

Combined Welshpool Library & Museum Survey



**A response by the Save Welshpool
Library Supporters Group**

23/11/2018

A Response to Powys County Council's Combined Welshpool Library & Museum Survey by the Save Welshpool Library Supporters Group

1. Introduction

This consultation response is based on comments/views gathered by the Save Welshpool Library Supporters Group which has been established to ensure that the residents of Welshpool and the large surrounding catchment area will continue to receive their statutory rights to a comprehensive public library service. This response will provide evidence, linked to Powys County Council's own strategic documents, that **the current proposal to close Welshpool Library in Brook Street and co-locate a significantly downgraded public library facility "into Powysland Museum next year" is unacceptable**. This proposal does not take into account "*the needs at a local level*" of the residents of Welshpool and surrounding areas and is certainly not "*working in new, innovative ways to deliver our priorities*" as outlined in the Council's *Powys 2025: Our Corporate Improvement Plan 2018-2023*. The Group recognises the financial difficulties faced by the Council and would welcome an opportunity to work with the Council and other partners in ensuring the continuation of a public library that makes a real difference to the quality of people's lives. To date the Group has secured over 4,000 signatures in support their campaign to save Welshpool Library. This petition objects strongly to the relocation/downsizing of Welshpool Library.

2. The consultation process

"Engagement and Communication Listening, sharing information and building trust with residents, communities and staff"

The Group welcomes the above commitment from the Council as outlined in its [Powys 2025](#) strategic document under the heading "*Making it Happen*". However this consultation regarding the co-location of Welshpool Library and Powysland Museum totally undermines this Council commitment and ignores key aspects of legal guidance published on the [Law Wales](#) website aimed at local authorities.

The guidance states:

"Whether or not there is a legal duty to consult, where consultation is carried out it must be done fairly."

"Consultation must take place when the proposal is at a formative stage."

The title of the consultation, "Combined Welshpool Library and Museum Survey" and question 4 along with press statements from councillors and officials indicates that the Council decision to close the current Library and pursue co-location has already been made. Published information notes that meetings to

discuss this matter began between the Town Council and Powys County Council as early as May 2018 and that a downgraded library facility (as indicated in the FAQ) would be situated on the ground floor of the Powysland Museum. This and other information indicates that plans are not at a formative stage.

“Sufficient reasons must be put forward for the proposal so as to allow for intelligent consideration and response. Consultees must have enough information to be able to make an informed input to the process.”

Law Wales

The information provided on the online consultation document and the accompanying FAQ is totally inadequate and undermines the ability of members of the public and interested groups to respond to this consultation and makes a mockery of the Council's commitment to "... sharing information and building trust with residents, communities and staff". The lack of detailed information from the Council to facilitate an open and transparent debate has been highlighted in the Group's discussions with County Councillors, representatives of the Town Council and the local MP.

It would not have required a major effort by the Council to put together a detailed document in relation to the consultation and include an overview of the services involved, drivers for change and options with appraisals. In the case of the Library, this could for example involve updating information on usage etc. from previously published library review documents. The Group has had to gather information from a variety of sources such as whistle-blowers, documents and ad hoc media responses from councillors/officials which all leads to unhelpful rumours. It would have been much easier to include information; such as the review of council accommodation, the need to close Neuadd Maldwyn and to relocate council staff to the current Library etc. with outline costing for options as part of the consultation! It also raises the question whether this should be part of a wider consultation on Council service delivery in and around Welshpool in order to develop the proposed Place Based Plans?

It is disappointing to have to spend time and effort in raising these issues around a process that is undermining a fair and open consultation. The **Group calls on the Council to withdraw this flawed consultation and engage meaningfully with the community to reduce the likelihood of any legal action** which has proved costly to a number of local authorities whatever its outcome.

3 Making a difference to people's lives

The fundamental reason for the Group's objection to the closing of the current Library without a suitable alternative is the negative impact that it

would have on the lives of local residents who use the library and future generations. This is a topic that has been totally ignored in the consultation documentation. Libraries make a real difference to the lives of residents of all ages and backgrounds, and this has been recognised in previous reviews and impact assessments relating to Powys Library Service as a whole. The following selected examples are listed to show the Library's contribution to the *Powys 2025* priorities.

a) Strengthen Learning and Skills

- Welshpool Library works in partnership with other agencies to ensure that children and families have the best start in life. This is achieved through initiatives such as Bookstart supported by a range of activities such as Story and Rhymetimes
- It works with schools to provide resources and assistance to help children improve their educational attainment. This role has become increasingly important since the education funding for the Schools Library Service was withdrawn by the Council.
- It assists people to get online and develop their digital skills to ensure that residents benefit from the advantages of the digital revolution. Providing fast broadband access via libraries is even more important in areas of Powys where broadband access is limited or non-existent!

“76% of respondents in the adult library user survey said that the library has helped them to learn something new.”

b) Health and Wellbeing

- Welshpool Library promotes the health and wellbeing of the community by providing resources that enable people to be proactive in improving their own health and wellbeing; thus saving money for health and social services.
- It works with the health sector by contributing to the Books Prescription Wales initiative to address mental health issues.
- It helps combat both loneliness and isolation with a range of activities such as Knit and Knatter sessions.
- Further evidence of the value of libraries contribution in promoting health and wellbeing is highlighted in the all-Wales document [*The first incomplete guide to wellbeing in libraries*](#). In his introduction, Professor Sir Mansel Aylward CB states:

“Evidence shows that better informed people have a better prognosis and greater wellbeing. The activities and services described in this guide show how libraries

contribute to the public health agenda by tackling health inequalities, supporting health literacy, improving mental health and helping with the prevention and early diagnosis of illness.”

c) Economy

- The proximity of the current Library to the town centre, with its adjacent parking, is a factor in maintaining a vibrant town centre.
- Welshpool Library develops people’s skills by supporting lifelong learning, e.g. providing resources and study spaces for students studying Open University / distance learning courses.
- It improves employability. Employers highlight the importance of literacy (reading and digital) for young people entering the jobs market. Welshpool Library promotes the literacy of young people by delivering initiatives such as the Summer Reading Challenge and a dedicated teenage area.
- It will tackle digital exclusion by providing access to the online Universal Credit resources and the increasing number of public services delivered primarily online.
- It currently provides high quality jobs to 5/6 (not FTE) members of staff.

d) Strong and flourishing communities

- Welshpool Library provides space for community groups run by volunteers to develop group activities.
- It works with external agencies to deliver services/activities that would otherwise not be available for the community.
- It provides local access to Council services as part of the Library+ scheme.

“A great Arteco club session last night in the library. Running it on Monday’s four til six. Aim is for attendees of any age to come together and use art to explore nature, environment and bring community together to support the wildlife of Welshpool”

An essential aspect of ensuring that the public obtain the maximum benefit from their library is motivated staff and in Welshpool we are very fortunate in our staff. The Council proposes to downgrade the library elements of the service, but the survey makes no mention of staff in question 2. Is this an indication of the Council’s support to and value they place on Welshpool Library staff, and that there is no threat to their jobs located in Welshpool? Unfortunately information gathered suggests that there will be significant job

losses in both the library and museum staffing which will result in a major reduction in the range and quality of services.

“Anybody want to see just how good the Library staff are ... just attend a pre school read and sing ...”

Indications are that the available floorspace for a library in the Powysland Museum building will be as little as a third of its current size. The current consultation asks people to prioritise the allocation of space for various services. This would indicate that there is a danger that some services/facilities may be withdrawn, e.g. teenage area or activities space. It also likely to lead to the dilution of services - a little bit of everything - that would not meet anyone's needs and a token gesture of a service. A proportion of the ground floor will have to be allocated to allow the free flow/circulation of visitors including large school groups to access the first floor, a shared reception desk, and essential facilities such as a public toilet (accessible to all) and other staff facilities. This will naturally limit the space available for other aspects of the service.

Evidence from previous downgrading of library services indicates that **it will result in a significant decrease in the number of people visiting and benefitting from library services**. This would also disproportionately impact the vulnerable in our society that cannot afford to buy books and secure fast Internet access. There is no evidence of the Council conducting an impact assessment in relation to this consultation. A previous Council assessment in relation to libraries in 2016 specifically excluded Welshpool Library:

“The 6 main libraries in Newtown, Welshpool, Machynlleth, Llandrindod, Brecon and Ystradgynlais, and the 2 mobile libraries, are outside the scope of this project because of their strategic importance in library+ service delivery,”

4 Understanding the needs of the people of Welshpool and surrounding areas

“Place Based Plans will be agreed with designated localities, setting out an understanding of each localities needs at a local and what interventions are required by 2020”

Powys 2025

The Group welcomes the Council's aim to develop Place Based Plans based on local needs. Welshpool is the fourth largest town in Powys with a population of over 6,600. Services in Welshpool are also used by residents of surrounding areas. These include some of the largest villages in Powys such

as Guilsfield (population (1,729) and Berriew (population 1,335) as well as the more rural areas surrounding Welshpool. Welshpool Library's strategic role in serving these areas has been recognised by Powys in the documentation accompanying an earlier review of libraries in Powys. See the above quote at the end of section 3.

Further evidence published by the Council indicates that it is the second busiest library in the county in terms of items loaned and extremely close to the top in terms of items loaned per hour - 45.1 compared to Newtown Library's 46.1 items.

Welshpool Castle and Welshpool Gungrog 1 are amongst the 10 most deprived Lower Super Output Areas in Powys.

The evidence above underlines the significant catchment area of the Library in the context of Powys and that it is a well-used high performing public Library meeting the needs of local residents. This is also reflected in the Council's current provision of a refurbished library providing a full range of resources. The usage and demographic evidence certainly does not indicate the need to significantly reduce the service to the residents in terms of size, resources and staffing as proposed by the Council in this consultation.

The important wider community role of the six strategic libraries in Powys has been recognised with two recent significant investment projects to co-locate libraries in Llandrindod Wells and the new cultural hub in Brecon. These innovative projects have and we hope will lead to enhanced services and benefits to their communities as well as developing a more sustainable public service.

These two developments are in stark contrast to what is on offer in relation to Welshpool; with the proposal to severely downgrade both the library and museum provision leading to a significant loss of benefits to local residents!

There is no mention in the consultation, but are the Council proposing a similar significant investment (from various sources as in the case of Brecon and Llandrindod) to expand the facilities to develop a library and museum that meets the future needs of the local residents in and around Welshpool? Discussions with Welshpool Town Council have been ongoing for months and has any innovative solutions to this issue been discussed involving securing grant funding from external sources to enhance facilities? There are ample examples of innovation in relation to Welsh libraries and across the UK and the Group would have welcomed some evidence in the consultation that various models had been actively appraised in detail.

It is clear from the evidence gathered to date that this process is being driven solely by funding issues, especially the need to sell Neuadd Maldwyn and relocate Council staff. However no evidence regarding the cost/income from adapting or selling the various buildings has been provided. Information gathered indicates that space allocation will be challenging, adaptations to a Grade II listed building will be costly and an additional investment in museum storage is required. It is highly likely that the Council has these costings available and it would have been a welcome addition to the evidence available to the public in responding to the consultation.

There are indications that there may be a multiple phase development that may consider co-locating other Welshpool services at a later date. Surely it would be more cost effective to carry out work once rather continually adapting buildings.

Preparing a Place Based Plan for Welshpool and the surrounding area by 2020 will be too late for the residents of Welshpool and surrounding areas as the Library, Museum and council services in Welshpool may have been already downgraded without a transparent evidence-based planning process. It would be common sense to review the full range of publicly funded services in Welshpool in a single coherent process as part of a Place Based Plan in order to deliver value for money in the long term.

5 Conclusion

Based on the evidence (or lack of evidence, provided to date) the Group has no choice but to object in the strongest terms possible to the proposed closure of the current Library and its transfer to Powysland Museum. Based on the evidence above, the main reasons for this standpoint are:

1. The significant impact that the indicative downgrading of services will have on local residents. The value that people place on the current service is reflected in the number of signatures collected to oppose the closure of the current Library. The proposed level of service will not be “an acceptable level of service provision”.
2. No evidence has been provided by the Council to show that it has fully assessed the needs of the local community in relation to the co-location.
3. No evidence has been provided by the Council in terms of the cost of the proposed co-location or that it has fully costed at a range of innovative solutions to address these issues.
4. From the information gathered from various sources, the decision to co-locate the Library at Powysland Museum is at an advanced stage, or as recent information suggests a ‘done deal’. The latter view is strengthened by the Council’s recent response to the efforts of the Welshpool Town

Council to work constructively in trying to maintain the best possible services as outlined on the My Welshpool Facebook post of 20 November 2018. On the one hand Council representative states that Welshpool Town Council's plans:

“...will be considered along with other comments generated through the public consultation.”

But the Council seems to have already dismissed these plans prior to the consultation:

“Regrettably they do not provide us with the confidence that they are deliverable and will protect the county council's assets in the town and staff employment rights.”

While the Council claims that it has detailed evaluations available, they are conspicuous by their absence from the consultation website! This and the lack of information forthcoming from the Council totally undermine the consultation process.

It is clear from the evidence that the Council is not implementing its *Powys 2025* vision and the key principles outlined in the document, such as evidence based decision making and being open and transparent in engaging with communities.

The Group calls on the Council to:

- call a halt to their proposal to co-locate the Library in Powysland Museum by 1 April 2019 and avoid potential costly legal implications.
- undertake meaningful consultation with the public and potential partners with the aim to deliver services that both meet the needs of the public in an efficient way; and
- meet in person with the community and other partners to identify innovative solutions as has been the case in Llandrindod Wells and Brecon. Re-engage with Welshpool Town Council and other interested parties that may come forward.

In the meantime the Save Welshpool Library Group has no choice but to continue to fight to save Welshpool Library, located in Brook Street, on behalf of the people of Welshpool and surrounding areas.

Thank you for this limited opportunity to share our views with the Council.