



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Briefing from NIPSA on  
Review of Libraries NI**

4 February 2010

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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### Briefing from NIPSA on Review of Libraries NI

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

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)

Mr P J Bradley

Lord Browne

Mr Kieran McCarthy

Mr Raymond McCartney

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr Ken Robinson

**Witnesses:**

Ms Alison Millar )

Ms Mary McVeigh ) Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance

Ms Josephine Quinn )

**The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):**

We move to the NIPSA briefing on the review of Libraries NI. This session will last around 20 to 25 minutes. I refer members to the follow-up information that was provided by Libraries NI after its briefing to the Committee on 14 January, the list of proposed libraries cuts, NIPSA's briefing paper, and suggested questions.

I welcome the NIPSA delegation, who will brief the Committee on its view of the review of Libraries NI. I hand over to Alison Millar, and ask her to introduce her team.

**Ms Alison Millar (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance):**

Thank you very much. Mary McVeigh is the chairperson of the NIPSA branch committee and a librarian at the Local Studies Library in Armagh, and Josephine Quinn is a librarian at Holywood Library and is also on the NIPSA branch committee.

I thank the Committee for giving us this opportunity, and, with the indulgence of the Committee, I will address two important issues: the major review of the provision of library services in the greater Belfast area, and the closure of library headquarters in Ballynahinch.

This is only NIPSA's initial response to the review of the greater Belfast library provision. As the Committee is aware, NIPSA is involved in a detailed consultation with its members, alongside the ongoing public consultation. We are consulting the public, library users and other community groups and political representatives. Over the past few weeks, we have not found anyone who has argued for the closure of his or her local library. However, we have not yet completed our consultation with our members or the communities.

I propose that NIPSA should furnish the Committee with the full submission that it will make to Libraries NI around the third week in March. That will coincide with the extended public consultation period, which Libraries NI will close on 5 April 2010. If the Committee wishes, I am more than happy to come back at that point to discuss the issues further. However, NIPSA is prepared to forward its full submission when its consultation is complete.

With regard to the current public consultation, NIPSA is angry and disappointed, as are many library users, that Libraries NI has decided to hold all its seven public consultation meetings away from, and not close to, the libraries that are under threat of closure. That feeling was made abundantly clear at a public consultation meeting held at Cregagh Library last night. More than 100 people attended that meeting, at which they complained bitterly about the location of the consultation meetings.

In NIPSA's view, the consultation meetings are poorly advertised. The dates were advertised in libraries only a week and a half ago and, as far as NIPSA is aware, they did not appear in the local papers. Despite that, the meeting in the Cregagh library was well attended, with more than 100 people present — they were crammed in like sardines. However, I went to the meeting in

Finaghy, which was not well attended. Between 12 and 15 people turned up, but that may be due to the fact that the library users in that area had a maximum of 14 hours' notice. They would have had to have been in the library on the day it opened to see when the meetings were being held. I looked at the local papers in that community, and no mention was made of the meeting.

The Committee will have heard of the number of people from ethnic and minority communities who use the libraries, for example, Philipinos, Czechs, Polish and Chinese. When Libraries NI presented its paper to the Committee, it said that it was aware of that situation. I understand that staff in one east Belfast library have been asked for the consultation document in other languages, primarily Polish, which is not readily available. Libraries NI has yet to provide that information. I suggest that Libraries NI is paying lip service to a section of the population. How does that fall in with its section 75 obligations? Given the high immigrant population in Belfast and wider afield, why did Libraries NI not have the forethought to produce material — consultation documents, proposals, meeting times and venues, etc — in other languages? Those sections of the community therefore have less time to consider and respond to the proposals.

What should libraries provide? No one would argue that we want many of the proposals set out in the documentation that NI Libraries has produced; however, we must deal with the reality here and now, and not everything is achievable in the short term. In our view, there are places for large libraries in small towns like Bangor and Lisburn — sorry, maybe they are cities now; I may have offended somebody.

**The Chairperson:**

You are OK.

**Ms Millar:**

There are places for medium-sized libraries, in, for example, Dundonald and Cregagh, and there are places for small libraries, for example, in Cloughfern, Dunmurry and Braniel, which are covered as part of the review, and are earmarked for closure. One should not always be seen as better than the other, or have pride of place in Libraries NI, yet consistently the new, larger libraries are referred to as the jewels in its crown. Modern does not always have to equate to large. Large libraries may provide a wide range of services and have large numbers of visitors for the populations that they serve; however, for many individuals, they can be off-putting and frightening places. Different libraries have different services and experiences for people of mixed

age and ability.

School groups, individual children, young mothers, toddlers, academics, researchers, adult-fiction readers and those who do not borrow books, but use the reference materials or come in to read the daily newspapers and socialise in the library are all, as far as NIPSA is concerned, valid and appropriate users of the library service. One type of user is not more valuable than another, yet the only things contained in the information and data available are about the usage figures; namely the number of active borrowers, the number of people using the public access terminal, book issues, etc. In our view, libraries are much more than that.

You have repeatedly heard NIPSA state that libraries cannot be one size fits all. Individuals are certainly not all the same, and their needs are as diverse as they are. Having been at last night's consultation meetings, one thing that was expressed by the public struck me, and I know, Lord Browne, that you were at that meeting. At the start of the meeting, Libraries NI set out its vision — I will not repeat that; you will have seen that — but the users last night said that it is not Libraries NI's library, it is their library. It is the public's library. It is not Libraries NI's vision; it is the public's vision, and communities want local, small libraries. I hope that Libraries NI has heard what the users actually want. That was the one thing that left an impression on me of all that was said last night.

It is not my intention to single out or mention every single library, and I do not think that the Committee would afford me the time to do that; however, there are some issues that need to be addressed. The 'Delivering Tomorrow's Library' vision of 85% of the population having access to a library within two miles is a bit oversimplistic. Throughout the document that Libraries NI has produced, it states that such and such a library is within two miles. In NIPSA's view, that is irrelevant. What we see as relevant are the public-transport links, the current user profile, whether people walk to the library or come by car, bus or train, and what the implications would be for the community if a library closes. Is it the last public provision in the community?

I will single out Belvoir as an example, which has been mentioned at both public consultation meetings that have taken place so far. The post office has closed, the clinic is closed, and the library is now the only public provision left in the centre of Belvoir. There are no east-west links, so people there cannot go to a library that appears to be only a bit along the carriageway. Are there other barriers? Ligoniel Library is proposed for closure, and it is said that Ardoyne Library

is within two miles. In our view, that is not a feasible proposition, as they are two segregated communities. In relation to Sandy Row, it is said that the nearest library is within two miles, on the Falls Road. Unfortunately, we have not moved that far in Northern Ireland. Those two communities would not feel comfortable about using each other's libraries. I have mentioned Gilnahirk and Braniel; there are no east-west bus links. One person said that it would take them an hour and 40 minutes to get from their house into Belfast and back out on another bus to get to a library with two small children. It is just not doable.

Often it is said that mobile, instead of static provision, should be made. In our view, mobile is a second-class service. NIPSA firmly believes that mobile provision has a role, but it is no replacement for static provision. NIPSA fears that mobile provision will be the answer to real opposition to this transition. Mobiles cannot provide even the range of services available in a small library: computers, storytelling, rhyme time and reading groups, to name but a few. Members are aware that Libraries NI intends to carry out a review of mobile provision. The agency may have indicated that when its representatives addressed the Committee. The review will extend to routes and number of visits, and it will take place later this year. NIPSA questions the review's timing. The steps should have been carried out consecutively, so that, if a decision is taken to close a particular library, the community can be engaged in considering alternative provision. Those steps follow from one another; that is better than taking one step now and another later.

Libraries NI provision of 30 hours' or 50 hours' opening seem to be oversimplified, and other options ought to be considered. It should take into account what users and potential users want, which can be discovered only by engagement with the community and asking what it wants from its local library. Libraries NI should listen to the response, unlike what happened in the South Eastern Board, which had the same chief executive as Libraries NI has now. When the South Eastern Board reduced opening hours at Braniel, Gilnahirk and Dunmurry, it asked the users what opening hours they preferred. The response, certainly in Gilnahirk, was that Saturday morning opening was preferable. However, the users' views were ignored and the library remained closed on Saturdays. Is it any wonder that usage has declined over the last three years to four years? That was stated time and again at last night's meeting.

I do not wish to single out any particular quadrant of the city. If these proposals are accepted, six libraries in east Belfast will close. In our view, that is unacceptable, and certainly it is

unacceptable to the community that uses those libraries. In west Belfast, only two libraries will be left for that huge population; and approximately 70% of the libraries proposed for closure are in Protestant working class areas. What are the section 75 implications of that proposal?

I know that the Committee's time is precious, and I turn briefly to the proposal relating to library headquarters in Ballynahinch. The decision taken by Libraries NI is to close library headquarters, which is a building that it owns, with effect from 31 March 2010. NIPSA believes that library headquarters should be used as the regional headquarters for the new Library Authority. The rates and utility costs for the two Lisburn sites, which are rented accommodation, amount to £80,000. That sum includes rates, utilities and rental costs. The same costs for the Ballynahinch site are £89,000 per annum. NIPSA argues that Libraries NI could have saved substantially in the last two years had it used existing available space in the Ballynahinch building. A vast area of that building is not currently being used. It makes economic sense to move to the Ballynahinch site, make it the regional headquarters and end the lease in Haslem's Lane. I understand that the two-year lease on the Haslem's Lane site is almost at an end. Every six months, Libraries NI can extend the lease at Sidings Office Park.

NIPSA accepts that money would have to be spent at Ballynahinch to section off parts of the building, improve disability access, etc. In our view, that would be a price worth paying in the short term and it would bring initial savings. In addition, the local studies library for County Down is housed at the Ballynahinch site. I have spoken with many of the users who are vehemently opposed to the breakup of the local studies collection. Many of them are researchers, historians or academics who view the breakup of the collection as sacrilegious. The breakup will make their research more difficult and time consuming. NIPSA accepts that the opening hours of 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday, need to be reviewed. The staff are more than willing to examine that and to work different hours to ensure that the collection stays together. They have had a personal involvement in building up that collection over many years. One member of staff has worked in that library for more than 30 years.

With respect to acquisitions, which is really the stock area, Libraries NI wants to move the work out to other areas. That would mean that there would be no stock department in that whole business area. The Ballynahinch building is more than adequate for that. It is purpose built, and it has purpose-built loading bays, which makes the move nonsensical in NIPSA's view. In addition, Libraries NI will now have to rent space to garage the mobile libraries that are already

housed in Ballynahinch.

NIPSA proposes that the new regional headquarters for Libraries NI be located in Ballynahinch in a building that, as I said, Libraries NI owns, and which is more than adequate to house 50 staff in broad corporate services functions. Staff are currently housed in Haslem's Lane, in conditions similar to those of battery hens. Local studies and local acquisitions should also be based in Ballynahinch. It is NIPSA's view that that is a sensible proposal, and one which Libraries NI and the Minister must be forced to accept.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you, Alison. Members have 10 minutes in which to ask questions. Therefore, I ask Ken and Raymond to ask their questions, to which we will get an answer, and then we will move on to Wallace and Kieran's questions.

**Mr K Robinson:**

I thank Alison and her colleagues for coming along. I apologise in advance, but I have another meeting to go to shortly.

I will put my cards on the table straight away, Alison. Cloughfern Library is in the middle of my constituency and is one that I fought to have replaced when it was burnt down some years ago. That library is not close to Rathcoole and it is not close to Glengormley. It is close to Monkstown library, which was taken away by the North Eastern Education and Library Board, but Monkstown Community School is now at the centre of a brand-new regenerated community.

The library closures are comparable to the school closures in certain areas. On one hand, we tell people that they are showing no educational interest in their children, and, on the other hand, we take away educational facilities such as schools and libraries. What alternative to Libraries NI's proposals does your union envisage?

**Mr McCartney:**

Thank you, Alison, for the presentation. Consultation processes happen across all Departments, but you are critical of the location of, and access to, the Libraries NI consultation process. Has NIPSA made any representations to the Library Authority in relation to the consultation, which, in your opinion, was poor? If so, what was the response?



In your briefing paper, you say that 70% of the libraries set to close are in Protestant working-class areas. Have you asked Libraries NI to carry out an equality impact assessment?

**Ms Millar:**

As a child, I lived in the Cloughfern area, and, therefore, I know it well. I do not believe that walking distance is an issue there.

As I said, NIPSA has not concluded its discussions or made any firm decisions around whether we want to oppose the closure of all 14 libraries or whether there are some libraries that should be closed. However, I have asked Libraries NI to tell us how much would be saved by closing those libraries, because we are of the view that the closures are partly to save money. Libraries NI has said that it needs to save £1.2 million in the next financial year.

It may be that alternative provision is created in an area in which a library is closed. However, the community groups that we have spoken to, in all areas, say that people, in particular, the young and the elderly, would much prefer to have a small library on their doorstep than have to travel a major distance. It is our view that perhaps Libraries NI needs to go back and rethink its proposals. Rather than have fewer bigger libraries with longer opening hours, it appears that the public want smaller libraries, closer to their doors, with perhaps shorter opening hours.

I have had two meetings with Libraries NI on the review, and we will be addressing the board on 11 February in relation to Ballynahinch library headquarters, because that is subject to a shorter consultation period. On 11 March, we are going back to speak to the board in relation to the proposals for Belfast. Libraries NI is currently carrying out an EQIA, which we say should have been done prior to the process. However, Libraries NI says that the public consultation is part of the EQIA process. That concerns me, because Libraries NI has said that it wants to make quick decisions by the end of April based on the public consultation. That is a very short time in which to do that if they have not concluded the EQIA.

**Lord Browne:**

I appreciate that this is only a preliminary document, and I look forward to the findings of your full consultation. I was present at the meeting at Cregagh Library last night. Although you mentioned north, south and west Belfast in your submission, I am disappointed that you did not

mention east Belfast, which faces the most severe closure proposals. The six libraries at Ballymacarrett, Ballyhackamore, Braniel, Gilnahirk, Tullycarnet and Woodstock are on the agenda for closure.

As you said, last night's meeting was very well attended. However, do you agree that it is a bit disingenuous to hold meetings in a library that will be improved? Secondly, as six libraries in east Belfast face closure, will you not press for more consultation with the public? Those libraries cover a large area. Indeed, people who attended last night did not all have access to a car. The venue was not on a Metro route for many people, and they had to walk for about 40 minutes. Do you agree that more meetings should be held in more suitable facilities?

Do you think that the consultation time should be extended? The equality impact assessment has been mentioned, and it is being carried out at the same time. Would it not have been wiser for Libraries NI to carry that out before beginning the consultation? Do you agree that the public consultation document is very difficult for people to read and to comprehend? It asks for people's comments somewhere; one would need a PhD to fill it in.

It was nice to see ethnic minorities represented. Do you agree that the consultation document should be available in different languages?

The public prefer smaller satellite libraries in their own communities. Although people agree with the vision, they do not want state-of-the-art libraries with coffee bars or massage parlours. *[Laughter.]* I should perhaps clarify that: they want small community-based libraries that unemployed people and schools can use. Will you consult school principals? Many libraries are located where local schools, especially primary schools, could make use of them.

**The Chairperson:**

Wallace, this is very important to your constituency.

**Mr McCarthy:**

There are not many questions left after Wallace's contribution. The issue of headquarters annoys me. You seem to say that there is an ideal spot for the new Libraries NI headquarters. They will probably argue that it will cost money to refurbish. What is your opinion on that? Furthermore, do you support Libraries NI's proposals to refurbish existing libraries? Finally, I asked Libraries

NI a question last week when it attended the Committee, and I was told that the proposals will not create any redundancies and that employees will be employed elsewhere. Are you happy with that?

**The Chairperson:**

You have a lot to contend with there, Alison. I am sorry about the format of questioning.

**Ms Millar:**

I apologise for not including east Belfast in the very short briefing paper; that is an important point. Wallace asked whether the consultation period could be extended. The process has major ramifications across the greater Belfast area. Although the consultation period has been extended until 5 April 2010, I would, given the ramifications, support a longer consultation period. Moreover, I agree that the EQIA should have been carried out in advance so that people could have been consulted. It is not ideal to collect all the responses by 5 April and make decisions at the board meeting at the end of April. We have some difficulty with that and have asked about it.

The consultation document, as a number of people said last night, is almost a sham. You could not possibly answer no to some of its questions, because they ask would you like this, would you like that, would you like to have better space in libraries. Of course people will tick the yes box. However, the document does not say that the result will be to have to give up small community libraries.

I have been working closely with a Polish association in east Belfast, members of which went into their local library, which is probably Woodstock, and asked for the document in different languages. That seems to have caused a furore in Libraries NI. I spoke last night to the consultant that it has employed to assist with the section 75 aspect of the consultation, and Libraries NI said that it will probably just organise a focus group with that section of the community. It is almost like saying: "We will take them off, isolate them somewhere, get interpreters in, and talk to them." That is not appropriate. The documentation needs to be available in various languages.

NIPSA wrote to all school principals in the greater Belfast area, particularly those whose schools use libraries and are close to those due for closure, to ask them to raise the matter with their boards of governors and put pressure on Libraries NI. We know that many schools regularly

use libraries. Therefore, I support all the points that Lord Browne raised.

NIPSA believes that the headquarters are ideally situated. There are reasonable transport links to Ballynahinch. With hindsight, rather than renting the premises in Lisburn for the past two years at a cost of £80,000 per annum, the building could have been used as Libraries NI's interim headquarters as it became established. There is a vast amount of space available. In fact, there is a room with 10 computers that have not been switched on in the past two years. That £160,000 in rent over the past two years was money unwisely spent.

I was told by staff members there that there were too many people at the Haslem's Lane offices in Lisburn, and Libraries NI was looking for an additional place to house people. They went and had a look at the finance section, did not really fancy it — maybe it was not as modern a building — and next, the chief executive of Libraries NI and her PA were moved out to a different building. There has been a gross waste of money there. Although some money may need to be spent, it would be on cosmetic work, partitioning and disability access, which could refurbish that building and make it an excellent headquarters. There were in excess of 80 members of staff in library headquarters in Ballynahinch in its heyday.

NIPSA is happy that there is a commitment to no job losses or redundancies as a result of the review. However, many fewer people are now employed in the library service, particularly in greater Belfast. As staff members left as a result of funding issues over the past three to four years, they were not replaced, and 13 more senior members of staff were made redundant just before the transfer to Libraries NI. Although we welcome a commitment to no redundancies, that is in the context of in excess of 100 jobs having been lost in the past couple of years.

**The Chairperson:**

I thank Alison, Mary and Josephine for coming along this afternoon to help the Committee to understand the issues.

**Mr P J Bradley:**

I am from South Down, so I had better record my support for all that you are trying to do, even though I have never been to that library, which is 35 miles away from where I live.

**Ms Millar:**

NIPSA is holding a public meeting about library headquarters next Wednesday evening, and any members who can attend and lend their support will be very welcome.

**The Chairperson:**

Where is that taking place?

**Ms Millar:**

In the Market House, Ballynahinch, at 7.30 pm.

**Mr P J Bradley.**

I do not know about the other South Down MLAs, but although I live 35 miles from that library, there has, to my knowledge, not been any great lobbying process to try to save the Ballynahinch building.

**The Chairperson:**

Or to maximise its use. OK. Thanks very much.