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Communities and Culture Committee

Inquiry into the Accessibility of Arts and Cultural Activities in Wales

Response from National Library of Wales

2010/CYHOEDDUS/AMJ

22 September 2010

Sandy Mewies
Chair, Communities and Culture Committee
The National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
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Dear Sandy Mewies

Survey by the Welsh Assembly Government Communities and Culture Committee on 'The accessibility of artistic and cultural activities in Wales.'

Thank you for the invitation to respond to the above consultation.

I enclose some written evidence on behalf of the National Library and declare our desire and willingness to appear before the Committee in due course.

We would like to draw your attention to the Library's activity as

- An artistic venue

- And as a provider of art and culture
 - at the location
 - in the community

- and online

We are home to 800,000 photographs, 50,000 paintings, 150,00 hours of sound recordings, 250,000 videos as well as millions of manuscripts, archives, books and newspapers.

Our aim is to share these collections with the nation and the world free of charge to enrich and inspire our peers of all ages and backgrounds. Almost 100,000 people visit the Library annually.

To this end we have:

- 8 exhibition spaces (including the Gregynog Gallery, the largest space in Wales)
- The Drum (auditorium/cinema of high standard which sits 100 people)
- 4 Reading Rooms (where people can ask to see almost all our collections)
- Meeting rooms
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Every year we hold:

- A programme of activity in the building which provides a stage for independent artists as well as for individuals and members of staff who want to interpret the collections. The programme regularly includes a photographic festival, literary readings, gigs, lectures, guided tours etc
- A programme of exhibitions offering a venue for contemporary artists as well as exhibitions from our own collections.
- A programme of community activity including loaning items from our collections to other exhibitions, film screenings, work with schools, a resident artist, lectures.

We also place great emphasis on digitising and exhibiting our collections on-line, and we encourage people, where rights allow, to re-purpose our material.

Yours sincerely

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Introduction

The National Library of Wales is one of Wales' **main cultural institutions**. It is a unique institution that offers access and interpretation (in the building, in the community and on-line) to a wide range of material for a very wide range of users, from Wales and beyond. Our services link the elements of offering a cultural experience on the one hand, and the opportunity to experience and interpret art and to have ownership of information on the other.

At its most basic level, the Library allows **unrestricted access** to its collections, its services and its facilities. By promoting the benefits of that access, and by encouraging participation, re-use, re-purposing and re-defining of material, a high level of accessibility is assured for users of all kinds.

As well as providing services of international standard for readers and researchers, it is part of the Library's mission to offer a **very wide range of cultural events**. The provision includes activities which provide access to the building and the collections; formal events (e.g. concerts, film screenings, photographic festivals and exhibitions). As well as this, 'purely' cultural events are held regularly, as an integral part of our seasonal programmes. This includes presentations (in Welsh and in English) by poets, writers and singers and presentations together with similar events which supplement and enrich the cultural experience.

As well as this, the Library has a programme offering **activities in the community**. The Education Service visits schools and involves hundreds of children every year using our cultural and artistic collections as an inspiration for the activity. The National Sound and Screen Archive Wales shows films in the community and works with groups to create and to learn through film. (An animation was created with children of the Gwendraeth Valley last year and this year we will be working with a group of young adults in Wrexham who have learning and physical disabilities, to learn through the medium of film). The Library has collaborated with two resident artists (and there will be a third in 2011) to present and create new work themselves and with schools based on the collections.

The Library is also an important **exhibition gallery** of national standard. Temporary exhibitions are held in eight exhibition spaces, including large and high status exhibitions in the Gregynog Gallery, one of Wales' main galleries. These exhibitions include the work of contemporary artists as well as art works from the collection and thematic exhibitions including materials of all kinds. Our contribution to the cultural life of Wales and especially mid-Wales, by means of our exhibitions and programme of events, is a key one and offers a provision not offered by other locations and organisers.

Referring specifically therefore to three sections of the Survey, here is further evidence of our activity. It is submitted as a summary and a selection from a range of activities in the areas in question. It is in no way a comprehensive list of our work in these fields, we can provide fuller information should the Committee so wish.

2. How exactly do artistic and cultural locations – including museums, libraries and archives – actively promote access, attract new audiences and encourage people to participate in accordance with the One Wales commitment and the Arts Council's strategies?

The National Library is confident that our services aim to achieve the core objectives of 'One Wales', namely to provide first class cultural experiences and to encourage participation. And also, to achieve this in a cost-effective way (for the sponsor and the user) and with a view to expanding and increasing the number of users of our services and activities.

The National Library's **collections** are an important contribution towards the cultural experience of the people of Wales, both physically and on-line. The Library exhibits our visual art collections in the building itself and in other galleries and locations the length and breadth of Wales and beyond. This is done through official partnerships with some institutions and by undertaking individual projects. In 2011, the Library will secure a permanent new presence at **Wrexham Museum**, and will undertake a brand new project jointly with **Theatr Mwldan** in order to create new artistic work based on the Library's collections. These events aim to widen access to our cultural collections in very specific parts of the country.

Another vitally important stream of work is our **seasonal programme** of events, held in the 'Drum' venue (a small, high standard auditorium that holds 100 people). The current programme, which reflects the usual pattern of events, includes gigs, films, lectures and high profile artistic sessions (by the poets Carol Ann Duffy, Gillian Clarke and Owen Shears and the prose writer Jan Morris). The current Drum programme also includes the 'Lens' photography festival, that will attract world-famous participants and attendees from all parts of Wales.

Our next exhibition 'Byd Bach / Small World' the first in an annual series of **thematic exhibitions**, encompasses several elements of our work. It exhibits varied material from the Library's collections on the theme of travel – by visual methods (photographs, art and moving images) and by means of supplementary activities; some are open events and others 'educational' e.g. session for schoolchildren on a curricular theme. The exhibition also includes a prominent participatory element which encourages interaction with the project through Web 2 methods.

The Library has experience of employing **resident artists** in order to present and interpret the collections in a new way but also in order to inspire creativity on the part of the professional artists and the young people based on the collections. Recently, a group of school pupils were inspired by a combination of a physical visit to the Library and digital interaction with a collection of Kyffin Williams' paintings to create works in the style of the artist, which have now been exhibited at the school and back in the Library.

We are also, of course, committed to offering **on-line artistic experiences**. We are a central partner (through the Culturenet company) in the People's Collection Wales and are completely committed to the

principles of that scheme. There have also been projects bringing older and younger people together to create digital stories, and the Library's work in this field has been acknowledged by experts in the field as an example of very good practice. The Library was also the first library in Britain to share its collections with the world through Flickr Commons (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ljgc/>) and to encourage people, by releasing rights, to re-purpose the material (a response was received from artists who have used them to create such varied items as shoes and *handbags!*).

As far as our ability to **communicate more effectively with our users** is concerned, the Public Services Department is in the process of putting new systems in place that will improve our effectiveness in collecting information about our varied audiences, and in distributing information to them. The aim is to turn the Library into an institution that has a clear focus on the needs of our customers as we plan and provide facilities for them. In our case, the work of getting to know more about our existing audiences will go hand in hand with the process of identifying and then providing for new audiences.

8. The Welsh Arts Council's Omnibus Survey in 2008 suggested that younger adults were more likely to attend a cultural event than older adults. Is this consistent with your experiences? Can you explain this variation, and how it can be tackled?

The numbers visiting the Library are close to **100,000** annually. Very roughly, those who attend can be classified into simple categories - readers and researchers; audiences for various events and activities, and visitors to the building. The profile is therefore a wide one, and is considered by the Library to be a virtue and a reflection of the strength of our varied provisions.

Our most recent surveys indicate a trend that is contrary to the evidence of the Arts Council. Most of our attendees – including those who attend artistic and cultural events - are in **the 50+ age category**. Indeed, the category 16-34 years of age (with the exception of university students' use of research facilities) is the most difficult age group for us to attract.

The **Beaufort Survey 2009** (for the Library) indicates that approximately 12% of the population of Wales has visited the establishment (equivalent to approximately 325,000 people) and 60% of the population is aware of our existence (up from 51% in 2007). Considering the geographical location of the Library, and possibly the presumptions and prejudices of some people regarding the purpose and objectives of a National Library, these are heartening figures. Beaufort confirms that it is a clear challenge for the Library in aiming to attract some users – from particular age groups, demographic backgrounds and geographical locations. Having said that, what is heartening is the levels of satisfaction with our services. In other words, having visited for the first time – in person or virtually – it is quite likely that a second visit will follow, with 90% stating that they would visit again. Of those who

have not yet visited, 40% wish to do so, if the usual obstacles could be overcome (distance, transport and practical arrangements).

As a result, there is some **missionary work** to be done – by improving and targeting communication and promotion systems; by, literally reaching out and creating partnerships, and by tailoring some aspects of our services especially for our prospective users – but by doing so in a structured and purposive way, the possibility of success is high.

As far as our presence on the web is concerned, the use of our services – by means of the central website, our sub-websites and our **Gwe 2** presence, is increasing enormously. The speedy and successful development in this field is already opening our services out to new users, and enabling people across the world to experience and respond to our cultural treasures.

12. .Would you like to make any further comments on the accessibility of artistic and cultural activities in Wales?

The Library is always willing to loan its collections to other locations in Wales and beyond and for some years now, it has been holding ‘**outreach**’ events. This includes the Reels on Wheels activity of the Film Archive and the work of the Education Service with schools. During October 2009 a series of very successful activities were held in the Gwendraeth Valley area; this year, Wrexham will be the focus of our activities. There, a series of specific events will be held between October and December, which will introduce some of our most prominent collections and services to completely new audiences. Also, we will exhibit some of our cultural collections in new centres and interacting with some particular communities through educational and digitising activities. This presence will evolve, afterwards, to become a permanent presence in the town, in the form of an exhibition of varied materials at Wrexham Museum.