



Commissioner for Older People
for Northern Ireland

Culture Policy Branch
Level 7
Department for Communities (DfC)
Causeway Exchange
1-7 Bedford Street
Belfast
BT2 7EG

By email: hccpublicconsultation@communities-ni.gov.uk

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Re: Consultation on a Public Libraries Policy for Northern Ireland

Dear Sir/Madam

I write on behalf of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI), Siobhan Casey in relation to the Department for Communities (DfC) consultation on a Public Libraries Policy for Northern Ireland. As COPNI's sponsoring body, the Department will know that the role of COPNI is to "safeguard and promote the interests of older persons" across Northern Ireland.¹ In this context, the Commissioner welcomes the opportunity to engage with this consultation and ensure the voices of older people are heard during the development of this policy.

In 1990, the United Nations General Assembly designated October 1 as International Day of Older Persons (IDOP).² 'What's on your doorstep?' was the United Kingdom's theme for this year's IDOP.³ Coinciding with this, in Northern Ireland, October is Positive Ageing Month which aims to "highlight the importance of creating a more age-friendly society, focusing on social connection, active living, and improving the wellbeing of older adults".⁴ During the month, each local Council offers a wide variety of events, activities and programmes for older people, many of which take place in public libraries. Considering the theme of 'What's on your doorstep?', libraries play an important role in encouraging older people to discover the support, opportunities, activities, information and connections available to them within their local area.

COPNI has consistently recognised the importance of libraries for older people. For instance, in July this year, the Commissioner, Siobhan Casey and Libraries NI Chief Executive, Jim O'Hagan signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding to strengthen their commitment to supporting older people and to "build on the organisations' existing partnership and create

¹ Commissioner for Older People Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

² United Nations (n.d.) '[International Day of Older Persons](#)'.

³ Centre for Ageing Better (2026) '[IDOP 2026: What's on your doorstep?](#)'.

⁴ AgeNI (2026) '[Positive Ageing Month](#)'.

further opportunities to support older people through local libraries”.⁵ Many of the objectives of the Memorandum of Understanding align with the proposed policy aims of the DfC’s draft Public Libraries Policy. In relation to some of those aims, COPNI offers the following comments.

First, it is important to note that Northern Ireland’s population is ageing. The number of people aged 60 plus is projected to grow by over 36% between 2025 and 2055.⁶ Population ageing is creating opportunities for libraries to play an increasingly important role in supporting healthy, active and connected communities. Older people are a diverse group in that they have differing needs, backgrounds, and experiences. Older people also embody multiple identities relating to age, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality, among other characteristics. Because we are living longer, the term ‘older person’ can refer to someone aged 60 but also someone aged over 100. Often, this diversity among older people is not recognised and, as a result, older people may not see themselves or their needs reflected in services on offer. It is, therefore, vital that services are responsive to the unique and diverse needs of older people, especially in the context of our ageing population. As such COPNI welcomes the DfC’s aim to respond “innovatively to meet the aspirations and transformational needs of a modern and evolving public library service”.⁷ The Commissioner trusts older people and their needs will be considered and used to inform libraries’ service provision.

Older people are also diverse in terms of their digital confidence. While many may be capable and confident online, others experience barriers to accessing or using digital technology. Digital inclusion therefore remains an important concern, particularly as more essential services, information and opportunities move online. Libraries can play a role in bridging this digital divide among older people by providing access to technology and a safe space in which people can develop digital skills at their own pace. As such, COPNI welcomes the DfC’s aim to support digital inclusion.⁸ However, while we strive to close the digital divide, factors such as disability or finances can mean some older people are unable to access the internet. A major concern for this cohort is the move of information and services to online-only, with little or no offline alternative. Thus, the Commissioner welcomes the aim to support access to trusted information and resources.⁹ To promote accessibility for all, COPNI hopes that actions under this aim will ensure older people can obtain information through offline means. By doing

⁵ COPNI (2026) ‘[Commissioner for Older People and Libraries NI Strengthen Partnership to Support Older People](#)’.

⁶ NISRA (2025) ‘[2022-based Population Projections for Northern Ireland](#)’.

⁷ Department for Communities (2026) ‘[Public Libraries Consultation Background](#)’.

⁸ Department for Communities (2026) ‘[Public Libraries Consultation Background](#)’.

⁹ Department for Communities (2026) ‘[Public Libraries Consultation Background](#)’.



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so, information and resources may be accessible to a larger proportion of older people than if they were online only.

Older people are also more likely to live with a disability or long-term health problem. 2021 Census data showed that over half of the population aged 65 plus live with a limiting long-term health problem or disability.¹⁰ COPNI's recent *Voices of Concern* report highlighted that access to health and social care services was the biggest concern among older people here.¹¹ While libraries cannot address these wider health and social care service pressures, they can make a contribution to positive health and wellbeing. Activities, events, reading groups, creative programmes and links with local organisations can help older people stay active, connected and involved in their communities. In this way, COPNI welcomes the DfC's commitment to "supporting positive health and wellbeing through engagement and participation".¹²

In sum, the Commissioner agrees with the DfC's analysis that "public libraries enhance the lives of people and communities through the provision of books, resources, events, and programmed activities and classes".¹³ COPNI, thus, recognises the significant contribution libraries can make to supporting an ageing population and promoting positive ageing across our communities. A Public Libraries Policy provides opportunity for a framework for strengthening the role of libraries in addressing the diverse needs of older people, promoting inclusion, participation and connection to local communities. By embedding these priorities within library planning and delivery, we can ensure that services remain accessible and responsive to the unique needs of an ageing population to ensure older people can benefit from what's on their doorstep. To ensure a Public Libraries Policy operates as intended, it must be supported by a full and resourced implementation.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the draft Policy, or this response further if needed or helpful.

Yours sincerely

Anna Doran
Policy Advice & Research Unit
Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

e. anna.doran@copni.org

¹⁰ NISRA (2022) '[Census 2021, Main statistics for Northern Ireland, Statistical bulletin, Health, disability and unpaid care](#)'.

¹¹ COPNI (2026) '*Voices of Concern: The Reality of Health and Social Care for Older People in Northern Ireland*'.

¹² Department for Communities (2026) '[Public Libraries Consultation Background](#)'.

¹³ Department for Communities (2026) '[Public Libraries Consultation Background](#)'.