

Subject: CSR Public Libraries Budget

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON CSR.

Lisburn

Attention of Melanie McGinnis.

31st Dec

2007

Everyone is aware of limited public financial resources and the need to prioritise spending in areas related to health and education and it is against this background that I express concern at the limited and reducing (in real terms) budget allocation to the Public Library Service. Comments also reflect the inevitable and potentially serious impact of the high level of savings anticipated in RPA projections for the library service over the next two to three years (c.£2m or c.7%+).

While capital funding seems to be relatively plentiful and is both welcome and necessary, it is most important that the individual and personal nature of public library provision is fully understood. What may not be fully appreciated is the labour-intensive nature of much library engagement with the public, often in circumstances where assistance and information has to be mediated to users on a one-to-one basis. Personal development and learning involves one-to-one service and interaction....so much more necessary when meeting the needs of people with a range of problems which may include learning difficulties, disability or health issues. Some library provision requires a large degree of self service, but to foster this approach (perhaps by means of substantial capital input) at the expense of the painstaking and intensive one-to-one attention given by library staff would be to miss or at least undervalue the importance of individual service. It may be argued that such interaction, while essential, is expensive in terms of staffing and service points. However, capital investment alone will not necessarily enable this vital personal service to continue or, even more importantly, to expand to meet equality legislation and society's changing needs.

To accompany appropriate rationalisation and consequent efficiency gains what is needed is revenue funding at a level sufficient to allow this neutral, stigma-free and locally accessible public service to continue to support health and education services to the full, in new and developing ways. The list of "needs" is extensive and will include such areas as the complex and multi-layered teenage issues, drugs misuse, mental health, literacy, parenting, citizenship, health information, community health, community and personal development, tailored services for people with disabilities and special needs... and many more. The library service, on a declining budget and often in partnership with other agencies, attempts to address many of these issues at present, but if the necessary and sustained impact on communities is to be made, funding must allow for the targeting and personal attention to continue. Current and proposed revenue funding (as suggested in the CSR) will not allow this vital work to continue at the necessary level. The public library's role in community regeneration and normalisation should also be reflected in the funding allocation. Is there a similar neutral and universally accessible agency in Northern Ireland with such a network of service points and contacts?

Local library services require to be tailored to meet particular local needs and since communities in NI are infinitely variable, one size does not... and will not..... fit all. One possible solution may be to include a funding element based on local needs and expectations as reflected by local council knowledge and involvement. If residents of a particular council area wish to enhance library (and perhaps other community-based) facilities and services should it not be possible for them to further subsidise the funding through their council? Such a hybrid funding solution has much to commend it and would encourage democratic response and input and local ownership and bring Northern Ireland libraries closer to the UK and ROI pattern where the library is often the gateway to other local council services.

To conclude; it would be remiss and permanently damaging to neglect the cultural and custodial role of the Public Library, both local and provincial (and, indeed, national).

Extensive study and research resources for current and future use need to be maintained, together with sufficient staff with the necessary expertise to conserve, organise and exploit. Preserving and making easily and publicly available the “memory of the community” is central to a mature, developing and stable society. We must ensure that Northern Ireland is not deficient in this area. Current and future generations will deserve, expect, and need nothing less. The substantial heritage and research collections held throughout NI, including those carefully collected and maintained in Belfast since 1888, require appropriate funding to guarantee their development and current and future availability to the public of this island and beyond.

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the CSR proposals and would encourage serious reflection on the level and method of funding needed by the Public Library Service.

(These comments reflect c.34 years of public library service)

Yours sincerely,

D. Jess.