

**LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES COUNCIL
(NORTHERN IRELAND)**

Draft Budget 2008-2011 – A Response

1. The Library and Information Services Council (LISC) is an umbrella organisation representing library and information services in the public, academic, government and special library sectors in Northern Ireland which seeks to promote the highest standards of service and provides advice to government on library and information issues. Drawing on the wealth of expertise of practitioners throughout the library and information sector, LISC is well placed to provide an informed view on how the draft budget 2008-2011 will impact on library services and the knock-on impact on users and on the delivery of wider government agendas. We welcome this opportunity to submit our comments; we wish, however, at the outset to record our deepest concern on the implications the budget will have for these services.
2. We note that within the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure budget the current expenditure projections for libraries indicate uplifts of just 2.2%, 2.2% and 0.8% for each of the three years. These uplifts fail to keep pace with reported rates of inflation – RPI inflation rose to 4.2% in October - and will therefore mean significant service reductions in real terms for public library services and for the Linen Hall Library over the time period considered.
3. Looked at in more detail the figures for public libraries are even more alarming. From April 2008 new additional costs associated with the establishment of the Northern Ireland Library Authority (NILA) will be deducted from the overall library budget. Furthermore, the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum associated with the Libraries Bill indicates savings of £0.6m in 2009/10 and £1.2m in 2010/11 “particularly through a reduction of staff needed at middle and senior management”. To the significant severance costs associated with these suggested savings must be added the new cost of a supporting infrastructure to replace those services currently provided by the boards. Even with a modest estimate of £1m for such provision the cumulative effect on budgets of the set up costs is likely to be devastating. The CSR profile for the next three years makes no allowance for these major additional expenses. Public library allocations will therefore be significantly less than the headline figures outlined above and are likely to leave services overall in a negative cash situation compared with previous years. The set-up costs of the NILA and the up-front costs of realising savings down the line need to be met from new funding rather than by top-slicing an already inadequate budget settlement.
4. In 2006, DCAL issued the forward-looking policy document Delivering Tomorrow’s Libraries, setting out the way ahead for the public library

service and outlining how libraries contribute to learning, literacy, culture, the economy and social inclusion. The proposed budget allocations will render the policy unachievable and threaten services in the following ways:

- Bookfunds will be the first to be hit as this is the only area of significant flexibility within any public library budget. Readers will find fewer new books on the shelves. Services will be unable to satisfy all requests. All materials, including children's books, large print books, newspapers and journals will be less readily available.
 - Libraries need to invest in the digitisation of the valuable resources that constitute our heritage and in new developments in the electronic delivery of information. This will be impossible within the proposed budgets and the service will consequently fall behind what citizens will be able to expect elsewhere in the UK and will fail to meet modern needs.
 - Literacy and reader development programmes with children will come under pressure threatening future educational performance while services to older and disadvantaged users and to areas of high deprivation will also suffer.
 - Library users in the future will be disadvantaged by the failure to procure key titles and maintain complete runs of serials today.
 - With little or no money for routine maintenance the fabric of the library estate will continue to deteriorate and the costs of putting this right the longer work is delayed will only increase. The implications for the health and safety of both public and staff are also serious and there have already been incidences of libraries having to close for long periods of time because resources were not available for essential repairs and maintenance. Even with planned capital investment and new build the use of much of the existing infrastructure will continue and its maintenance must be properly resourced.
 - Staffing levels, already reduced in some areas, will need to be reduced further as both salaries and employers' pension costs will exceed the terms of the proposed settlement. Resources are already at their extreme limit for basic service sustainability in some boards and this has resulted in incidences where insufficient numbers of staff have been available to operate the scheduled opening hours. This scenario is likely to become more common if the proposed budget is not revised upwards by a substantial amount. Ad hoc closures undermine public confidence in the service and this will seriously threaten its viability in the medium to long term.
5. It would not overstate the case to describe the outlook for the library service and for library users across the province as extremely bleak.
6. Libraries also contribute to the delivery of broader agendas set out in the

Programme for Government.

- By ensuring the ready availability of information to all citizens from its 100+ service points and its electronic network libraries are a major player in building a peaceful, fair and prosperous society.
 - Through its programmes and services aimed at children and young people and lifelong learners, the library service helps to develop our skills base, a key building block for a dynamic, innovative economy.
 - Libraries have provided a haven of neutrality through a long period of conflict and their services continue to contribute to tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being, They promote the free exchange of ideas, help in the development of well-rounded, well-informed citizens and research shows that 10% of public library use is for information on health and related issues. It would be fair to say that the presence of a modern and relevant library service in society is strong evidence of a commitment to the principles of tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being and countries which do not enjoy such a service are also characterised by the absence of a commitment to these principles.
7. An inadequately resourced public library service will undermine the potential for full delivery of many aspects of the Programme for Government whereas a properly funded service will add value far above the modest level of investment needed. The LISC publication *Libraries Deliver: Northern Ireland's Libraries in a changing environment*, attached with this response, sets out in more detail the role and contribution of libraries in our society.
- 8 LISC acknowledges and welcomes the capital funding for libraries set out in the Investment Strategy. It is, however, important to point out that capital investment brings with it implications for recurrent costs. While buildings can be designed to be more efficient both in terms of staff deployment and in maintenance/energy costs, new libraries increase use and demand – typically by as much as 30% and the costs of meeting the increased demand also rise.
9. LISC also wishes to draw attention to the funding of the library service to schools, for which the Education and Library Boards receive funding from the Department of Education. The support provided by the boards to schools in terms of both the supply of materials and practical advice on the management and development of school libraries makes an essential contribution to the delivery of the curriculum and the academic achievement and personal development of pupils. This service will face major change associated with the establishment of the Library Authority and the Education and Skills Authority and adequate funding must be provided to ensure continuity and quality of service throughout the planning and implementation period and beyond. The capital programme for schools – a welcome and

necessary investment – will provide an opportunity to develop high quality library facilities in schools and these must take account of best practice in all aspects of their design and management.

10. LISC (NI) has fully supported the establishment of the Northern Ireland Library Authority and believes that it represents a real opportunity for a cohesive approach to service improvement throughout the province through an efficient use of resources. This draft budget, however, if applied will mean that the new authority will inherit a service in an ailing and possibly terminal state and will fail to achieve the potential that the Department has envisaged for it. Northern Ireland's citizens will suffer as a result from having a reduced access to the world's information and creative output at a time when it is essential to Northern Ireland's successful economic modernisation, as well as the social and personal development of our citizens.
11. LISC considers it essential that the budget proposed for library services is considered again and would be happy to provide any further information or advice that would ensure that final decisions are properly informed.

LISC (NI)
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