



**'Meeting the Demands for a Modern Public Library Service within Northern Ireland - Stage 1: Greater Belfast Area'**

**Belfast City Council Response**

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
	<p>Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the review of the provision of libraries in the Greater Belfast Area. Libraries are very important and therefore this consultation which seeks to take stock of the strategic position of libraries is of great interest to the Council.</p> <p>The Council has made comment on a number of occasions about the role of libraries in local communities and the potential that the service represents in meeting local needs. This response reiterates many of the points previously made and the important role we believe that libraries have 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.</p> <p>In its response to the RPA Further Consultation Document in September 2005, Belfast City Council stated that it believed that it was essential, when thinking about the future of the public library service, to agree what 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 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. 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.</p> <p>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 accessible to all.</p> <p>The Department of Culture &amp; Leisure in the report "<i>Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries</i>" stated that it's vision for the public library service is "<i>A flexible and responsive library service which provides a dynamic focal point in the community and assists people to fulfil their potential</i>" the Council would strongly concur with this vision.</p> <p><b>Response to the current consultation</b></p> <p>Given the focus of the current consultation, the Council has a number of specific points to make about the way the proposals will have an impact at the local level and the need to ensure local communities are not disadvantaged.</p>

	<p>It outlines some questions about the process that has led to the conclusions reached in the document e.g. the criteria used for decision making and the role that considerations of the condition of the estate played in this process.</p> <p>The Council is supportive of the values of Libraries NI as outlined in the consultation document, however would add the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ It is not explicitly clear from this document where the wants and needs of individuals and communities have informed the decisions outlined. Decisions need to be informed by the best available evidence.</li> <li>▪ The Council endorses the need for innovation and improvement and proposes that Libraries NI should engage with stakeholders including other agencies to identify new and innovative delivery mechanisms.</li> </ul> <p>The Council is supportive of the vision of Libraries NI, in particular providing opportunities to develop partnerships. However it is not clear in the review what process will be used to make this happen and the Council would seek clarification on this issue.</p> <p>Belfast City Council would be keen to explore the co-location of library services within Belfast City Council owned buildings. Particularly where Belfast City Council buildings are located in the proximity of libraries facing potential closure.</p> <p>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. As we enter a new phase of the peace-building process, there is a clear need for new innovative delivery mechanisms and creative service delivery by the statutory sector to deliver a truly shared and open city.</p> <p>There is a growing openness to the concept of shared space and an increased recognition that duplication of services is an inefficient and unsustainable method of delivery and this needs to be considered when making decisions</p> <p>The consultation states that the Belfast Central Library strategic development will be the subject of a separate paper and the Council would stress how important it is that it is fully involved in considerations about the future of Belfast Central Library.</p> <p>The Council notes that response is sought against each of the three proposals outlined in the response questionnaire. We have therefore set out our comments in this format. However many of the points made are relevant across all three proposals.</p>
<p><b>2.0</b></p>	<p><b>Proposal One – Libraries NI is of the view that the recommendations, outlined in the Strategic Review, if implemented, will lead to an improved service for people in Northern Ireland.</b></p>
	<p>The Council understands that the review is being undertaken to improve services and that the focus of the review is about providing a better service to allow for better allocation of existing resources in library stock, longer opening hours, other library services and more outreach services. Notwithstanding the Council would make the following points.</p> <p>The Council agrees that libraries need to be attractive places to visit, welcoming, and responsive to the community and therefore welcome the recommendations outlined in</p>

terms of opening hours, staff, improved stock and improved facilities.

With respect to focus on usage figures it is interesting to note that the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals "*What Makes a Good Library Service – Guidelines on public library provision in England for portfolio holders in local Councils*" clearly states that "*Libraries benefit everyone, whether or not they use their local library or not. They stand for intellectual freedom, democratic engagement, community cohesion, social justice and equality of opportunity*" the guide goes on to say that "*Libraries give identity to a community and provide opportunities for everyone in it.*"

### **Criteria used and analysis of need**

The Council notes that in reaching its conclusions, the document focuses on what could be described as physical criteria; this should be balanced by an analysis of the needs of local people and the removal of barriers to accessing services.

Care needs to be taken when representing statistics to put these in the context of the operating environment to which they relate – for example – relating usage to the number of hours open, the Council notes that some of the libraries proposed for closure have reduced opening hours.

It is imperative that there is an assessment of the population needs of the areas where service withdrawal is proposed. This is particularly relevant for Section 75 or other hard to reach groups in the area. Whilst the Council acknowledges the need to find resources to invest in fit for purpose libraries, full consideration must be given to the needs of local people for example; mobility and access issues need to be considered. The older population and those with physical disabilities may for example find distance a limiting issue. Consideration should also be given to the affordability of transport for those on low incomes.

The Council would highlight that The Department of Culture & Leisure in the report "*Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries*" stated under the heading "Access" that "Static libraries should be located and designed so as to provide suitable access, mobile libraries should serve people where there is no static library, and opening hours should meet the needs of users – with the target – 85% of households have access to a library service within 2 miles". Libraries NI should be mindful of this when making decisions in relation to proposed closures.

The Council would stress the need to consider the transportation network in the Greater Belfast area especially in relation to bus routes. It is important to recognise that there may not always be a direct bus route available to the proposed alternative suggested within the review. The Council would stress the need to ensure that any relocation, where practicable, takes account of accessibility by public transport.

The Council would highlight the need to consider alternative methods of delivery and it would be worthwhile to note that, across the world, an increasing number of public libraries are being located in, or close to, shopping centres in recognition of the very large numbers of people which shopping centres attract. There is mutual benefit to retailers and libraries of co-location, with the added benefit of parking convenience for library users. In the United Kingdom, research found that placing a library in a shopping centre puts the library where many people can easily visit. This includes people from a potentially larger population than would usually access a public library

One such example is a new £2 million Shepherd's Bush Library which was opened at London's biggest shopping centre in September 2009. Situated at the heart of Westfield

	<p>Shopping Centre the library was entirely built and fitted out by the centre's owners at their own expense.</p> <p>The focus of the consultation document is on efficiency and service effectiveness as key drivers in delivering even better public services. The Council is mindful of the current economic climate and agrees that there is a need to provide value for money in delivering services. With respect to this, the Council recommends that a more collaborative approach is taken, between the agencies serving people in Belfast, to the creation of estates strategies. That aim in future should be to co-locate services where possible in a way that is efficient, mutually supportive and better serves local needs. The Council would welcome clarification on what alternative delivery vehicles are being sought to mitigate the impact of any closure on local communities</p> <p>In summary factors which need further consideration when making decisions on proposed closures include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 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.</li> <li>▪ 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.</li> <li>▪ In some of the areas where closures are proposed the library may be the only community space available to residents.</li> <li>▪ Some of the proposed closures are situated in areas of high deprivation, where a significant proportion of residents have no or low levels of qualifications.</li> <li>▪ There is merit in considering what other community facilities exist within the area in order to look at relocation options if feasible.</li> <li>▪ Proposed mobile services to replace existing service may not be suitable for older people or people with disabilities and this needs to be addressed.</li> <li>▪ 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.</li> <li>▪ The Council is of the opinion that libraries, like council leisure facilities, should have opening hours which reflect customer demands, possibly including longer opening hours in the evenings and weekends.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3.0</b></p>	<p><b>Proposal Two – Libraries NI has a vision of providing a network of libraries throughout Northern Ireland with improved resources and facilities.</b></p>
	<p>Belfast City Council as highlighted previously recommends the need for a more collaborative approach in the creation of estates strategies and the co-location of services in the future. It is important that Libraries NI work closely with other statutory organisations, particularly with the Council, to ensure that a collaborative partnership is adopted. This would help to ensure that the service would reflect the needs of the community by working to incorporate other public services within the facility – based on</p>

	<p>best practice facilities such as the Grove Well-being centre.</p> <p>Libraries must be community facilities and for this reason the Council continues to believe that libraries should no longer be stand alone buildings but should be integrated with other public service facilities such as education and health for the ultimate benefit of the whole community.</p> <p>The benefits of delivering services in an integrated way have already been evidenced through the successful Grove Wellbeing Centre which officially opened in September 2008. Highlighting a commitment to partnership working, the Grove Wellbeing Centre was delivered by Belfast City Council, the Belfast Health and Social Services Trust and the Belfast Education and Library Board. It is this model that we intend to enhance and expand, in terms of delivering a truly shared space which transforms relationships. The Grove Wellbeing Centre offers a range of leisure, community, library and health services, including GP surgeries, dentistry, podiatry, and adult day care in a one stop, open and welcoming environment. With regards to the library facilities, previously only 16% of the registered users were active users in the old Skegoneil library, since the opening of the new library facilities at Grove this figure has increased to 70%. Additionally overall loans from the Library have increased by 42% and the number of visitors to the facility has increased by 94% as people drop into the library when they are using the other facilities in the Centre.</p> <p>In terms of planning for the future provision of public estate in the city, Belfast City Council believes that it is imperative that Libraries NI explores options for potential future co-location. The Council welcomes the opportunity to explore the potential for future co-location, particularly in the context of opportunities like the Girdwood Community Hub.</p>
<p><b>4.0</b></p>	<p><b>Proposal Three – In order to implement Proposals One and Two, it is necessary to carry out a number of major developments across the NI Libraries Estate as well as close a number of libraries in Greater Belfast which are unable to meet the vision of delivering improved services for people in Northern Ireland</b></p>
	<p>Belfast City Council is concerned to note that some of the libraries that are proposed for closure are situated in areas of high deprivation with communities that are socially and economically disadvantaged where a significant proportion of residents have no or low levels of qualifications.</p> <p>Research indicates that addressing literacy skills is a key first step in beginning to address and help to overcome other related factors that lock individuals into a cycle of disadvantage.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>As highlighted earlier it is imperative that there is an assessment of the population needs of the areas where service withdrawal is proposed. This is particularly relevant for Section 75 or other hard to reach groups in the area. Whilst the Council are not opposed to the related benefits of improved service provision, mobility and access issues need to be considered. The older population and those with physical disabilities may for example find distance a limiting issue.</p>

	<p>Access to the nearest library if the closures proceed is a concern that needs further exploration. The Council would seek clarity in relation to the use of mobile library services and whether these will be designed and utilised to meet identified gaps.</p> <p>As highlighted previously Belfast City Council would be keen to explore the co-location of library services within Belfast City Council owned buildings. Particularly where Belfast City Council buildings are located in the proximity of libraries facing potential closure.</p> <p>Whilst the document refers to the need for improved facilities across the city, the consultation does not make clear the vision for this and the benefits improved facilities will bring over and above current provision. The Council would welcome further discussion with respect to the types of services and facilities that are envisaged in a new and improved libraries estate.</p>
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Concluding Remarks</b>
	<p>Belfast City Council's comments are intended to be constructive and positive and the Council looks forward to working with Libraries NI to ensure that the review has a minimal impact on communities at the local level.</p> <p>The Council seeks clarification on what alternative delivery vehicles might be sought to mitigate the impact of any closure on local communities and would stress the importance of being kept informed throughout the process.</p> <p>It is important to ensure that any decisions on closures are made as a result of genuine engagement with the local community and that the equality implications of this strategy are fully considered.</p> <p>Belfast City Council seeks reassurances from Library NI that any decisions about future library provision in Belfast should take into consideration the need to maintain shared spaces and would fully address issues relating to need in communities across the city.</p>