

IFRCS26 Sarah Ecob, Head of Economy and Culture, Conwy County Borough Council

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, Cyfathrebu, y Gymraeg, Chwaraeon, a Chysylltiadau
Rhyngwladol | Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and
International Relations Committee

Effaith Gostyngiadau Cyllid ar Ddiwylliant a Chwaraeon | Impact of Funding
Reductions for Culture and Sport

Ymateb gan: Sarah Ecob, Pennaeth yr Economi a Diwylliant, Cyngor Bwrdeistrefol
Sir Conwy | Evidence from: Sarah Ecob, Head of Economy and Culture, Conwy
County Borough Council

1. What impacts has reduced funding had on your organisation and sector so far?

We are currently covering gaps left by reduced funding using SPF grants. When this funding comes to an end later this year we face a cliff-edge in terms of local provision. It is likely that cultural & sports activities such as our groups for young people (in libraries, Family Centres, leisure centres and theatres), afterschool & holiday provision and our groups for adults will largely come to an end. We have strong evidence of the positive impact these groups are having on mental and physical wellbeing, thus reducing impacts for CAMHS, our local health board and social services. Young participants also report greater engagement and progress at school due to the groups they are involved with. Our relatively cheap activities being reduced will undoubtedly have a longer-term, more expensive outcome.

In terms of the sector, we are having regular conversations with organisations who are on the verge of closure. In one case this is an organisation that has existed for over 140 years. This loss of provision is extremely concerning as it is unlikely that it will be recreated once it has gone.

The loss of our own provision and that of local organisations impacts mainly on members of our community who are experiencing difficulties, in particular those who are not financially well off. Whilst those with money can often find ways to continue with creative activities, those with less find themselves unable to engage

with cultural activities. This will lead to a further widening of the class disparity in our society.

Some specific examples include reduced spend on library resources including a reduction down to only two professional Librarians to cover the whole county. We are also considering reducing library opening hours by 25%. We have people using the libraries every day as a sanctuary and we know that if we close for a day a week these people are likely to present themselves at their GPs or to Social Services which will cost considerably more.

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[REDACTED]. This will have an economic impact locally and will also mean the players of the future aren't able to see elite sport played in their area. One third of the Welsh women's team are from North Wales so the loss of matches in the area will likely impact on the future development of women.

2. What measures have you taken in light of it, such as changing what you do and how you do it?

Conwy County Borough Council is exploring all options to balance our budgets. As non-statutory services, our theatres, leisure provision and culture teams are at huge risk. If we have to close any of our facilities we will never get them back.

We are working with colleagues in the health service to identify ways of increasing cultural and sport social prescribing, which we hope will attract additional funding through trusts & foundations, the lottery etc to help fill some of the gaps currently being created.

We have merged services and are looking at co-location of provision to reduce building costs.

Our culture strategy, "Creu Conwy: Creating the Spark", has helped us to engage with new partners and extend our work with others to deliver greater reach with reduced funding.

We have moved away from event delivery, instead working to support event producers based in the area and those coming in to the area. This does mean that we can no longer deliver major events (which would previously have been run in conjunction with the BBC, Armed Forces, sporting organisations etc) that brought high levels of economic impact to the area.

Our theatres and leisure services have been directed to be entirely commercially focused, resulting in less provision for those in deprivation.

Professional library tasks have been re-allocated, e.g. out-sourced to suppliers, or contractors, activities for customers and outreach work to attract new users will be impacted.

Delivery of the Library and Information Strategy 2021.2026 and Creu Conwy - Creating the Spark are being reduced due to the lack of resources.

3. To what extent will these impacts be irreversible (e.g. venues closing, or specialist skills being lost rather than a temporary restriction in activities)?

As mentioned above, the loss of organisations is likely irreversible.

We are likely to see a reduction in culture & sports staff when SPF funding comes to an end, creating a downward spiral of not enough people to raise money or deliver events leading to less money leading to a further reduction of staff.

The uncertainty staff and freelancers are facing is already leading to people leaving the industry and a reduction in available skilled professional staff. Staff are moving to better paid jobs outside of the local authority and the interest, from experienced staff, in vacancies is not as high as it would have previously been.

The evidence for the positive impact of engagement with culture & sport and of the efficiency of money spent (reducing GP visits etc) is huge. Sadly, this will likely result in an increase in social service budget requirements which will lead to further reductions in money available for cultural provision.

Venue Cymru contributes £33.5m to the local economy annually. Reduced funding is putting the centre at risk. We remain hopefully that the £10million offered in the March UK budget will be honoured but this is yet to be confirmed. The funding will not only enable replacement of 30 year old technical equipment and 20 year old seating but would also see the development of a cultural hub with a health board social prescribing base, co-location of the library and provision of cultural industry spaces.

We are working to find ways to keep at least a minimum provision of each of our services open. We are keenly aware that if we close facilities the chances of them re-opening are close to non-existent. We have already reduced our staff numbers and lost many experts within the authority.

Specialist skills have been lost relating to book selection, the preventative health agenda libraries contribute towards and increased pressure on remaining staff.

4. What interventions would you like to see from the Welsh Government, beyond increased funding?

Promoting the prevention agenda that the arts & sports deliver. Encouraging early intervention with culture & sports activities as a cheaper and better option than waiting until more expensive, specialist intervention is needed. Likewise for recovery programmes.

Developing social prescribing. This had been very successful with the National Exercise Referral Scheme with our leisure service and the model could be easily extended to additional sports activities and to the arts. We are currently working with colleagues in the health service to develop a new social prescribing hub. WG support for initiatives such as this would be very welcome.

Where funding is available, awarding it on a 3 year basis would help to ensure sensible planning and the best use of public funds. One year funding results in reduced impacts and a greater difficulty in securing partnership working.

Opening up funded apprenticeship schemes to local government so the wealth of talent we have can be used to train those who want to come into culture & sport. Many of our jobs provide transferable skills and provide an excellent base of knowledge for young people entering the workforce.

Greater awareness of the jobs available in the creative & sports industries and training for school careers advisors so they understand and promote these roles.

Advocacy and championing the work of the sector in delivering agendas for WG sections beyond the Culture Section e.g. education, transport (bus pass applications) and supporting the preventative health agenda.

WG Sector colleagues could provide an overview of the current impact of this financial situation from information collated in the Welsh Public Library Standards reports, considering the reduced budget, spend on library resources and number of library staff and professional library staff, this data can be compared year on year.

5. To what extent do the impacts you describe fall differently on people with protected characteristics and people of a lower socioeconomic status?

The impacts fall mostly on people with protected characteristics and of a lower socioeconomic status. Those with money can afford to pay for music lessons, gyms, theatre tickets, art classes etc. Those without, who could often benefit most, get left behind.

The arts deliver significant economic benefits to our towns, driving tourism and visitor numbers in particular. The supply chain impact is also an important area of impact. The economic impact of up to £33.5m p.a to the local area delivered by Venue Cymru is of particular importance to local hotels and restaurants. This supports many entry-level and minimum wage jobs in the area which will be the first to go as provision diminishes. Local businesses will also be adversely impacted as purchasing reduces leading to job losses at best and closure at worst for specialist organisations.

Reducing access e.g. due to less library opening hours will impact those actively seeking employment through use of library resources and facilities / computers for example. Reduces staff capacity for developing and provision of support through relevant activities with groups with protected characteristics.

Reduced access to physical activity is proven to reduce wellbeing which in turn impacts working lives and the need for additional interventions from medical and social services professionals.

6. Do you have any other points you wish to raise within the scope of this inquiry?

There is a huge evidence base that shows involvement with culture and with physical activities helps to improve wellbeing, reduces visits to medical professionals and reduces the need for social services assistance. Whilst the arts and sports are not a cure-all, they play an extremely important role in both prevention and in recovery and the costs of these interventions are relatively small. We would be happy to share specific examples to demonstrate this.
