



**Response by the Northern
Ireland Council for Ethnic
Minorities (NICEM) to the
Libraries NI Consultation,
'Meeting the demands for a
modern Public Library Service
within Northern Ireland'**

April 2010

Introduction

NICEM is an independent non-governmental organisation monitoring racism and racial inequality in Northern Ireland. As an umbrella organisation we represent the interests of black and minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. Currently we have 29 affiliated black and minority ethnic groups as our full members; this composition is representative of the majority of black and ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland.

In this context, NICEM is making a brief response to this consultation. We have sight of UNISON's response to this consultation and fully support its content.

The consultation process

Like UNISON we have deep concerns about this consultation process. Originally the consultation period was due to last until 5 March 2010. It was then extended, without any public announcement, until 5 April which is a public holiday. We have decided to make this submission today although the setting of this date offends all principles of consultation.

We also note that an EQIA was produced during the course of this consultation with a closing date of 25 April. In our view, it is unacceptable to issue an EQIA after a policy has been put out to consultation. It is also unacceptable to set a closing date for the EQIA consultation after the closing date for the main consultation as this gives the clear impression that the policy has already been decided and that the EQIA is merely a device to avoid complaints to the Equality Commission on Libraries NI's failure to comply with its equality scheme. We also note that the consultation period for the EQIA is the minimum permissible but includes public holidays. We will nonetheless respond to the EQIA, having consulted our member groups.

The selection criteria

We agree with UNISON that the criteria for selection of libraries to be closed take no account of vital social, educational and economic criteria which underpin the social cohesion of local communities. In a piece in *The Guardian* on 20 March, Lynsey

Hanley states:-

“The socialist paradise in which I’m now sitting is a place where people from all walks of life, young and old, firm and somewhat less firm have - through a combination of apprenticeship and self-examination - come to learn together about the world, without having to pay for the privilege.

It’s a public library, of course: a place which you visit voluntarily in order to learn more things than you were taught at school. I call it “the place where dreams can come true”. It’s where the project of learning continues, at your own pace and of your own volition, and where you are understood to be an equal participant in the making and changing of your mind. No possibility is closed off to you.”

These words are perversely prophetic in light of Libraries NI’s intention to close a large number of local libraries in the Greater Belfast Area.

Equality criteria

As stated, we are consulting our member groups on these proposed closures. We share with UNISON concern that no attempt has been made by Libraries NI (and its predecessors) to monitor the use of local libraries by the vulnerable groups protected by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However we already have anecdotal evidence of many members of ‘newcomer’ communities using local libraries, including some which are earmarked for closure. We understand that this usage is not just as a source of information and learning, but also as an important aspect of their involvement in local communities.

Through their involvement in local libraries, migrant communities learn about the lives of those with whom they live. In turn, members of local communities learn about the lives of migrant communities, rather than relying on the misinformation which is propagated against those who have come to live amongst them.

In these circumstances, we are deeply concerned that the closure of some of these local libraries will have a significant adverse impact on the community involvement of many migrant communities.

Conclusion

In our view, this consultation should be suspended until the consultation process on the EQIA has been completed and the responses fully considered by Libraries NI. This consultation should then be reissued applying the criteria set out by UNISON and fully taking into account the outcome of the EQIA.