



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Briefing from Libraries NI on Stage 2
Consultation – Meeting the Demands for
a Modern Public Library Service in
Northern Ireland**

17 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr Declan O’Loan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr David McClarty
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Dr David Elliott)
Ms Irene Knox) Libraries NI
Ms Helen Osborn)

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

I invite Dr David Elliott, chairperson of the board of Libraries NI; Ms Irene Knox; and Ms Helen Osborn to join the meeting. Good afternoon. Dr Elliott will lead the presentation and introduce his team.

Dr David Elliott (Libraries NI):

Chairperson and members, thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee on the second stage of our strategic review of library provision in Northern Ireland. I am chairperson of Libraries NI and with me are, Irene Knox, who is the chief executive, and Helen Osborn, who is the director of service delivery.

Members have a copy of the consultation document on the stage 2 review, which sets out our vision for the public library service, the context of the review and the methodology used as well as the proposed way forward. Members also have a summary document. We previously briefed the Committee on stage 1 of the review, which covered greater Belfast and was completed in June 2010. In greater Belfast, we consulted on the potential closure of 14 libraries. Following an analysis of responses, the board decided that four of those should remain open.

At stage 1, we also indicated that we would invest in three libraries this year: on the Falls, the Shankill and the Whiterock, and we followed through on that commitment. Work is under way in all three libraries. Whiterock will be completed by the end of March and work on the other two libraries will be completed early in the new financial year. It is also important for the Committee to note that, since the review was completed, the overall use of libraries in greater Belfast has increased.

We are engaged in public consultation on proposals that emanated from stage 2 of the review, which covers libraries in the rest of Northern Ireland. In due course, we will also review mobile library provision, which will include considering routes across Northern Ireland as well as whether additional provision is required as a result of implementation of stages 2 and 2 of the review.

A key target established by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) for Libraries NI was to undertake such a strategic review of library provision. In the current financial climate, in which considerable savings are required to be made by Libraries NI over the next four years, it is even more important that we undertake that review process, so that the best use can be made of increasingly scarce resources and our services are affordable and sustainable into the future.

Particular difficulties are associated with, for example, trying to sustain a large number of branch libraries, some of which have low usage and are in poor physical condition. Offering the full range of library services in smaller, more limited buildings with inadequate facilities for users and staff poses a difficulty, and particular difficulties arise in the utilisation of scarce staff and stock resources in many locations.

There are 99 branch libraries in Northern Ireland. This review looked at 77 libraries; the other 22 are in greater Belfast. The libraries were assessed against four criteria, the first of which is whether they are fit for purpose, including consideration of issues such as size, condition, suitability of the building and any constraints that might be in place that would inhibit development.

The second criterion is whether they are capable of delivering modern twenty-first century library services, much of which is about having the space to provide, for example, separate children's and teenagers' sections that do not encroach on quiet study areas; public-access computer terminals that are configured in such a way that they could be used as a learning space so that children and adults can use computers quite separately; and space for regular activities such as rhyme times for toddlers and their carers, story times for older children or reading groups for adults, and activities to support our key themes of learning, culture, information and heritage.

The third criterion is whether they are in the right location and are easily accessible by all sections of the community as well as how well they are being used by the local population. That includes consideration of the DCAL target that 85% of the population should live within two miles of either fixed or mobile library provision.

The fourth criterion is whether a library is sustainable. That includes, for example, information on the number of active borrowers, the level of borrowing, the cost per issue and the cost per active borrower.

It is important to remember that no single criterion was considered in isolation. It is those factors, in the round and in combination, that determine whether a library is delivering or has the potential to deliver effective and efficient services and realise the vision of a modern twenty-first

century library service.

Of the 77 libraries considered, 44 were deemed to be viable with little or no money being required to be spent on them. That category includes some of our newest libraries, such as Antrim, Dungiven, Newtown Stewart and Carrickfergus, which has been closed for major refurbishment and will open again to the public in March, as well as libraries that we refurbished last year, such as Comber, Carryduff, Whitehead and Keady. A further 21 libraries were deemed to be viable but will require further refurbishment or newbuilds. It is regrettable that there is no capital funding at this stage to take forward for the plans for at least some of those libraries such as Enniskillen, Lisnaskea, Kilkeel, Newtownards and Coleraine, which are at an advanced stage of development. There are two libraries in Armagh, the branch library and the Irish and Local Studies Library, and we are proposing that those two should be consolidated into a single entity on an existing or new site.

Ten libraries have been assessed as potentially unviable, and we are currently seeking the views of individuals and communities about the impact on them if those libraries were to close. One of those, Greystone, has been included because a commitment was given that, when the new library in Antrim opened, the future of Greystone library, which is about one and a half miles from the new Antrim library, would be reviewed.

I believe that we, in the board, and this Committee are seeking the same objective, namely, the provision of an effective, efficient and affordable library service throughout Northern Ireland. Clearly, no one joined the board of Libraries NI to potentially close libraries, and we recognise that the particular issues associated with rural communities will need to be considered in coming to a decision on the way forward.

I will finish now by providing a timeline. Public consultation on the proposals began on 14 January and will run until 8 April 2011. We have everything to gain by being as open as possible and by having an open debate. I want to emphasise at this stage that no decisions have been made. We are sincerely seeking the input of key stakeholders such as this Committee to help to inform the decision-making process. It is vital for us to gather as much information as possible. We are very keen to hear from library users, those who do not use libraries and local representatives, and

we have begun to hold a series of public meetings across Northern Ireland so that people can make their views known to us. Copies of the consultation document and questionnaires are available in all our libraries as well as on our website so that people can let us have their views.

We also published a draft equality impact assessment and are engaged in consultation on that document. When the consultation is completed, all the views expressed will be collated and analysed, and it is anticipated that the board will make a decision in June 2011.

Thank you, Chairperson and members, for your interest. We will be pleased to try to answer any questions.

The Chairperson:

I can detect a high level of concern and worry among members of the Committee. That concern is increasingly strong in communities, even those that have been relatively silent to date about the prospect of the closure of their library. That concern is definitely burning away in those communities now. Committee members are most familiar with libraries such as Fintona, Draperstown, Killyleagh and Carnlough. Those are the ones that individual members are familiar with through their constituencies.

I have been told that this is not really about improving services but making cuts. Also, government is meant to engage in rural-proofing, and we want an assurance on that.

Finally, you said that no decisions have been made. Can you give me a categorical assurance that there is a lot to play for in this consultation? What would make a difference? How should communities construct their case to make a difference?

Dr D Elliott:

I will hand across to the chief executive to answer questions on making cuts, and our director will talk to the rural-proofing aspect.

Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI):

Chairperson, you made a point that this is not about improving services but about cuts. Libraries

NI is aware that there are concerns amongst our users and communities about the process. We have had three public meeting already, and we have another one tonight. So far, the meetings have been very well attended, and we have listened to the comments that our users have made. The Committee is aware that we came with stage 1. DCAL set us a target of carrying out a strategic review of libraries across Northern Ireland. We completed the stage 1 review, and we are now engaged in stage 2.

This is not about cutting services for the sake of it. It is about looking at how we create a network of accessible sustainable libraries across Northern Ireland. Yes, we are faced with difficult financial situations, and we have to look at all this in the context of the budget implications over the next four years, because resources are spread thinly and they will be spread even more thinly over the next four years. So, we need to make sure that our libraries are well used, that they are accessible, that the buildings are suitable and that we can carry out the range of activities in those buildings that we need to be able to carry out to ensure that they remain in high use over the next period of time.

Helen will respond on the rural-proofing aspect.

Ms Helen Osborn (Libraries NI):

This review covers many rural areas outside greater Belfast and there are many libraries in the review, either in the category to be invested in and kept open or in the category for potential closure. As part of the consultation, we are keen to hear from our customers and potential customers about each and every issue to do with rurality and we will take them on board. We are aware of the recent updated guidance from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on rural-proofing and we will take that into account.

Dr D Elliott:

Finally, Chairperson, I give you an absolute, categorical guarantee that no decision has been made on any library in the consultation process.

Mr Sheehan:

Thank you for your presentation. We received a letter from the chairperson of the Ballinascreen

Community Association about the proposed closure of the library in Draperstown. The association is very concerned, and I can understand its concerns. The area has experienced a major economic downturn in the agriculture sector and, more recently, in the construction industry. There is high unemployment, there is an infrastructural defect and the transport infrastructure is particularly poor. There is a proposal to close the library in Draperstown and move it to Maghera. The criteria set by Libraries NI include fit for purpose, capable of delivering, being in the right location, sustainability, and so on. For this library, around 85% of the people live outside the two-mile radius. However, if it is moved to Maghera, 100% of the people will live outside that two-mile radius. So, that does not even fit your own criteria.

That area has experienced a negative impact from the economic downturn with all the social and economic problems that have been created. That facility has a positive impact on the community and people are using it, particularly people who are now unemployed. They are able to spend time in the library, interact with other people from the community, reskill themselves, and so on. Given that, it seems that the area deserves a library, that the local community needs that library and that all the negative social impacts that arise from an economic downturn can be helped by the provision of the library in that area. As far as I am aware, although that building may not be fit for purpose — I am not particularly clear on that issue — it is leased by Libraries NI; so, there is no need for a rebuild or capital investment if another building in that area could be leased and used as a new library.

The Chairperson:

You are responding to letter that we received; that is essentially what you are doing.

Mr Sheehan:

Yes. Could you respond to some of those comments?

Dr D Elliott:

We had a very lively meeting on Tuesday night in Draperstown. It was very well attended, and the Draperstown community made its views very well known to us. We want to thank those people for coming to the meeting. I will hand across to our director of service delivery, who will take up some of those points.

Ms Osborn:

We believe very strongly that libraries have important roles to play in helping people, particularly during the recession, with upskilling and so on, as you so eloquently described. The reason why Draperstown is on the list for the consultation for potential closure is fitness for purpose. The issues are the size of the library and its condition. It is a small library of 120 sq m. That means that, for example, there is only room for a very small number of computers for the public to use. So, when we were approached by an organisation that wanted to bid with us to put computer training into rural libraries, the space was not available to avail ourselves of that opportunity because of the size of Draperstown library. It is also on that list under the sustainability criterion because of the low level of use.

I will pick up on the point about 85%. DCAL policy is that 85% of the population should live within two miles of a mobile library or a branch library. If — I stress the “if” — no decision has been made, Draperstown library or any other library were to close, a very important part of our consultation is to establish what alternative provision would best suit that community. Our document says that the next nearest library is Maghera or, obviously, other libraries in different circumstances; that is purely for information. It is not that we assume that everyone will use that library. A fixed building is only one way in which we provide library services. We provide mobile libraries, the one-to-one service for housebound individuals, and we support the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) home service for visually impaired people. We work with Sure Start, Bookstart, local playgroups, community associations, community centres, and so on. We would wish to consult on local communities on those matters, if, indeed, a library were to close.

Based on experience, there are always costs associated with relocating a library service from one building to another, such as the initial fit-out costs, the cost of installing the IT connections, and so on, and those are generally considerable. As we know, budgets are very tight at present. I hope that I have covered all the points that you raised.

Mr Sheehan:

I will come back to the point that you made about fitting a building out with IT connections. I

presume that other libraries are going to be fitted out with IT suites. Have I picked that up wrongly? If it is the case, it would be just as easy to fit out a new or alternative building if it is being leased as it would be to fit out an existing library.

You made a point about low usage of libraries. What is Libraries NI doing to market its facilities, particularly in rural areas?

Ms Knox:

I will answer the IT question and Helen will address the marketing issue. All our libraries are fitted out for IT provision. They all offer free Internet access and the lending system is computerised. The costs associated with a move to a new building are the result of the types of contracts that we inherited. So, there are costs involved in stopping the service in the library. There are also additional costs for rewiring, meeting the computer needs in another library, and so on.

Ms Osborn:

We have a marketing team to market and promote the service. It produces marketing leaflets and other print materials. Our website is moving to Web 2.0 so that we can promote the service through social networking sites such as Facebook. We also heavily promote our events, because we find that events are a good way to get people into a library for the first time, after which they come back. Last week, for example, we held the Speaking of Books festival across Northern Ireland, with events in libraries about authors and books. That requires space, and, unfortunately, we do not have the space in Draperstown library to hold well-attended events. The other part of marketing, and often the most effective, is what our branch staff do in their local communities to engage with schools, playgroups, and so on, because word of mouth is extremely powerful.

Mr Sheehan:

I know that the criteria that you laid down are important, but you should also take into account the impact that closures will have on local communities.

Ms Knox:

One of the points that we make to the people who attend the public meetings — I normally make

the presentations at those meetings — is that the purpose of the consultation is to determine the impact on individuals and on communities if the library were to close. We can provide all the statistical information, and we have people at those meetings to record that information so that it can be fed into the consultation process and into the report that the board of Libraries NI will consider.

Mr O’Loan:

Thank you for giving evidence to the Committee today. It is obviously a very important issue. The Chairperson referred to a number of libraries that members were particularly interested in. I will add Kells and Connor library in my constituency, which is holding a public meeting tonight. Unfortunately, I will not be able to attend that meeting because of a prior commitment here. I will, obviously, be interested in what happens at that meeting. I want to make particular reference, however, to the situation in Carnlough, because strong representations have been made to me about it, after which I would like to ask a couple of general questions.

Obviously, there is not time to explore in full the detail around any one library, and I do not want to take up too much of your time. However, it is crucial that each library is discussed and, therefore, a different arena will have to be found in which to pursue the conversation. Of all the libraries that have been suggested for closure, the distance for Carnlough is the greatest. I do not think that you did yourselves any favours presenting the distances as the crow flies. Nowadays, information as to the actual travelling distance is readily available. From Carnlough, it is over 10 miles to Cushendall and the nearest static library, which is a long way.

Looking at the table, I see that the actual costs for small libraries are not hugely different from the costs for other libraries. There is not an incredible variation. That needs to be looked at. On a more general point, which also applies to Carnlough, I worry greatly if a significant criterion is that the building is in poor condition or not well located. Although that may present a management problem for you, the key question is whether that is the right place to have library provision. If it is, even if the library is in an appalling physical state and even if you currently have no capital to address that, it would be a serious mistake to close a library primarily for that reason. If a library is in the right place to serve the population, that has to be addressed as a management issue, and you have to find a way of solving the quality of building issue in the due

course of time.

I have a lot of concern as to how the catchment population was defined. Due to the electoral wards that you used, it undoubtedly captures people who would not look to Carnlough as their local library, but who would look naturally to Cushendall. As a consequence, it looks as though usage among the catchment population is low, whereas, if it is viewed in relation to the approximately 1,600 people in the village, the immediate natural catchment area, usage is quite considerable.

I would like a response to those questions about Carnlough, and then I have a couple of more general questions, if you will indulge me, Chairperson.

Mr Hilditch:

Rather than go back and forth between members about Carnlough, can I just say that I support Declan's comments. There is a high percentage of users in the local populace. Carnlough is on the A2 Causeway coastal route, which is problematic, because that road is sometimes closed for periods of time and the community in Carnlough can sometimes feel cut off. I am not sure whether that was raised at the public meeting. However, I want to come in behind Declan on that.

Looking at the box-ticking exercise, I see that three out of five boxes were ticked for Carnlough. I wonder why Carnlough has not had some sort of future development plan attached to it, rather than just "R" for rationalisation.

Mr K Robinson:

David and I represent East Antrim. Carnlough is unique in its geographical situation; it is on the coast and the hinterland behind it is rather tall. The village has specific difficulties, and has been trying to regenerate itself over a period of time, with some great success. To lose this facility now would be a very negative blow. I set that in the context of school closures, which the area has also suffered over a period of time. There has almost been a withdrawal of basic amenities from that community. I ask that that be taken very seriously into consideration.

Ms Knox:

Thank you for those comments. Perhaps I can respond to the questions about Carnlough. We had a very useful meeting with the public in Carnlough earlier last week, I think. I forget which meeting was when at the moment, because we are going through a series of meetings. The meeting was well attended and we were very pleased to have such a good turnout. I go back to the point that those public meetings allowed us to hear the kinds of comments that have been made by members here about the community and the isolation that it suffers because of its location. Those are very important things that we need to take into account as part of this process.

To pick up on a specific point; the distance specified in the consultation document is as the crow flies. In the EQIA document that we have also published in draft form at the moment, we included the travelling distance from Google Maps, so both distances are there.

As regards the criteria, one of our big concerns about Carnlough library is the building. The building is not ours; it is leased from Larne Borough Council. We had a meeting with the council to discuss the issues there; for example, it does not have disabled access and the staff facilities are very poor. Various issues around that building need to be addressed. At the public meeting, we did, in fact, have a commitment from a councillor that Larne Borough Council would do something about the building. I hope that it follows through on that.

Mr Hilditch:

Name names. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Knox:

I will not do that here.

We want to know if there are things we can do to improve the facilities by working with the people who own the buildings. For example, we recognise that Carnlough has a big tourist attraction, but, if the library is to be part of that, we would want to improve the facilities and to ensure that the building is suitable for tourists. We want it to be a tourist attraction. At the moment, the building looks quite dilapidated from the outside and there is no disabled access, so there are a number of issues that need to be addressed.

People at the public consultation also drew our attention to the fact that, from their understanding of wards, they felt that some of the wards that we have included in the EQIA do not necessarily constitute a catchment area for Carnlough library. That is absolutely fine. The draft EQIA is currently out for consultation, and that is exactly the kind of response that we need from people who know the area much more intimately than we do and who can tell us, for example, that the catchment area is not that big.

Mr O'Loan:

I have a slightly more general point to make. I respect the fact that managers have to do their job, and that, sometimes, that job is difficult. They deserve some political backing when they are making difficult decisions. However, you are a relatively new organisation that has inherited a legacy of an estate that, for the first time, has been looked at as one unit. It is important that you are not overly hasty in doing the standard thing; looking at the estate and deciding to rationalise and proceed that way without first considering alternatives, some of which you started to indicate when you talked about Carnlough. However, I am talking now in a completely general sense.

Have you adequately considered the options of sharing facilities; partnerships that have not yet been developed; staffing and costs, if you are volunteering; and the whole concept of community planning? For you to be working in isolation would be a mortal sin given that local councils are starting to develop the whole concept of community planning. In many ways, that is where this process should be starting in each area. We want you to be seen to be very willing partners in community planning exercises.

Community planning is an embryonic process that was really supposed to come to life with the newly created councils. Those newly created councils have not come into being, but, if a library closes, it is closed, and no new ones will be opened for the foreseeable future. You must be very careful of your ground before taking an irrevocable step that we could end up regretting for many years after. Perhaps if you had allowed time for conversations about partnerships and other ways of doing things a totally different solution could have been found.

The Chairperson:

I support everything that Declan has said. It strikes me that, as you go about the place listening to communities, you are energising the community and its interest in libraries. This could have the outcome of energising the population, which is a good thing. People could become even more attached to their libraries. There should not be a presumption in favour of closure. There should be better marketing. I hope this exercise improves things and does not have the opposite effect. However, will you answer Declan's points, please?

Ms Knox:

I will take that point first. We are passionate about libraries, and we want people to use them. We need more people to use libraries to make them sustainable in the future. If the process does nothing else, it will at least raise people's awareness of libraries. Sometimes people take libraries for granted. As long as the building is there, it is there, but it might not be being used. It is only when this sort of situation arises that people become aware of the value of libraries.

I will go back to the point that was made about what happened in greater Belfast. As our chairperson said in his introduction, there was a lot of discussion at that time about libraries in greater Belfast. Since our review was completed, the number of books issued in Belfast has gone up by over 3% and the use of computers has gone up by almost 5%. We think that that is partly down to the fact that there was discussion about libraries and their value. People who would not have thought of using libraries previously are using them now. Furthermore, because there are not as many libraries as there were, we have been able to improve the stock and facilities in existing libraries. We are conscious of the issues that you and Mr O'Loan have raised. Those are the types of issues that we will take into account.

Helen will talk about some of the specifics, because partnerships are very important to us. We already have a number under way.

Mr K Robinson:

You made the point about stage 1 and the discussions that we had. You know that the situation with Cloughfern library agitated me quite a bit. At that stage, the shared space, the neutral venue, figured largely in what we were trying to do there. I am glad to say that we were successful in the

end. Due to demographics, it is more difficult to achieve that neutral shared space in the countryside. Are you downgrading that factor in your deliberations, or do you still want to give it a fairly definite push to see it through?

Ms Knox:

In many ways, a library is perceived as a shared space in country areas and towns, more so than may have been the case in big cities, where libraries tend to be in particular areas. One of the important issues for us, particularly in smaller towns, is that a library is often the only shared space that is used by all sections of the community. Therefore, it is important for us that the library is seen as a shared space.

Ms Osborn:

As Irene has said, we are very open to partnerships, and we already operate a number of libraries on a partnership basis. For instance, the Grove library on Belfast's Shore Road is run in partnership with the council, and there is a swimming pool and leisure centre in the same complex. There are also GPs, dentists and a range of allied health services there. The library in Strabane is run in partnership with the council, as is Magherafelt library, which provides a tourist information centre. Work is currently under way on the leisure centre there, so the fitness suite is actually in the library at the moment. There are more examples. We have a number of successful partnerships.

We hope and believe that, through the consultation process, the potential for partnerships in each of the areas on which we are consulting will emerge. In fact, that is starting to happen. It will be different in every community. There are different opportunities. We are very keen to pick up on that as part of the process. We are open to all opportunities.

We are developing a volunteer policy, which will be about volunteers providing added value to what library services do. That is under way.

Mr K Robinson:

May I make a plea for Richhill library? I was a resident in Richhill many years ago. Although it had an excellent mobile service in those days, which served me and my family well, it is better to

have a static library. After all, it is a growing village, and the indications are that it will continue to grow. What is the main factor militating against Richhill? Is it the building? Is it the location? The figures for regular users are not particularly low.

Ms Osborn:

There are two factors with Richhill library. One is the level of use, which is relatively low. The other is the building — I do not know if you are familiar with it — which has a very awkward layout. The library is on one and a half floors, with a small ground floor and a sizeable mezzanine with no disabled access.

Mr K Robinson:

Is it at the lower end of the village where the sports fields are?

Ms Knox:

It is beside a residential home.

Ms Osborn:

It is adjacent to the chemist and opposite the health centre. Of the very small amount of space in Richhill library — some 138 sq m — about one third is not useful; there is a mezzanine about which there are health and safety issues and to which there is no disabled access. The other aspect is that, for those who have cars — I appreciate that not everyone does — the libraries in Armagh and Portadown are not very far away when compared with some of other libraries that are being considered.

Mr O'Loan:

Your document suggests that you have a vision of only large and medium-sized libraries and that small libraries are very much seen as a concession to where you really want to go. That worries me, given the reality of library provision in Northern Ireland, particularly in the rural areas that we are looking at at the moment. Is that the right way to have expressed that policy?

Ms Knox:

First, the vision is long-term; it will not happen overnight, and it will take a long time to get there.

Secondly, when we talk about medium-sized libraries, we are trying to say that a small library should be able to provide the type of facility that is provided in what we call a medium-sized library. Those libraries should be able to provide longer opening hours, better stock and more space for stock. We do not talk about the size of the community that that library should be in, because we recognise that that will differ across Northern Ireland. It is about the kinds of services and the minimum level of service that should be provided in a library. That is what we mean by a medium-sized library.

Mr McCarthy:

I am the last Committee member to question the witnesses. All my questions have been asked and the answers have sort of been given.

My constituency takes in Killyleagh, the home of Sir Hans Sloane. I see that you are all nodding already. He was the first guy to introduce libraries to these islands, yet we have a proposal before us to do away with the library in Killyleagh. It is a disgrace, it is shameful and, hopefully, it will not happen. David Elliott mentioned a lively meeting that took place in Draperstown. I am sure that if it was anything like the meeting in Killyleagh, it was more than lively. That meeting was a gathering of angry and disillusioned local residents, and Killyleagh certainly deserves better. The library in Killyleagh is a very popular facility that caters for a largely rural community. In your submission on stage 2 of the strategic review of library provision, you state that you want to:

“deliver effective and efficient public library services and realise the vision of a modern 21st century library service into the future.”

We can all agree with and subscribe to that view, but where do the people, community and human beings of Killyleagh come into it? The libraries at Richhill, Draperstown and seven other locations are equally in the melting pot. Where do the people in those areas come in to it?

As public representatives, we acknowledge the work that has been done over the years by so many people — I am talking specifically about Killyleagh — to provide an excellent learning facility. I have talked to those who were there when Killyleagh library was first opened, and I know a bit about its history. Indeed, I am sure that Irene also knows that, as her former employers, the South Eastern Education and Library Board, own that building.

Ms Knox:

Sorry, Chairperson, if I could just pick up on that point. The South Eastern Education and Library Board does not own the building; it is owned by the South Eastern Regional College.

Mr McCarthy:

Well, OK. We are near enough.

The Chairperson:

Your local library has 950 active borrowers.

Mr McCarthy:

Absolutely. How can Libraries Northern Ireland throw away with a stroke of a pen all the good work that has been done over the years? Are you prepared to respond positively to a good, sound argument? The idea of sharing facilities was mentioned, and that makes sense. I think that it was Helen who mentioned the Grove Wellbeing Centre, which provides various services in one location in the city. Are you prepared to consider a similar option for Killyleagh? Ultimately, the aim is to continue to provide a good library service for the people there. We all want services for ordinary people. Are you prepared, as Irene said, for all those things to be in the mix? At the end of the day, the people in Killyleagh whom I represent want a facility to be retained there.

The Chairperson:

You want an assurance that they will listen.

Mr McCarthy:

Absolutely.

Ms Knox:

At the end of the day, the board will make those decisions, but I assure you that we are listening and have listened. For example, in greater Belfast, we consulted on the closure of 14 libraries and kept four of them open, which demonstrates that we listen to good, sound and reasoned arguments about why a particular proposal should not go ahead. I met representatives of the

“Save Killyleagh library” campaign and told them that we will listen to any proposals that they might have. I cannot guarantee that those proposals will be accepted, but, at this stage, we are certainly happy to listen to, take on board and discuss views, and that applies not just to Killyleagh but to all communities. At public meetings, we make the point that, if local community associations want to meet us, we will discuss things with them. We have written to councils, and I have written personally to a lot of MLAs. Indeed, I have received letters from Mr McCarthy and other MLAs, and we have said that we will meet them. We are genuinely engaged in a consultation exercise, and, if people come forward with good, sound proposals, we are happy to consider whether there is merit in taking them forward.

Mr McCarthy:

I am encouraged by Irene’s response. In your report, you mentioned the fact that there is no disabled access to Killyleagh library and that there is already a deficit in the repair budget. It seems to me that you might consider providing the service in another building. As I said, the end result must be that the people of Killyleagh and the surrounding rural area have access to a library, because, remember, nowadays, not everybody has a car. Indeed, Down Community Transport is cutting back its funding, so people in rural areas will not have access to transport to Killyleagh. All those things factor in, so, if we can provide something new that takes account of disabled access and other factors, we would be happy to see it come about. Thanks for listening.

The Chairperson:

On a general point; how do you define an active borrower?

Ms Knox:

An active borrower is someone who has used the library at least once in the previous 12 months.

The Chairperson:

Members, we shall conclude now. My concluding point is that I feel very strongly about Fintona library, particularly in relation to Pat Sheehan’s point about the impact of a library closure on a community in which there is social deprivation. I keep thinking that the presumption must not be in favour of closure. There has to be a presumption in favour of something else, such as development, better marketing or engaging and energising the community. Consultation

exercises are already having that effect in other places, so this could be an opportunity for libraries to make a better impact. If things can be turned around, it will have been a very democratic exercise. I take Declan O'Loan's point about the youth of the organisation, including you three; it is a very young organisation, but it is moving too hastily on stages 1 and 2. That is my impression, but there is a lot still to play for. I thank Dr David Elliott, Ms Irene Knox and Ms Helen Osborn for coming before us today.