

# Library & Information Services Council

## (Northern Ireland)



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### **Response of the Library and Information Services Council, Northern Ireland (LISC) to Meeting the Demands for a Modern Public Library Service within Northern Ireland – Stage 2**

The Library and Information Services Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Libraries NI consultation on the second stage of its strategic review, Meeting the Demands for a Modern Public Library Service within Northern Ireland.

As LISC observed in its response on Stage 1, we agree, in general terms, that a review of public library provision in Northern Ireland is overdue and we are broadly sympathetic with the basic strategic direction outlined in the paper. We commend in particular the plans for improvements to libraries and new-builds although we are of course concerned about the degree to which these plans are achievable in the current economic climate. We do not propose to comment on the proposals with regard to individual libraries identified as unsustainable but rather to look at the broader issues driving the review.

It is unfortunate that this stage of the review has coincided with the consultation and continuing debate about the Northern Ireland budget in general, as this has tended to obscure the fact that the libraries review was part of an ongoing process which, although subject to the impact of the budget deliberations, was still a separate and necessary exercise.

The Stage 2 report has tried to set the review in the wider context of an overall vision for the service. While there are several references to the *Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries* policy document, LISC's view is that the articulation of the vision within the report itself needed to be much stronger to help the reader to conjure up a clear picture of how the service could evolve through the development of alternative models of delivery, enabling the extension of its reach and impact beyond the current network of physical libraries. Some explanation of Libraries NI's position within the wider library and information community and mention of the opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships in the interests of users would also have been useful. The current economic climate increases the onus on providers to work together to optimise the impact of their services.

The vision could have described the immense potential offered by digitisation of resources to make local historic and cultural material available more widely, to preserve the original material and to showcase Northern Ireland's heritage. The wide range of material already available needs to be brought together in an organised way and managed effectively to present an attractive, simple gateway to quality assured information and resources. Another useful inclusion would have been an indication of how Libraries NI intends to proceed with a variety of means of community engagement, including social media, and partnership models of provision, perhaps illustrating these with successful examples from here and elsewhere.

In the absence of this dimension, the consultation process and the attendant commentary in the media have focused mostly on the fate of the 10 libraries considered unsustainable to the exclusion of a broader, informed debate on the potential future shape of the service as a whole. This may well have had the knock-on effect of causing long-term damage to the service's brand and image and to the trust which should characterise the relationship between the service and the public.

LISC therefore urges Libraries NI to initiate an awareness programme with the aim of enthusing and inspiring the public and helping them to imagine what a modern library service could and should aspire to. As part of such a programme, Libraries NI should identify and engage with bodies and individuals who are in a position to advocate effectively, and from an informed standpoint, on behalf of the service.

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31 March 2011