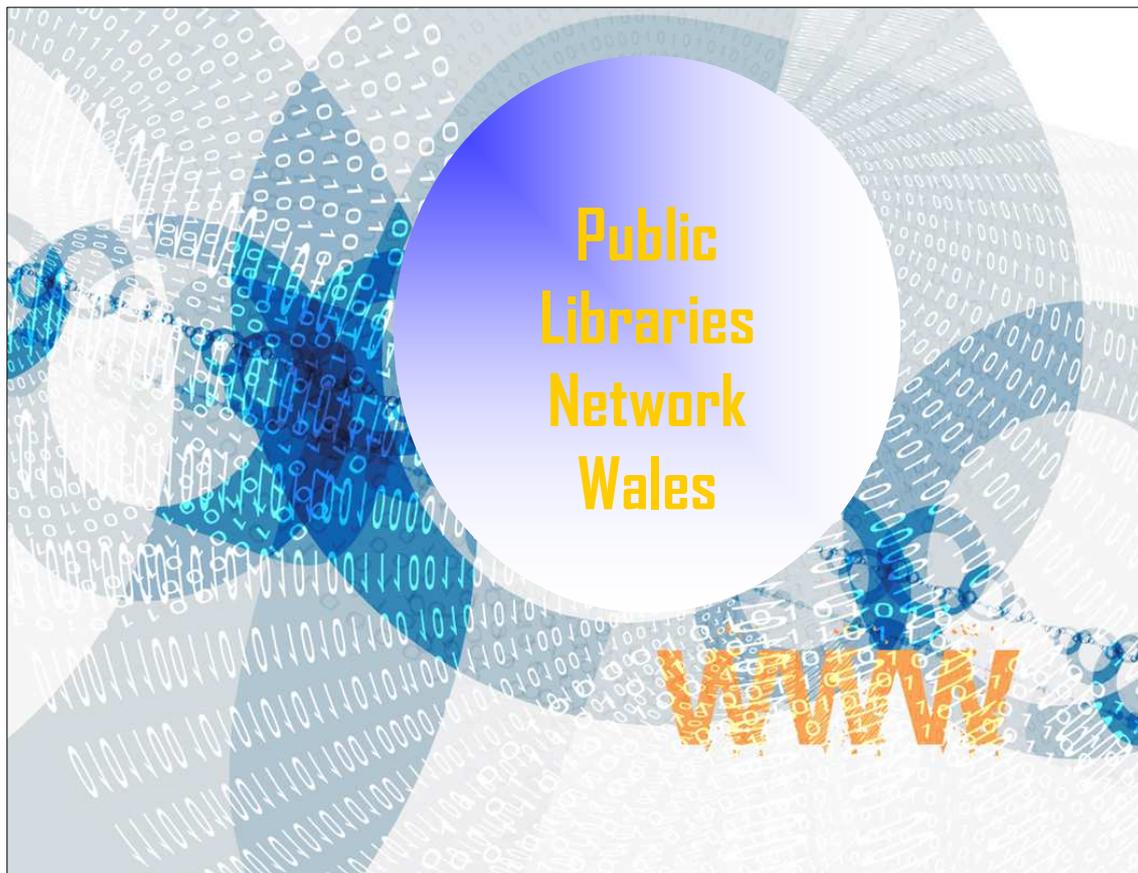




Cymdeithas Prif Lyfrgellwyr Cymru

**A report by the  
Society of Chief  
Librarians  
(Wales)**



**Addressing the  
Digital Divide**

**Public Libraries in Wales**

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## Foreword by Gareth Evans, Chair of SCL Wales

The Society of Chief Librarians (Wales), representing as it does the chief librarian, or equivalent officer, of each library authority in Wales, asserts that modern, vibrant and well-developed public library services are essential to the citizens of Wales in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our purpose in this report is to demonstrate to you the role that public libraries have and can have in relation to reducing the digital divide in Wales. We believe that public libraries are uniquely placed in the heart of the community and provide free digital access and support for service users.

We also believe this potential requires greater recognition and exploitation within both local and national digital inclusion strategies. For example, where new funding is available to develop community projects aimed at bridging the digital divide (such as that proposed for Communities 2.0) we recommend that public libraries are considered as key partners and enablers. We also recommend that where community networks are established, they are encouraged to include all local public services, including libraries.

We fully support the amendment to the proposal agreed at the Senedd on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2009:

*“That the National Assembly for Wales recognises that public libraries have a key role to play in widening access to new technologies across all age groups”*

The attached report clearly identifies the potential that public libraries have in relation to reducing the digital divide, empowering the community and providing equality of access for all.

With the correct level of investment the role of public libraries can be enhanced further thus allowing those not fortunate enough to have access to internet technologies at home, or those that are not using it to its full potential, to be supported to learn and prosper equitably.

On behalf of SCL (Wales) I hope you enjoy reading this report.



**Gareth Evans,  
Chair of SCL (Wales)**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Society of Chief Librarians (Wales) consists of the chief librarian of each library authority in Wales. The Society aims to influence the statutory, financial and other decisions which relate to the effectiveness of public library services, and takes a leading role in the national development of public library services.

The Society of Chief Librarians (Wales) has prepared this report to demonstrate to the Welsh Assembly Government, The National Assembly for Wales and other key partners the significant role that public libraries have in relation to digital inclusion and their potential to further develop this role.

We are increasingly aware of the emergence of the digital divide in Wales as it affects communities. We wish to work with the Welsh Assembly Government and other key partners in relation to this.

The report 'Digital Inclusion in Wales' (2009) produced by the Welsh Affairs Committee states:

*"During our inquiry it became clear to us that there is a need to provide more support to a wider range of people in order to help them use technology more effectively and to help them keep up-to-date with technology developments."*

At the debate on public libraries which took place at the Senedd on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2009 the following was proposed:

*"The National Assembly for Wales supports the Welsh Assembly Government's continued investment in modernising public libraries, in partnership with local authorities, to meet the educational, cultural and recreational needs of the public and to ensure that the maximum number of people benefit from the enhanced resources provided"*

The following amendment was tabled:

*"That the National Assembly for Wales recognises that public libraries have a key role to play in widening access to new technologies across all age groups"*

It is apparent that public libraries play an increasingly significant role in the delivery of digital inclusion activities, community engagement and social inclusion. The potential to extend this provision is significant if given the appropriate level of support in the areas highlighted in this report.

ICT provision is provided in **all** 22 local library authorities throughout Wales through a network comprising over 300 library buildings. The Welsh Public Library Standards reveal a remarkable degree of consistency between all local library authorities.



There is much evidence to show that people are using public library ICT provision to address issues in their lives, such as job seeking, learning and finding information.

The fact that there are libraries in most communities in Wales also means that everybody can access ICT and the internet easily, conveniently and cheaply.

A key point of course is that all public libraries in Wales offer **free** internet access. In the current economic climate this is particularly significant.

Many library authorities also provide much more than access to ICT and the internet and will also offer training and support.

The rest of this report provides information about current provision and highlights ways in which we can further our potential.

### **Here are key aspects of current provision:**

- ICT provision is provided in **all** 22 local library authorities;
- All public libraries offer **free** internet access. In the current economic climate this is more significant than ever;
- Public libraries have the ICT network infrastructure in place;
- Public libraries can offer an accessible network of service points and now includes mobile libraries with ICT;
- Public libraries have the hardware and software, with specialist equipment for special needs;
- Public libraries are close to their communities in terms of location and awareness of needs;
- Public libraries offer a lot of support to users, varying from taster sessions, to practical hands on help and from informal tuition to formal teaching leading to qualifications;
- Public libraries have a proven track record of success with a range of users.
- Public libraries have a proven track record of success in relation to working in partnership with others. Additional ICT provision is provided as a result of the partnership work.

To find out more about current digital inclusion activity in all public library authorities in Wales please read our supplement “**Addressing the Digital Divide : Public Libraries in Wales (Information from 22 local authorities)**”



## What public libraries do to help bridge the digital divide

### Further Information

#### The importance of digital equality

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are playing an increasingly important role within society.

Computer skills and knowledge of the internet can help to:

- improve access to learning opportunities;
- link to government services;
- connect people to the jobs market;
- open up to more flexible ways of working;
- offer additional forms of communication and social networking.

Technologies such as computers and the internet can help people gain access to information, knowledge, employment and skills, social activities and networking and much more. It can also lead to wider choice and empowerment around the major areas of their lives.

There are also indirect uses, for example technologies can help national and local government to plan and deliver services leading to significant improvements, better integration, better access and further opportunities for joint working.

There are concerns, however, about unequal access to ICT by the public and the dangers of digital exclusion.

Digital inclusion is best seen as an aspect of social inclusion. There is an emerging body of evidence to show that those who suffer social exclusion – a combination of social disadvantages such as poor skills, poor health and low income - are also likely to be excluded from the information society. This is evidenced in the report: 'Digital inclusion: an analysis of social disadvantage and the information society' (2008) by the Oxford Internet Institute. This report states that ICT deprivation can be considered alongside, and strongly linked to, more traditional twenty-first century social deprivations, such as low income, unemployment, poor education, ill health and social isolation.

Digital exclusion affects social exclusion. Social exclusion affects digital exclusion.

The correlation between digital and social exclusion means that those already at a disadvantage and arguably with the most to gain from ICT and the internet are the least likely to be making use of it.

The HM Government Paper 'Delivering digital inclusion: an action plan for consultation' [2008] states that there are 17 million adults not using the



internet in the UK. This can be compared with figures around literacy and numeracy. Now ICT skills are seen as the 'third basic skill'.

There is evidence also to show that there are categories of people who are more disengaged from the Internet than expected on the basis of their social advantages. These are people who live in rural rather than urban areas, older people, unemployed people and those less likely to live in a household with children. Therefore, factors such as educational achievement, employment prospects and rurality can appear to influence whether a person is unexpectedly engaged or disengaged.

The needs of disadvantaged individuals and communities therefore need to be looked at holistically, and technology will only be part of the solution. For people to be socially engaged issues such as learning, knowledge, information, democratic processes, accessing information about jobs, enhancing wellbeing and social inclusion are also crucial.

### **What are the current barriers?**

Current barriers preventing people from engaging with digital and ICT activity include:

- Access ( in the physical sense)
- Availability (location of PCs that can be accessed)
- Affordability
- Lack of time
- Low literacy levels
- Disabilities
- Motivation - ' I have no need/it's not for me'
- Concerns about security/ putting privacy at risk
- Skills
- Confidence and self-esteem
- Lack of support

### **Motivators**

Things that are likely to motivate people to engage in ICT and digital activities are:

- Fear of being left behind and/or missed opportunities
- Easy access
- Affordability and/or opportunity to save money
- Being able to keep in touch with people (family and friends)
- Social inclusion
- Non-judgemental support and advice
- Opportunity to engage in flexible approaches to personal development and learning, for example distance learning
- Helping/supporting their children (also grandchildren; family members etc.) to learn and do their homework.



## What role can public libraries play?

More detailed information provided by all 22 local authorities is included in the Supplement to this report "Addressing the Digital Divide : Public Libraries in Wales ( Information from 22 local authorities)"

### **Key aspects of current provision:**

- ICT provision is provided in all 22 local library authorities.
- All public libraries offer **free** internet access. In the current economic climate this is more significant than ever.
- Public libraries have the ICT network infrastructure in place
- Public libraries can offer an accessible network of service points and now include mobiles with ICT;
- Public libraries have the hardware and software, with specialist equipment for special needs;
- Public libraries are close to their communities in terms of location and awareness of needs;
- Public libraries offer a lot of support to users, varying from taster sessions, to practical hands on help, to informal tuition to formal teaching leading to qualifications;
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- Public libraries have a proven track record of success in relation to working in partnership with others. Additional ICT provision is provided as a result of the partnership work.

The role of libraries in ICT provision is reflected in the Public Library Standards for Wales ('Achieving higher standards: a performance measurement framework for public libraries in Wales: April 2008 – March 2011'). Public libraries are required to provide a stipulated range of ICT facilities such as public access PCs with office software and free e-mail for users. Furthermore, libraries are required to provide free basic support to users in the use of the range of ICT facilities and, increasingly, libraries are offering information literacy sessions for users. In addition, as part of the Citizen Entitlements for public libraries, a number of provisions relate to ICT eligibility including providing online membership registration and free access to the internet and computer facilities. Public libraries are striving to achieve the Standards and Entitlements to provide a comprehensive and consistent service to users across Wales.



Public libraries have a particular role to play in relation to digital inclusion. Librarians and Information professionals work closely with excluded individuals and communities through public libraries in local communities, in other communities of interest such as prison libraries and through partnerships with other library sectors, for example within schools, further and higher education and health.

Our network of public libraries throughout Wales are open to all individuals and communities and enable them to access free internet and ICT provision. The fact that there are libraries in most communities in Wales also means that everybody can access ICT and the internet easily, conveniently and cheaply.

People who don't have the internet at home are able to call into their local library and use the facility for free!

*"The library has made a difference because I don't have the internet and the library is within walking distance from my house"*

*[Customer - Flintshire Library Service]*

*"I don't have access to the internet at home. Thanks to the library I get fast access to the internet.*

*This allows me to stay in contact with one of my friends who lives abroad and allows me to stay in touch with friends in the UK.*

*[Customer - Swansea Library Service]*

In addition, some people who do have the internet at home prefer to use their local library until they become proficient. They may initially need to be supported through an intermediary such as a library and require some level of support from library staff when they first use the internet and other forms of ICT. A library and the library staff help people to gain skills and confidence to engage with technology.

## **Informal Learning**

In relation to **learning**, many people prefer to learn informally. Public libraries support adult community learning and informal learning for people of all ages. At a library, everyone can study the subject of their choice, in their own time, at their own pace. Through the network of public libraries people can read, learn, research, surf (the web), meet and share – various activities which help people to learn and develop as well as engage with their local communities and beyond.



### Public libraries offer:

- FREE Internet access
- FREE On-line membership registration and access to library services and information
- ICT taster sessions. This would include for example - Introduction to PCs, how to print documents and images, navigating the operating system, saving documents, text editing, use of clipart, introduction to the internet and successful web searching, using the email and use of social networking.
- Computers for the terrified
- Some Local Studies Librarians offer family history taster sessions.
- Many libraries hold 'Silver Surfer' sessions for older people
- Many provide smaller specialised courses working with further education providers, for example, on family and local history research
- Learndirect 'bite-sized' learning is available in some libraries
- Some are more niche in nature focusing on topics such as 'buying on ebay'.
- Many have sessions focusing on information literacy themes
- OCN training provision is provided in some libraries
- Some host accredited ICT courses offered by local FE colleges.
- Many hold community learning classes
- Many hold job seekers sessions
- Most offer ongoing ICT help from frontline staff and/or Libraries ICT support officers
- Many libraries have developed interesting projects with key target groups. For example, in Wrexham the ICT and Learning for Children and Young People Project targets mainly school children in the transition from primary to secondary school. Also, Caerphilly Library Service has developed the information literacy scheme to include young people (14+) who are completing the Welsh Baccalaureate.

Informal learning opportunities are often the first access individuals have to digital technologies (for example, using a computer in a library). By using computers in libraries learners can become more confident and socially mobile. It is then more likely that learners will begin using ICT for their own benefit.



*A group of people brushing up on their computer skills at Barry Library, Vale of Glamorgan.*

*Actress and writer Ruth Jones finds out more!*

Public libraries can help people acquire learning and life skills, including learning to use ICT. This can help considerably with confidence building so that they are ready to participate in the next stage of learning and employment.

*"Joining the library has changed my life totally. I joined the library three years ago – in this time I have completed OCNs Level 1 and 2 in information literacy through the Gateways to Learning project. I have learnt how to use the internet. I have also joined a basic skills class in the library. The library has given me motivation and confidence to return to learning – in a happy relaxed environment. This year I have been awarded a Certificate of Special Merit at the Blaenau Gwent Adult Learning Awards!"*

*[Customer – Blaenau Gwent Libraries]*

Informal learning or independent learning such as that undertaken through libraries often serves as an important first step into further learning.

*"I have just finished a three year teaching degree. My University was in London, my kids and fiancée here! The university was too far away really and I practically did all my studying and assignments, including my dissertation, here! This place got me through a degree, got me a 2:1, and now I'm a qualified teacher – it practically saved my life. I will endorse libraries forever!"*

*[Customer – Pembrokeshire Library Service]*

People who wish to study for additional learning and skills find that the resources and facilities combined with the informative and conducive environment of a public library provides an ideal learning environment. Often people choose to use a library as their place of study or learning as they like the idea that the information and support is readily available and because they feel the need to remove themselves from their everyday work or living place. Learning resources, ICT, free internet facilities and staff available to help – what better place to come to than a library?

Public libraries also provide localised support for learners who may otherwise be working in isolation thus providing essential referral points for **remote learners** who may otherwise be both digitally and socially excluded.



*“The Library helps me to do serious scholarly research in a rural environment, by giving me access to world class libraries through the inter-library loans system. The service is unique and invaluable”*

*Customer - Powys Library Service*

Public libraries have pioneered various innovative methods of supporting learners in their use of ICT. The Routes to Learning project in Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Swansea and Wrexham libraries explored the ways that library staff could support learners individually and in small groups. The project, funded through the New Opportunities Fund, demonstrated how this type of semi-formal learning could benefit socially excluded people. It was significant that a high proportion of the people who attended sessions were aged over 50 and many had not experienced any formal learning since leaving school.

The SCL Wales report: ‘Brighter, Bolder, Better: Breathing New Life into Welsh Library Services’, (2009) describes in more detail community and informal learning opportunities provided through public libraries.

*(A copy of this report has been sent to all Assembly Members and is also available on the [library.wales.org](http://library.wales.org) website and on the CyMAL website)*

### **Other life skills**

A major influence for the latter part of 2008, throughout 2009 and into 2010 is the **global recession**. Significant redundancies have resulted in more people returning to learning and wanting to update their skills in a cost-effective way. People are also using public libraries to help with business related enquiries. Staff at Wrexham Library’s **Business Line** for example, have noticed a big increase in enquiries related to new Business start-ups.

In addition people are looking for general ways to make savings.

*“I haven’t got internet access at home and I need it these days to keep an eye on my bank account, pay my gas, electricity, water, council tax and TV licence and to look for jobs and fill in applications online as well as check my e-mail.*

*The library has access to the internet.*

*The library saves me a lot of time and money.”*

*[Customer – Cardiff Library Service]*



People are also using libraries to find out about **job opportunities** and as a way to get them back on the career ladder. Many job opportunities are now placed online as it is a cheaper way to advertise. Those who are not accessing online information are therefore missing out on potential job opportunities.

*"I am unemployed at present, so I joined the library to be able to go on internet and look for jobs. It also has a job search machine and the staff are great and very helpful. Most jobs require you go online. If you haven't got the internet at home or can't afford to have it, the library is the place to be. Really look forward to coming in"*

*[Customer – Caerphilly Library Service]*

Many libraries offer special sessions for job-surfers. For example, in Denbighshire a new course was introduced at Rhyl library in September 2009 to assist Job Seekers finding jobs and completing application forms online. The course consists of 2 sessions per week for 5 weeks, and was developed as a response to concerns by library staff – and from Job Centre plus staff – regarding the number of requests for IT assistance from young people who did not have the IT skills to apply on-line for vacancies. Monmouthshire libraries also offer weekly job-surfers sessions. These sessions give computer and internet access to customers who might not have access to IT elsewhere. Library staff give assistance with a range of skills from basic keyboard and using a mouse to help with CVs. Torfaen Libraries provide free printout for job seekers from relevant websites. In Rhondda Cynon Taf job centres are referring people to public libraries to use computers and other resources to enable them to find jobs. Public libraries are perceived as being a key resource in this area.

### **Inclusiveness – libraries are for everybody!**

Libraries help to bridge the digital divide by providing a service for all people, of all ages, of all walks of life – in fact everybody!

Libraries and information services provide advice, information, research opportunities and mediate help on a wide range of topics. People of all ages use libraries when they have a query that needs answering or for more extensive research.

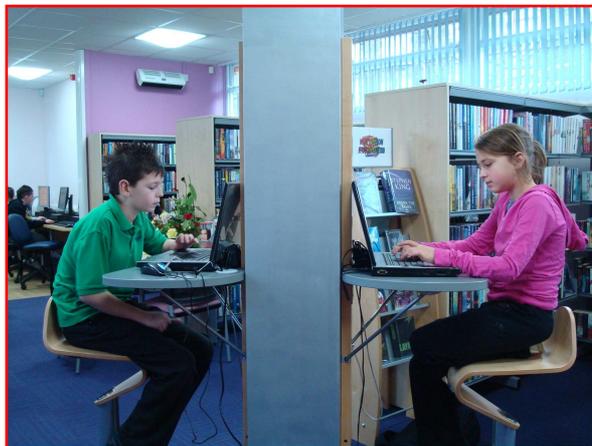
Libraries can help **children and young people** to engage with their communities by offering a wide range of ICT equipment resources including books, CDs, DVDs, music and free filtered internet access. Children can also use the facilities for homework and learning whilst students are frequent users of public libraries including during holiday periods.





Many libraries offer targeted training to young people. For example, Caerphilly Library Service has developed the information literacy scheme further to include young people (14+) who are completing the Welsh Baccalaureate. Blackwood Comprehensive School pilot this new course with some 30 students completing an OCN qualification in Using Sources of Information with sessions hosted at both the School and Public Library. Further OCN work has been initiated for young people through the Council's Youth Club structure.

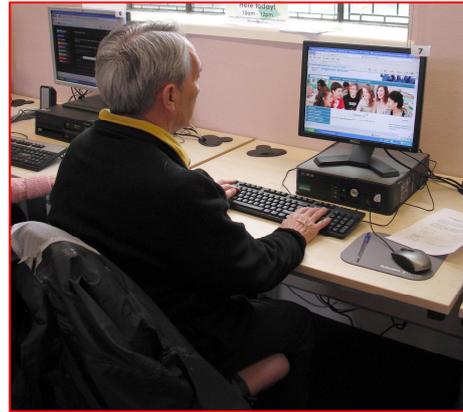
In Wrexham the 'ICT and Learning for Children and Young People Project' targets mainly school children in the transition from primary to secondary school.



Gwynedd Libraries have developed the Her y We web-site to encourage and assist children and young people to use libraries. The site contains information, games and resources and has ideas for school librarians to promote their libraries in support of the curriculum. The site is available at [www.herywe.org.uk/](http://www.herywe.org.uk/)

As well as enjoying the social interaction that takes place within a local library and the selection of books and resources that are available, many **older people** use libraries to access the internet and participate in ICT training activities.





Many public library authorities are actively engaged in older people's initiatives. For example, the Head of Libraries at Monmouthshire serves on the Older People's Strategy Group. Caerphilly Library Service is currently leading on a Digital Inclusion project 'Let's Get Digital' funded by the 50+ positive action partnership and working with Community Education Tutors to deliver a series of informal training sessions on basic ICT skills and Information Literacy to 50+ residents in 8 libraries across Caerphilly Borough.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the ICT taster sessions appeal to older, less ICT literate users who are comfortable coming to a neutral location where they are more likely to be in the company of similar 'beginners' (and this could also apply to being with others of a similar age.) ie the familiarity factor! In addition the work of academics has shown that engagement in learning, including ICT learning, in later life contributes to mental health and well being, reduces social exclusion and improves self confidence.

*"Next year I will reach the big 70! I really wanted to be a Silver Surfer (just to keep up with the six grandchildren originally!) so I enrolled at the library. I do not have a computer at home so I love going down to Brynhyfryd Library - where the staff are brilliant, very helpful, and very patient, always helping out with a problem. Besides being an avid reader, I love sending e-mails to family and friends. Oh yes! I love my library!"*

*[Customer - Swansea Library Service]*

Libraries also encourage intergenerational activities.



A Monmouth Library customer reading up on extra information from a new book about evacuees for his talk to local children about his experiences during World War 2.

There are many examples to demonstrate what public libraries are doing to help people who maybe socially and digitally excluded due to living in **rural or remote areas**. The network of public libraries, including mobile libraries, reach many rural areas throughout Wales. In addition there are positive examples of specific projects that have been developed to ensure people living in rural areas are able to access ICT and digital media. For example, Bridgend Library Services operate a Cyberlink ICT training vehicle specifically to take ICT access and training out into remote and deprived communities. It has delivered regular awareness raising and training sessions (as well as drop-in People's Network access) to all Community First areas in Bridgend and many other deprived communities, including special client groups (job seekers, disabled groups, secure psychiatric unit, etc).

In addition, Bridgend have followed a policy of building ICT training suites in deprived communities, usually in partnership with community groups, for example they have recently developed the E-Libs service based at Pyle which seeks to engage people with basic skills needs (literacy, numeracy as well as ICT) through libraries. This is proving very successful and is now a leading referrer and trainer for the European Convergence programme "Bridges into work".

At Ceredigion, under a Local Services Board Project: 'Fan Hyn Fan Draw', the village mobile library is used as a focus for local community activity. The project consist of several partners including CAVO, Police, Fire services and others under the lead of the Library Authority.

**Community cohesion and diversity** issues are reflected in public library policies and in the delivery of services. For example, they are reflected in Rhondda Cynon Taf's Pawb web-site: PAWB (Public Access Without Barriers). PAWB provides an introduction to RCT's libraries in 15 community languages. The web-site has been such a success that it is planned to replicate the initiative in North Wales in 2010. It is worth bearing in mind that there are an increasing number of ethnic groups such as migrant workers and Polish people in many of our Welsh communities.

Linked to this is the flexibility that public libraries offer to people who may not have permanent residency in the locality. This would include people with temporary residence and also tourists and visitors. We have adapted to the modern world where people have become more mobile and transient.



Tourism is big business in many areas of Wales. Public libraries encourage tourists to use their local library. Often tourists and visitors like to have access to the e-mail and internet in order to keep in touch with people back home. This has been facilitated by the recent SCL 'Universal Membership' agreement (see page 18) which allows a member of any library service to use any other library in Wales and England.

The majority of Library Services also provide adaptive aids to assist **people with a disability** to use the ICT equipment installed in libraries. Pembrokeshire is one example amongst many who have made screen reader and magnification software available for people with a visual impairment. In Rhondda Cynon Taf, staff have been working with Ability Net on the WRAP project (Wales Remote Assessment Project) which provides resources and knowledge to support disabled computer users at home. This project has provided libraries with WRAP's special packs of assistive technology (flexible keyboards, mini keyboards, trackballs etc.) and the Housebound Library Service helps users complete WRAP's online assessments.

The range of additional equipment introduced by Library Services is extensive and includes assistive keyboards, mouse alternatives (for example, trackballs), digital visualizers, Braille software etc. This builds on a long-standing tradition of making library resources available for visually impaired people in various formats such as large print and audio and is evidenced by the partnership between the Society of Chief Librarians and Share the Vision.

Public libraries also have a track record of working in partnership with others. For example we (The Society of Chief Librarians in Wales) are currently working with BBC Learning on their forthcoming campaign to encourage greater internet use. The BBC's research emphasises how people don't use the internet due to fear – fear of not being able to use it, fear of looking stupid etc. Public libraries have a key role here as non-threatening environments where people feel comfortable asking for help from non-technical staff.

### Literacy

Public libraries have a key role also to play in relation to improving **literacy levels** in Wales. There is evidence to show that people with low literacy skills are also reluctant to use ICT as they may not have the confidence to read what appears on the screen. Low levels of literacy will therefore impact on digital inclusion. Figures from the Basic Skills Agency suggest that 25% of the population of Wales have literacy skills at entry level or below (the level expected of an eleven year old). This compares to 16% in England for the same literacy levels. In Wales, 4% of the adult population have the lowest level of literacy, where they can understand short texts with repeated signs and symbols. This is equivalent to around 72,000 adults in Wales. Addressing the educational requirements of people with low literacy levels is essential for achieving greater levels of digital participation. Libraries have a key role to play here as libraries not only provide opportunities for digital inclusion but also promote reading and literacy.



## Information and Knowledge

**Information Literacy** is also vital in helping to address the digital divide. Public libraries are information services with staff on hand to help with information based enquiries, to help retrieve information using printed and electronic sources. Librarians are engaged in promoting information literacy and supporting users to develop their own skills. At national level plans are in place to develop Information Literacy further through all library sectors.

Effective **knowledge and information management** is also critical to a digital inclusion programme and librarians and information professionals are leading on this in Wales.

## Staff

Staff in public libraries are able to access information (including electronic information) and are equipped with the right skills to help the customer search for and retrieve this information for themselves. Public library staff are information navigators and facilitators. Librarians and Information professionals have the skills to match the information needs of individuals to available resources (including digital and media literacy) at the point of need and in the context of real enquiries.

Many staff also assist and support customers with ICT support and learning. Customers often need to be supported through an intermediary such as a library and require some level of support from library staff when they first use the internet and other forms of ICT. A library and the library staff help people to gain skills and confidence to engage with technology.



*Staff at Colwyn Bay  
Library assisting  
television presenter  
Gethin Jones to find the  
information he is wanting*

## Access

As stated, there are public libraries in most communities throughout Wales. In 2009, in order to **improve access** to our public libraries in Wales even further, a national libraries website [library.wales.org](http://library.wales.org) was developed.

Library.wales.org provides a portal to all public and other libraries in Wales, their catalogues, resources and services. This was an initiative funded by CyMAL (a policy division of the Welsh Assembly Government). With one click of the mouse, a 'customer' can access all the information in a library in Wales from their own home or indeed anywhere they like. This isn't in place of libraries but rather is an additional tool to enable people to access information and library services.

Also, all local library authorities now offer online registration (either locally or where this hasn't been possible, through the [library.wales.org](http://library.wales.org) website.)



*Customers searching on  
library.wales.org in a  
place and in a way that  
suits them!*

In addition, in September 2009 the Society of Chief Librarians agreed to a 'Universal Membership' scheme. This means that membership of a local public library service entitles any customer, on production of their library membership card, to use other public library services in Wales and England. As a minimum, this would allow a member of any library service to borrow books from any library in Wales and England. This is a very strong statement about the universal nature of our library service in Wales, and is tangible evidence of our ability to work together to widen access and remove barriers to use.

## Governance

Libraries can also help the public engage more with **governance, democratic processes and other council services**. Socially and economically disadvantaged people who could benefit most by accessing council services will be the least likely to be able to use electronic means to access government initiatives or democratic information. Public libraries can provide

mediated access to online services. There is a need to promote and enhance the role of libraries here.

An example of this would be the recent promotion to encourage the public to use public libraries to access PCs in order to complete Tax Return Forms. Other agencies are likely to follow suit.

Public libraries are in many cases the public face of local councils. Because libraries provide support as well as access to digital technologies, there is huge potential for libraries to drive the take-up of e-public services and e-government services. This is particularly important as outlying government and local authority offices are closed and services are increasingly made available online. This could have significant impact in areas such as employment, housing and health now and in the near future. Public libraries have a base of experience in delivering public services including online library services and have the potential to signpost and guide users to other online public services.

*So we know that public libraries have a key role to play to help bridge the digital divide in Wales. However, in order for public libraries to fully reach their potential, investment and further development is still required. (see pages 20 -22)*



## Key areas that require investment and development

Public libraries in Wales are ideally positioned to help the Welsh Assembly Government to bridge the digital divide. However, additional investment would unlock further potential and enable libraries to perform additional roles efficiently and to offer good value for money.

### **Staff**

Staff in public libraries help customers to access information (including electronically) and help the customer search for this information themselves. However, as most front-line staff are allocated to directly assist customers they often find it difficult to find the time they would like to spend helping people with additional ICT training or support. This would be particularly problematic in single staffed libraries.

#### **What needs to happen?**

- A revenue stream to be made available that recognises the importance of developing workforce skills in public libraries.
- Investment in the library workforce to include increasing staff capacity and updating skills through appropriate training is crucial if public libraries can fully reach their potential in relation to bridging the digital divide.
- There is also evidenced demand for additional dedicated staff to focus on ICT and digital media.
- Develop opportunities to utilise more innovative ways of working, for example partnership working.

### **ICT infrastructure**

- People expect up to date technology. There are challenges in maintaining the resources used to an appropriate standard. We need to ensure the public network continues to be free to customers and that we are able to provide a network that is up to date in terms of **hardware and software**.
- Libraries are linked to the Public Sector **Broadband** Aggregated Network (PSBA) and there has already been significant investment in ICT infrastructure in libraries dating from the New Opportunities Fund (UK wide national funding) in the early years of the last decade. However, since that initial investment, the funding for the replacement of hardware, the enhancing of software and services, and the upgrading of network links has varied.
- Many library services require higher bandwidth. A lack of a Broadband connection in some rural areas in Wales is proving problematic as stated in the Welsh Affairs Committee Report 'Digital Inclusion in Wales' ( 2009)



“The eradication of broadband ‘notspots’ in Wales must continue to receive priority attention. We welcome the Government’s proposals to introduce a universal service commitment for broadband and to provide public funding for this service”

- Some local authorities’ policies are too limiting. For example, some discourage Wi-Fi use and use of social networking. There remains a great disparity across Wales in relation to public access to emerging technologies, often dependent on local access and network security arrangements

### **What needs to happen?**

Public expectation is high and continues to grow. We need to keep up to date with the needs of the public in relation to developing technologies by:

- Ensuring our corporate partners and colleagues understand the need to provide products familiar to the public and support the rapid advancements in both hardware and software.
- Addressing poor Broadband connection in rural areas. Broadband needs to cover current ‘notspots’. In addition, all areas in Wales need to be brought up to speed. (This is of-course a wider issue that goes beyond public library services)
- A minimum specification and currency specified in the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) supported by a national programme of funding.
- A higher bandwidth is needed giving libraries better access via the PSBA network
- A consistent approach to enabling access to Web 2.0 technologies, including social networking, must be developed.
- A consistent approach to enabling Wi-Fi access must be developed
- Innovation challenge funding to be made available to allow early adopter technology to be trialled thus allowing best practise to be channelled throughout the wider library network.

### **Access**

- Small buildings limit the number of PCs available and it is difficult in some libraries to find the space for dedicated ICT facilities.
- Some libraries provide out-of-hours training sessions to compensate for limited opening hours.



### **What needs to happen?**

- The refurbishment programme under the Community Learning Libraries Capital Development Grants must continue in order to enable more library buildings to be made suitable for digital access and community learning
- To consider shared services, shared premises and sharing expertise.
- Authorities to be recommended to relax restrictions on Wi-Fi access and social networking. (We would welcome an agreed SOCITM approach to WiFi and social networking).
- An Acceptable Use Policy to be created for All Wales
- Consideration of library opening hours and how this can be sustained

### **Funding streams**

Funding that public libraries can access for arranging training courses is limited. Libraries could do a lot more if we could tap in to more funding; for example, we are able to offer free taster sessions for 5/6 people at a very local level while the colleges need a minimum 12/15 people to make a course viable (other than Basic Skills).

### **What needs to happen?**

- Librarians to be able to access learning funds
- A revenue stream to be made available that recognises the importance of informal learning
- See also the points raised in the other boxes – staff, ICT and Access.

### **Marketing**

We could improve how we market this aspect of our service to customers and potential customers. There are still many people who are unaware that we offer ICT and the internet in public libraries.

### **What needs to happen?**

- It is essential that campaigns include marketing the benefits of using the internet and how public libraries can help them. Specifically we need to actively target people in excluded groups by highlighting how the internet can enrich their lives.
- Public libraries need to promote the role they can play in relation to digital inclusion, for example through the production of documents such as this, press coverage etc.



## Conclusion

Our purpose in this report is to demonstrate the role that our public library network in Wales has in relation to digital inclusion and to highlight the overall value that this has brought to communities and individuals across Wales. We hope this report gives you a feel for the considerable difference that public libraries are making and their potential to make an even bigger difference should the right level of investment be made.

It is apparent that public libraries now, more than ever, play a key role in the delivery of digital inclusion activities, community engagement and social inclusion. The potential to extend this provision is significant.

### Key aspects

- Some form of ICT provision is provided in all 22 local library authorities in Wales;
- All public libraries offer **free** internet access. In the current economic climate this is more significant than ever;
- Public libraries have the ICT network infrastructure in place;
- Public libraries can offer an accessible network of service points and now include mobile libraries with ICT;
- Public libraries have the hardware and software, with specialist equipment for special needs;
- Public libraries are close to their communities in terms of location and awareness of needs;
- Public libraries offer a lot of support to users, varying from taster sessions, to practical hands on help, to informal tuition to formal teaching leading to qualifications;
- Public libraries have a proven track record of success with a range of users;
- Public libraries have a proven track record of success in relation to working in partnership with others. Additional ICT provision is provided as a result of the partnership work.

### Other important aspects

- The network of public libraries together with mobile libraries reach many rural areas throughout Wales. In addition there are positive examples of specific projects that have been developed to ensure people living in rural areas are able to access ICT and digital media;



- Public libraries support adult community learning and informal learning (including use of ICT, use of the internet and e-learning) for people of all ages;
- Many people looking to start up in business use public libraries and the on-line search facilities available;
- People are also using the internet in libraries to find out about job opportunities and as a way to get them back on the career ladder. Many libraries offer special sessions for job-surfers;
- Public libraries also provide localised support for learners who may otherwise be working in isolation and may otherwise be both digitally and socially excluded;
- People of all ages use libraries to access the internet and participate in ICT training activities;
- Public libraries have a key role to play in relation to improving reading and literacy levels which impacts on digital literacy levels;
- Information Literacy is also vital in helping to address the digital divide. Public libraries are information services with staff on hand to help with information based enquiries, to help retrieve information using printed and electronic sources;
- Effective knowledge and information management is also critical to a digital inclusion programme and librarians and information professionals are leading on this in Wales;
- Libraries can also help the public engage more with governance, democratic process and other council services;
- We are improving our access to libraries in Wales through our Universal Membership, on-line registration facilities and library.wales.org website. This is a very strong statement about the universal nature of our library service, and is tangible evidence of our ability to work together to widen access and remove barriers to use.

However, in order for us to build on this and reach public expectation levels there needs to be further investment in relation to our workforce and ICT infrastructure including equipment, hardware, software. In addition networks need to be updated and Broadband access needs to be improved.

We also feel that Welsh Assembly Government Members should consider the role of public libraries when contemplating future programmes and strategies in relation to Digital, Media and ICT.



At the debate on public libraries which took place at the Senedd on October 13<sup>th</sup> 2009 the following was proposed:

*“The National Assembly for Wales supports the Welsh Assembly Government’s continued investment in modernising public libraries, in partnership with local authorities, to meet the educational, cultural and recreational needs of the public and to ensure that the maximum number of people benefit from the enhanced resources provided”*

The following amendment was tabled:

***“That the National Assembly for Wales recognises that public libraries have a key role to play in widening access to new technologies across all age groups”***

We, the Society of Chief Librarians in Wales, fully support this amendment.

We recognize that the Welsh Assembly Government aims to develop libraries and make them fit for the 21st century. We wish to work with you towards this aim.

Continuing to invest in public libraries is essential to attaining the ‘One Wales’ vision and to providing better services to local communities. Investment in public libraries – existing services available in local communities across Wales with the right infrastructure in place - would be a wise investment to make in relation to helping the Welsh Assembly Government to bridge the digital divide in Wales.

Should you wish to find out more, please read the supplement to this report [Addressing the Digital Divide : Public Libraries in Wales \( Information from 22 local authorities\)](#)

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. We hope you found it useful.

### ***Quote from a very satisfied customer***

*“Before I joined the library I was unable to use a computer but with the help of the staff I am now able to do so.*

*Everything you want to find and know... and it’s free.*

*What else could be better for me! Thank you.”*

