



Department for

Communities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk

Public Libraries Consultation Background



© Crown Copyright 2026

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence visit:

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/

or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright-holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Culture Policy Branch

Level 7

Department for Communities (DfC)

Causeway Exchange

1-7 Bedford Street

Belfast

BT2 7EG

Email: HCCpublicconsultation@communities-ni.gov.uk

CONSULTATION OVERVIEW

The Department for Communities (DfC) is the Executive department with responsibility for public libraries in Northern Ireland and is developing a new policy for public libraries.

Libraries NI is Northern Ireland's single public library authority. It receives its funding from DfC and is an arm's-length-body of the Department. Under the **Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008**, Libraries NI has a statutory responsibility to deliver 'a comprehensive and efficient public library service for persons living, working or studying in Northern Ireland.'

The new policy for public libraries will replace the current policy which is called Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries. It was published in 2006. For more background information on the public library service, please click on the following link: <https://www.librariesni.org.uk>

DfC has developed a draft vision statement for Northern Ireland's public library service along with 16 draft policy aims. The draft vision and aims are suggested as the basis of the new policy for public libraries.

Through this consultation your views on the draft vision and the policy aims are being sought. The consultation also provides an opportunity for you to provide your views on the public library service in general.

Your views are important to us and will help inform the policy development work for Northern Ireland's public library service.

DfC is seeking your views through a **questionnaire**. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, we would ask that only one person from each organisation submits a response.

A paper-based questionnaire is available on request from HCCpublicconsultation@communities-ni.gov.uk. To support an effective and holistic analysis of all responses, we ask that all responses answer the questions set out in the questionnaire and use the questionnaire format.

For this consultation, we may publish all responses except for those where the respondent indicates that they do not wish for their responses to be published. All responses from organisations and individuals responding in a professional capacity may be published. We will remove any personal data, including email addresses and telephone numbers, from these responses; but apart from this, we may publish them in full. For more information about what we do with personal data please see our **consultation privacy notice**.

Your response, and all other responses to this consultation, may also be disclosed on request in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR); however, all disclosures will be in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (UK) 2016/679.

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential, so that this may be considered if the Department should receive a request for the information under the FOIA or EIR.

In order to facilitate the survey, Citizen Space, which is not operated by DfC, is used as a data processor. Details of Citizen Space's privacy policy can be found online at [Privacy Notice](#).

MINISTERIAL FOREWORD



In July 2024 I made a commitment to deliver a new policy for public libraries as part of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme. This consultation is a crucial step in that process.

As Minister for Communities, and longstanding library member, I know the value of our public libraries and of the people who work in them.

Our public libraries are there for everyone to use and enjoy, and through the new policy I want to make sure they stay that way.

In Northern Ireland, Libraries NI is responsible for our public libraries and does its work with funding provided by my department. Having a single public library authority sets Northern Ireland apart from all our neighbours and brings real benefits for the public. I do not propose to alter that.

In our libraries you will find a range of books and other material that bring the world of literature within the reach of every family and, in our library staff, every reader will find an expert guide ready to help with the next step of their reading journey.

But our public libraries must continue to be much more than just buildings with books or warmly remembered sources of nostalgia. They must be trusted, safe spaces that

are open and welcoming to everyone and they must be inviting and familiar places.

Places where people come to learn, be entertained and inspired, research and study, and to connect, whether that is in the digital world or through the extensive and growing range of community and partnership activities that libraries host, organise and deliver.

In this consultation, I am seeking your views on a draft vision for public libraries and on a series of draft policy aims. These are intended to provide the foundations of the new policy and the focus of the actions that will deliver it.

By taking part, you will be helping to inform that policy. It will set the foundations of how my Department and Libraries NI will support and shape our public libraries through the opportunities and challenges of the next ten years, and how they will continue to meet the needs and aspirations of all those who already use the service and encourage those who currently don't.

If you are a library member, I trust you will continue to use all its services; if you aren't, I hope this exercise might nudge you to go to see for yourself what our libraries can offer. In either case I want to thank you, in anticipation, for your time in participating in this consultation.

Gordon Lyons MLA

Minister for Communities

30 September 2026

Policy: Background

1. The Department for Communities (DfC) is the Executive department with responsibility for public libraries in Northern Ireland. Libraries NI receives its funding from DfC and is an arm's-length-body of the Department. It is Northern Ireland's single library authority.
2. **The Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008** places on Libraries NI a statutory responsibility to deliver 'a comprehensive and efficient public library service for persons living, working or studying in Northern Ireland.'
3. Through this public consultation, DfC is seeking views to help inform the development of a new policy for public libraries. That new policy will replace the current policy, Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries, which was published in 2006.
4. The new policy will be based around a vision and a set of policy aims, drafts of which are the focus of this consultation. The vision and aims are intended to inform and shape Libraries NI's strategic planning for the delivery of the public library service over the next decade. The Department will review the policy aims during the life of the policy to ensure that they remain relevant and continue to support Libraries NI's strategic planning.

The Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme

5. The work to develop a new policy for public libraries forms part of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) programme. HCC was set up by the Minister for Communities in July 2024 and will see

the development of a comprehensive collection of culture-related policies.

6. New policies for the arts, historic environment, public libraries and museums are included in the first round of work under HCC and will give each of the policy areas the status they merit and provide each of the communities of interest with their own focus. An HCC action plan will be published alongside the new policies to address key issues that impact across HCC policy areas, including skills, research and evidence, collaboration and capital investment. Being a key stakeholder, Libraries NI will be involved in the work to develop and implement HCC actions. More information about HCC can be found at **Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme**.

Guiding Principles for Policy Development

7. The HCC Programme is built on a shared set of guiding principles for the policies to be developed under it. They are that Heritage, Culture & Creativity Programme policies will:
 - be **valued** by all
 - be **inclusive**, recognising and respecting difference in our society
 - bring **equitable** access to opportunities and experience
 - **enhance** the lives of people and communities
 - be **sustainable** in the face of economic and environmental challenges

Libraries NI: Background

8. The policy that is the subject of this consultation relates to the public library service delivered by Libraries NI.
9. Libraries NI was established in 2009 under powers in the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. It was created through the amalgamation of library services previously delivered by the former education and library boards and is the single public library authority for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's single authority model is unique in the British Isles.
10. Northern Ireland benefits from having a single library authority delivering services across its network of 98 public libraries (including two heritage libraries), 16 mobile libraries and digital platforms. Crucial to the delivery of those services are the dedicated librarians and other staff.
11. Libraries NI's physical network of library buildings and mobile libraries provides extensive reach into local communities, with 82% of Northern Ireland's households living within two miles of a library service point (a static library facility or mobile library stop).
12. The modern public library service goes well beyond its core purpose of supporting knowledge and learning through reading. Libraries in Northern Ireland also provide people and communities with important free-at-the-point-of-access services including, but not limited to:
 - borrowable reading material, in libraries and digitally
 - digital resources, including computers, WIFI and printing facilities
 - resources, information and services
 - a wide range of programmed classes, groups and events
 - cultural experiences including exhibitions, musical performances, and poetry and book readings
 - local heritage collections, resources and information
 - space to read, work, study, create, exhibit, or simply be
13. Public libraries enhance the lives of people and communities through the provision of books, resources, events, and programmed activities and classes. Across the range of Executive and departmental priorities, policies and programmes, public libraries make an often-unique contribution to many areas, including:
 - child and adult literacy
 - early childhood development
 - educational and learning needs of school age children
 - health, wellbeing and social inclusion
 - creativity and life-long learning
 - skills and employability
 - information literacy
 - digital inclusion
 - social cohesion
 - placemaking – our libraries are often central, easily recognised civic centres, and are important places within rural settlements and urban communities

Key Information About Public Libraries in Northern Ireland

14. Data from recent years provides a number of useful insights:

- 96% customer satisfaction with the public library service (satisfied / very satisfied)
- Northern Ireland has over 265,000 active library members
- 82% of Northern Ireland households live within two miles of a library service point (98% for urban areas and 52% for rural)
- Over a third of static libraries (34) are situated in the 20% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland
- 29 public libraries are situated in rural settlements of fewer than 5,000 people
- A further 19 public libraries draw at least 40% of their customer base from rural hinterlands
- Over 3,800,000 loans are transacted each year, about 1,000,000 of which are digital
- There are around 340,000 instances of participation in core programmes offered by the library service

Libraries NI: Budget

15. Libraries NI is funded by the Department for Communities. The investment in the public library service over the past five years is illustrated in the table below.

	Resource Funding (final budget)	Capital Funding (final budget)
2025/26	£35.1million	£1.3million
2024/25	£32.6million	£4.5million
2023/24	£31.8million	£7.5million
2022/23	£31million	£5.2million
2021/22	£30.3million	£2.9million

16. Resource funding is used to fund library service operations, including paying library staff and buying stock. **Capital funding** is used to refurbish and replace things like library buildings, vehicles and equipment.

17. Public finance uncertainties and constraints over several years have provided a challenge for the library service. While the Libraries NI budget has increased in recent years, funding has not kept pace with increased costs and this has led to some impact in areas such as opening hours and the procurement of stock.

Opportunities and Challenges

18. It is against that background that the new policy is being established, so it is important that the policy aims should be ambitious and stretching, but achievable. The following sections explore a number of areas we have identified as requiring particular focus during the development and implementation of the policy.

The Purpose of Libraries NI

19. Under the new policy the primary function of Libraries NI is intended to remain as the provision of a comprehensive and efficient public library service for all persons living, working or studying in Northern Ireland.
20. At the core of that will remain the provision of free-to-access books and digital equivalents as a means of supporting and promoting literacy and a love of reading, coupled with access to staff who can offer support and advice to users, whether they are reading for study or for pleasure.
21. Successful delivery of the policy will also require Libraries NI to explore opportunities to increase revenue and assist with financial sustainability. In order to meet the current demand for library services, and to realise the ambition to grow user numbers, Libraries NI must plan and prioritise carefully to deliver the maximum value it can with the resources available to it. In circumstances of increasing costs and where public expenditure is likely to remain constrained, an important aspect of Libraries NI focus will be on how it can generate revenue to augment public funding to support its activities.

Increasing Users

22. The Continuous Household Survey in 2024/25 found that 23% of adults in Northern Ireland said they had used the public library service at least once in that year and, of those, 93% were satisfied with their experience. However, the data also indicated that 49% of adults surveyed were not interested in using the service, while the 2022 Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey found library usage had been dropping among our young people since 2013.
23. Those responses reflect both the value of the public library service to its users and the opportunity to attract new users.
24. As such, we intend that the new policy will encourage Libraries NI to increase substantially the number of people who are regular users of its services, including by working to change the minds of those who don't currently see the value of being a public library user.

Partnerships

25. As well as its engagement with its members and their communities, one of the principal intentions of the new policy is to support and encourage Libraries NI to deepen and widen its partnerships as part of its wider programme of engagement.
26. Libraries NI has a long history of seeking out and building relationships with other institutions and organisations, where their specialist skills and resources can be applied for mutual benefit and impact. It already works with a host of bodies including BBC NI, the Public Record Office NI, Arts Council NI, the

Open University, National Museums NI, Executive Departments and local councils.

27. The new policy will provide the context for exploring and developing new and deeper collaborations across the public sector. In particular that will extend to exploring the common strategic and operational interests and connections between Libraries NI and the Education Authority and the transformative potential of developing that relationship. It will also include examining and building on the mutual benefits of its engagement with the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Children and Young People

28. One of the most striking aspects of the Libraries NI provision is the support and opportunity it offers for children and young people.
29. For generations our libraries have provided a range of reading material that would otherwise be beyond the reach of families. In the new policy it is proposed that children and families should continue to be a priority for Libraries NI. This will be particularly important in terms of harnessing its resources and expertise for the benefit of those most in need of its support, especially for people and communities which might be marginalised or disadvantaged.
30. The value of public libraries for children and young people doesn't just lie in the range of books they provide but in the nature of the setting and with the assurance that the material available is appropriate for those who might access it. This is important not just to ensuring that libraries remain

a safe place for young people but to securing the trust of parents. Libraries NI's operational policies and practices will ensure that the arrangement and provision of material allows for parents to make informed choices for their children and to feel confident to bring their children to libraries.

Serving Communities

31. Our public libraries have long been seen as important community assets, respected for their impartiality and regarded as safe spaces in the heart of our communities. As such, they do not exist in a vacuum and their design, content, services and practices change to respond to the needs of the people, communities and wider society they serve.
32. Under the new policy Libraries NI will continue to provide services for everyone and will have a focus on retaining its place as a trusted organisation, even-handedly providing shared services and facilities. Its operational policies – including on bookstock, community information and use of space in libraries – have been developed to support this intent.
33. In support of this, events and programming will be underpinned by a content-neutral policy. Groups, including community, faith or political groups, will be able to book space or host a talk under the same terms which will respect and protect Libraries NI position as a trusted, valued and community-centred service.
34. The new policy will also provide a stated commitment to viewpoint diversity. This will require an approach to stock which provides for a range of cultural,

political and religious perspectives in a balanced way that reflects the broader demographics of Northern Ireland.

35. Protecting our libraries as a neutral and shared space, flags/emblems/political displays will be kept off general library premises.

The Shift to Digital

36. In developing a new policy, it is important to take account of factors that might reasonably be expected to emerge, or grow, over its ten-year life, ensuring that the provision of public library services takes account of changing customer habits and needs.
37. That need for a responsive awareness can be seen through developments in technology over the past decade, where Libraries NI has acted by introducing new digital services in response to changing customer borrowing preferences.
38. However, that shift to meet the demand from library users for digital services has consequences for the libraries budget and capacity to plan because while digital delivery makes books more easily accessible for those who prefer it, it comes at a financial cost.
39. Where growing numbers of users shift to digital services, the number of physical visits to our libraries is likely to reduce. This will add a new dimension to Libraries NI's management of its digital and, particularly, its physical estate.

Estate Management and Usage

40. Within the lifespan of the new policy, it will be necessary to make decisions on the management of the library estate, including on the programme of maintenance, refurbishment and, in some instances, the replacement of facilities and vehicles. This might include consideration of the scale and location of libraries, and their interior design, so they can continue to meet the needs of users.
41. More broadly, the Libraries NI estate, and the organisation's appetite for partnerships, offers the potential for it to expand its contribution to the development of wider public services. In particular, that will see libraries playing an important role in a wider public sector capital asset strategy. As such, library development plans will take greater account of the needs and opportunities of other public sector organisations in the area. They will also consider the role they may play in regeneration initiatives and placemaking so that the right facilities are in the right places, of the right size and connected to other public services. It is important to be clear that, in such circumstances, the needs of library users continue to be a central consideration in such planning, whilst recognising the wider opportunities and challenges.
42. In terms of the library estate as it currently stands, a decision will be needed on the future role and redevelopment of Belfast Central Library, in order to make the most of this flagship building for the people of Belfast and more widely in Northern Ireland and beyond.

The Draft Vision for the Public Library Service

43. Through the consultation questionnaire you will be invited to offer your views on the draft policy vision for the public library service which is: **“A single library service that is trusted, valued and community-centred.”**

Developing Draft Policy Aims

44. The following have been taken into account in the development of the draft policy aims:
- Government policy priorities, including Programme for Government 2024-27
 - legislative duties as set out in the Libraries Act (NI) 2008. The Act itself can be found at: [Libraries Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2008](#)
 - engagement with Libraries NI and sectoral stakeholders including Ulster University, Libraries Connected, the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals UK, and the Rural Community Network
 - literature review and best practice examples from elsewhere in the UK, Ireland and internationally

The Draft Policy Aims

45. At the heart of each of the policies developed under HCC are three common focusses: People & Communities, Places and Partnerships and three shared drivers: to strengthen, to connect and to innovate. When brought together these form a matrix which is the basis for the presentation of the policy aims.
46. The matrix below sets out 16 draft policy aims for the public library service. The new policy will rest on the aims, and you are invited in the following pages to offer your views on them.

Conclusion

47. We very much appreciate you taking the time to give us your views on the draft vision, aims and other matters connected to the public library service.

Libraries	HCC Goals	People and Communities	Places	Partnerships
	Strengthen: Building resilience, growing capacity and ensuring the sustainability of the sector.	1. Promoting the benefits of reading and contributing to improved literacy. 2. Supporting positive health and wellbeing through engagement and participation. 3. Inspiring creativity and supporting opportunity for life-long learning. 4. Contributing to the development of children and young people whilst retaining the trust of parents.	9. Preserving, growing and promoting local heritage collections.	13. Demonstrating the value of the public library sector in meeting government outcomes. 14. Investing to deliver a comprehensive and efficient public library service.
	Connect: Realising the full potential of creative connections, intersections and partnerships.	5. Growing library membership and encouraging engagement and participation. 6. Supporting access to trusted information and resources. 7. Supporting digital inclusion.	10. Providing safe, accessible, neutral and genuinely inclusive spaces which are welcoming for all.	15. Working with others to support and celebrate local heritage, arts and culture.
	Innovate: Fueling innovation and propelling growth, impact and reach.	8. Responding innovatively to meet the aspirations and transformational needs of a modern and evolving public library service.	11. Responding to environmental challenges through sustainable operations and local actions. 12. Developing a financial and operating model which enables resilience and sustainability.	16. Working innovatively with others to support positive outcomes for people and communities.



Available in alternative formats.

© Crown Copyright 2026