Libraries NI

Public Consultation on Cuts to Library Opening Hours

Comments submitted by the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance

July 2016
1. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) is the largest locally based Public Service Trade Union with over 42,000 members across the public sector, including the Civil Service, Local Government, Health, Education, Housing, the Community and Voluntary Sector and of course many hundreds of members in Libraries NI.

2. NIPSA has a proud record of speaking up on behalf of our members who work in the public sector. It also prides itself in taking a stand on issues of public policy and supporting citizens across the whole community who are affected by policy changes in respect of public service provision.

3. For many years NIPSA has campaigned for appropriate levels of funding for library service provision. We have worked closely with our members, the community, political parties and community activists in a common cause to ensure that libraries at the heart of every community, continue to be support and properly funded. NIPSA has been involved in campaigns to stop closures of libraries in Greater Belfast and also in more rural communities. We have also lobbied strongly against severe budget cuts in recent years which caused significant concern at the time that some libraries would be forced to close if that level of cuts was imposed. Thankfully the Minister at the time was persuaded to change her mind.

4. In respect of this latest consultation exercise regarding reduced opening hours for the 14 largest libraries, NIPSA considers that this is a flawed exercise. While we appreciate that the proposed reductions are a consequence of further reductions in the funding received from the Department, it is counter productive in terms of the Vision and Mission of Libraries NI.

A decision to reduce hours in the main libraries will clearly impact, severely in some cases, on the ability of each library to remain visible and accessible to the very people it is trying to provide a service to.

5. What is perhaps most concerning about the proposed reduction in opening hours is how little money in relative terms would actually be saved by implementing those changes. This is truly a case of penny wise, pound foolish by Government in respect of funding for libraries.

6. In survey after survey the general public have demonstrated, without exception, that they get libraries, they understand their importance, they appreciate the service provided (even when they don’t personally use them) and they support their retention in every village, town and city.
7. It is widely accepted that the public service provided by libraries touches many aspects of peoples lives and contributes to the very fabric of every community. That service, without favour or fear reaches the whole community, like few others. Whether the citizen is old or young, local or a new comer to these shores, employed or without work, in good health or with a disability, well educated or still learning, surrounded by family or far from home, living in comfortable surroundings or in need of accommodation, an inquisitive student or a political activist, all are welcome in a library, as equals.

8. Libraries represent all that should be good about our society. They should be nurtured, like a child growing. They should be protected like a vulnerable adult. It is counter productive and indeed counter intuitive to reduce the opening hours of libraries, while at the same time purporting to want to enhance the services provided by those libraries.

9. NIPSA recently wrote to the new Department for Communities Minister, seeking his intervention to secure the additional funding necessary to avert this imposition of reduced hours. Helpfully he has indicated that he intends to reflect on the outcomes and responses from the public consultation exercise (before making a Ministerial decision, presumably). NIPSA would encourage the Minister to react positively to our request that the necessary resources are provided to maintain the current level of service across all 96 libraries in the community.

10. Given the cross cutting nature and benefits of the service provided, it seems entirely appropriate in this apparent new age of closer working at Government level that libraries are viewed in that multi dimensional and cross departmental manner. When a service provides benefits to communities generally across the ages, impacts on health, education, migrant workers, housing, urban and rural it makes its own case for proper funding.

11. There is an argument to be made that other Departments should consider the benefits provided by libraries in terms of their own departmental priorities. It would be useful, given the comments made in the Programme for Government about focusing now on the outcomes, that one tangible way to demonstrate this new thinking and new approach is to collectively take a decision at Executive level that libraries are there for everyone, benefit everyone and are at the very heart of each community and therefore should be supported by every Executive Minister. What a positive message this would send to wider society, that in sharp contrast to the attacks on library services in England and Wales the local Assembly has different priorities and recognises the invaluable service provided by Libraries NI and our members.
12. There are very few examples today of an equal society, where everyone has equal access to a service, where that service is provided free and respects all its users equally regardless of their background or circumstances. The shared society that politicians talk so much about is no more clearly demonstrated by the every day reality of life in the day of a library.

13. In the short term it is imperative that the money, substantially less than £200k as NIPSA understands, should be provided to Libraries NI to protect its current library provision. In the medium to longer term there needs to be a broader debate about ensuring that we don’t have to revisit this issue year after year. Libraries are there for everyone today and are a societal investment for the future. Libraries need protections. To do otherwise is fundamentally anti-community.

14. NIPSA wishes to be part of the wider debate about the future service provision for libraries. We consider a good starting point to be a reversal of the current proposals to reduce opening hours. This would ensure a positive atmosphere and starting point for the broader debate on developing further what is already a first class library service.