PPR response to the DFC consultation on a public libraries policy for Northern Ireland

24 November 2026

PPR's response to the DFC's consultation on a draft libraries policy stem from our experience of the DFC's use of the mechanism of consultation to further its desired changes to housing policy.

The draft libraries policy introduces language around 'parental concerns' at the 'age appropriateness' of library materials which are wholly absent from the existing policy (which dates from 2006 and was written under Labour MP Maria Eagle as Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure). There don't appear to be evidence-based reasons for introducing these elements – it has been a DFC choice.

Alongside these new components, the draft policy contains what appear on the face of it to be commitments to free speech and diversity. These would be more reassuring if Minister Lyons' public statements didn't contradict them.

The draft policy up for consultation

The existing 2006 policy makes one reference to parents:

> The library should assist people to develop interests, enrich their lives, and become effective citizens, parents and consumers (2.7)

It makes no reference at all to parental concerns about content, age-appropriateness or children's exposure to potentially contentious material.

Two years after that policy, the Libraries Act (NI) 2008 sets up an NI Library Authority replacing the Education and Library Board as the responsible body for libraries. Its duties appear straightforward, defined and limited:

> "secure that facilities are available for the borrowing of, or reference to, library materials sufficient in number, range and quality to meet the general requirements of adults and children" (2.2.a)... having regard to the desirability of

... (i) encouraging both adults and children to make full use of the library service ... (iii) promoting literacy and lifelong learning" (2.2.b)

The law does add, under section 9 (Directions), that 'the Department may give the Authority general or specific directions as to the exercise of its functions' (9.1) – but there is nothing specific about content, and there is no indication that the Department have tried to use this clause to impact library content.

Until today. The current DFC does introduce the issue of content into its new draft for consultation (which is part of the DFC's 'Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme' with its proposed "comprehensive collection of culture-related policies"). A few examples:

- The Minister's Foreword says, "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*" (p.6) – implying that this is somehow under threat but offering no evidence for this.
- The text also introduces the themes of **appropriateness** and **parental trust:** "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" (para. 30).

These 'operational policies' include "bookstock, community information and use of space in libraries" (para. 32). Again, this is new: the old policy did not address content at all. The consultation document fails to explain or clarify what changes the DFC foresee in operational policies around content - a deeply concerning grey area.

The text then pivots, giving a series of nods to free speech and diversity:

> 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. (33)

(For the record, 'content-neutral' is a term imported from US academia and comes from debates around the meaning and limits of First Amendment protections of free speech. It is to be contrasted with 'content-specific' – which refers to libraries screening materials based on what's in them. 'Content-neutral' is supposed to align with respect

for free speech and diversity of opinion. The DFC document uses this term without explaining – or respecting -- this context or its exact meaning.)

The DFC draft goes on

> 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. (34) Protecting our libraries as a neutral and shared space, flags/emblems/ political displays will be kept off general library premises. (35)

On the face of it, the latter sentence can read as a reference to paramilitary flags. However, the Communities Minister recently referred explicitly to banning LGBTQ Pride flags – something 160 NI writers and illustrators have rightly condemned, expressing concerns that the proposed policy "could pave the way for book bans, restrictions for minority group visibility and library closures".

On 23 November 2026, in response to MLA Philip McGuigan's question in the Assembly yesterday about 'potential censorship' (AQT 2844/22-27)), the Communities Minister tried to brush off such concerns:

> "The libraries policy states that we want to make sure that children have *age-appropriate material and that libraries can be places where people feel welcomed and are not put off*. Everybody should agree on that. Librarians will make the decisions about the books that are in a library, but we need to have a policy in place that gives guidance in order to ensure that we are providing *age-appropriate material*."

Such 'guidance' around 'age appropriateness' was not considered necessary in the 2006 policy, nor in the 2008 legislation. The DFC have offered no evidence of why it would be necessary now. This reflects PPR's experience of other recent DFC policy consultations where the DFC have appeared to introduce some policy elements off its own bat without an evidence base, while ignoring others that have both evidence and expert recommendation behind them.

In the midst of an ongoing acute housing shortage and a few short months after a racist pogrom that burned families out of their homes on the basis of their skin colour or perceived religion, the choice to spend time, money and human resources on these particular proposals is surprising to say the least.