



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>CONSULTATION – A MODERN AND PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE FOR THE GREATER BELFAST AREA – INTRODUCTION</b>
<b>Date:</b>	Tuesday 16 <sup>th</sup> March 2010
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### **Purpose of the Report**

To bring to the attention of the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee details of a consultation document issued by Libraries NI “Meeting the demands for a Modern Public Library Service within Northern Ireland, Stage 1: Greater Belfast”. The closing date for responses is Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2010. This report summarises the consultation document for Members and outlines some key issues which Members may wish to consider in advance of the meeting. A draft response to the consultation document will be forwarded to Members in advance of the meeting. The intention being that this can be amended after the discussion with Libraries NI and presented for approval on 19<sup>th</sup> March.

### **Relevant Background Information**

The consultation document was previously brought to the attention of members at its meeting on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2010. At this meeting members agreed that a special meeting be held to receive representatives from Libraries NI in relation to its consultation document on the Strategic Review of Libraries in the Greater Belfast area. Irene Knox, Chief Executive of Libraries NI will be present at the meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> March to present the proposals to Members and to answer any questions that Members might have.

### **Summary of Consultation**

Libraries NI was created in 2009 to take responsibility for the public libraries service across Northern Ireland. One of the first tasks that the new authority is carrying out is a strategic review of its library provision across the Province. This is being done in a number of phases; the first phase includes a review of the Greater Belfast area.

The document indicates that there are presently 33 libraries within the Greater Belfast area. Each of these libraries was examined under 4 criteria which were:

- fit for purpose;
- capable of delivering on the vision of Libraries NI;
- in the right location; and
- sustainability

Using these criteria it was contended that the following libraries were considered to be no longer viable: Andersonstown; Ballyhackamore; Ballymacarrett, Belvoir Park, Braniel, Cloughfern, Dunmurray, Gilnahirk, Ligoniel, Oldpark, Sandyrow, Tullycarnet, Whitewell, Woodstock.

Libraries that meet the key criteria for future use and may have been recently refurbished and are well placed geographically to remain are Carryduff, Dundonald, Finaghy, Glengormley, Grove, Hollywood Arches, Rathcoole and Whiterock.

The review indicates that libraries that require new builds or major refurbishment are Ardoyne, Chichester, Cregagh, Falls Road, Lisburn Road, Newtownbreda, Ormeau and Shankill

Libraries that require to be clustered to consolidate provision into a single viable entity are Suffolk and Colin Glen.

### **Previous response to Northern Ireland's Libraries – A Framework for Change**

An extensive public consultation exercise was undertaken about the future of the public library service which resulted in the publication in July 2006 of a libraries policy framework, entitled 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries - principles and priorities for the development of public libraries in Northern Ireland'. The council submitted a response to this consultation and some of the comments made by the council are highlighted below:

- The Council is committed to the view that successful libraries are not simply about a formal academic understanding of education; they are also about improving quality of life through the provision of a combination of educational, social, cultural, health and general information opportunities for local people. As such they are potentially invaluable as a means of delivering the social outcomes that will be set as part of any community planning process.
- The council stressed that it would be imperative that the new library authority must work closely with other statutory organisations, particularly local government, to ensure that a collaborative partnership approach is adopted.
- Libraries have a strong role to play, in terms of building a sense of inclusion and citizenship, as well as developing an understanding of our heritage, cultural diversity and dealing with conflict.
- It is critical that libraries are seen as a public place for community interaction and they are accessible to all. Libraries are central to communities.
- Libraries are important as a community resource, particularly in disadvantaged areas. They provide a neutral and safe environment for community use and their role as part of the community should be further developed.
- The Council stressed that it believed that libraries should be community facilities and that libraries should no longer be stand alone buildings but should be incorporated with other facilities such as education and health for the ultimate benefit of the whole community – for example based on new best practice facilities such as those at the Grove Well-Being Centre.

### **Previous response to the RPA – Further Consultation Document**

The Council in response to the Review of Public Administration further consultation document made the following comments on the role we expect the libraries of tomorrow to perform:

- The Council is committed to the view that successful libraries are not simply about a formal academic understanding of education, they are also about improving quality of life through the provision of a combination of social, cultural, health and general information for local people. As such they are potentially invaluable as a means of delivering the social outcomes that will be set as part of any community planning process. In Belfast the opportunities for libraries to offer a safe and neutral environment for people from all sections of the community is also an important consideration

## **Key Issues**

There are a number of issues that members may wish to consider when considering the consultation document.

- There is a focus on the physical properties of the library within the consultation document. The current criteria do not look at the expanding array of services that are being provided by libraries – for example: hosting educational events, Bookstart initiative, facilitating cultural and learning events etc.
- Any plans for the closure of libraries should take into consideration access to public transport. The older population and those with physical disabilities would for example find distance to an alternative library a limiting issue.
- Libraries are regularly used as community spaces and local people use them as such. In particular, older people, younger people and migrant workers use libraries frequently.
- In some of the areas where closures are proposed the library may be the only community space available to residents.
- Some of the proposed closures are situated in areas of high deprivation, whose residents have no or low levels of qualifications.
- There is merit in considering what other community facilities exist within the area in order to look at relocation options if feasible.
- Proposed mobile services to replace existing service may not be suitable for older people or people with disabilities and this needs to be addressed.
- Libraries are an important meeting place for social and community activities many associated with life-long learning outcomes but also just places to drop in, attend thematic events, meet socially and are used by the local community in such a way.
- One of the issues that Members may wish to explore with Libraries NI is the potential to explore co-location of library services within BCC-owned buildings. Particularly where BCC buildings are located in the proximity of libraries facing potential closure.
- In terms of planning the future provision of public estate in the city, the Director of Property and Projects is currently exploring options with the Estate Director within the Library Service.

## **Recommendations**

1. To consider the draft consultation response after the presentation from Libraries NI in order that the response can be amended and presented for approval on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2010.