

Denbighshire County Council

Cae Bach, Talisein
20th October 2023

Dear Councillor Jason McLellan,

I am writing with regards to the current consultation on Denbighshire County Council proposals to cut library opening hours. I write as a librarian (at Aberystwyth University) and as the former Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) Relationship Manager for Wales.

I appreciate the increasingly difficult financial position local government is finding itself in across Wales and the complex budgetary decision making that this must involve. I would ask, however, that Denbighshire County Council rethinks the cuts and considers opportunities for continuing to be innovative in its approach to public library provision.

The consideration of access to opening hours in the proposal is very clear but this focus undermines the true value of a library service – especially a successful one like that in Denbighshire. One look at the service's social media demonstrates its role as a vehicle for delivering local government. In October 2023 alone there has been a Dementia Aware memory box event, Bookstart and Rhymetime sessions, a 'Remember When' Cuppa and Chat, a family photo marathon, a Halloween Craft and Chat, a writing workshop, and a book launch and many more activities on top of the ever present electronic and physical resources that the whole community has access to. These activities and collections serve young and old, parents and families. They promote the Welsh language, develop skills and share information about health. You don't have another trusted service that can reach your communities like this. No local authority does.

The integrated library and One Stop Shop Service delivers the face-to-face customer service for the Council, supporting and enabling people who are often the most excluded or disadvantaged to access council services – to make cash payments, to request a service, for help around homelessness, for help to complete benefits forms, to apply online for a Blue Badge. I know first hand that your staffs' skills and empathy are key to providing this service for so many people who face challenges in life – people who will have nowhere else to go if the library isn't open and properly staffed – and this will have an onward impact on social care, housing and health services.

The Welsh Public Libraries Standards show that you successfully use libraries to provide your communities with ICT, E-government support, and literacy and skills training. Via Book Prescription Wales, Better with Books, designated health and well-being collections and local government sign posting you have delivered support for health and well-being. You have committed to your Welsh language collections and continued to offer access to the internet and Wi-Fi.

Although good, these statistics don't explain that it is the skills and dedication of the staff who do so much more than keep a branch open. They engage with your communities - digitally and in person. They work to understand who your communities are and what they need. They share best practice and reach out to collaborate with programs in health and

education. They are the people who will ensure the Council will meet the aims of national government programming, in digital skills for example, or in delivering the Anti Racist Wales Action Plan. It was working on the latter that I relied on staff like yours in Denbighshire to share how the library profession can implement anti-racism in communities.

I understand the pressure to focus on opening hours but I would encourage Denbighshire County Council to be more proactive and to lead in more long term approaches to budget cuts. People appreciate that there is a financial crisis. People also know that reductions in staff result in permanent reductions in service. Staff who survive a crisis like this need to know that there is a future worthy of their investment of energy and passion, where they can contribute professionally, as librarians, to the delivery of local government. This means that as an employer the Council should be focusing on the staff and skills at risk here and how to ensure their survival so that as you emerge from this crisis, your communities find that they still have a dedicated professional service to turn to.

I'm sure that, as the national professional body, CILIP would be very happy to work with you to find a positive path through today's challenges.

Best wishes

Amy Staniforth

Dr A. Staniforth, MCLIP