



Response to the Public Consultation on the Strategy for Public Libraries 2018 - 2022

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Introduction

Fórsa is Ireland's largest public service trade union, representing roughly 80,000 workers.

Fórsa's local government division has around 13,000 members who work in local authorities throughout the country.

The union represents around 1,200 library staff.

1. Consult First

1.1 Fórsa is seriously concerned that submissions to a consultation process designed to inform the drafting of an important strategy document are being sought after a 25-page confidential draft of that document has already been compiled.

1.2 The principle of 'consult first' should always apply. In this context, Fórsa hopes and expects that its ideas, observations, reservations and recommendations can and will be taken into consideration in any final draft.

1.3 Notwithstanding these concerns, Fórsa welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

2. Consult Often

2.1 Taking a broader view on the issue of consultation, Fórsa believes that a forum for consultation with elected members and users should be established. Such a forum could be accountable to the relevant strategic policy committee in each local authority. A forum like this existed prior to Better Local Government reform.

2.2 A specific forum for staff consultation which directly involves operational staff at all levels within the services should be established in each local authority.

2.3 Consultation and enhanced mechanisms of communication must represent **a key priority** for the library service for the period 2018 – 2022.

3. Getting the Language Right

3.1 The manner in which issues and people are referred to deserves careful attention. Issues of language are easily overlooked, but are very important both in terms of the signals they send and in terms of the role that language plays in forming our impressions and prejudices. Accordingly, Fórsa suggests a number of changes to the draft strategy.

3.2 All references in local authority literature should brand libraries as local authority libraries rather than as 'Libraries Ireland' libraries, which has no corporate status. Page eight of the draft strategy, in particular, requires attention in this regard.

3.3 Library staff are not mentioned or referred to in any way in section three: 'The Public Library Service in 2017'. This is not acceptable and should be changed to reflect the work carried out by diligent and dedicated library staff.

3.4 Fórsa is concerned that the draft document as currently formulated does not demonstrate sufficient esteem for library staff. For example, 'Library Team' is listed as the second of six 'Strategic Enablers' on page six. Fórsa suggests a convention whereby sections pertaining to people – whether to staff or to users – are listed ahead of items referring to material assets such as infrastructure.

3.5 Fórsa notes, with some concern, the use of euphemistic language to refer to proposed staffless libraries. For example, Fórsa sees the emphasis placed on staff being "able to

move freely among users” as implying that staff would not work in issuing and returning items.

3.6 Throughout the draft, several adjectives are used to describe what libraries are or should be like. On page five, an ambition is expressed to ‘ensure libraries’ position as a central community, civic and cultural space within their local areas’. Page nine states that libraries should be ‘bright, attractive, trusted [and] welcoming’ spaces. Page ten says they should be ‘attractive, vibrant [and] multi-functional’. Fórsa recommends the addition of the word ‘safe’ to these descriptions. Fórsa believes that the strategy should explicitly set out the belief and ambition that libraries should represent safe spaces at the heart of communities.

4. Valuing Staff

4.1 Fórsa welcomes the statement on page 20 that “the library team is the most vital part of the service”.

4.2 Fórsa also welcomes the commitment in the draft document to ‘provide for increased resources’ for the library services. Significant resources and investment are required in library staffing. Vacant posts must be filled. Recruitment is sorely needed at the grade of library assistant. An immediate recruitment drive is necessary. **Investment must be a key priority for the period 2018 to 2022.**

4.3 A significant number of staff have left from central HQs. There is insufficient assistance and support being given to lone working branch libraries and the branch librarians who work there. Branches need weekly visits from line managers to provide assistance to branch staff.

4.4 Notwithstanding a move to electronic issuing and returning of items, with proposals for so-called staffless Libraries, the fact remains that for an overwhelming number of library users their interaction with staff and needing staff assistance is of paramount importance. Even in Branches where Public Computer users have facilities to print materials themselves problems still occur daily that have to be dealt with by staff.

4.5 Under the section ‘Learning and Information’, point two states that “The library team will deliver lifelong learning and will develop partnerships to assist and promote a lifetime of learning for all users”. This ethos of lifelong learning is welcome and provision should be made to ensure that this applies equally to staff as well as to users. A programme of professional development and training should be introduced to achieve this. Training and Development on an ongoing basis for Library Staff was a casualty of the economic depression and needs to be an integral part of any Strategic Plan.

4.6 Fórsa trade union believes that staffless libraries as envisaged under “My Open Library” do not represent the best strategic objective of local authority libraries. The experience of our nearest cultural counterpart the UK, has shown that such developments directly lead to branch closures and a reduction of dedicated library staff. The evidence shows that the public appreciate the valued assistance of dedicated library staff as being one of the principal assets of the local authority library service. No diminution of services, either in terms of current or capital spending should apply to local authorities who do not operate staffless libraries. Specifically, capital development should not be linked to agreement by local authorities for staffless libraries.

4.7 An audit of the age profile of Library Staff needs to be carried out as in some authorities there are few or any staff members under 40 years of age. Such a profile means staff are not as representative of the public we seek to serve.

5. Access

5.1 The draft document states that “all barriers to library use” “should be removed” (p. 4). The document also lists “universal access” as an ambition.

5.2 Local authorities should continue to ensure increased access to all services for disabled users.

5.3 Though staffless libraries are pitched as a means of increasing library access, Fórsa remains concerned that the programme will ultimately serve to diminish access for some users. There are several serious safety concerns. It also is unfair on those hoping to access literacy support to expect them to do so using a text-based user-interface.

5.4 Investment in infrastructure and in materials will also go towards in increasing access for users. An audit should immediately be carried out on buildings used as branch libraries.

