

## **Policy Framework for Northern Ireland's Public Library Service**

### **Background**

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) developed the first Policy Framework for the Public Library Service – entitled 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' and published in July 2006 – which suggested guiding principles and priorities for the future development of a cost effective and citizen centred public library service. This was the culmination of a process which started with the production of 'Tomorrow's Libraries' (launched in 2002).

### **Approach**

The approach used was, from the outset, inclusive and outward looking. While the initial draft policy framework (entitled 'A Framework for Change') was being drafted officials consulted with a range of organisations, including Trade Unions, other departments, library organisations and third-sector groups with an interest in literacy, adult education and access. We also took regular advice from library professionals elsewhere in the UK and Ireland, and researched library services elsewhere in the world.

'A Framework for Change' incorporated statistics and indicators of performance which showed that book borrowing was declining, that libraries were becoming less efficient, that in a number of ways they were underperforming and that the future of the library service should not be taken for granted. It was necessary to address the fundamental issues facing the library service and not try to avoid unpleasant truths.

'A Framework for Change' was issued for public comment on 31 October 2005. The consultation period ran until 31 January 2006. Over a hundred people or organisations wrote or e-mailed their views. The Minister held a series of meetings with political parties and with Education and Library Boards. There were two public meetings which officials held in Belfast and Cookstown. EQIA and Rural Proofing reports were also prepared. In particular two aspects of the process were innovative:

#### On-line consultation

A special (simplified) version of the consultation document based on 'slides' and incorporating consultation questions and forms for answers was prepared and put on every library computer in Northern Ireland. Nearly a thousand people made submissions this way and this exercise ensured that the consultation involved a high level of participation by library users. This facility is available for other consultations, and DCAL libraries branch would be happy to put other Departments in touch with AMEY, who can arrange this.

#### Standards

'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' also includes ten 'Public Library Standards'. These reflect the minimum levels of service in areas like staff, access, stock and

customer satisfaction that people in Northern Ireland are entitled to expect. They will be monitored each year and their inclusion clearly indicates the priorities in the Policy Framework to the library service. They will also help to demonstrate the value of the Public Library Service and ensure value for money is being provided. They have been formulated so that they are clear and easy for library customers to understand.

#### Timescales:

Start of initial consideration	May 2005
Initial pre consultation	Summer 2005
Launch of 'Framework for Change'	31 October 2005
End of consultation period	31 January 2006
Issue of report of responses	May 2006
Issue of final document ('Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries')	26 July 2006

#### **Outcomes**

Following consideration of the consultation responses, a final document entitled 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' was launched in Ballymena Central Library by the Minister on 26 July 2006.

The document is short (24 pages) and defines the role of the public library service. It reviews the areas that need attention in order to achieve change. It contains ten 'public library standards' that will ensure that Library Boards provide the types of library service that the document describes – these will also give the public a clear idea of what standards of service they are entitled to expect.

Key features of 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' include:

- Targeting library services at the people who need them. Libraries working in partnership with other partners in support of provision to targeted groups.
- Greater priority to improving book stock.
- Longer opening hours – including evenings and weekends (especially in larger libraries).
- Releasing more staff to frontline tasks to enhance the service for the customer.
- A proposed new funding formula for library authorities.

The document has received praise from library interest groups – including those who have criticised other similar policy exercises in other jurisdictions.

#### **Lessons Learned**

##### Online consultation

The online consultation proved extremely valuable and fruitful. However it was undertaken without fully considering the potential this technology had for far more targeted and complex information gathering. For example, we asked 'what sort of opening hours would you like to see which would assist you in using your

library more?'. We received hundreds of different types of answer, some of which were difficult to interpret (for example, did 'weekends' mean Saturdays and Sundays?)

The technology available meant that we could have designed a question which gave more detailed, useful and easy to interpret information, for example:

Please mark the times when you would like to use a library:					
Time:	(9am-12pm)	(12-2pm)	(2-5pm)	(5-8pm)	(8-10pm)
Monday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tuesday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wednesday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thursday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Saturday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sunday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

With hindsight we could have taken longer and designed a better on-line version of the consultation document. Ideally we would have thought about the need to run an online consultation while we were drafting 'Framework for Change', and designed the printed version of the document to make it easier to do this. Rather than adding an online element later, we could have totally integrated it into our consultation process.

### Standards

The incorporation of Standards was important in proving to people that we were serious in effecting change in how library services were delivered. They showed that this report wasn't going to be left to gather dust on a shelf. We learned that it was important that the Standards were clear and relevant to library users.

### **Summary of Key Features of Policy Process**

'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' clearly describes the library service that it is designed to achieve. The policy demands that library services focus on their core activities and show innovation and flexibility. Systematic review of the effectiveness of the policy, the library service and the Library Standards is built in to the policy.

The policy process took account of experience and work on renewing library services in other regions and countries. The process also used evidence from here and elsewhere, even where that evidence was uncomfortable. This was valuable as it focused minds on the need to renew the library service.

The policy process deliberately used **innovative new consultation methods** which ensured that the consultation responses were mainly from users of the service – those who would be directly affected by the policy. The Policy Process

used **Library Standards** to drive implementation of the key features of Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries in a way that library users could understand. The whole policy process was mapped out and all relevant documents provided on a webpage on the Departmental website. We used regular Ministerial press releases and visits to libraries to ensure that the public and library sector were informed of progress and timescales.