

To: Libraries NI
25-31 Demesne Avenue
Ballymena
BT43 7BG

From: Community Relations Council
6 Murray Street
Belfast
BT1 6DN

Contact: Gemma Attwood, Policy Development Officer

Email: gattwood@nicrc.org.uk

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

1. Introduction

- a. The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the above consultation.
- b. CRC's aim is to lead and support change in Northern Ireland towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and promote sharing over separation. We work by promoting constructive and relevant dialogue, by actively supporting those taking real risks for relationship building, by acting as a practical bridge between groups in society and between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors and by promoting wider learning through developing better practice. Our overall aim is to lead and support change towards a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society founded on the achievement of reconciliation, equality, co-operation, respect, mutual trust and good relations.
- c. CRC believes that all government policies should be embedded with the concept of building strong cohesive and sustainable communities. This approach will require the involvement of all government departments and agencies working together to deliver particular strategies and that suitable and effective monitoring and evaluation measures are in place to map progress.

2. CRC position

- a. **CRC believes that libraries have a key role to play in the promotion of equality and good relations, by creating sustainable shared spaces, and tackling poverty and social exclusion. Libraries can also play an important role in building community cohesion as public service facilities which promote learning and interaction between individuals from diverse social backgrounds.**

3. General Comments

- a. The promotion of equality and good relations is the core business of CRC and it is on this basis that we will comment on the current review process of libraries within the Greater Belfast Area. CRC has examined the proposals against the backdrop of a legacy of the conflict and would like to remark on both the opportunities and challenges for the current review.
- b. CRC recognises the need to carry out a review of current library provision and the desire of Libraries NI to create a library service that is flexible and efficient i.e. longer opening hours, better allocation of stock and more outreach programmes. Nevertheless it is important to consider libraries as a holistic entity and how they complement public & private service provision in the local community.
- c. Libraries are not just physical buildings. They act as places that connect people and communities, promote learning and understanding, bring people and communities together and form part of the social fabric of society. Our society and its communities currently represent an experiment in ~~conflict~~ transformation meaning that whilst we have a political peace process, particular parts of our society continue to experience legacy issues such as fear, mistrust, territoriality and divided communities.
- d. Furthermore, many of these communities continue to experience high levels of unemployment and low educational attainment, thereby strengthening the need to deliver public services and facilities that can help tackle inequalities and disadvantage, promote good relations, and build community cohesion.
- e. Libraries have a clear role to play in exploring our past e.g. a history class which meets weekly in Greenisland library is currently studying the Civil Rights period of Northern Ireland's history (1968-1974) - this library has created a safe space to explore political history and perceptions.
- f. Furthermore, libraries provide a range of programmes that can help assist those who face social exclusion i.e. children and homework clubs and study space, adults accessing web-based email accounts/banking/job clubs, providing space for local community groups to meet, as well as reading groups, story telling, and literacy and numeracy skills programmes etc.
- g. Libraries are also providing a key service for our new residents . offering a point of communication and contact for new residents and their families.
- h. It cannot be underestimated the role libraries have in cementing communities and helping create a sense of value.

4. Tackling Poverty and social exclusion

- a. CRC notes that some libraries proposed for closure and clustering are currently located within areas experiencing high levels of deprivation, low income and high levels of economic inactivity. Many have also been directly affected by the conflict.
- b. CRC is therefore concerned that these proposed closures and clustering could negatively impact on individuals and communities who currently utilize their local library to access online jobs vacancies and educational courses. A recent report by Oxford Economics¹ predicts that the future Belfast economy will demand a much greater reliance on skilled and educated workers. It is predicted that over half of new jobs in Belfast over the next 10 years will require a graduate qualification, and less than one in seven jobs are expected to require no academic qualifications. Given the educational role libraries play it is crucial that these services continue for local, particularly disadvantaged, communities.
- c. In addition research by the University of Sheffield looked at the impact of reductions in access to public libraries². The research found that following library closures up to a third of adults may be deprived of access to a public library, and that the worst affected are young children and elderly people. It also concluded that libraries played an active role in making people feel part of their community, helping them to feel part of a local information network, reducing loneliness and encouraging friendships. These findings are important within the context of this review and the possible negative impacts on inclusion and participation.
- d. The Review has used a distance criteria for the provision of alternative library services i.e. within a two mile radius/mobile /or fixed library provision. It is critical Libraries NI give greater consideration to the segregated nature of our society, particularly the geographic spread of Belfast, and how this could impact on accessing library services. This is particularly notable for Ligonell, Whitewell and Sandy Row Libraries (facing closure). It has been indicated that current users of these libraries could be re-directed to Ardoyne, Grove and Falls Libraries respectively. These suggestions have not been considered within the context of a segregated and divided society. There is no doubt that such factors such as fear, mistrust and segregated communities continue to create barriers and reduce accessibility and mobility.
- e. Furthermore it is important to take public transportation routes into consideration. It is vital these proposals take account of limited and non-existent travel routes on public transport e.g. there are not

¹ Oxford Economics, Development Brief, The demand and supply of skills in Belfast, November 2008, Issue 13 Available at <http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/stateofthecity/docs/CurrentDevelopmentBrief/DevelopmentBrief13.pdf>

² Public Library closures: the management of hard decisions. Sheffield University, 1999.

always direct bus routes to particular locations and facilities. Moreover, if travel is required through an unfamiliar area e.g. across an interface or into another community, this can have huge implications on choice and decision to use that particular facility.

5. Libraries as Shared Spaces

- a. CRC support the development of shared spaces and services . both as a way of reducing inefficiency and duplication of services. More importantly, they can help promote good relations by supporting and enabling engagement and interaction between different communities.
- b. The proposal to close Suffolk library and cluster it with Colin Glen library has the potential to reduce or impede the sharing power of this local library. There are community concerns that the closure of Suffolk library, and the uncertainty of the new cluster site, could reduce the sharing capacity of this community, thereby reducing interaction between different communities³. If the next facility does not take into account the positive use of the current site and replicate it, closing this shared facility will have a negative impact on good relations. It is important the Equality Impact Assessment addresses these concerns and presents mitigating proposals.
- c. If clustering is to happen, the shared capacity of the new site should be developed as part of the planning process and again should be addressed in the EQIA process.
- d. Given that we now have a peace process, greater consideration should have been given to the promotion and development of shared spaces. There are a number of opportunities to develop additional shared facilities. These will not be overnight transformations but communities must be given the time, support and opportunity to raise their expectations beyond division and build towards a cohesive, shared and integrated society. As already mentioned there are a number of libraries e.g. Ligoniel and Whitewell, that face closure but the potential to develop new shared spaces has not been exploited. CRC recommends full consultation with the communities within the geographical location of these libraries to explore the potential for creating shared libraries through a good relations lens e.g. the Hazelwood Integrated Partnership is currently agreeing an action plan for good relations in the area, including the responsibility of different organisations. This will include the commitment of resources and Whitewell library could play a key role in this discussion.
- e. Finally, given the importance of promoting shared spaces within local communities., CRC would like information as to how Libraries

³ Suffolk/Lenadoon is an interface community in West Belfast and it is an area of significant interest for CRC. The Suffolk Lenadoon Interface Group (SLIG) are working hard to build and maintain relationships between the two communities, and have successfully developed a range of initiatives to promote shared spaces and services.

NI intend to promote new shared spaces, as well as sustaining existing facilities that are shared. This detail should be included in the EQIA process.

6. Partnership approaches

- a. It is unclear from the proposals what level of discussion has taken place regarding possible partnership approaches. Planning for the future of libraries needs to be done in collaboration with other service providers e.g. education, health, and employment. One example is the Grove Wellbeing Centre which operates as a one stop shop for leisure, health and library facilities, and provides services such as a dedicated health centre, library, leisure complex, café and wellbeing park.
- b. Joining up with other with other service providers can help utilise new and existing space within communities, thereby ensuring the overall vision of enabling libraries to be at the heart of communities becomes a reality. Where closure or clustering is proposed, there should be greater exploration of other options in terms of alternative spaces available in the community e.g. health centres, regeneration projects and shopping centres e.g. Itakeskus Library in located in a busy shopping centre and transport hub in a working class suburb of Helsinki⁴. Alternative sites and premises are viable options and need to be given greater positioning within the Review.
- c. CRC would like further detail on how the rationalisation of libraries at this specific stage of the Review compliments the Programme for Government (PfG) targets for DEL, DETI, DE in terms of learning and employment, improving literacy and skills⁵ and a shared and better future. Libraries NI need to take a holistic view and work with a range of partners to create a local service which meets the needs of local learners.

7. Growing Library Users

- a. The consultation paper documents many statistics relating to number of users and maintenance backlog etc as evidence for closure and clustering. These are important issues to inspect within any review but it is also important to examine other reasons for low usage and CRC would recommend an evaluation of programmes and services on offer in the libraries as part of this consultation.
- b. It is also critical to carry out a needs assessment with local communities, thereby influencing the type and range of range of programmes on offer. Libraries NI should look at its current

⁴ Itakeskus Library in located in a busy shopping centre and transport hub in a working class suburb of Helsinki. Page 46 . need to get link.

⁵ Two of Islington's adult learning centres are located in libraries. London's public libraries as community learning hubs. Page 12. need to get link.

outreach programmes and services and evaluate this against the demographics of the community it serves. It is important to plot use and users now and in the future.

- c. Another barrier to engagement is marketing - how the local library is marketed can have a profound impact on usage. Therefore proposals should include actions for marketing and relationship building within the local community. Shared sites will require a marketing strategy that promotes a space which is safe, welcoming and stocked with materials which meet the needs of people irrespective of race, religion or political belief.

8. Conclusion

- a. **Libraries offer a source of knowledge and these hubs of knowledge are important to the whole of society, but critically more so in communities that experience poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion.**
 - b. **Libraries must connect into wider public policy and compliment strategies that aim to tackle economic inactivity, educational attainment, community development and good relations.**
9. CRC would like further clarification on the following:
- How Libraries NI and the current Review will promote and maintain libraries as shared spaces.
 - What partnership approaches have been considered? It is important that the priorities of local councils and funders in an area are taken into account; CRC recommends engagement with key stakeholders, including local government, local community organisations, and those involved in educational, employment and health provision, on potential closures and clusterings, with a view to devising alternative approaches to service delivery e.g. alternative library provision should be explored within local regeneration projects and community facilities etc. .
 - What other measures have been considered to address the negative impact of closures on disadvantaged areas.
 - Finally, Libraries NI must give greater recognition to the segregated nature of our society and how closures etc are likely to have a negative impact on mobility and access to any new library provision.

CRC's comments are intended to be constructive and positive and we would welcome further discussions with Libraries NI in relation to the particular issues we have raised.

END