

CILIP Ireland  
Shantallow Library  
92 Racecourse Road  
Derry/Londonderry  
BT48 8DA

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Culture and Arts Strategy, Response Co-ordinator  
Arts and Creativity Branch  
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure  
Causeway Exchange  
1-7 Bedford Street  
Belfast  
BT2 7EG

BY EMAIL ONLY: [consultations@dcalni.gov.uk](mailto:consultations@dcalni.gov.uk)

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Consultation on the Strategy for Culture and Arts 2016-2026**

We refer to the above matter and wish to express our view that libraries are a vital part of the cultural sector and have an extremely important role to play in the delivery of the proposed Strategy for Culture and Arts 2016-2026. We believe that culture and arts play an important role; enriching the lives of individuals and communities whilst creating a healthy and democratic society.

This strategy focuses specifically on the use of culture and arts as a vehicle for improving society, promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion. There are estimated 2,850 people working within the information sector in Northern Ireland. Of these 76% are employed in libraries across a wide range of sectors including academic, public, government, school, legal and special collections. Libraries as social spaces across all sectors should be recognised as being uniquely positioned, and, as detailed above resourced to deliver this strategy.

By way of background information CILIP Ireland represents members of CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) in Northern Ireland. It is the leading professional body for librarians, information specialists and knowledge managers within this jurisdiction. CILIP's vision is a fair and economically prosperous society underpinned by literacy, access to information and the transfer of knowledge.

As our funding comes from member subscriptions and our own commercial activity we are able to act as an independent voice of the profession reflecting the knowledge and expertise within our membership. CILIP is a registered charity, no. 313014 and more information about us can be found at <http://www.cilip.org.uk/about/devolved-nations/cilip-ireland>.

We have chosen to comment on each of the themes in the consultation document only. Most of the questions are more appropriate for individuals than for a professional body.

**Equality through Arts and Culture**

It is essential that everyone should have access to arts and culture. Libraries are uniquely positioned at the heart of campuses, schools and local communities. They enjoy a level of trust as sources of knowledge, offering equal access in neutral and shared spaces. They open-up new possibilities for community engagement and the creation of a vibrant society.

Libraries across all sectors provide a comprehensive service for everyone through access to books, information,

computers, internet and trained professional staff. They reduce barriers to arts and culture by providing a welcoming, accessible and neutral environment. The provision of a wide array of programmes facilitate people in coming together to learn, gain knowledge and have an opportunity to socialise. Libraries are already providing programmes to ensure equality through arts and culture.

For example, the Library in St Patrick's College, Ballymena delivers an *Accelerated Reading* programme for all Year 8 pupils. Books are carefully selected by library staff to reflect a range of abilities. This programme is open to all pupils including those for whom English is not their first language. Pupils are supplied with a Tablet device which contains a quiz on the book they have just read. Once they demonstrate their proficiency and pass the quizzes at a set level they then move up the levels thereby encouraging reading. The pupils who have very little English are able to translate the text on the Tablet which enables them to read the book and also helps bolster their English.

### **Creativity and Skills**

Libraries support creative and lifelong learning from an early age through the delivery of a wide range of programmes to support skills development. These are designed to expedite reading development and encourage wider reading for pleasure, develop digital skills and increase knowledge.

Libraries NI deliver a wide range of programmes for all ages, abilities and backgrounds. For example, the *Rhythm and Rhyme* programme is free and comprises of stories, rhymes and songs delivered on a regular basis by Libraries NI staff (or held in partnership with SureStart) for parents, carers and pre-school children (aged 0-4 years). The aim of the programme is to improve children's language, concentration, listening and communication skills before they enter formal education. The most recent official statistics published (for 2013/14) indicate that there were 120,280 participants (54,676 adults and 71,604 children) engaged in a total of 4,431 Rhythm and Rhyme sessions for pre-school age children.

Although libraries provide access to the internet it is recognised that there is a very real need to equip users with the skills to do so safely. As a result the *Got IT?* computer help programme has been devised and delivered by Libraries NI staff to support people with little or no knowledge of computers. The programme focuses on an introduction to computers, the internet and email. Furthermore they offer the *Go ON* programme which takes skills one step further enabling participants to enhance their computer abilities.

### **Valued Arts and Culture**

We believe that libraries in general and specifically in rural areas contribute to tackling social isolation and financial poverty through access to books, information, computers (digital inclusion) and trained professional staff. Additionally libraries can be viewed as social spaces and community hubs. CILIP Ireland strongly supports key stakeholders working together to help tackle poverty and social isolation. A collaborative approach will ensure provision of measures of sufficient range and scope as to make a real difference, especially in an environment of reduced funding in the public sector.

Creative writing workshops are regularly delivered across Northern Ireland by Libraries NI. Library staff guide and encourage participants from a wide range of backgrounds through a unique creative, collaborative, and interpretive experience. The interactive format enables groups to work together, critiquing each other's work, asking questions and exchanging insights. These sessions can run in parallel with formal education and extend far beyond it for those with no formal education.

### **Rich Cultural Expression**

Libraries across all sectors are important custodians of local archives, heritage and special collections, all of which are key resources in establishing and maintaining the cultural identity of communities. A wealth of archives and collections are held in public, academic and specialist libraries across Northern Ireland. These resources can be used by a wide range of organisations, artists and researchers to facilitate events, programmes, projects and research relating to cultural

identity.

One excellent example is the Forster Reid archive which is available at the library of Queen's University Belfast. This collection includes the Edward Morgan Forster ó Forrest Reid (1875-1947) correspondence covering a period of thirty-four and a half years (31st January 1912 ó 18th August 1946) and includes 217 letters and cards from E.M. Forster, many of which deal directly and at length with literary and cultural matters. The letters contain detailed discussions considering the role of the arts, expose Forster's insecurities and anxiety regarding his creative output, and provide insight into the conception and development of hugely significant literary works, not only by Forster and Reid but numerous established and new writers in the early part of the twentieth century. The collection was the focus of a public exhibition at the Queen's Welcome Centre to facilitate public engagement.

### Wellbeing

Libraries across Northern Ireland are making a positive contribution to people's health and wellbeing through heavy involvement in initiatives championing health, well-being and inclusion which is crucial in bridging the gap created by disadvantage, exclusion and isolation.

The *Health in Mind* project ([www.yourhealthinmind.org](http://www.yourhealthinmind.org)) brings together many useful resources which support positive mental health and wellbeing. It is a legacy of the original *Health in Mind* project, led by Libraries NI, working in partnership with four major mental health charities and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The project, which reached 200,000 people, provided information, reading and learning activities mainly in local libraries. *Health in Mind*, which was externally evaluated and won a number of awards, exceeded its targets and demonstrated the important role that libraries play improving mental health.

In Northern Ireland *Knit and Natter* started in one library as an experimental venture and now, thanks to its success, operates weekly in 80 libraries. It combines an opportunity to socialise with the chance to relax through knitting and crocheting and, in many cases, learn new skills. A variation on *Knit and Natter* is *Technostitch* when *Knit and Natter* groups meet with groups of young people to exchange craft and IT skills. *Knit and Natter* groups have also been involved in 'mobile volunteering'. These sessions are a result of Libraries NI's partnership with Volunteer Now and group members undertake tasks such as removing labels from branded goods that have been donated to charities. In 2014/15, 28,145 people attended *Knit and Natter* groups. As the majority of *Knit and Natter* attendees are female many libraries, in the interests of gender equality, offer *Newspaper and Biscuits* sessions which fulfil a similar function and tend to attract men.

Clearly, as set out above, libraries across all sectors offer a cost effective means of making arts and cultural opportunities available locally across Northern Ireland in an inclusive manner by promoting and enhancing access to culture, cultural heritage and the arts. The library infrastructure must therefore be at the core of the *Strategy for Culture and Arts 2016-2026*.

We are happy to discuss these matters in further detail. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours faithfully

Gerardine Blee  
CILIP Ireland Development Officer  
[Gerardine.blee@cilip.org.uk](mailto:Gerardine.blee@cilip.org.uk)