bodies must work, and work together, to improve the well-being of Wales. The Act does not displace or override existing powers or duties of relevant public authorities (known in the Act as ‘public bodies’) but puts a framework around their decision-making processes.

The seven well-being goals for Wales include desired outcomes for a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales and a Wales of cohesive communities – and we recognise that both libraries and leisure services can make a contribution to the health and well-being of our nation and are often the heartbeat of our communities.

The Minister for Social Justice and Chief Whip has committed to explore an evaluation of the Well-being of the Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, as part of the post-implementation review arrangements. This remains in its scoping stage and will likely include a systematic evidence review and a social impact assessment. Given the broad nature of the Act and its reach in terms of government, public bodies, public services boards and town and community councils, the evaluation will need to involve stakeholders from across the devolved Welsh public sector. The evaluation will also take into account the evidence provided by the Future Generations Commissioner (monitoring duty, review power, and annual, and Future Generations Report), the Auditor General for Wales (examination duty and results of examinations report), and the Public Accounts Committee’s inquiry in 2020-21, which provide rich insight into how the Act is working.

Recommendation 5

The Welsh Government leads a rapid review of the current state of public leisure provision in Wales and works in partnership with key partners such as the WLGA, One Voice Wales, Sport Wales and the WCVA to consider improvements for the future of leisure services.

Response: Accept in principle

The Welsh Government will discuss this recommendation with key partners, especially the Chief Leisure Officers Wales (CLOW) group to determine what assessment of leisure services has already been undertaken, in terms of level and type of provision and condition of facilities. Following this the Welsh Government will engage with the key partners identified to determine if there are gaps in this assessment and consider whether a wider review is needed to assess the opportunities for the improvements of leisure services.

Recommendation 6

The Welsh Government should take all reasonable steps to develop stronger links between public leisure and health services. This should include developing a new policy framework for public leisure, which closely links with health and wellbeing services. As part of the process, the role of Public Services Boards and Regional Partnership Boards in improving joint working between health and public leisure services should also be reviewed.

Response: Accept

The Welsh Government recognises the vital role that public leisure services play in supporting the health and wellbeing of the nation. Many people use them to take part in organised or self-guided activities that support healthier lives. The Welsh Government already has made strong links between the health and leisure agendas through activity such as the National Exercise Referral Scheme and the 60 plus Active Leisure Scheme, which are in turn part of our Healthy Weight Healthy Wales Strategy and Delivery plans. This recognises that our public leisure facilities are an important part of the infrastructure that supports people to be more physically active, in conjunction with other strategies such as active travel.

We also recognise the role that leisure services play in supporting physical and mental wellbeing. Recognising what matters to an individual and how to support their wellbeing needs is the underpinning of social prescribing. The Welsh Government is finalising its Programme for Government Commitment to develop a national framework for social prescribing, that will aim to support Wales-wide standards on areas such as workforce and community assets. Public Leisure assets are an important part of the infrastructure that supports the activities that social prescribing can direct individuals to.

The Programme for Government commitment to keep regional partnership working under review with local partners is expected to report in the autumn of 2023. This

specifically looks at the role of partnerships, including Public Services Boards and Regional Partnership Boards, in aligning more closely to improve well-being.

The Public Services Boards have published their local well-being plans and supporting communities to live healthier lives and prevent future poor health is a key facet of these plans.

Recommendation 7

The Welsh Government works with local authorities via the WLGA to provide support, guidance and share best practice relating to different models of service delivery.

Response: Accept.

The Welsh Government already works closely with the WLGA on a range of policy areas to share good practice on service delivery.

In 2021-22 the Improvement Programme was launched to support sector-led improvement across local government in Wales. The Welsh Government provides £800,000 per year to the WLGA to provide sector-led improvement, underpinned by peer challenge, support and mutual aid.

Alongside the proposals for recommendation 5, the Welsh Government will include the type of provision in the assessment of leisure services.

Recommendation 8

The Welsh Government, in collaboration with local government partners, undertakes regular analysis and publication of Wales specific data on the social value return on investment in delivery of both leisure and library services.

Response: Accept.

Investing in research is included as a theme in the draft Culture Strategy. There is an increased appetite from the Library Sector and other cultural sectors to collate evidence of social value and return on investment. For libraries, this will be explored with the development of the 7th Framework.

As part of the WPLS submissions, libraries are encouraged to submit case studies/impact statements to illustrate good practice. Culture Division officials will review how these can be utilized to share good practice across the sector. Consideration will be given to hosting an event where good practice across Wales can be shared.

Recommendation 9

The Welsh Government should explore the options for establishing a Libraries Taskforce to promote the value of libraries and the contribution they make to their communities and wider societal benefits.

Response: Reject

Promotion of public libraries is currently undertaken by the Society of Chief Librarians Wales, via the National Digital Library Service which is funded by Welsh Government and has a Marketing Plan as part of its remit, and via the work of officials within the Culture Division. Promotional campaigns are released via the Library Wales social media channels and website and include examples of engagement with users. Culture Division officials work across government departments to promote the value of public libraries in delivering the Well-being of Future Generations Act e.g., with health colleagues to promote the reading well services; with communities and tackling poverty team to help identify the support public libraries play in terms of warm spaces and access to the internet. There is currently no additional resource to support a Libraries Taskforce, and we feel this would duplicate work already being undertaken.

Recommendation 10

The Welsh Government, with local government partners, monitors and evaluates the efficiency and effectiveness of co-location in Wales to date and shares these findings with local authorities.

Response: Accept in principle

For library services the data collected for WPLS returns could be utilised to assess the effectiveness of co-location by comparing before and after data; however, to attribute any changes in service provision to the relocation would require additional research. Where co-location has been funded through Capital Grant Transformation funding, performance indicators are a requirement of that funding. Additional data collection would be required by local authorities to evaluate any efficiencies generated by co-location. Should further research be considered, it may be beneficial to link it to that required in recommendation 7, to ensure efficient use of resources and there are links in the themes.

Regarding leisure services, as part of the discussions proposed with CLOW (Rec 5), we will include a review of the efficiency of existing co-location examples and explore the opportunities of co-locating other/alternative LA services and report back to Committee in due course.

Recommendation 11

The Welsh Government works with local authorities via the WLGA to ensure that transport, including community transport services, is a key consideration in decision-making on the co-location of services.

Response: Accept

We have, and will continue, to work closely with the WLGA and community transport groups to inform decision making on co-location of services. For example, we have involved WLGA in the development of guidance for Regional Transport Plans, which in turn asks the Corporate Joint Committees of Local Authorities to co-develop transport solutions for their communities. We will work to align this transport Plan to the land-use 'Strategic Development Plan' for the same regions to best co-ordinate transport with location of services.

Community transport is an important part of our transport system in Wales, supporting vulnerable people to access essential services. We will, through Transport for Wales, work with our Community Transport partners to look at ways we can best support both the people who use this vital service and those who give their time to run it.

We know that provision of local and community transport makes an important contribution to our strategic commitment to improve accessibility.

Recommendation 12

The Welsh Government allocates the £3.5 million in consequential funding to swimming pools, especially those which may be unviable without additional support. The Welsh Government should update the Committee when a decision about the allocation of the additional £3.5 million has been made.

Response: Reject

We can confirm that the Welsh Government will receive a total consequential of £3.54m in 2023-24 as a result of this measure, comprising £1.153m revenue and £2.307m capital. There is no consequential anticipated for 2024-25 for this measure. We have yet to receive the funding from HM Treasury, but it is expected to flow through as part of the 2023-24 Main Estimates process, which is currently ongoing. It is an important principle of devolution that consequential funding is not ringfenced for similar purposes in devolved governments. Welsh Ministers are continuing to assess and consider where the greatest impact will be when making funding decisions in line with Welsh circumstances and priorities, noting the range of identified pressures, including active discussions on pay and mitigating the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

Funding in support of local authorities' services is provided through the Local Government settlement. We agreed significant additional investment for Local Government for 2023-24 which will support local authorities to continue to deliver the services their communities need. In 2023-24, local authorities will receive £5.5 billion from the Welsh Government in core revenue funding and non-Domestic rates to

spend on delivering key services. This equates to an increase of 7.9% or £403 million on a like-for-like basis compared to the current year. No Authority receives less than an 6.5% increase. Nevertheless, in the context of the very high levels of inflation affecting the UK there is a challenging financial situation for Welsh and Local Government with difficult decisions having to be made.

Our 2023-24 annual budget, approved by the Senedd on 7th March, provided £16m of capital funding to Sport Wales over the next two years, which will support the sector to upgrade sport facilities, including swimming pool facilities, with energy saving measures.

Recommendation 13

We endorse the recommendation of the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee that the Welsh Government should provide additional targeted funding to the sports and culture sectors to help venues and organisations that face closure but have a sustainable future beyond the immediate crisis.

Response: Reject

In the context of a very challenging situation, the Welsh Government is unlikely to be able to provide additional funding support in 2023-24.

As we said in our formal response to the Senedd Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport & International Relations Committee report - Increasing Costs - Impact on Culture & Sport", the Welsh Government recognises the exceptional inflationary pressures to utility costs and costs of living pressures at the arm's length bodies and also local sector organisations. To assist with these pressures, the Welsh Government agreed to provide £3.75m during the 2022-23 financial year to the National Library of Wales; Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales; the arts sector via the Arts Council of Wales, the sports sector via Sport Wales; the independent museums and community libraries in Wales; the Books Council of Wales; and the independent creative industries in Wales.

Local museums, libraries, and archives would be eligible to apply to the existing Transformation Capital Grant programme for support to undertake capital works that support organisations' sustainability. Sport Wales provides funding for those who wish to make their clubs more sustainable. This can be through making improvements to facilities, and in creating long-term sustainability through upskilling volunteers and in measures to reach people currently under-represented in sport and physical activity, for example.

Recommendation 14

The Welsh Government updates the Committee on what additional financial support it will provide leisure and library services to deal with the current energy and cost-of-living crises.

Response: Accept

In the context of a very challenging situation, the Welsh Government is unlikely to be able to provide additional funding support in 2023-24.

In 2023-24, local authorities will receive £5.5 billion from the Welsh Government in core revenue funding and non-domestic rates to spend on delivering key services. This equates to an increase of 7.9% or £403 million on a like-for-like basis compared to the current year. No Authority receives less than an 6.5% increase.

Recommendation 15

The Welsh Government updates the Committee on progress to develop a strategy to encourage primary schools to provide free swimming lessons, and how it is working with leisure providers on this strategy.

Response: Reject

While we accept and wholly agree with the intention of the recommendation to encourage more swimming and greater use of swimming pools, we need to be mindful of the financial pressure the recommendation would imply for schools in the current difficult financial circumstances.

The statutory guidance within the Curriculum for Wales, which all schools must consider, includes learners engaging in a range of physical activity, including within water. This provides for swimming, which is likely to be the appropriate activity for most learners. During the next academic year, we aim to help make this expectation clear for schools and raise awareness of the profile of swimming and water safety within the Curriculum for Wales.

We are committed to encouraging schools to support learners to swim and make use of swimming pools in the course of this. Officials are working with Swim Wales to explore further ways of supporting schools and local authorities with their swimming offer. The cost of swimming, including transport can be a significant pressure for schools. In the context of a cost-of-living crisis, it is important that schools are able to commit funding to activities that support their learners' needs and at times, schools may have no option but to pass some of this cost on.

Recommendation 16

The Welsh Government explores how it can raise awareness of the support for decarbonisation of leisure and library facilities.

Response: Accept

The Welsh Government Energy Service was established in 2018 to support renewable energy and energy efficiency schemes. The Energy Service is a key enabler in providing technical and financial help to the public sector to deliver the collective ambition of a net zero public sector by 2030.

A new contract was awarded in 2023 to a consortium led by Carbon Trust and Energy Saving Trust. Local Partnerships lead on the strategic engagement aspects of the service. A new service delivery plan was recently agreed.

Officials are working with the Energy Service contractors and WLGA to raise awareness and develop activities to support decarbonisation of leisure and library facilities.

The draft Culture Strategy emphasises the importance of collective responsibility in terms of the climate emergency. Culture Division is currently investigating the potential of offering decarbonisation support across the cultural sectors and officials are in the process of gathering case studies on current practices to inform this work. Taking this forward will be subject to the budget review currently underway by Welsh Government and to support from the revenue funding allocated to support the implementation of the draft culture strategy.

Recommendation 17

The Welsh Government invests in supporting the decarbonisation and refurbishment of leisure and library facilities across Wales. This should include shorter-term solutions, as well a long-term strategy, to help local authorities and delivery providers improve the energy efficiency of their facilities as a matter of urgency.

Response: Accept

Local Authorities have worked together to co-produce and agree ambitious commitments across procurement, transport, buildings and land use which are now being delivered. Decarbonisation and responding to the climate emergency must be built into every aspect of decision making and funding, not seen as an additional and separate responsibility. Nevertheless, we are providing up to £20m capital each year as part of our support for local authority decarbonisation of their estates. This scheme can include leisure centres where authorities wish to do so.

Additionally, as referred to above, our 2023-24 annual budget, approved by the Senedd on 7th March, provided £16m of capital funding to Sport Wales over the next two years, which will support the sector to upgrade sport facilities, including swimming pool facilities, with energy saving measures.

The Transformation Capital Grants Programme for Museums, Archives and Libraries has sustainable development as one of its priority criteria. This aligns with the Programme for Government Well-being objectives and the aim to reach Net Zero by 2030.

The draft Culture Strategy recognises the importance of developing a long-term capital investment strategy for culture to ensure that funding is allocated in a prioritised manner going forward.