



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Strategic Review of Libraries**

14 January 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**Strategic Review of Libraries**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)

Mr P J Bradley

Mr Dominic Bradley

Lord Browne

Mr Trevor Clarke

Mr Billy Leonard

Mr Kieran McCarthy

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr Ken Robinson

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Anne Connolly )

Dr David Elliott ) Libraries NI

Ms Irene Knox )

Mr Nigel Macartney )

**The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):**

I welcome the team led by chief executive, Irene Knox; chairperson, Dr David Elliott; chairperson of the services committee, Nigel Macartney; and Anne Connolly, director of planning and performance. Thank you for your attendance. Dr Elliott will brief the Committee, followed by Ms Knox. Perhaps, Dr Elliott, you will reintroduce your team to us.

**Dr David Elliott (Libraries NI):**

Thank you, Chairperson and members, for the opportunity to brief the Committee on the strategic review of provision in the greater Belfast area. My colleagues are: Mr Nigel Macartney, a board member and chairperson of the services committee, which was charged with undertaking the preliminary work on the review; Ms Irene Knox, the chief executive; and Mrs Anne Connolly, the director of planning and performance.

With the establishment of Libraries NI, for the first time ever the opportunity exists to review public library provision across Northern Ireland, no longer constrained by the former education board boundaries. One of the key targets established by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) for Libraries NI in its first year of operation was to undertake such a strategic review and to bring forward plans to enable a planned programme of investment in libraries from 2010-11 onwards.

In considering the library estate across Northern Ireland, we were conscious that work had already begun or been carried out in many areas to rationalise provision and to bring forward plans for newbuilds or major refurbishment. In this financial year, for example, a major refurbishment of the library in Newtownstewart was completed, a new library will open in Antrim, work will continue on the new library for Dungiven, Whitehead Library has been refurbished, and approval has been received for a major refurbishment of Carrickfergus Library, as well as newbuilds in Kilkeel and Lisnaskea. Work continues to secure new libraries for Enniskillen, Newtownards and Coleraine — in the cases of the last two, in partnership with local councils. We are also taking forward plans for a major development of Belfast Central Library.

It quickly became clear that a key priority for the strategic review had to be the greater Belfast area because of the large number of libraries there — 33 out of a total of 109. They are often in close proximity to one another, and many of the buildings are in poor condition; some have a very low level of usage. There is an urgent need to establish a sustainable and affordable framework for public library service provision in the greater Belfast area so that the best use can be made of scarce resources and there is equity in provision across Northern Ireland.

I understand that members have received a copy of the results of the review; 'Meeting the Demands for a Modern Public Library Service within Northern Ireland — Stage 1: Greater Belfast Area'. It sets out our vision for the public library service, the context for the review and the methodology used, as well as the proposed way forward. You have also received a shorter summary document.

We on the board and members of the Committee all seek the same objective: an effective and efficient library service throughout Northern Ireland. No one joined the board of Libraries NI to close libraries. There was a great deal of heart searching in coming to our unanimous decision to consult on proposals. At its meeting on 10 December 2009, the board agreed that public consultation on the vision and the proposals should take place.

The consultation commenced on Monday 11 January 2010 and will run for eight weeks. We have everything to gain by being as open as possible and by having open debate. We do not claim to be the font of all knowledge; however, we have a responsibility to be as effective and as efficient as we can, and to outline the vision for the way ahead for libraries in Northern Ireland.

I must emphasise that at this stage these are proposals only; no decisions have been made. We seek sincerely input from key stakeholders, such as the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, to help to inform the decision-making process. I understand that you may have questions; we will do our best to answer them today. We would also appreciate any advice or input that you can give. It is vital for us to gather as much input as possible.

We are keen to hear from library users and from people who do not use libraries, as well as public representatives. We will hold a series of public meetings in the greater Belfast area and will make copies of the consultation documentation available in all our libraries as well as on the website so that people can express their views.

One of the five values in our corporate plan is decisiveness; having gathered all the evidence, we intend to move quickly to a decision. That is only fair to our stakeholders and to our staff, and it is in the interests of making the most effective and efficient use of the resources for which we are accountable. We intend to make that decision at our board meeting in April 2010.

I will now hand over to the chief executive, who will discuss further our vision for libraries, not only in Belfast but throughout Northern Ireland.

**Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI):**

Thank you, Chairperson and members. Through engagement that I had with the Committee during its scrutiny of the legislation that established Libraries NI, I know that you are keenly aware of the key role that libraries play in communities as centres where people of all ages can receive support with learning; access information in printed form as well as increasingly online; explore their heritage; participate in arts and cultural events; or simply spend time choosing CDs or reading books.

The traditional image of libraries as simply book-borrowing centres has long gone. Although books and reading remain central to everything that we do, people's expectations of the services that they can and should receive from libraries have changed and will continue to evolve in parallel with technological advances and societal changes.

Increasingly, there is a need to provide not only a greater range of books and other resources in a wide variety of formats but to open for longer hours and at times that suit modern lifestyles; deploy our staff more effectively in a customer-support role; work with other agencies to enhance access to complementary services; and have attractive, flexible, well-designed and equipped buildings that people will want to visit and where there is space to engage in learning, cultural and other activities. Evidence both from here and elsewhere in the UK shows that library use

increases when people have access to a wider range of services in modern, fit-for-purpose buildings.

Our vision is for two main types of libraries. First, those that open for a minimum of 30 hours each week, of which 10 hours would be outside normal business hours, by which I mean evenings and weekends. Those libraries would provide a wide range of stock in various formats: books, newspapers, music, film, online resources and local-studies material that relates to the immediate area; computers for public use with free internet access; and they would be configured in such a way that they can be used for group learning as well as by individuals, one-to-one support from experienced staff, and regular activities to support our four key themes: learning, culture, heritage and information.

By that, I mean reading groups, class visits, exhibitions, family history events, silver surfer classes and many other activities. We also want to develop zoned areas: having space in a library to create quiet study areas away from the noisier children's and teenage sections.

Secondly, we want to develop a network of larger libraries with longer opening hours. We want those libraries to open for a minimum of 50 hours a week, of which 15 hours would be outside normal business hours. They would offer the same type of services that we have already mentioned but on a larger scale, with specialist collections, including local studies material in a range of formats, such as maps, photographs, microfilm, with specialist ICT facilities, including, for example, Wi-Fi, as well as meeting rooms, dedicated exhibition space and refreshment areas.

There is an opportunity to realise that vision in the greater Belfast area and to develop a network of libraries that will provide people with greatly enhanced stock and services and which is sustainable into the future. It is not feasible to maintain the current number of libraries in the greater Belfast area. To try to do so would place intolerable pressure on already constrained budgets, and it would have an adverse impact on the libraries in the city that are making good provision, as well as on libraries elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

In the consultation document we identify the libraries in the greater Belfast area that we believe can deliver the vision as they exist at present or as newbuilds, major refurbishments, or in a clustering arrangement. Eighteen of the 32 libraries covered by the review fall into those categories.

It is important to remember that the consultation document sets out proposals for a three-year plan of investment in several of those facilities, including newbuilds on existing and new sites, as well as major refurbishments, with those plans starting to be put in place, subject to the necessary approvals, during the next financial year.

Our review indicates that some of the remaining 14 libraries are unlikely to be sustainable, not because of any one factor but rather because of a combination of factors, including the condition of the buildings, their lack of potential for refurbishment or extension, their close proximity to other libraries, and, indeed, in some cases, very low usage levels. We need to have a debate with users and non-users about the future of those libraries and how services can be provided to people in the area.

Thank you for your interest. We will try to answer your questions and will be pleased to hear your views on our vision and on the way forward.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much. When will the equality impact assessment on the proposals be completed? What does an equality impact assessment typically involve?

**Mrs Anne Connolly (Libraries NI):**

A policy is out for public consultation, and that is a screening process. When we get to the

section 75 groups and focus groups, we will start to build up our evidence for an equality impact assessment, which means that we will look at how a library closure would seriously affect individuals in any one of the section 75 groups. That is why it is a consultation process, because we must consider all the evidence before a decision can be taken.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Thank you for your presentation. Happy new year. Any closure will draw criticism and anxiety from communities, and rightly so. Does Libraries NI have a target of making a certain amount of savings from its budget through the review?

**Ms Knox:**

The purpose of the review is not to save money. We have budgets that are under pressure and, as you will be aware, they will be under further pressure next year. However, we want to make more efficient use of our budget to support library provision across Northern Ireland. If we are to do that, we must address what we consider over-provision in the greater Belfast area, because, as I said, to continue to maintain the number of libraries there puts intolerable pressure on the budget for the whole of Northern Ireland. The proposal is not primarily about saving money; it is about redirecting and redeploying our resources to create a network of better libraries.

As I said in my introduction, the evidence is that where there are good buildings and facilities, usage of libraries increases. We are committed to making no redundancies as a result of this process. In the past, libraries have been understaffed because of the need to spread resources thinly. We aim to redeploy staff into the libraries that are busy so that we can improve services.

**Mr McCarthy:**

That is very encouraging. Thank you for your response. I thank the chairperson for mentioning Newtownards; I was afraid that he would leave it out.



**Mr K Robinson:**

Thank you, Kieran, for the commercial on behalf of Newtownards.

I thank the folk for coming along this morning and I thank Irene for giving us a presentation. As you know, the Committee has a vested interest in the Library Authority because the Committee helped to steer the Bill that, despite opposition throughout, established it in its proper form. Is Libraries NI a fully constituted body or is it in limbo like the education and skills authority?

**Ms Knox:**

It is an absolutely fully constituted body.

**Dr D Elliott:**

All members are present and operating.

**Mr K Robinson:**

That extends to the locally elected representatives that the Committee was keen to see put in place so that Libraries NI gets a flavour of what people across Northern Ireland are saying and thinking.

I welcome the upgrade of the Belfast Central Library, which the Committee visited. All members support it and it is vital that that be completed. It is an important resource not only for Belfast but for Northern Ireland.

As a personal commercial, I also thank you for your positive comments on Carrickfergus and Whitehead libraries. However, and I am sure that Anne Connolly will put on her steel helmet at this point, I notice that Cloughfern library is to go, and I have a particular interest in that library

since my days on the North Eastern Education and Library Board, when it was vandalised and burnt down. I insisted that the board rebuild it, which it did; I would hate to lose it. I note that you say that it is in close proximity to Rathcoole. I invite the Committee one day, for the benefit of members' health, to walk from Cloughfern to Rathcoole and back again; I am sure that they would all feel the better for it. It is not easy to get to Rathcoole from the Cloughfern area, where the library is located. Given the population profile, access is particularly difficult. Cloughfern library is almost in the precincts of King's Park Primary School. It seems strange therefore that its closure is being considered, since one of your objectives is the promotion of learning: the library is an educational complex that would introduce children to the joys of using a library, maintain usage through their adult lives and encourage the community to support its library. You should reconsider that proposal.

However, the question I was supposed to ask you was as follows —

**The Chairperson:**

Since we are in the mood for walking, we can walk some day from Newtownstewart to Castlederg.

*[Laughter.]*

**Mr K Robinson:**

Can you provide us with a breakdown of the libraries that you consider no longer viable in east, west, north and south Belfast? I will add Newtownabbey to that list. If I have read this document correctly, Newtownabbey will finish up with only Rathcoole and perhaps Glengormley libraries. Given the problems of moving from the south to the north of the borough, it seems that Newtownabbey would take a hit compared to the general Belfast area. Have you taken that into account?

**Ms Knox:**

It is difficult for me, off the top of my head, to provide an analysis of east, west, north and south Belfast. We have looked at this in the context of greater Belfast, although I can provide the Committee with that information afterwards.

We want to create a network of libraries across greater Belfast. We recognise that there will be issues such as the member raised about Cloughfern library, and that is the point of the consultation exercise: people will tell us about possible difficulties with proposals. We will look at transport and bus routes.

As far as possible when considering new sites for libraries we will try to ensure that they are on main arterial routes, with bus stops close by. That is exactly the kind of information that we hope will be returned as a part of the consultation exercise.

**Mr K Robinson:**

That is helpful to know. In her previous life on an education and library board, Anne Connolly was involved with a wonderful site for a library at Monkstown that no longer exists.

The nearest library to Monkstown would have been in Cloughfern, which may not exist. In the opposite direction, the nearest library is in Greenisland, and now the library in Rathcoole will be the nearest, if you can get there. That is the problem.

I want to make a serious point: we are all concerned about educational underachievement, but it is not a task that the Department of Education can carry out on its own. If we cannot provide infrastructure in the form of libraries in areas where educational underachievement has been identified, we will pull apart instead of working together. I want to draw that point to the attention of Libraries NI, and I hope that it will take it on board as well as the geographical problems that I have outlined.

**The Chairperson:**

MLAs may wish to feed into the consultation.

**Ms Knox:**

We welcome that, Chairman. As we said in our introduction, this is an open consultation, and we want feedback from as many people as possible to influence whatever decisions are made at the end of it.

**Lord Browne:**

Thank you for your presentation. We all want a well-run and efficient libraries service. Research has shown that libraries play an important role for families and for those seeking to move out of unemployment, particularly in these lean times. I accept the need for a strategic programme and a vision for improving the service in greater Belfast. It is important to examine the condition of the physical stock of the buildings and to make recommendations, but I am not sure that centralising state-of-the-art libraries is necessarily the way forward.

I would like to think that Libraries NI has considered satellite centres rather than the centralisation of a few libraries. East Belfast seems to have been singled out for closures; of the 14 libraries proposed for closure, six are in east Belfast. I do not apologise for naming them: Ballyhackamore; Ballymacarrett; Braniel; Gilnahirk; Tullycarnet; and Woodstock. I am pleased that there will be a full consultation, and I am sure that people in east Belfast will put up a strong fight for those libraries.

Belfast City Council sponsors the Grove Wellbeing Centre, in which the concept of locating a library in an alternative setting has been established. I would like Libraries NI to explore that concept with the private sector. Do we need library buildings when we could use vacant property that is available all over Belfast in shopping centres and other places? The Grove concept should

be examined. Has Libraries NI explored such possibilities with Castlereagh Borough Council or Belfast City Council against the background of the proposed library closures in east Belfast?

I could go on, but this may not be the place; the consultation is the best place in which to make those points. However, it is not good enough to say that closures are justified merely because there is another library within a two-mile radius. There are many housing estates in east Belfast, and bus routes are important. However, unemployed people cannot afford to get on a bus, and the walking distance can be a problem for families with children. I would like Libraries NI to explore entering into agreements with the private sector and with councils.

**Ms Knox:**

We are keen to work in partnerships with other organisations. We mentioned our work with the relevant local councils to look at shared facilities in Newtownards and Coleraine. As Lord Browne said, the Grove Wellbeing Centre is the kind of concept that we would like to explore; there are not always opportunities to do that, but, where possible, we want to explore it. We have had discussions with officers of Belfast City Council about possibilities that might exist in future. We have also spoken to some of the partnership boards about their ideas for developing particular areas. We want to explore those possibilities.

We are not averse to working with the private sector; however, renting accommodation increases our recurrent costs on top of normal running costs.

It is something that could be considered, and we are also keen to work with partners in the public sector.

Libraries are about books and reading, but they are also about giving people access to services. Libraries NI wants to examine how libraries can become one-stop shops in which people can do a whole range of things; the Grove Wellbeing Centre is a good example of how that works in

practice. We hope that through the consultation exercise people will come back to us with ideas, suggestions and views on how we might do that.

**The Chairperson:**

Could you provide the Committee with further written information on the Grove Wellbeing Centre?

**Ms Knox:**

Yes, absolutely.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Good morning. My first question relates to the consultation process. Will meetings be held, and have they been advertised? Is a consultation document available on the website?

Secondly, can you provide the Committee with the estimated savings from the closure of the 14 libraries on a library-by-library basis?

Thirdly, someone said earlier that most of the libraries in question are in socially deprived areas and that it is traditionally difficult to encourage library usage in those areas. Would increasing the distance that people must travel not diminish library usage so that usage by the people who stand to benefit most from libraries will decline even further?

Finally, from reading your submission, I see that the cost per issue varies from £1.67 to almost £20. Can you give the Committee an indication of what you consider to be a viable cost per issue?

**Mrs Connolly:**

I will address the member's question on the consultation process.

At its meeting of 10 December 2009, the board announced that it would commence a consultation exercise. The process began on 11 January 2010 and will run until 5 March 2010.

The process will be conducted in various ways. It is being conducted online at the moment, with those who use computer facilities in libraries being presented with a pop-up message asking them to read a summary document and to complete an online questionnaire. Hard copies of the consultation documents and questionnaires will also be available. Libraries NI will also have some presence in shopping centres et cetera, because we also want to find out why people do not use libraries. That is a very important issue, as a very large proportion of the population do not use libraries at all.

The consultation process will also involve holding focus groups, and Libraries NI is working with two equality experts to examine how best to manage those. That work will mean, for example, that those under 12 years of age are not expected to fill in complicated forms, but we still want to hear what views young people have on libraries. Section 75 groups, the elderly and other groups will also be invited to attend focus groups and all the information obtained will be compiled.

Libraries NI has also arranged to meet all the councils and some political groups. Indeed, we will meet any regeneration group, political party or council to listen to what they have to say. An independent person will be present at those meetings and his or her report will go to the board.

The board will consider the findings and the effect that those finding might have. If a decision is taken to close a library, Libraries NI will consider what it might need to do to compensate the community affected.

**Mr D Bradley:**

I accept what you say about the variety of ways in which you will be consulting the public. However, not everyone is IT-literate. Many people, particularly those from the senior generation, are not au fait with that technology, and, often, the best way to consult them is face to face.

**Mrs Connolly:**

Focus groups will be held for those people and for those with poor literacy skills. Public meetings will also be held.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Will those focus groups be advertised publicly?

**Mrs Connolly:**

Yes. We also get advice from various bodies, such as Age Concern, about how best to meet people in that area. We need to get a good representation of people. I forgot to add that we will hold seven public meetings at neutral centres. We will finalise those dates this week, and they will be advertised in the press next week.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Local primary schools often work hand in hand with local libraries, and I hope that you will give schools in those areas the opportunity to respond.

**Mrs Connolly:**

Yes, we will do that.



**Ms Knox:**

I will answer the question on savings. Savings will be made if we close buildings, but they will be made in utility costs only and, hence, will not be huge. That is because we intend to redeploy the staff who work in those buildings to busier libraries in the city. The book stock and computers in the libraries to be closed would be circulated to those other libraries. Therefore, other facilities would improve as a result.

Although we are not projecting a huge saving in anything other than utilities, like every public sector organisation, we will have to find additional savings next year. Some of the savings on utility costs will become part of that process, which is about using existing resources more effectively to provide better support and resources to a large number of people. We must ensure that we invest in book stock, greater facilities, better online resources, and events and activities that will attract people into libraries.

To pick up on the point made about TSN, we are very aware of areas in greater Belfast with high levels of social need. Libraries are not well used in those areas. We need to be able to provide libraries with the space and resources to run classes and put on a range of activities that will attract people into the buildings. When we get people in, we can start to encourage them to use other facilities. However, the real TSN issues are not being addressed if the buildings are small, the facilities are not good and there is a lack of space to run adult literacy classes, computer classes and children's activities, including class visits that can be held without disturbing other library users.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Is a cost-benefit analysis not conducted before proposing changes of this type?

**Ms Knox:**

I am not sure what is meant by cost-benefit analysis in that context.

**Mr D Bradley:**

I mean the financial benefit that will accrue from amalgamating those libraries and how the savings will be invested in improving the service overall.

**Ms Knox:**

We know the cost of libraries in greater Belfast. The total current cost of those 33 libraries, including Belfast central library, is approximately £5.5 million. Central library alone costs £2.7 million. The 18 libraries that have been identified as high-performing cost £1.75 million, and the 14 being considered for rationalisation cost a little more than £1 million. A lot of that money is for staffing costs, and staff from any libraries that close would be redeployed to other libraries. I do not have the figures for utility costs, but the savings on utilities will be the only savings made.

**Mr Nigel Macartney (Libraries NI):**

As members will have gathered from reading our submission, many, if not all, of the libraries on the list for possible closure require considerable investment to become sustainable. Many need tens of thousands of pounds of capital, which we simply do not have. Issues such as disability access and other aspects of risk must be dealt with in our capital programme.

The other element that we have not stressed is that the authorities are undertaking a simultaneous review of mobile library services in greater Belfast. Mobile libraries can, of course, make a considerable contribution to meeting people's needs. On the basis of the review that was carried out in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area four years ago, we radically changed mobile library services. Some people in communities that lost fixed libraries that were open one or two days a week at rather irregular hours commented that they preferred the mobile service because they knew when and where it was going to be and because it visited several locations in that community.

We must look at the big picture. Obviously, the consultation exercise will allow communities to comment on the variable approaches that we might undertake, but do not forget the capital cost.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Might an improved mobile service be one of those approaches?

**Mr N Macartney:**

Yes.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Did the staff take part in the general consultation, or did your organisation consult with their trade union representatives?

**Ms Knox:**

We have already had two meetings with the trade union on the issue. We have also had meetings with staff to ensure that they are aware of the proposals. We are giving all staff a questionnaire to complete so that they can provide individual input to the consultation process.

**Miss McIlveen:**

A number of the points that I was going to raise have already been covered, so I will not repeat them. Irene is aware that I am very excited about and supportive of the vision for the new library in Newtownards, particularly the site that has been identified.

Did Libraries NI carry out the audit internally, or did it receive advice from consultants? Did Libraries NI make its own decisions, or did it receive external advice?

I note from the consultation document that the information that we have received deals only

with the libraries that are proposed for closure. Is it possible for the Committee to get similar detail on the other libraries so that it can see how you came to your conclusions? I share the concerns of my colleague from East Belfast Lord Browne about the number of libraries that have been earmarked for closure.

Finally, what discussions has Libraries NI had with the Department and the Minister about its proposals?

**Ms Knox:**

The work that we have done, we have done ourselves. We believed that it was important to do the initial work ourselves, so we did not bring in consultants to carry out the initial audit. DCAL set us the target this year of carrying out a strategic review, and we built that into our business plan for this year. External advice is part of what the consultation process is about, and we are very keen to take advice from whomever wants to tell us about that or any other proposals. We will take advice from anyone who wants to give it to us.

We can certainly provide the Committee with similar detail on the other 18 libraries; that is not a difficulty.

We have worked closely with departmental officials; they are aware of what we are planning. David, Anne and I also had a meeting with the Minister in November to make him aware of what we were thinking about.

**Miss McIlveen:**

Were there to be major refurbishments of libraries, would temporary facilities be provided for users?

**Ms Knox:**

When a new library is being built, the library service decants to another facility for a time; we have a lot of experience of that. If a site is being refurbished, the library service moves to rented premises for a short period. We are just completing a rental agreement for temporary accommodation for Carrickfergus library so that work can start on the new library.

**Miss McIlveen:**

Will you come back to the Committee with information on the consultation?

**Ms Knox:**

We are happy to do that.

**Miss McIlveen:**

Thank you.

**Mr Leonard:**

It is good to see you. You are very welcome. I have a couple of comments and a few questions. I do want to take up time, but I want to endorse the points that have been made about areas of educational underachievement and social deprivation. Libraries play an important role in addressing that. This is not the sort of thing that costs £1.90 an issue. Rather, libraries provide social capital and a service to citizens who deserve it and who deserve our efforts to try to provide services that deliver for them.

I know that the report is essentially about greater Belfast. However, when talk starts about criteria and proposed cuts, we begin to wonder what will happen next and how the cuts will translate to smaller towns and rural areas. I am interested in some of your thoughts about the criteria that you will use for small towns and rural communities. In that context, the issue is not geography. The report states that you will stick to the accessibility standard that 85% of the

population should live within a two-mile radius of a library, even in rural areas. A library service has perhaps an even greater social role in a rural or small-town community as a collecting point. How will you address that when you move to review the service in the rest of the North?

With regard to services and the idea that libraries are centres for services, I appreciate the points that were made about mobile libraries. I have had conversations with various people in my constituency about mobile libraries, and I am sure I will have more in the future. However, as well as mobile libraries, I have a feeling that many communities would prefer some services to be delivered instead of having to travel five miles or whatever to access the entire package. That reflects the idea of a centre point with satellite services. A mobile library may well meet the needs.

If there is a need for IT literacy classes and for computers to be used to aid numeracy and literacy exercises, why not look at using community centres? There are many places that will be glad to provide services. I would appreciate your views on that suggestion for urban or rural areas.

Ethnic minorities must also be considered. If we are cutting back on the number of centres, how will we continue to provide services for ethnic minorities, some of which are different from those for the general population? How will you continue to deliver for ethnic minorities and encourage them to use our libraries?

I appreciate the points that you make in the report about some libraries opening for 10 or 15 hours outside normal working hours. That is great. However, my concern is that reducing normal working hours could impact on school usage of libraries. There is plenty of room for schools to use their local libraries. That is a spin-off worry on which you may be able to provide reassurance.

You mentioned the £25 million reduction in the budget for 2010-11. I know that there is more work to be done on that issue; the Committee will be looking at it in more detail at our next meeting, as I am sure you will be. How worried are you generally about what you will have to cut?

I am going to be parochial, but you will understand why. I take it that the Dungiven project is totally ring-fenced and that there is no way that it will be stalled by even one brick or book. The Coleraine scheme is in the pipeline, and we know that there is a deadline for being on site. I hope that the 2010-11 cuts do not start to affect the Coleraine project, because it is a very good one. I will be delighted to hear you provide an assurance that the Coleraine project will not be affected by the cuts in the slightest.

**Dr D Elliott:**

Nigel can answer the questions that are about outside the greater Belfast area.

**Mr N Macartney:**

We will look at the rest of Northern Ireland. However, as I mentioned earlier, the north-east area was thoroughly reviewed in 2004-05. I think that it is the board's view that, although a similar review should be undertaken for the rest of Northern Ireland, we do not anticipate anything more than minor changes to the physical location of branches, and it is likely that the criteria will be very similar. The criteria and the vision that Irene outlined chime in very well with the advice from DCAL and with what is going on south of the border and in other parts of the United Kingdom. That indicates the direction in which the authority wishes to move.

**Ms Knox:**

The Dungiven project is already on site. Therefore, I have no reason to suspect that it will not be completed. We are working closely with the council in Coleraine, and the indicative budget for next year contains some funding for Coleraine, subject to the approval of the economic appraisal and the business case.

**Mr Leonard:**

An indication to set in concrete would be appreciated.

**Ms Knox:**

We will continue to work closely with the council and our colleagues in DCAL to try to ensure that it becomes a reality.

Mr Leonard asked how a reduction in normal working hours might impact on schools. We are keen to increase overall opening hours. For example, one of the bigger libraries in Belfast, Ormeau Road library, is closed some mornings. We believe that such a well-used library should be open all day, in the evenings and all day on Saturday. People's lifestyles have changed, and young families may want to go to the library on a Saturday afternoon or in the evening after school. Schools are important, and libraries tend to be quieter in the mornings, therefore that is the best time to schedule class visits. We must ensure that libraries are open for the optimum number of hours to suit the community and to optimise library usage in particular areas. Anne will outline examples of other facilities that we use and of our work with others.

**Mrs Connolly:**

There are two main points about opening hours. First, the Coleraine area bore much of the pain re closures, and I do not want to revisit that situation. We promised the public — and kept the promise — that we would extend opening hours, and, in that case, we have the best opening hours in Northern Ireland. I do not want those hours to be reduced because we do not have the courage to consider Northern Ireland strategically. That must be said.

Secondly, we underwent great pain over Bushmills library because it was underused and there were a lot of assaults on staff. However, it is an area of high TSN. When we examined Bushmills library closely, we discovered that no one with an address in Bushmills was using the



library even though we had targeted the estate there. People from Portballintrae, weekenders mainly, were using that library, and, therefore, we took the decision to close Bushmills library. At that stage, we moved into the community centre with Sure Start and Bookstart, and we now have more outreach programmes in Bushmills and do more work with the families than we ever did in the library.

It is all very well saying that libraries are needed in TSN areas. However, people who cannot read will not come to places where there are books, because it is intimidating. Therefore, we need to consider using other places. We should not lose sight of the fact that libraries are not always just about the static building; many staff are skilled at working with family learning groups, and so on.

**Ms Knox:**

Members of the ethnic minority populations use libraries substantially, particularly the computer facilities. One difficulty is that small libraries have few computer facilities because there is not enough space to accommodate machines. That causes queues of people who want to use that service. We want to ensure that buildings have the facilities to attract people from ethnic minority communities or otherwise. Moreover, most of our libraries, particularly those that serve large numbers of people from particular communities, provide material in the language of different communities. That is one way to continue to attract people.

**Mr Leonard:**

You are committed to continuing that.

**Ms Knox:**

Through this process, we are committed to continuing to invest in stock, such as books or online resources. That is our lifeblood, and it is what we use. However, we must attract people to the library in the first instance or use other outreach methods to get that material to people. We will certainly continue to do that.

**Mr Leonard:**

A Facebook or Bebo page would put the word out to schools and attract a teenage audience. They will respond.

**Ms Knox:**

We are considering that.

**Mr T Clarke:**

I welcome some familiar faces that I recognise from a previous life. As other members have said, the points have been covered. However, I will stick my head above the parapet a wee bit. We over-scrutinise sometimes. Targets have been set, and we are working with limited money. I am glad that I am not sitting beside my colleague Wallace Browne when I say that. Although 33 of the 109 libraries are in Belfast, it is unfortunate that so many are in east Belfast.

We can over-scrutinise. A question was asked about savings. Nigel stole my thunder slightly because he said that there was a backlog. At that stage, I was doing a calculation of the backlog in maintenance. There is a backlog in maintenance of about £350,000 in the libraries that you are considering. Initially, that is a saving. It is pain that we have to take. We have to live in the real world. We are not awash with money, and we have to take some hard decisions. It is easy for me to say that because I know that Antrim is getting one of the new flagship libraries that are due to open.

**Mr K Robinson:**

I did not want to say that, Trevor, but I was thinking it.

**The Chairperson:**

Wallace would like some redistribution. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr T Clarke:**

I was trying to reassure Ken because I know that he is concerned about other parts of Newtownabbey. Whenever Newtownabbey joins Antrim, we will have Northern Ireland's flagship library.

**The Chairperson:**

What is your question, Trevor? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr T Clarke:**

It is an observation more than anything else. We can over-scrutinise, and we can all be parochial. However, hard decisions have to be made, and we have to support some of them and try to sell them to the community.

I am looking at some of the dates of when the libraries opened. Transport was not as easy in the 1950s and 1960s, but it is easier now; we are talking about libraries being within a two-mile radius.

It would have been useful to have a map of the whole Province to show the distribution of all of the libraries. Wallace referred to Ballyhackamore and other areas. We can all be parochial about libraries in our areas. However, looking at the effort that has been put into all of the other libraries and their locations, we have to be realistic.

**Ms Knox:**

One of the points that we made in our presentation was that there has been, and continues to be, a lot of capital investment elsewhere in Northern Ireland. One of the reasons that that was possible is that hard decisions were taken. Our organisation did not come into being to close libraries; our aim is to try to create an effective, sustainable framework of good libraries across Northern Ireland. It is impossible to do that given the current number and condition of libraries in Belfast. There is little room for manoeuvre as far as refurbishment, and so on, are concerned.

You talked about the library in Antrim. The kind of facilities that we have there and that we now have in Lisburn, Bangor or Newtownstewart, which is opening next week after a major refurbishment, are the kind of facilities that the people of Belfast deserve. That is what we want to try to create in the greater Belfast area.

**The Chairperson:**

PJ, did you have a question?

**Mr P J Bradley:**

All of my questions have been answered.

**Mr McCarthy:**

I am concerned about the statement about the possible closure of some old buildings. Having to provide facilities for disabled people was mentioned. I would not like to think that any buildings would be closed when you could invest in measures to get people with disabilities into the library. That is the last thing that should be on anyone's mind. It is about people being entitled to libraries, wherever they are.

**Mr Macartney:**

That is certainly true. I was emphasising the point that we are in serious need of capital

investment, particularly in the greater Belfast area. The money is simply not there. That has to be part of the overall deliberation.

In relation to disabled access, the authority continues to do its best to meet the needs of that community in a variety of ways. One of the services that we offer is for housebound readers. That is very important to us. It reminds us that the scale of library services across Northern Ireland is actually very big. We deliver in all sorts of ways, not just through buildings or high-tech programmes, but through face-to-face services such as that. Like everything in life, we have to balance what is possible with what we would like to do.

**The Chairperson:**

What about the extent of provision? Kieran, did you mention audiobooks, for example, for blind or visually impaired people?

**Mr McCarthy:**

Absolutely.

**Ms Knox:**

In our libraries, we provide books on tape and CD, and we also subscribe to the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). We pay subscriptions for people who are registered blind, and they can then access the RNIB library through what we provide. We are anxious to continue to provide services for people with disabilities.

Some of our buildings are so old that trying to create access to them presents huge difficulties.

**Mr McCarthy:**

That can never be an excuse for not doing it.

**Ms Knox:**

No, and it will not be an excuse. We want to have buildings that are completely accessible to any member of the public, whether they have a disability or not.

**Mr Leonard:**

What is the state of play with e-books?

**Ms Knox:**

You may have seen a lot of publicity over Christmas about e-books, and we must consider them. The difficulty is in deciding what route to take with e-books. Some of you are, as I am, old enough to remember when the Betamax and VHS formats were around. That is the situation with e-books; we do not yet know what the platform will be in the longer term. It is difficult to invest in e-books, because the area is developing so quickly. In six months or a year, a certain platform may be out of date. We need the market to settle before we proceed, but we need to consider e-books, particularly for younger people.

**Mr Leonard:**

The issue is on your radar.

**The Chairperson:**

The Betamax and VHS period is before your time, Ken.

**Mr K Robinson:**

If you need archive material, I have some Betamax tapes. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr D Bradley:**

What is your board's attitude towards staff members who wish to remain in employment after they reach the statutory retirement age?

**Ms Knox:**

The legal retirement age is 65. We have a procedure in place by which anyone who wishes to work beyond age 65 can make a request to do so. That request is considered, and decisions are made on the basis of that request.

**The Chairperson:**

I thank the team, Dr David, Irene, Anne and Nigel, for coming.