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NICEM SUBMISSION

Cuts to Library Opening Hours

Libraries NI

May 2016

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Introduction

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) is an independent non-governmental organisation. As an umbrella organisation¹ we represent the views and interests of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.² Our mission is to work to bring about social change through partnership and alliance building, and to achieve equality of outcome and full participation in society. Our vision is of a society in which equality and diversity are respected, valued and embraced, that is free from all forms of racism, sectarianism, discrimination and social exclusion, and where human rights are guaranteed.
- 1.2 Libraries are an important resource for all people living in Northern Ireland (NI), but particularly for ethnic minority communities, including refugees and asylum seekers, who rely on them for internet access, to seek employment and contact their families.
- 1.3 Consequently, NICEM welcomes the opportunity to engage with LibrariesNI and indicate how BME communities in NI could be impacted by proposed changes to opening hours.

Differential Impact and Digital Exclusion

- 2.1 Statistics illustrate that library use is high amongst BME groups in NI, with non-‘White’ BME users accounting for 2.85% of active library members in 2011/12 despite comprising only 1.79% of the population.³
- 2.2 Some perspective can be gained on the BME population inclusive of ‘White’ ethnicities if one considers those who do not have English as their main language. These persons accounted for 3.7% of active library members, despite comprising just 3.1% of the population.⁴
- 2.3 While there is little information available on why the BME population in NI make such heavy use of library services, some conclusions may be derived from the fact that BME groups account for a high rate of computer usage within NI libraries (accounting for 7.2% of sessions in 2011-12, but only 1.79% of the population).⁵

¹ Currently we have 27 affiliated BME groups as full members. This composition is representative of the majority of BME communities in Northern Ireland. Many of these organisations operate on an entirely voluntary basis.

² In this document “Black and Minority Ethnic Communities” or “Minority Ethnic Groups” or “Ethnic Minority” has an inclusive meaning to unite all minority communities. It is a political term that refers to settled ethnic minorities (including Travellers, Roma and Gypsy), settled religious minorities, migrants (EU and non-EU), asylum seekers and refugees and people of other immigration status united together against racism.

³ Libraries NI, ‘Audit of Inequalities 2012/13’ (2013) p.15

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

- 2.4 There are two main reasons why this may be the case. Firstly, there are strong links between poverty and ethnicity in NI: research has illustrated that factors such as low pay, poor employment practices, poor social mobility and a disproportionate impact from the economic crash place BME groups generally in a poorer economic position than their majority peers.⁶
- 2.5 Consequently, it could be the case that BME library computer use is linked with the lack of internet access that is common to low-income groups.⁷
- 2.6 Secondly, many asylum seekers in the United Kingdom (UK) are dependent on libraries in order to contact their relatives in their countries of origin.⁸
- 2.7 This is due to the extreme financial restrictions that accompany seeking asylum in the UK, which makes private access to the internet unobtainable.
- 2.8 Naturally, restricting opening hours across numerous libraries would have a disproportionate impact on BME people, including asylum seekers, who are dependent on these services for computer and internet access.
- 2.9 Utilising computers and the internet is no longer an optional aspect of life in the UK. Researching and applying for jobs usually requires online access to application forms and a computer on which to draft an application, thus being online can lead to more employment opportunities for users.⁹
- 2.10 Furthermore, the UK Government's plan to make Universal Credit 'online-only' means that a limitation of access to online services could impede vulnerable groups from accessing social security.¹⁰
- 2.11 Indeed, the potential for differential 'digital exclusion' as a result of changes in hours seems apparent. This is particular so, as many BME people work irregular hours and thus have limited access to services that are available during regular 09:00-17:00 hours and Libraries NI's proposals focus on cutting opening hours after 17:00.^{11 12}

⁶ Wallace, A., McAreavey, R. and Atkin, K., 'Poverty and Ethnicity in Northern Ireland: An Evidence Review' (2013), pp.25-27

⁷ Government Digital Service, 'Policy Paper: Government Digital Inclusion Strategy' (2014)

⁸ Goulding, A. *Public Libraries in the 21st Century: Defining Services and Debating the Future* (2016, Routledge) pp.182 and 196

⁹ Northern Housing Consortium, 'Welfare Reform – Members Good Practice Briefing: Digital Inclusion' (2012), pp.4, 7, 10 and 11

¹⁰ See: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/introduction-to-universal-credit>

¹¹ Webb, M.A, Kernaghan, D. and Caffrey, M., 'Believe in Childcare? The Childcare Needs of Ethnic Minority Communities in Northern Ireland' (2014) pp.6 and 30

¹² Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, 'Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission Submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 58th Session on the Sixth Periodic Report of the United Kingdom's Compliance with ICESCR' (2016), p.9

- 2.12 This includes cuts to after-17:00 hours in facilities in Belfast, Dungannon, Finaghy and Glengormley, all of which have above average BME populations (at 3.6%, 2.5%, 5.6% NS 2% respectively).¹³ Belfast also contains the majority of NI's asylum seeker population.¹⁴
- 2.13 Ultimately, it would seem reasonable to conclude that reducing hours in Belfast Central Library, Dungannon Library, Finaghy Library and Glengormley Library would have a differential impact on persons of different racial groups, due to the potential for perpetuating digital exclusion.
- 2.14 It is important to recall that Libraries NI is a public authority for the purposes of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Consequently, there is a duty upon Libraries NI to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different racial group.
- 2.15 ECNI guidance highlights the need for public authorities subject to Section 75 to perform Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) to determine whether their policies have a differential impact on protected groups.¹⁵
- 2.16 While Libraries NI screened out this policy from requiring a full EQIA on the basis that there is no evidence of differential needs by racial group, it did state that it would gather evidence through consultation on the likely impact of this policy on equality of opportunity between people of different racial groups.¹⁶
- 2.17 Considering the evidence presented above, it is felt that there is a clear difference of need and priority for BME service users and that they would be differentially affected, in an adverse manner, by plans to reduce opening hours in libraries where there are high BME and asylum seeker populations.
- 2.18 NICEM recommends that opening hours in Belfast Central Library, Dungannon Library, Finaghy Library and Glengormley Library remain in their current form.**

¹³ Drawn from Census 2011 data on Ethnic Group by LGD, DEA and WARD

¹⁴ Law Centre NI, 'How Many Asylum Seekers and Refugees Are There in Northern Ireland?' (2015), p.2

¹⁵ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 'Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: A Guide for Public Authorities' (2010), p.41

¹⁶ Libraries NI, 'Opening Hours Policy Screening Form' (2015), pp.6 and 7

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