



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Library Opening Hours

6 October 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Terry Heron)
Ms Irene Knox) Libraries NI
Mr Nigel Macartney)
Ms Muriel Todd)

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for coming. Please make some introductory remarks.

Mr Nigel Macartney (Libraries NI):

Thank you, Chairperson and members. I will take just a small fraction of the prepared note and highlight a few points. I hope that that will be enough to highlight the points that you want to pick up on and respond to. The challenges that we are facing, as you know, have led us to the proposal to review our opening hours. I will not take you through the long history of the

negotiations on the budget. Suffice it to say that our savings delivery plan was published in December last year as part of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's (DCAL) budget consultation. The proposed budget was increased by £2.8 million over the years of the comprehensive spending review (CSR). We are grateful for that increase, but all that it did was reduce the savings that we had to find from £13.8 million to £10.2 million. We thank the Assembly for voting that through. You still left us with quite a task, but you made it slightly easier.

Given the earlier comments from Mr McGimpsey, I stress that Libraries NI, in the two years since it was established, has already made substantial savings amounting to £2.7 million, involving a range of measures, including the voluntary redundancy of 58 staff at management administrative grades. We have addressed the backroom staff issue very thoroughly. Another example is that we have reduced the number of stock departments from five to one, which has allowed us to put a little bit more money into front line activities. We spent more on stock, for instance, than the five education and library boards did in the year before they were dissolved.

Work will continue on trying to find economies in the back-office functions, but the required savings are such that we cannot save the front line services from very serious reductions. Reduced opening hours is one of the measures in our savings delivery plan. It is estimated that a reduction in opening hours that equates to 1,200 staff hours a week will release savings of approximately £750,000 per annum with effect from 1 April next year. From the outset, we recognised that we needed to review opening hours to harmonise the arrangements of the five education and library boards. We had hoped, as a result of the review, to increase hours in many areas to encourage access. We are now faced with a situation in which the reverse is the case. That makes the board and staff very unhappy indeed, but we have no alternative.

As Terry Heron has said, we must put on record to the Committee our belief that the proposal to reduce opening hours is about saving money and ensuring that we live within our budget. There is no other rationale for it. The themes that we are applying to the process are consistent across all libraries, and you will see that as a thread in the proposal. The available hours should be used in the way that best meets customer needs. Opening hours will be determined by historical levels of library use, and should be sustainable. It is no good promising hours that we

cannot maintain when we have staff shortages. As Irene mentioned, we have assigned a band to each library, and individual libraries will be looked at in that regard.

There are two stages to the consultation process. The first stage is concerned with principles, and the proposal on the hours available in each library is under way. The board will make decisions on the outcome of those proposals in December and determine the number of opening hours for each library. The second stage of the consultation process will then begin in January, when there will be engagement with customers at individual library level to establish the pattern of opening hours that best meets local needs.

This is clearly a time of great anxiety for staff. We have some proposed schemes for voluntary redundancies, and we have applied to DCAL for funding to support that process. Nonetheless, staff are, of course, extremely concerned about the possibilities that face them. With that very much shortened set of notes, I will finish and offer the opportunity to take some questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. You indicated in your last few sentences that voluntary redundancies are likely. Can you develop that a little more? How many people are you talking about? What funding have you requested from DCAL to cover that?

Mr Terry Heron (Libraries NI):

We have bid for over £700,000 from DCAL to fund voluntary redundancies. Before the start of this year, we bid for that amount under the invest-to-save initiative, but it was rejected. We bid for it again this year, and we are in discussions with DCAL about that. We have not been given any assurance that we will get any money.

On the issue of voluntary redundancies, the 1,200 staff hours that we are trying to save equate to 33 full-time equivalent staff. Just fewer than 700 full-time equivalent staff are employed. A lot of our library staff are not full time. They work part-time hours, so there may be more people involved.

There are a number of schemes to try to save those 1,200 staff hours a week, and, as our chairperson said, voluntary redundancy is one process. We will also look at the posts covered by agency staff. Those staff are employed by an agency, so they are not our staff. We will certainly look at those areas. We have some short-term temporary staff, but we also have long-term temporary staff who have similar rights to those of permanent staff.

The Chairperson:

When do you anticipate that process starting?

Mr Heron:

Are you talking about the process of implementing reduced hours?

The Chairperson:

No; the voluntary redundancies.

Mr Heron:

We have started that already. We issued expression-of-interest letters to all staff this week. It is not just front line staff who are involved. We have to make savings in other staff costs, so the letter seeking expressions of interest has gone to all staff. We will look at all expressions of interest to see whether we can manage without those posts.

The Chairperson:

Is there a timescale within which that process has to be completed?

Mr Heron:

It has to be completed within this financial year in order to implement the savings by 1 April.

The Chairperson:

OK. Do you anticipate any decrease in service delivery or in the expectations for your own vision as a result of the proposals that you have put out?

Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI):

It is important to say that if we reduce opening hours, the amount of time available to staff in libraries to continue to provide the range of services that they provide at the moment will obviously be more limited. Therefore, it will have an impact on some of the programmes that we deliver. Area managers and staff are working with each branch to look at the programmes that are being delivered in that branch to try to ensure that the options that we come up with for the pattern of opening hours, which will be put to customers at each library in January, are such that we can continue to carry on much as we do at present.

Every other building that is open to the public has busy times and less busy times. We want to make sure that the pattern of hours suits the majority of people and programmes. At the moment, for example, we are running a huge class visits programme across Northern Ireland, with every year 4 and year 6 pupil being offered the opportunity to come along from school to the library. We are also offering rhythm-and-rhyme sessions in every library. We want to continue to give priority to those sorts of services.

All that will be taken into account. However, it would be wrong of me to sit here and say that this will not have an impact. It will have an impact on services and delivery and that is why it is so difficult for us and our staff. I held 12 staff briefing sessions over the past three weeks at which we brought together staff from individual libraries to explain that to them. Members of staff have said to me that they are concerned about their own positions, but it is more about what this means for the community that they serve. That is a very difficult issue, and the board and senior management team know that. It is not a road that any of us wanted to go down. We came into this job to try to improve access to services, but we are realistic and know that we have a budget that we have to live within. This is just one of the savings measures, but every area of our work will be affected over the next number of years.

The Chairperson:

The major concern emerging from everything that we have heard today is that people will lose their jobs.

Ms Knox:

Everyone shares that concern. We said to staff that we will do everything in our power to guarantee the contracted hours of our permanent staff and any of our long-term temporary staff to whom we have obligations. What we cannot guarantee is that those hours will necessarily all be worked in the library that they are in at the moment. For example, if one library's hours are reducing from, say, 40 to 30, and somebody works 36 hours in that library, you cannot have 36 hours if the library is open only 30 hours, or you may not need someone to work 36 hours. However, we would be looking to use that person's hours in another library within a very close radius so that we can try to protect their hours.

That is the process that is under way with staff. There will be discussions with almost every individual member of staff about what the implications will be for them and their timetables. However, we want to make sure that any reduction in staff numbers is done through voluntary retirement or voluntary redundancy. We have a new flexible retirement scheme. There are also opportunities for job shares and career breaks. All sorts of tools are there to avoid compulsory redundancy.

Mr Irwin:

You said that you have taken a consistent approach to opening hours. On the face of it, it looks anything but consistent. Some libraries' opening hours have increased by five or six hours. Richhill is my local library but 18 hours are indicated at each one irrespective of whether they are open for 24, 35 or 29 hours. From the outside looking in, it does not look consistent.

Mr N Macartney:

I think that you will find, as you indicated, that there is an historical variety of opening hours inherited from previous education and library boards. That was a major driving force in reviewing our opening hours. Certainly, in my experience, having served on the North Eastern Education and Library Board, hours were built up over the years and, often, were never changed or challenged. They seemed to get set in concrete. So we said that we would review them. The rationale is, as we have said, four bands, but we are making special provision for libraries that have been refurbished or for major centres.

Ms Muriel Todd (Libraries NI):

As Terry said, when we looked at all the libraries, the overarching idea was to save money. We looked at all the activities that each library undertook, including visits, the number of issues, the public access terminal (PAT) use and the amount of active members, to obtain a total activity number. Some libraries issue more books, whereas others have more social aspects. So, as Nigel said, because we have inherited a range of opening hours that have not suited some of the communities where a library is situated, the new opening hours include a variety of evenings, mornings and afternoons, and that is why those numbers have been included.

Mr Irwin:

It seems strange that we are reducing hours when some libraries' hours have increased.

Ms Knox:

I will pick up that point. The hours in a few libraries have increased because they fit into a certain band. For example, Newry city library is a band 1 library that had 55 hours. We are now saying that it should have 57 hours because the level of activity is above the limit for a 55-hour library. So, based on hours, it had previously been under-resourced, and we are bringing it into line with other libraries that do the same level of business. That approach was taken to try to ensure that, right across Northern Ireland, the number of opening hours that are available to a library are related to the business that it does.

Mrs McKeivitt:

Apologies on behalf of MLA Bradley; he had to leave. However, I have a number of questions to ask on behalf of us both. I will touch on the reduced hours in libraries, and, as Terry said, you are looking to save 1,200 staffing hours. Of the 572.5 hours throughout the region, only 15.25% will be from band 1 libraries. Why is that? You touched on Newry, but why are there so many from the others? If the hours are to be reduced, will at least two staff members be on duty at any time during the new opening hours in each branch?

Ms Knox:

Your first point is about the 15.25% reduction in band 1 libraries. Libraries in band 1 are our busiest libraries and, yes, the reductions in those libraries are probably less than elsewhere.

However, they are considered the busiest libraries. Moreover, in band 1, there are 10 libraries compared with many more in the other bands, and, therefore, the percentage of hours in the other groups is higher.

The staffing is very much related to the number of hours that the library is open. Throughout Northern Ireland, we already have libraries that open for 18 hours a week, some of which are single-staffed. Some have more than one member of staff, and it depends very much on the individual circumstances of each library. So I cannot give you a guarantee that all libraries will always have two staff members because, across Northern Ireland — we inherited this from the education and library boards — we already have libraries that open 18 hours a week and are single-staffed. We do not propose to change that. There may be more libraries that will be single-staffed at certain times, and at other times they will be staffed by more members of staff.

Mrs McKevitt:

How and why did Libraries NI decide on the ceiling of 80,000 tasks per library? Why are the criteria limited to issues, visits, public access terminal use and active borrowers per branch during 2011? Branch libraries that are open 30 hours per week or less could never achieve that 80,000 ceiling, and are, therefore, placed at a serious disadvantage from the outset.

Ms Knox:

Any library with a total activity rate of less than 80,000 a year was placed in band 4. Those are our smallest libraries, and they would never achieve a rate of higher than 80,000 tasks. However, we must draw a line somewhere. The process is about saving money and we had to put in place parameters within which libraries could be fitted.

There is a group of libraries in small communities with activity levels between 20,000 and 79,000. All those libraries play a very valuable role in their communities, and, as I have said, quite a number of those libraries already open for only 18 hours and do a very good job in their communities. The ceilings for each of the bands were determined to enable us to make savings, and I make no bones about that. The chair has already said that this is a savings exercise, and we had to draw lines somewhere to achieve the required level of savings.

Mrs McKevitt:

I have a few more questions.

The Chairperson:

Given the time, be brief.

Mrs McKevitt:

The annual number of visitors was estimated by counting visitors over a period of one week last autumn and multiplying that figure by 52. In bigger libraries, electronic gate counters are in operation, and a single visitor may roam from floor to floor and be counted a number of times. In libraries in which manual counting takes place, it is often the case that visitors may be overlooked, especially during busy periods or when there is only one member of staff working and customer service takes precedence. How do you ensure that the visitor count is accurate?

Ms Knox:

The visitor figures are produced using what is known as the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) methodology. Every year, CIPFA produces and publishes library visitor figures for all libraries across the UK. That methodology has been used for as long as I can remember for counting visitor figures in libraries. We use a combination of counting methods as the CIPFA methodology allows. Where there are counters, CIPFA has an established methodology on how to use those counters, and where there are no counters, as in some of our smaller libraries, CIPFA has a methodology that takes the figures over a week and aggregates them up. The figures were compiled according to that published methodology.

Mrs McKevitt:

I have one further question. As MLAs, it is important to make representations and to get the best information for the communities that we represent. Therefore, I was very disturbed when I heard last night that senior management in Libraries NI have suggested that any mail that comes from elected representatives — particularly Margaret Ritchie MP — may be returned unopened. Irene, will you personally investigate what is going on?

Ms Knox:

I am very interested to find out where that came from. It is very difficult for staff to be put under pressure in individual libraries, and we have told staff that if there are any queries that they feel that they cannot deal with, they should refer them to the senior management team. That is the normal process. If a letter was sent to a library by an MP, an MLA or anyone else and the branch felt unable to deal with that letter, I would expect the staff to know what the lines of communication are. If you want to give me some more information, I would be very happy to investigate.

Mrs McKeivitt:

You have requested that staff send information on.

Ms Knox:

We have certainly asked staff to do that if they receive any correspondence on the issue. It is not right for staff to be put under pressure, and they may not always have the full picture. We have asked them to copy any correspondence to us so that we can give any representative a full picture. I have always said that I am happy to meet any public representative on this or any other issue.

Mr Swann:

A lot of the points on the consultation on the opening hours have been covered. I have a couple of points on mobile provision, which is going out to consultation shortly. The Committee raised our concern that Libraries NI was remiss in not acknowledging the Committee before it went to consultation on reduced opening hours. I ask that, if you go to consultation on the provision of mobile libraries, you give the Committee its due place.

Can you look towards the timetable for the consultation on future mobile provision and provide a guarantee that it will not get tangled up with the issues of opening hours, closures, and so on?

Ms Knox:

Under our original timetable, the review of mobile library services was to begin shortly, but we are conscious that we have consultations out on stage 2 and on opening hours. Therefore, we will

be postponing the review of mobile libraries until early 2012.

Mr Swann:

That will be after the other two consultations are done and dusted.

Ms Knox:

Yes, they should be out of the way by then. We think that there are enough consultations out there.

Mr Swann:

Libraries NI has a texting service through which you can inform members that their library books are overdue. Can you use that service to inform your members that the consultation on opening hours is on? From some of the public meetings on closures, I am aware that the only public display to announce that the consultation was ongoing was a small A4 printed sign in the window of the library. In some cases, the best-kept secret that Libraries NI had was that a closure consultation was under way.

Ms Knox:

Thank you for the suggestion. We have investigated that, and it is not possible to use the texting service for that. There are certain issues around data protection, and so on, to do with the reasons why we asked people to join up for the texting service. We are now on Twitter and Facebook and have made information available in that way. In addition, anyone who logs into a PAT session at a library immediately sees a pop-up that tells them that the review is happening. However, for various legal reasons, texting cannot be used for that purpose.

Mr Swann:

That is fair enough. You have already taken out £90,000 from mobile provision in the October monitoring round. Is that an indicator of what will happen?

Ms Knox:

We have taken £90,000 out?

Mr Heron:

I am not familiar with that figure.

The Chairperson:

It was raised during our session on the October monitoring round. We were advised to ask you about it.

Ms Knox:

We have not taken anything out of that.

Mr Heron:

I am not aware of that.

The Chairperson:

Perhaps someone needs to have a look at that.

Ms Knox:

Perhaps someone would like to tell us about that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Heron:

Are you referring to an allocation to us being taken out?

Mr Swann:

Yes, in the October monitoring round.

The Chairperson:

We have written to the Department for more information on that, so we will pass that on to you.

Ms Knox:

Please do.

Mr Heron:

It may have been taken out of the money that was given to us, but we have not taken it out of the money that has been given to mobile libraries. We have balanced our books somehow.

Mr N Macartney:

We have maintained the spend on mobile libraries as best we can.

Ms Knox:

We are in the process of procuring some new mobiles.

Mr Heron:

Is it capital money?

The Chairperson:

When we get the detail, we will forward it to you.

Mr Heron:

It may refer to capital moneys because of a timing issue over the year end.

Ms Knox:

Thank you. We will ask a few of our own questions about that.

The Chairperson:

We will get the information to you. Undoubtedly, you will have had a conversation by the end of today.

Ms Knox:

We will have a conversation with some DCAL people after we leave this meeting.

Mr Ó hOisín:

I will raise a local issue, because it is about a case that I know particularly well. I appreciate that you will revisit everyone individually. Membership of Limavady library has almost doubled in

the space of a year, yet it is to lose 17 hours. What were the criteria for that decision?

The other question is more general. There are nearly a dozen libraries that have either been newbuilds or refurbished, and I see that there is an arrangement whereby there is a two-year period before there is a review of any extension of their hours. In a number of those libraries, the experience has been that member numbers, loans and visits have gone up substantially. Is that period too long? Are you doing that for comparative purposes over a two-year period? I would think that, in some cases, that should be looked at in order to extend the opening hours for those libraries.

Ms Todd:

Our experience has shown that, in any newbuild or refurbished library, the statistics certainly soar in the first year. If we give it another year, that helps the statistics to settle and gives us a more realistic view of the sustainability issues.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Do you agree that there is a missed opportunity when you see the fortunes of libraries being turned around, with substantial numbers of people visiting who have probably never been in libraries before, because those libraries are newbuilds or have been refurbished? Those people see the reduced hours and then they wonder why the libraries are effectively closed two or three days a week, in some cases.

Ms Todd:

I absolutely agree, and I think that it is fair to say that the board agrees with you. This is not a road that any of us ever wanted to go down, but we are in a situation in which we have £10.85 million to find and we have to take action that nobody wants to take. One of the things that the boards said in making the decision — which it made very reluctantly — was that, if and when adequate levels of additional finance are available, opening hours should be restored to an appropriate level as soon as possible.

Mr Hilditch:

On the same theme, in relation to the same situation as in Limavady, there is a local government

area in East Antrim where there are only two libraries. One is earmarked for closure and the other is having its opening hours reduced by 17 hours. What message does that send out to those local communities? It seems to be lose, lose, lose. I know that a decision will be taken on 20 October.

Mr N Macartney:

That is a fair point. There is no easy answer to it. We have to do the best that we can with the resources that we have. I can assure you that every attention will be paid to the case that can be made for that area. Obviously, the first decision is on the closure or retention of the library in Carnlough, and then it can move on. Who knows what the end result will be?

Mr Hilditch:

The people next door in Carrickfergus have a great brand-new library in the town centre. You can understand a reduction to a certain level in Whitehead and Greenisland.

Mr N Macartney:

As Irene has said, we accept that there is unhappiness. We are as unhappy as anybody. We are just managing as best we can, but your point is well taken.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much once again. We will hear from you again in due course.