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**The Nordic Library Conference – Copenhagen, 25<sup>th</sup>- 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011**

**Conference theme: ‘cultural diversity, community and services’**



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**Leicester is rapidly developing a reputation for excellence in embracing diversity and leading community cohesion in the UK. We are very proud of that reputation, and we are also very honoured to have been invited to take part in the Nordic Library Conference this year.**

In Leicester we have an important guiding value to everything we do. It's called *One Leicester*.

### **One Leicester**

*One Leicester* means different things. It means we all try to work together as partners, with communities and with residents to make Leicester a better place. It also means we seek to be united as a city – over what is important today and what we want for the future.

But above all it means that we strive to understand communities' different needs, and try to make sure that through close engagement with the people we serve, we design services and solve problems in a way that responds effectively to that diversity.

In Leicester we know that our diversity is a strength. As a city we reflect the world we live in. And that will be the key to our survival and growth into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because diverse cities are much more resilient to change. Diversity is now a fact of life as globalisation develops. It's a challenge to our services, but engaging with and harnessing diversity brings us the solution too. I would like to show you what I mean using the example of libraries in a moment.

### **The diversity of Leicester**

But first an outline of the demography of the city today. Leicester has a population of around 300,000 people. It is estimated that currently over 40% are from ethnic minority backgrounds; and it is projected that in the near future we will become Britain's first city where there is no one ethnic group in the majority.

In the early 1970s, Leicester became the destination of expelled Ugandan residents of Indian origin – many originally from the Gujarat region. Subsequent waves of migration from the Indian sub-continent brought other communities to the city including people from the Kashmir and Bangladesh.

Then, many people of Somali origin also moved into Leicester from 2001. We think there are up to 10,000 Somali people in the city now. Many of the Somali population are in families, and many are EU nationals having received refugee status in the Netherlands, Denmark or Sweden.

In recent years new groups of people have also come to the city, for example from Iraq, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Kosovo, Iran and other African and Middle Eastern countries. Many of these newer groups are made up of single young men.

As part of this, estimates suggest that there are just under a thousand asylum seekers living in the city. An estimated two thousand refugees also live in Leicester. In addition there are probably a substantial number of 'hidden migrants' living including failed asylum seekers and illegal immigrants.

In addition it is estimated that since 2005 we have had between 3,000 to 5,000 economic migrants from the new European Union countries, mostly from Poland, and from India.

Leicester ranks as the 20<sup>th</sup> most deprived city in England. But this deprivation is not confined to ethnic minority populations. There are high levels of unemployment in our established white communities as well, and it is in these communities for example that we have some of our biggest challenges in raising educational attainment for children and increasing skills for employment amongst adults.

So cultural diversity, the theme of this year's conference, means a great deal more than ethnicity or migration. Diversity is also about socio-economic groups, it's about disability, about the needs of young, and about our response to an increasingly aging population as well. All of these need to be reflected in and responded to in the way in which we deliver services.

### **Responding to diversity through libraries**

So I would like to give you some examples from the way in which we are transforming our library service in Leicester to meet the needs of our diverse communities, but in a way that sees that diversity as an asset and not just a challenge.

We have 16 libraries in Leicester, ranging from old to new, and the last decade has seen a revolution on how we do things to ensure that we are achieving inclusion in our library service. In fact from 2001- to 2006 we set up and successfully implemented a strategy called 'Achieving Inclusion'. And now, we have a comprehensive strategy entitled 'Better Libraries, Better Lives' which is taking us forward to 2013.

Here are some examples of our response to diversity in the library service:

- Libraries are a valuable, neutral **community space**. Through them we can bring people together to **strengthen community ties** and promote civic values. So we have developed over 120 projects to promote ‘**active citizens**’ through libraries since 2006.
- For people new to the UK – our libraries are an essential venue where they can **study British Citizenship and learn English** – and learning English is a fundamental key to starting a successful life in the UK and beginning to integrate.
- Most notably, we work extensively to reach out to **support refugees and asylum seekers**, linked to events such as Refugee Week, Family Learning Week and Black History season.
- In our libraries we **celebrate our communities’ many festivals**, such as Christmas, Eid al-fitr, Diwali and carnivals. This helps reinforce people’s sense of belonging to the city and to their neighbourhood, and helps different communities to enjoy each other’s cultures too – an important part of creating community cohesion.
- To respond to the needs of **older people**, we support their learning to use IT and to promote healthy living. We make sure that our libraries and the resources in them are accessible, and provide transport and home library services as well.
- We work closely with agencies that support the needs of **people with learning disabilities.**, to make sure we are providing services to them in a sensitive and appropriate way.
- Our libraries are **family-friendly** and **child-friendly**, providing many activities for families and children to support their learning and enjoyment together.
- For **adults who need support in the basic skills** of reading, maths or using IT we offer a friendly and non-threatening environment for learning.
- We have fully embraced the huge increase in demand for **IT and for CDs and DVDs and now e-books** as well. Our libraries are a critical service in **closing the digital divide**, and our vision for the future is to provide the kind of wire free, creative, open, cafe style spaces that represent the cutting edge of libraries today.

But it’s not just about the services we provide. Embracing diversity means getting to the very heart of how we do things: it means moving away from the ‘us and them’ mentality that characterised public services in the past. To do that we have to make sure our workforce really understand our customer’s needs. In Leicester we strive to fully engage and involve customers in what we are doing. And we

work hard to **give communities every opportunity to be part of providing the service** as well as receiving it.

We have done this in a number of ways:

- We have done a great deal of work to **consult people** over plans and strategies. The design and development of our newest library at New Parks was based on an extensive programme of involvement and engagement with local residents, to make sure that they really felt they were in the driving seat in deciding how the library would be designed and what it would offer.
- We have **involved residents** – including young people – in the steering committee for our newest library, in New Parks.
- We provide **volunteering** opportunities for local people to work in our libraries – which for some can turn into employment opportunities and /or leads to qualifications.
- We have thoroughly **reviewed our requirements for new staff**, as we recognised that what people need to work in the library service is not library qualifications, but simply the **right attitudes to the customers and the interpersonal skills to meet their needs**. So we no longer require people to have library qualification to get a job with us. We then support them to train once they are with us. As a result we now have libraries staffed by people who better reflect the makeup of the local community, not only in terms of ethnicity but also in terms of socio-economic background too. This is a huge change – as in the past libraries were almost exclusively staffed by people from white, middle class backgrounds.
- We have also developed a **customer centred culture** in our libraries. For example staff are appraised on issues such as widening participation. They are encouraged to come forward with fresh ideas, and they move between libraries to develop their experience and share good practice.

I hope this has given you a good insight into Leicester, and the huge changes that we have made to respond to and embrace diversity through our library service. I truly believe that community diversity makes cities stronger. It challenges us to think and do differently. There are still many challenges and problems for us in Leicester, and I would never claim that we have got it right.

But diversity is not in itself a problem, the problems come when we fail to respond effectively.

<http://www.leicester.gov.uk/libraries.aspx>