



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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COMMITTEE FOR  
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

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**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
(Hansard)

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**Changes to Museums' Opening Hours**

1 October 2009

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

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

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)  
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr P J Bradley  
Mr Dominic Bradley  
Mr Francie Brolly  
Lord Browne  
Mr Trevor Clarke  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr Raymond McCartney  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Ken Robinson

**Witnesses:**

Mr Tim Cooke	)	
Ms Gillian McClean	)	National Museums Northern Ireland
Mr Marshall McKee	)	
Ms Kim Christophi	)	
Mr Tom Croft	)	Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance
Mr Stephen Mulholland	)	

**The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):**

I welcome Tim Cooke, Gillian McClean and Marshall McKee, the team from National Museums NI. I will hand over to Mr Cooke to brief the Committee.

**Mr Tim Cooke (National Museums Northern Ireland):**

Thank you, Mr McElduff. It is a pleasure to see you again and to appear before the Committee. I note that there have been a few changes to the Committee since I was last here. Miss McIlveen and Mr P J Bradley have joined the Committee, along with Mr Trevor Clarke, who is not yet here.

For the benefit of the newcomers, I will remind the Committee what National Museums Northern Ireland is and what it does. It is the statutory national museums service for Northern Ireland. That includes the Ulster Museum, which is going through a major refurbishment that cost £17.5 million, and which it is due to reopen to the public on 22 October 2009. It is looking absolutely spectacular. Members of the Committee will receive an invitation to the opening event, so it would be good if you were to put that date in your diaries now.

National Museums Northern Ireland also looks after the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, which is based on 180 acres at Cultra, and the Ulster American Folk Park, which is outside Omagh. All three sites are major tourism attractions in Northern Ireland. We also look after Armagh County Museum and W5. I do not intend to refer to those two today, because under the review of public administration (RPA), Armagh County Museum will transfer to the new local authority, which means that it will move away from National Museums Northern Ireland; therefore, the changes to opening hours, per se, do not apply there. W5 is a wholly owned subsidiary of National Museums Northern Ireland, and it works under a slightly separate aegis with its own business dynamics.

In setting the broader context, I will refer to the headlines of our corporate strategy for 2009-2012 and pull out two of the three headings, which are the main blocks of the corporate strategy. The first is “Extending Engagement”. The whole drive of the organisation is to extend public engagement and connections between the sites, the services and the knowledge that we provide. It is also about increasing visitor numbers. We do that through learning programmes, strategies to engage with new audiences — traditional museum visitors and non-visitors — listening to users through dialogue and feedback and putting an increasing emphasis on digitisation and virtual engagement.

We also have a significant capital programme under the heading “Investing in our Museums”. The Ulster Museum is the largest single example of that, and we have plans to develop new

visitor centres at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and the Ulster American Folk Park. Key performance indicators (KPIs) form part of our corporate strategy, and the one that always tops the list is “visitor numbers”, because visitors remain our propriety. The target for 2009-2010 is to attract 780,000 visitors, which is followed by a target of 915,000 for 2010-11. The magic figure that we have set for 2011-12 is one million. The thrust of the organisation is to increase engagement with local people and visitors.

We do that in a funding context, which is challenging, and has been since I have been chief executive of the organisation. We had flatline revenue funding in 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08. We had an uplift under the comprehensive spending review (CSR) 2007 settlement, but we have had no increase in revenue funding between 2008-09 and 2009-2010. Obviously, that poses significant challenges for an organisation such as ours, which is heavily dependent on grant-in-aid from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). Our pay structure and terms and conditions are linked to those of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Therefore, we are obliged to adhere to any settlement, whether we get more money from the Department via grant-in-aid or not. Of course, like everyone else, we have suffered as a result of the increase in utility and energy charges over the past 18 months. Alongside that, I recognise that we have had significant capital investment from the Department and other sources.

We support the Programme for Government by making a significant contribution to tourism, lifelong learning and to community engagement. We have a series of varied programmes across and beyond our sites. We aim to become the first choice cultural, learning and tourist destinations in Northern Ireland, and, combined, that is exactly what we are. As I said, we are committed to attracting one million people during 2011-12. We are also committed to increasing our appeal to tourists and to making our museums more widely available to communities in Northern Ireland.

In developing all our activity, including opening hours, we are focused on listening to our users. We have conducted extensive audience research, probably in more depth than almost any comparable public-service museum service anywhere. We have analysed existing visitor patterns, and we have plenty of evidence and information from our own experiences over the years of how visitors behave. That evidence confirms that most people wish to visit museums at weekends, because it suits their lifestyles. Our usage and attitude survey suggested strongly that more than 70% of people prefer to visit museums on a Saturday or a Sunday. Those visitor

patterns are reflected across the UK and Ireland. For a range of reasons, mostly historical, the opening hours of our museums have not kept pace with the changing trends.

The Ulster Museum, which has been closed for the past three years for refurbishment, was shut on Saturday and Sunday mornings, and opened only at 1.00 pm and 2.00 pm respectively. That is not sustainable as we go forward. The Ulster American Folk Park, which is the main tourism attraction in the west of the Province, was closed to the public at weekends throughout the autumn and winter months.

Previous opening hours reflected the historical development of each of the sites and the contracts of the staff employed there. The revised opening hours, including opening longer at weekends, will reflect the shift from a traditional model to a twenty-first century approach that will open our sites when people most want to visit.

I mentioned the issue of a “resource envelope”. To be frank, we cannot afford to open seven days a week while extending those hours at weekends. Therefore, to position the service by taking account of best value for money and directing our limited resources to meet the headline objectives that I outlined, we decided that Monday — being the day when fewest people use or want to use museum services — was an appropriate day on which to close. That allows us to concentrate more resources on weekend activity.

Under the revised opening hours, when it reopens on 22 October, the Ulster Museum will be open on Saturday and Sunday mornings and, from this weekend, the Ulster American Folk Park will remain open at weekends throughout the year. That will bring those sites into line with their national and international counterparts. The changes have been warmly welcomed by tourism bodies in Northern Ireland.

Gerry Lennon of the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau said:

“we welcome the extended weekend opening hours which are an important development in response to clear visitor demand.”

Mr Lennon went on to say that:

“the current level of provision and activity in Belfast on Sundays is inadequate.”

and he drew attention to the needs of visitors who arrive on cruise ships.

Alan Clarke of the Tourist Board also voiced his support for longer weekend opening hours by saying that it is:

“good news for tourism in Northern Ireland. In the current economic climate it is important that we listen to and respond to the needs of visitors, ensuring that they have the best possible experience while they are here.”

Elaine Donaghy of Sperrins Tourism Limited was “delighted” that the Ulster American Folk Park will welcome additional visitors with its new extended opening hours at weekends during autumn and winter. Finally, Niall Gibbons, the chief executive of Tourism Ireland, also welcomed the move to extend opening hours at weekends, noting the significant increase in the number of tourists who visit Northern Ireland for weekend breaks.

However, access is not just about opening hours. That issue also concerns many other aspects of our organisation, and much of the work that has been carried out to develop access has been done through our learning and partnership strategy that I mentioned to the Committee previously. We want to develop our learning engagement beyond the formal learning processes and move more in the direction of informal and lifelong learning, and, as part of that, we will be announcing a partnership with Help the Aged and Age Concern today. That partnership has been funded to the tune of £1 million by the Big Lottery Fund, and it will run for five years in an attempt to extend engagement with older people under a live and learn programme. Such partnerships will open up new possibilities for engagement.

The refurbished Ulster Museum has three different interactive learning discovery zones, which are aimed at formal and informal education. We also want to improve our overall services to the formal education sector, and we are working in partnership with that sector to do that. Furthermore, we want to extend our outreach programmes to take museum services around the Province. Our whole approach to outreach was recently endorsed by the Education and Training Inspectorate. We are also committed to developing online learning resources.

Finally, we are committed to delivering a high-quality public service, and we intend to keep the issue of opening hours under review so that it can be adjusted to respond to visitor demand if necessary. We are committed to providing the best possible service in support of tourism, learning and leisure activities. We are also committed to attempting to provide the best value for money for the grant-in-aid and public money that we receive.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you, Tim. Will jobs be lost or affected as a result of the revised opening hours?

**Mr Cooke:**

No.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Thank you for your presentation. I wish you and your organisation every success. I also hope that the target of attracting one million visitors is reached even sooner than expected. Who carried out the research for National Museums Northern Ireland, over what period of time was it conducted and how many people were surveyed?

**Mr Cooke:**

If you do not mind, I will ask my colleague Gillian McClean, the director of marketing at National Museums Northern Ireland, to answer those questions. The research that was conducted dealt with more than just opening hours. We wanted hard evidence across a range of issues on which to make important decisions about the organisation. The issue of usage patterns was just one of the issues that we dealt with.

**Ms Gillian McClean (National Museums Northern Ireland):**

As Tim said, market research was a fundamental element of the overall reform and modernisation of National Museums Northern Ireland. That research took place over nine months — from February to the end of October 2007 — and more 3000 visitors and non-visitors were surveyed as part of it.

**Mr McCarthy:**

What organisation carried out the research?

**Ms McClean:**

It was undertaken by Millward Brown Ulster as part of an open tender.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Did you say that the 3,000 people who were surveyed were mostly visitors?

**Ms McClean:**

No. As Tim said, our emphasis is on widening audiences; therefore, the research involved visitors and non-visitors from GB and Northern Ireland.

**Mr K Robinson:**

Thank you very much, Tim, for your presentation and for the statistics. There is obviously a window of opportunity, particularly as the Ulster Museum is about to be brought back on stream. It is laudable to reach for the sky, although there is always a danger that you might fall flat on your face in the process.

How have schools reacted to the spectre of Monday closure? Schools have internal difficulties on Mondays — dinner money and trip money must be collected — so it is a difficult day for them. However, constraining school visits to four days out of five must have an impact. I was delighted to hear about the outreach programme. Can you develop a project to take more of the museums' artefacts out to the schools, so that schools do not always have to go to the museums? In fact, such journeys waste a lot of time. Can you be more proactive in going out to schools with what you have, and are there possibilities for developing outreach further?

**Mr Cooke:**

I will ask my colleague Marshall McKee to comment on that in one moment. We are absolutely committed to moving outside the walls of the museum. Inside the walls, it will be much more interactive and dynamic than ever before, with discovery and learning zones. However, we have had an extremely successful outreach programme during the period of closure. During that three-year period, we took school activities to some 250 venues across Northern Ireland.

**Mr K Robinson:**

Before Marshall answers, I wish to make a plea on behalf of those of us who are disadvantaged by living east of the Bann. To get to the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh is a difficult undertaking. There is potential to grow your visitor numbers if that difficulty could be addressed, whether by extending opening times, opening for longer at weekends, and so forth. Those who live west of the Bann, with their adequate roads system do not understand what I am talking about?

**The Chairperson:**

We are totally advantaged. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Marshall McKee (National Museums Northern Ireland):**

The formal sector is a key element of the community that we serve in Northern Ireland, so we were mindful of our colleagues in the education service. The response from the education service was that our proposals will not be to its detriment. We have been taking bookings from the schools for the four-day, as opposed to the five-day, operation, and we have had no adverse reaction from that sector. We are entirely confident that we have the capacity to operate in the four days and offer the same level of service that we previously provided.

A number of local museums in Northern Ireland close for one day a week. Likewise, as members will be aware, the National Museum of Ireland and National Museum Wales confirm that there is no detriment to the service that they offer to the schools market. Mr Robinson touched on the issue that Monday is the least preferred day for schools to visit the museums.

**Mr K Robinson:**

I would not say that it is the least preferred day; it is the most difficult day.

**Mr McKee:**

Indeed, it is the most difficult day. Therefore, our bookings for school visits are at their lowest on Mondays. As I said, we have been taking bookings for some time for the four-day-a-week operation, and there has been no adverse criticism.

**Mr K Robinson:**

You mentioned the potential that exists with people coming in on cruise ships. How flexible can you be under the new arrangements? If a cruise ship is expected to arrive in Belfast on a Monday in August, for example, and the folk on it want to visit one of your establishments, can you be flexible enough to make specific arrangements for them?

**Mr McKee:**

An important point is that the changes have been introduced in response to visitor demand, and we will remain flexible. For example, although the tourism bodies tell us that the cruise-ship market is more likely to be a weekend, particularly a Sunday, market, we can, nevertheless,

remain flexible. There are ways in which we can offer visits to cruise-ship passengers on Mondays, if that is the only day on which visitors or —

**Mr K Robinson:**

So, you can predict and respond to demand?

**Mr McKee:**

We can, and we intend to do so.

**Mr D Bradley:**

You mentioned that you had carried out market research into the proposed changes. Did you carry out any formal consultation, for example, with frequent users of your facilities, such as the schools and your regular customers?

**Mr Cooke:**

Again, I will ask Marshall to comment on that in one moment. That issue of travelling and opening hours at weekends had been debated and discussed over a long period. Much dialogue took place with those who are responsible for tourism, and much thinking and discussion took place to do with our approach to learning. For example, a well-known museum publication called ‘Inspiring Learning for All’ sets out new directions for learning in museums that move away from slightly more formal approaches.

**Mr McKee:**

As Gillian said, the research was carried out among our users and non-users. In that respect, our customer base was covered as a result of the consultation. The consultation process also included elements of the education sector, which was carried out by way of questionnaires. We also have close working relationships with teachers and the education sector in general. We feel confident that the needs of the education sector, an element to which Mr Bradley referred, have been taken into consideration by the proposal for the change in opening hours.

**Ms McClean:**

In addition to the postal survey, six in-depth interviews were undertaken in schools across the Province.

**Mr D Bradley:**

What percentage of school visits take place on a Monday?

**Mr McKee:**

Over a week, visits from schools take place as follows: 13% take place on a Monday, 21% on a Tuesday, 21% on a Wednesday, 25% on a Thursday and 20% on a Friday.

**Mr McCartney:**

Do you have the overall figures for visitors to museums on a Monday?

**Mr McKee:**

Excluding those from schools, and excluding bank holidays, when, of course, the museums will remain open, the figures for Mondays are as follows: 7% at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum; 10% at the Ulster Museum; and 8% at the Ulster American Folk Park. We remain confident that those visitors will use the facilities between Tuesday and Sunday.

We have not identified a segment of people who can visit the museums only on a Monday. In response to our colleagues from the trade union side, part of our questionnaire asked for the day on which people were least likely to visit museums. The response confirmed everything that we know about our visitation patterns: Monday is, undoubtedly, the least preferred day of visit.

**Mr D Bradley:**

Thirteen per cent is a fairly considerable portion of overall school visits. Do you have the personnel and the facility to cope with those visitors being added across the other four days?

**Mr Cooke:**

Yes. Part of that reflects the changing pattern of how we work as an organisation. For example, we have just appointed a number of demonstrators to work in the discovery zones at the Ulster Museum. Those people come in specifically to take classes, workshops, seminars and interactive programmes with visitors. Moving more towards that model gives us more flexibility, more capacity and more expertise in particular areas. It also enables us to target particular areas. Overall, that adds value. Since we started making bookings available from Tuesday to Friday, there has been no decrease in the number of education bookings.

**Mr McKee:**

Our education service will now have the facility to conduct outreach activities that it would not be able to do during a five-day week. We are covering the education market — those who come to the museum — over the course of the four days. If that changes, as I said earlier, we will be flexible. The opening hours must be flexible, and we must respond to visitor demand. However, our teaching staff will have contact with schools as part of the outreach programme. Some programmes are best delivered in the classroom and are not readily delivered in a museum gallery. I stress that there will be an increase in outreach activity as part of the provision.

**Mr Cooke:**

For clarification, in case there is any suspicion that we are doing that as some kind of whim: it is an absolutely considered strategic decision on the part of the organisation to reinvest its efforts and staffing resources at times when people are most available to use its services. That is the key driver for the proposal when considering the corporate strategy about the numbers of visitors and the quality of engagement.

**Mr McNarry:**

You are very welcome. The Committee will take a view on the issue after our sessions with you and the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA). However, we are dealing with a decision that has already been taken, which tells me that you did not consult with this Committee on that decision. However, in the past, you have been anxious to interact with this Committee when you needed funding or when you wanted to explain yourself. Here you are, taking unilateral decisions and bypassing elected representatives. I am not too enamoured with that. I understand your explanations, but I think that you have a lot to learn about whom we represent and why we represent them. It is those views that I will put to you, because I will make points that were raised by people whom I represent. You said that you operate within a budget that is set by DCAL. Is it not true, though, that you also attract funding from other sources?

**Mr Cooke:**

It is.

**Mr McNarry:**

Why did you not include that information in your submission? Why make the big claim that you have to operate within the limits of the DCAL budget. Was it almost to say that that is why the

decision was taken? Does that other funding have any impact on helping your situation?

**Mr Cooke:**

The other funding is variable, but our self-generated income accounts for approximately 25% of our turnover. That comes through admission charges, which are obviously critical to us and are also part of our driver.

You are right: grant-in-aid is part of our income. It is not all of it, but it is by far the most critical element. However, we are very focused on developing more of our self-generated income, the single biggest part of which is admission charges to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and the Ulster American Folk Park. Our decision also makes good commercial sense for us.

**Mr McNarry:**

I understand that. In your written submission, you stated that the recent audience research showed that only 3% of those who were questioned expressed a preference for visiting museums on a Monday. I may be being sceptical, but assure me that it is coincidental that 3% also represents efficiency cuts.

**Mr Cooke:**

There is no direct connection between those two matters.

**Mr McNarry:**

I just wanted to be assured that there is no connection.

**Mr Cooke:**

Market research is not an absolute science, but it is conducted in a professional manner against well-recognised standards. We judge the outcomes of that research against other information. Visitation patterns and market research do not match the figures exactly, but they support each other and show trends.

**Mr McNarry:**

Some people will accuse you of opening longer hours on Saturdays and Sundays at the expense of opening on Mondays. Would such an accusation be accurate?

**Mr Cooke:**

A number of elements are involved in the decision, and I specifically outlined the resource envelope within which we operate. Grant-in-aid makes up only 75% of our income, and we do not envisage that we will suddenly make more money through self-generated income activities. It is not acceptable to have £17.5 million invested in the Ulster Museum, if it does not open on Saturday and Sunday mornings. We have similar views about the Ulster American Folk Park, and the general effort to support tourism in the west of the Province and Northern Ireland as a whole. It does not seem sustainable a major facility such as the Ulster Museum simply to be closed on Saturdays and Sundays. Given the resource envelope in which we operate, we have to target our staff effort, our finances and our activity at the times at which we can provide the best service.

**Mr McNarry:**

We are talking only about additional hours, because previously, the museum opened at 1.00 pm on Saturdays and 2.00 pm on Sundays. Those weekend opening times are now going to be brought forward to 10.00 am and 11.00 am. What do you say to potential visitors who are not in favour of Sunday openings and whose opportunities for visiting are reduced by their lifestyles? Those people cannot go to the museum on a Sunday, and now they will not have the option of going on a Monday either.

You have placed a lot of emphasis on people coming in on cruise ships, and we all welcome cruisers and the business that they will bring. However, you have given us no evidence of an itinerary that states that a cruise ship will dock in Belfast and that the tourists on board will go to the museum. I hope that it will, but you have given us no evidence whatsoever to substantiate the idea that that will provide a big boost to tourism. Nevertheless, you are prepared to sacrifice Monday opening, and, therefore, limit the visiting opportunities of local people whose lifestyle dictates that they will not go to a museum on a Sunday.

**Mr Cooke:**

Overall, we believe that the change will provide greater access opportunities to the Northern Ireland population and that it represents better value for money. All our evidence suggests that many more people want to visit on Saturdays and Sundays than on any other day of the week, and our resource envelope simply does not allow us to work seven days a week.

**Mr McNarry:**

I just want you to make it clear that you are not discriminating against people with a particular lifestyle who may not wish to visit museums on Sundays.

**Mr McKee:**

I understand your point, but the revised opening hours are not based purely on the tourism market or cruise liners arriving in Belfast.

**Mr McNarry:**

Most of what you have said is all about that.

**Mr McKee:**

Our empirical evidence and research shows that the group that most welcomed extended opening hours on Saturday and Sunday was local people.

**Mr McNarry:**

Fair enough. Finally, if that is the case, can you tell me what extra revenue will be generated by opening longer hours on Saturday and Sunday?

**Mr McKee:**

From admission charges?

**Mr McNarry:**

Yes.

**Mr McKee:**

Admission charges currently generate around £700,000 per annum. We aim to increase the number of visitors to museums from the current 780,000 per annum to 915,000 and then to one million. Ticket prices are currently around £3 on average, so if we are able to bring in an extra 150,000 visitors, the revenue will increase by around £450,000.

**Mr P J Bradley:**

Thank you for your presentation. Your submission states that Monday closures will be kept

under review. Have you or will you consider opening museums on Mondays during July and August?

**Mr Cooke:**

Yes. As part of the dialogue that we have been having with the trade unions, which can, of course, speak for themselves, the suggestion was made that we should at least consider opening on Mondays during the peak summer period. That will be considered.

**Mr McCartney:**

The contention will be that museums are forced to close on Mondays to ensure that they can open on Saturdays and Sundays. Your submission states that the National Museum Wales and the National Museum of Ireland close on Mondays, and goes on to list three other museums which, it states, close one day a week. Do they close on Mondays as well, or on another day?

**Mr McKee:**

In most instances, Monday is the preferred day of closure. It is slightly different on the continent; I think that the Prado Museum closes on Tuesdays, but the preferred days for closure are either Monday or Tuesday.

**Mr McCartney:**

Do you know whether the backdrop to those closures is the extension of hours on Saturday and Sunday, or was it just a decision that Mondays are a bad day for museums?

**Mr McKee:**

My understanding about the National Museum Wales is that there is a changing pattern of visitation, and people are visiting in greater numbers at weekends. That is why it offers those extended opening hours.

**Mr McCartney:**

Tim said that market research is not an exact science. Your figures show that around 8% of visits to museums take place on Mondays, yet the market research shows that only 3% have a preference for visiting on a Monday. The word “preference” is used in pitching the question, but, when asked whether they would prefer to visit a museum on a Monday or a Saturday, most people would say Saturday. It is important to be cautious of how the question is pitched.

**Mr Cooke:**

Absolutely. Perhaps Gillian will comment on that.

**Ms McClean:**

As Tim mentioned, the Ulster American Folk Park is currently closed on Saturdays and Sundays during the autumn and winter period. The actual visitation pattern is skewed, as it allows for a five-day week visitation period. That helps to explain the 7%. When commissioning the independent market research, we took advice about the form of questioning to be used. More than 3,000 people were surveyed, so the information was robust, and could be the basis on which important strategic decisions can be made over a three- to five-year period.

Mr McNarry made a point about lifestyle and Sundays. As I said, the market research discovered that most Northern Ireland visitors and non-visitors indicated a preference for visiting museums on Saturdays. We asked open questions. Had we asked people whether museums should be closed on Mondays, for example, we would have got different responses from those that we got when we asked them which day they would prefer to visit. Therefore, 54% of those people from Northern Ireland who were surveyed said that Saturday was the day that they most preferred to visit, and 21% said that they preferred to visit on Sundays.

**Mr McNarry:**

That is perfectly understandable.

**Ms McLean:**

That corresponds to what you said about lifestyle.

**Mr McKee:**

The market research was only part of the evidence base on which the decisions were reached. We have historical data about our visitors and visitation patterns. We can track the increase in visitors who come to our museums at weekends. It is a fact that prior to its closure, the highest number of visitors to the Ulster Museum went on Saturdays and Sundays. It is also a fact that, on average, most visitors attend the Ulster American Folk Park on Sundays. At present, however, throughout the autumn and winter period, that museum is closed on Saturdays and Sundays. I do not want the Committee to think that those decisions were based purely on market research. The

market research supported our empirical evidence.

**Mr McNarry:**

No one disputes what you are saying. The key issue that you talked about is that the action that you will take will generate an extra £450,000. All that we want to do is encourage you to do that, and for you to come back and tell us that you have achieved it.

**Lord Browne:**

I look forward to the reopening of the Ulster Museum, which has been closed for an awful long time. As Belfast is the gateway for tourism in Northern Ireland, the museum has been sadly missed. Indeed, if the museum had been in the private sector, it would probably have been out of business by now.

Have overall opening hours increased or decreased across the three sites that have been talked about? Perhaps, you could help me to establish whether Cultra's Ulster Folk and Transport Museum's weekend opening hours have been reduced. That would seem to be in contrast to what is being done at the Ulster American Folk Park and, indeed, the Ulster Museum.

**Mr Cooke:**

I will let my colleague Marshall McKee comment on that in one moment. I hope that you will find the reopening of the Ulster Museum was worth the wait. It was the correct decision to take it out of service; carry out quite radical surgery; and to reposition it. I hope and believe that it will serve this place well for the next 20 years.

**Mr McKee:**

The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum will close on Mondays. Therefore, it will operate a reduced number of hours during the course of a week. Your question was about weekends, when there will be a small reduction in opening hours. There are reasons and a rationale for that. Previously, it opened until 6.00 pm during the summer months. Our experience and market research indicates that around 96% of visitors come to our museums between 10.00 am and 12.00 noon. Staying time in our museums is around three to four hours. Five or six years ago, when we extended opening hours to 6.00 pm — which was a decision that I took, as managing director — it was on a trial basis. We thought that people might want to stay longer in the afternoon. Our experience has been that during summer months, most people leave the site by 5.00 pm.

Therefore, it was felt that, on balance, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum should close at 5.00 pm.

One of our biggest difficulties over the years since the merger has been to get simple communications across to our audiences about our opening hours. We had three sites with a hotchpotch of opening hours. It was difficult for ordinary visitors to know when the Ulster American Folk Park, the Ulster Museum or the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum were open. I can attest that the new arrangements are much more uniform and more readily understood. I accept that there has been a small reduction in opening hours at the weekend, but the evidence clearly showed that visitors left the site between 5.00 pm and 6.00 pm.

**Lord Browne:**

Yet that does not apply to the Ulster American Folk Park. It is open for longer at the weekends.

**Mr McKee:**

No.

**Lord Browne:**

Are the opening times the same?

**Mr McKee:**

The times will be the same; all three will close at 5.00 pm. We carried out a considerable benchmarking research exercise on our opening hours. The museums in Glasgow and Liverpool close at 5.00 pm. Some cities operate open-air museums, as we do, but they close at 5.00 pm.

**Mr T Clarke:**

I apologise as I was not present to hear the entire presentation. You sold yourself short in your answer, because you said that you had problems getting the message out. You were the managing director at that time, and I would have thought that the responsibility to market the museums lay with you. You have sold yourself badly on that issue.

I was alarmed by the answer that you gave to my colleague about numbers having decreased. Surely that flies in the face of what you are proposing to do now. If the statistics prove that attendance levels have decreased in Belfast, how can you make a case for changing the opening

times? Perhaps you could share those figures with us.

**Mr McKee:**

I will clarify the figures. Earlier, Tim made the point that one should not equate access with opening hours. Museums can be open when people are not visiting. We are opening our museums at times when people want to visit them, which is on Saturdays and Sundays.

**Mr T Clarke:**

Did you not carry out the same research when you changed the hours previously?

**Mr McKee:**

No, we did not. At that stage we were considering a regime at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in which it opened until 5.00 pm. We felt that there might be merit in extending the opening hours to 6.00 pm. We did not carry out market research on that, I have to admit.

You asked about reduced opening hours. We are closing the museums on Mondays, because that is when fewest people use them. We are opening the museums when most people want to visit them; therefore, we are increasing access. It would be wrong to present what we have done as anything other than that. Open museums does not necessarily mean accessible museums.

**Mr T Clarke:**

What is the daily breakdown for visits in July and August, for example? It would be useful to have historical statistics about the numbers of visitors on each day of the week. That would allow us to judge for ourselves.

**Mr McKee:**

I did respond to that question earlier.

**Mr T Clarke:**

I did apologise; I was late for the meeting.

**Mr McKee:**

I responded to that question earlier on and gave a breakdown of the numbers of visitors from Monday through to Sunday. I pointed out that the fewest number of visitors come to our sites on

Mondays.

**Mr T Clarke:**

Is there a difficulty in going over the figures again? I apologised that I was late, and I did not hear the whole presentation.

**Mr McKee:**

At the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum — excluding bank holidays, because we are going to be open on those days — 7% of visitors come on Mondays; 11% on Tuesdays; 11% on Wednesdays; 10% on Thursdays; 12% on Fridays; 28% on Saturdays and 21% on Sundays.

**Mr T Clarke:**

I worked that out for myself. What are the total visitor numbers?

**Mr McKee:**

Total number of visitors, including bank holidays, is 178,000; excluding bank holidays, it is 164,000.

**Mr T Clarke:**

Therefore, are we working on the figure of 164,000?

**Mr McKee:**

Yes.

**Mr Cooke:**

Mr Clarke can work it out if he wants, but we are happy to provide him with details of visitor figures. There is no issue with that.

**The Chairperson:**

While Trevor Clarke is working out his sums, Francie Brolly has a question.

**Mr Brolly:**

I look forward to meeting Tim at his home base of the Ulster Museum. Ken talk about schools and flexibility. As a former teacher, I appreciate that Monday is not a good day. However, there

are times during which museums might get a glut of applications from schools. If they are not open on Mondays, schools may be refused visits. In those circumstances, will you show the same flexibility as will be afforded to those arriving on cruise ships?

**Mr Cooke:**

In general, we do not intend under this regime to respond to specific requests for Monday visits from schools. We want to focus the formal educational engagements on Tuesdays and Fridays.

**Mr Brolly:**

I am not saying that museums should respond to specific requests to opening on a Monday. However, if schools could not be accommodated on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays or Fridays, would museums be prepared to fall back on the use of Mondays in the event of a glut of applications?

**Mr Cooke:**

If the feedback from the education sector is that Tuesdays to Fridays are not working, and there is a major issue with Mondays, we would consider ways of responding. Ultimately, our goal is to provide the best possible service and to increase access. Of course we are prepared to listen to feedback and be flexible, but it is not always easy to be particularly responsive to small groups when a system, rotas and other arrangements are in operation.

**Mr McKee:**

The Ulster Museum opens in three weeks' time. There is high expectation among the education market. Bookings are coming in faster than in normal operating times, and we are not experiencing difficulties with capacity. If capacity issues arise, I assure the Committee that we will review the position.

**Miss McIlveen:**

There would have to be a business case and a threshold to make ad hoc opening feasible. Is there a round figure estimate of how much a one-off opening would cost in the case, for example, of the Ulster Museum? Staff costs, heating and other factors must be considered, but, a round figure would help to inform this debate.

**Mr McKee:**

I am trying to do some mathematics in my head as I speak. May I come back with a response? I do not want to provide a figure off the top of my head, and we have the statistics that will answer that question.

**Miss McIlveen:**

Yes. My question was prompted by comments that were been made about cruise ships docking in Belfast. Having been on a cruise, I know that not every passenger will want to visit a museum. Therefore, will a bus load of 30 or 40 people make it economically feasible and viable to open a museum on a Monday?

**Mr Cooke:**

The long-term issue is about developing museums and tourism planning strategically and sensibly. We work in partnership with the Tourist Board and other tourism providers to try to devise programmes, schemes and ways of working that support the tourism drive. If patterns emerged, we would look at them and try to be flexible and responsive. As we move forward, I do not think that we will open for 30 or 40 people who happen to want to visit on a Monday, because that would not be economically viable and it would affect other rotas and plans. We work within a tight resource envelope.

**Miss McIlveen:**

I do not think that people will be misled, but they may anticipate more flexibility than there will actually be. That will create greater expectation on which National Museums will be unable to deliver.

**Mr T Clarke:**

Your submission quotes what Alan Clarke, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, said about the extended opening hours. I am sure that he wrote a full letter. I am interested that he made one comment about weekend opening hours. Did he also refer to disappointment that the museums are to close on Mondays? I would be disappointed if any part about his disappointment had been forgotten?

**Mr Cooke:**

We did not forget to include it; he did not refer to that. As I outlined earlier, the whole thrust of

the tourism deliverers is completely supportive of this move. They understand its economics and desirability and our need to focus limited resources on the times when most people are available to use the service.

I have a responsibility to provide the best service that I can and to provide best value for money. We considered the issue of opening hours in detail, and we conducted extensive research and tested it against the empirical evidence of our visitor patterns. We also talked to partner organisations in tourism. We are shifting our whole approach to extend learning engagement across not only the formal sector but the whole informal learning sector. We would not be doing this if we did not think that it was in the best interests of audiences from home and abroad. The intention is to provide the best possible service using the available resources.

**Mr T Clarke:**

Chairman, I have a question for you. Various statements were referred to in the presentation. Is it possible for us to get a copy of each of those in their full context as opposed to a synopsis and the lifting of paragraphs from them?

**The Chairperson:**

It is entirely legitimate for us to request those, and we will do so.

**Mr D Bradley:**

David asked Mr Cooke a question that I do not recall being answered. He questioned why the Committee had not been consulted before the proposals were brought forward. After all, it is the Committee's role to scrutinise the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and its arm's-length bodies.

**Mr Cooke:**

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has been aware of the proposals throughout their development, and, it is fair to say, has not taken a specific view on them. The Department considers that this is a matter for the organisation and its board of trustees to come to a decision on in the best interests of the service in a value for money context. If there is any suggestion from the Committee that there has been discourtesy on the part of National Museums Northern Ireland in not bringing the matter to its attention, I am happy to consider that and respond to it. I would not want the Committee to think that there had been any intentional discourtesy.

**The Chairperson:**

The high level of interest on the part of Committee members in posing questions has meant that the session was longer than we anticipated. Thank you, Tim, Gillian and Marshall.

I now welcome the representatives of NIPSA. Kim, I will pass over to you to introduce your team and make your presentation.

**Ms Kim Christophi (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance):**

Unlike the chief executive of National Museums, this is the first time that I have done anything such as this, so please be gentle with me. Rather than a PowerPoint presentation, I brought two front-line members of staff from the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. We were limited to a team of three people; otherwise we would also have brought a representative from the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh. The issue affects these people, and they will say a few words.

Mr Tom Croft is a visitor guide at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Mr Stephen Mulholland was a gallery assistant at the Ulster Museum until it closed for refurbishment in 2006. Since then, Stephen has been temporarily redeployed.

At the end of what I hope will be a relatively short presentation, I will invite my colleagues to say a few words. Many of you have raised the points that I was going to make, and I am grateful for that.

I was relieved to hear that the first question that the Chairperson asked the delegation from National Museums was about whether the proposals carry a detriment to staff. The answer was categorically given as no. I was relieved to hear that, because NIPSA has not concluded the negotiations yet. I deliberately wanted to steer away from matters of negotiation to do with terms and conditions of employment, because that is a matter for negotiation between the recognised trade union, NIPSA, and the organisation itself. I felt that going into those details would have been wasting the Committee's time.

I was relieved to hear that the answer was given as no, and I hope that we are able to bring the negotiations on terms and conditions of employment, including working hours, to a swift

conclusion. You will appreciate that all the issues to do with terms and conditions, including working hours and rosters, are, to an extent, predicated on the issue that we are here to speak about. That issue is the closure of museums on Mondays and the review of the opening hours at the three sites that have been talked about.

I was also encouraged to hear Tim Cooke refer throughout his presentation to increasing engagement. However, we are here today, because, as far as we are aware, no formal engagement had taken place until the trade union wrote to people to ask whether they had been consulted on the matter, whether they had concerns about Monday closure and what those concerns were. We encouraged people to bring the concerns to the fore to National Museums.

As you quite rightly pointed out, the issue came before the Committee not because you were consulted on it but because NIPSA wrote to many of the Committee's members. I thank the Committee for taking the issue seriously and for giving us the opportunity to voice our concerns and have the debate, which is healthy and necessary.

It is worth noting that at least three directors, along with the chief executive, of National Museums, are present at today's meeting. That is encouraging and reassuring, because it shows that, at last, the matter is being viewed with such importance.

I know that I have been bombarding the Committee with much information, but I have tried to summarise the information by presenting the main points in a document with which I have provided the Committee. I shall not read out through document word for word, because I appreciate that your time is precious, but I will give a few examples to illustrate our points.

The Committee will see that I quoted from a letter that I wrote to the director of operations of National Museums on 8 May 2009, and that quote, in a nutshell, paraphrases the purpose of today's meeting. NIPSA members believe that the public should have been fully consulted before any decision was taken to close museums on Mondays. The public was not asked formally or informally how those closures would affect them, and the Committee has made it clear today that it was not been approached about that issue. NIPSA has repeatedly asked National Museums to consult with the public, whom, as a public organisation, it serves. However, it has refused to do so.

The Committee will also note from the NIPSA submission that National Museums released a press statement on 27 April 2009, which referred to a consultation exercise taking place with stakeholders with an interest in museums. However, I have never been informed of any consultation taking place, whether stakeholder-based or otherwise.

I also refer the Committee to a newspaper paper article that NIPSA has supplied as part of its submission, and of course we all believe what we read in the newspapers —

**Mr McNarry:**

Do not believe anything you read about pot plants for goodness' sake. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Christophi:**

I will try and remember to stay away from that particular issue. *[Laughter.]*

I believe that that article appeared in the 'Bangor Spectator' on 17 September 2009, and is, therefore, quite recent. As far as NIPSA is aware, that article was one of the first public announcements, if not the first, about the revised opening hours, and, therefore, the first time that the public was given notice about the revised opening hours and Monday closures. However, the Monday closure issue is merely mentioned in the article, and, for obvious reasons, its whole stress was on the extended opening hours for museums. That is a point that I will return to later.

The main point about the article is that Monday closure was presented to the public after the decision to close has actually been made, and it was effectively presented as a *fait accompli*. The actual headline of the article, "Longer opening hours at museums", as the Committee will have gathered from its questions and answers this morning, is a misleading sweeping statement and headline. I do not know what font size that headline uses, but it is the one that really hits the reader.

Reduced opening hours at each of the museum sites will take effect from Monday of next week. Therefore, how can anyone argue that potential access is not being reduced? That is nonsense. Of course, potential access will be reduced if the museum's doors are closed to the public for one day each week.

I was encouraged by the responses from National Museums' representatives, particularly

about the summer period at the Ulster American Folk Park and the open-air sites. However, why increase access during that summer period, and close on Mondays when customer demand and expectation peaks? That just does not make sense.

The Committee has quite rightly pointed out today that statistics can be interpreted in different ways, but my trade union colleagues and I have analysed the actual visitor figures that the Committee has asked for. The Ulster American Folk Park introduced a pilot scheme in 2008 to open at the weekends in October, and even with that scheme in place the statistics for that year clearly show that Monday, on average, was the joint most popular weekday for attendances during July and August. That puts a slightly different slant on the statistics that the Committee has been quoted today.

Another issue, and one that I am sure the Committee will want to debate further, is about bank holidays. The Committee has heard today that the three sites will remain open during the UK bank holidays. Unfortunately, National Museums decided to close on the Republic of Ireland's bank holidays. The feedback that I received from members of staff and management at Omagh is that that is a bad move, because those are popular days for visitors. The Committee can ask for the statistics to back that up.

The newspaper article also mentioned that weekend hours are being "doubled". However, that is another sweeping and misleading statement. NIPSA recognises and welcomes, without question, the extension of opening hours to suit visitor demand, but we have some concerns. Of the three sites, "doubled" weekend opening applies only to the Ulster Museum; its weekend opening hours double from seven to 14. However, to pay for extended weekend opening, those sites will close on Mondays.

Visitor figures illustrate that, when the Ulster Museum was last open in 2005 and 2006, Monday was its least popular day on only six occasions during the year. However, the wonderful idea of closing on Mondays that is predicated on market research reflects average figures. A detailed analysis of the data reveals that Monday is shown, by visitor figures alone, to be the least popular day to visit only six times a year.

It is worth bearing in mind that the Ulster Museum has been refurbished to an extremely high standard. No one can deny it, and, although I have not yet been to see the finished article, I am

sure that I will be invited. It is worth remembering that more than £17 million of public money was spent on that refurbishment, yet the doors will be closed to the general public on at least 45 Mondays of the year. How does that make sense?

I want to hone in on a point raised by some Committee members, for which I thank them. They picked up on the fact weekend opening at the Cultra site will be reduced. Specifically, it will be reduced by up to three hours every weekend, depending on whether summer or winter opening times apply. That amounts to half a day and Monday closure to pay for extended opening. Therefore, the statistics do not stand up to scrutiny. Overall, weekly opening hours at the Cultra site are being reduced by 13 hours a week in the summer and 11 hours a week in the winter. We implore the Committee to consider that.

I would like to cover the extensive audience research —

**The Chairperson:**

Kim, given the time constraints, and to allow members to ask questions, you must conclude your presentation. Unless we operate on the basis of 10-minute presentations followed by questions, we will not have time for the debate.

**Ms Christophi:**

I will rattle through the remainder of my presentation as quickly as I can.

**The Chairperson:**

The Committee's agenda also includes the consideration of terms of reference for an arts inquiry.

**Ms Christophi:**

If it will help, I can provide a copy of a more detailed submission.

**The Chairperson:**

We have that document in front of us.

**Ms Christophi:**

The document contains much more detail than I provided to the Committee.

I was interested to hear that 3,000 people were interviewed during the market research, because when we asked, we were told that the figure was only 855.

I ask members to bear in mind that the cost of the consultancy and market research was £70,000. The question that the market researchers posed was not on which day people were least likely to visit, as was suggested, but on which day they were most likely to visit? Those two questions may elicit different responses.

An interesting point for members to note is that the strategic report made no recommendation to close on Mondays. Weekend visits accounted for between 36% and 40% of weekly visits, and that is not reflected in the market research figure of 73%. The CEO actually stressed that point about 73%. What he did not tell you was that, in the same market research, approximately 40% of the people who were asked whether they are likely to ever visit a museum said no. I leave members to draw their own conclusions.

The other reference that I would pay particular attention to is that about lower visitor demand on Mondays. I emphasise that, this morning, Marshall McKee, the director of operations, stressed that bank-holiday Monday visitor figures were removed from the statistics, so how can the Monday figures that are left correlate to those for Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday? It is not a fair analysis.

The figures clearly establish that Monday is not consistently the least popular day for visitors. I will wind up my presentation soon, with your indulgence, Chairman.

**The Chairperson:**

There will not be time for questions if you do not, Kim.

**Ms Christophi:**

I was quite impressed by the excerpts, as they were called, from the letters of response received by National Museums. I have shared with the Committee the full letter that NIPSA received from the Belfast Education and Library Board. That board has given us full permission to share it, and I was delighted that it did so. Members can see for themselves the points that the Belfast Education and Library Board made. A representative of the board with whom I spoke stressed that the board did not know anything about the proposals for Monday closure or extended

weekend opening hours until NIPSA wrote to it.

I will finish by giving the Committee a practical example of something that happened at the Ulster Museum two weeks ago. As members will appreciate, people are working away at the Ulster Museum to get it ready for reopening. A group of tourists from Barcelona arrived, specifically to see the Spanish Armada and the Girona treasures exhibition. They were turned away. They asked clearly whether they could return on the same day in a couple of weeks. They were told that they could not because, although the museum would reopen soon, it would not be open on a Monday. Their response was that Monday was the cheapest day on which to get a flight here for a short stay. What sort of message is that sending to tourists? Are we closing Northern Ireland down on a Monday? Are we not catering to short-stay visitors any more?

It is interesting to note that National Museums —

**Mr McNarry:**

This is going on too long.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you, David. We will move on to questions.

**Mr McCarthy:**

Thank you for your presentation. You started off well, but you went on and on and on. You and the management team are like our Executive. It is time that you sat down together to sort the matter out.

**Ms Christophi:**

We have done that.

**The Chairperson:**

What is your question, Kieran?

**Mr McCarthy:**

Monday is the day that has been picked for closure. Do you have a preferred day for closure?

**Ms Christophi:**

No. There should be access seven days a week, without question.

**Mr McCarthy:**

You were in the Public Gallery this morning; you heard the response to that. The witnesses from National Museums said, as I understand it, that the matter would be open to review, if necessary. Perhaps that is some consolation?

**Ms Christophi:**

I would like to see that in writing, Sir.

Mr McCarthy mentioned sitting down and talking. We do not want to be here, having these discussions at this level. We want to be able to sit around the table to resolve those issues. The problem is that, no matter what we have said throughout the negotiations and consultation, as you have seen from the extensive documentation that we provided, our points have not been listened to. I implore the Chairman to let me provide the Committee with the rest of my presentation, because there are some very interesting facts, from my point of view, that I wish to share.

**The Chairperson:**

All members have the document that you provided, but —

**Ms Christophi:**

There is much more.

**The Chairperson:**

If you wish to provide additional documentation, please feel free to do so.

**Ms Christophi:**

As was said, we do tend to go on and on.

**Mr P J Bradley:**

The longer you went on, the more difficult it was for us to take it all in. How will the changes affect staff working patterns and salaries?

**Ms Christophi:**

As I said, we have been intently negotiating with the management about that matter over a period of time. The difficulty has been receiving formal proposals that meet the parameters within which we have been negotiating. We received proposals that are awaiting final bits and pieces of before we can consult and ballot members on them. In a nutshell, they contain a guarantee of no detriment to existing staff as far as pay is concerned. However, the rate for the new jobs that will be created or have been created is slightly lower. That is one of the main points that we have tried to pursue and rectify.

The work-life balance issue has, to a degree, been taken on board by the receipt of different types of rosters and proposals for working hours. However, as the Committee can appreciate — and as I said at the beginning of my presentation — those are predicated, to a large degree, on whether staff will work on a Monday. Ultimately, we are in a situation in which, from today, the policy of the three sites is to close on Mondays. From Monday, staff will be on a roster, but the museums will not be open to the public.

**Mr McNarry:**

It goes without saying that the Committee is very supportive of sustaining and improving our museum estate. We are supportive of the management, workers and staff who come together. We are involved in the shared vision that has been outlined to us of what the future holds. That means that we are very excited and are looking forward to the reopening of the Ulster Museum in Belfast. As politicians and elected representatives, it is our duty to promote and champion that investment.

This Committee also picks up on a subject such as this in which there is a bit of dispute. I am not sure what your pitch is this morning. I am not sure whether it is a union versus management matter over conditions, in which case it must be sorted out, or whether it is a serious challenge that you are mounting about a policy that was introduced by National Museums regarding or affecting the efficiency of that policy. If that is what your pitch is about, we are interested. Perhaps you could put something on paper about that, because it is not contained in your submission.

Your document states that Monday closures are not common for museums the United Kingdom. You said that 90% of them open on Mondays. Can you provide us with evidence to

back that up?

**Ms Christophi:**

That information was contained in market research that was conducted by National Museums Northern Ireland, which provided that information to us.

**Mr McNarry:**

Can you provide us with that information?

**Ms Christophi:**

Absolutely; that is no problem. Of the 10% of the museums that close to the public on Mondays, not all of their areas are closed to the public.

**Mr McNarry:**

This morning, the National Museums delegation said that the new arrangements are expected to bring in an additional £450,000 in revenue. You said that extended hours require an additional £300,000. National Museums did not stack up its figures. To be fair, we should have asked it to do that, and we will. Can you stack up your figures?

**Ms Christophi:**

That figure was presented to NIPSA by National Museums Northern Ireland when we asked what the deficit was. For us to be able to extend the opening hours at the weekends, which we want to do, and to stay open on Mondays, National Museums said that that would cost an additional £300,000.

**Mr McNarry:**

Explain how it will cost an additional £300,000.

**Ms Christophi:**

It was couched to us as payroll costs. With respect, I suggest that that is a question for National Museums.

**Mr McNarry:**

As a result, would your members benefit to the tune of an additional £300,000 in pay?

**Ms Christophi:**

No; not at all. It is a payroll deficit of £300,000 or thereabouts that would be required to open to the public on Mondays. It would cost National Museums £300,000 to staff its four sites for seven days a week; we are now talking about only three sites.

**Mr McNarry:**

Is that figure based on the sites opening seven days a week?

**Ms Christophi:**

That is what National Museums is saying.

**Mr McNarry:**

Therefore, it is not based on the policy that is apparently being introduced.

**Mr Tom Croft (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance):**

What seems to have happened is that we have been told that to operate seven days a week across all the sites, including extending weekend opening at other sites, would incur an extra cost of £300,000.

**Mr McNarry:**

Does that mean that it would wipe out the £450,000 additional income from the new opening hours and add another £300,000 costs? Are we talking about £750,000? Or, does that include the £450,000?

**Mr Croft:**

I would say that the figure includes that. As things stand, the Cultra site is opened seven days a week. The Ulster Museum does likewise but for fewer hours at the weekend. The Omagh site closes for part of the year at weekends. The contention is that extending weekend opening hours across all sites and continuing on a seven-day basis, would cost another £300,000. I think that the £450,000 is projected income from increased visitor traffic over a few years.

**Mr McNarry:**

I can go only with the figures that the witness presents, and it is good to have them broken down.

Will doing what NIPSA wants cost an extra £300,000?

**Mr Croft:**

That is management's position in regard to costs.

**Mr McNarry:**

Is the union backing that? The figure is in NIPSA's document. Is the union saying that the costs are factual? Does it accept management's estimate that to do what NIPSA wants will cost an extra £300,000?

**Ms Christophi:**

NIPSA did not debate that matter with National Museums Northern Ireland during the negotiations process. We were going to make the point later in our presentation that the £300,000 would be reduced, because Armagh County Museum was taken out of the mix. We did not debate or question the £300,000 that National Museums stated would be an additional requirement to pay for Monday opening.

**Mr McNarry:**

Has the union done any costings for its pitch? Can it produce its own figures for the Committee of the cost of doing what it wants, what it might save and how much it brings to the table?

**Ms Christophi:**

The simple answer is no, but we can do that. We can provide those figures to the Committee.

**Mr McNarry:**

OK. Thank you.

**Mr Croft:**

As an addendum to that; we have been told clearly that if the required £300,000 was found, it would not be used to open seven days a week. It would be funnelled into enhancing the Ulster Museum or another site.

**Mr McNarry:**

That is a different matter. Stick to my point, which is that NIPSA accepts National Museums'

figures but will produce its own for the Committee. However, for now, we are working on those figures, which state that doing what NIPSA wants will cost an extra £300,000, despite National Museums' statement that its plans will increase revenue by £450,000. Is that OK?

**Mr Croft:**

That is right.

**Ms Christophi:**

We will produce our own figures.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you. For the sake of clarity: is it NIPSA's position that opening hours and opening days should have stayed as they were?

**Ms Christophi:**

We are not averse to discussing extending opening hours. I already welcomed the fact that National Museums is considering opening hours and extending weekend opening, but how to make those changes should be a matter for discussion and consultation.

Other than at the winter time at the Omagh site, there is weekend opening. NIPSA is very approachable and has made its position clear. We are prepared to discuss weekend winter opening in Omagh, which is an open-air site. We are not against that, but we oppose shutting the doors to the public one day a week.

**Mr Croft:**

I work at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, which closes three days a year. Under the new proposal, that figure will be closer to 50.

**Mr Stephen Mulholland (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance):**

The Ulster Museum is somewhat similar. It used to close four or five days a year. Under the new proposal, it may close 45 to 50 days a year.

**Mr D Bradley:**

My question is similar to that asked by the Chairperson. Excluding the return to the status quo

that existed before today, what is your preferred solution to the situation?

**Ms Christophi:**

The first thing that National Museums needs to do is to consult the people that it is designed to serve. It has not sought the views of the educational establishment. The representatives said that they had spoken to — or had sent questionnaires to — six schools. It is quite clear from the Belfast Education and Library Board's letter that I provided to you that the message has not filtered through to the main educational establishments.

**The Chairperson:**

Is it fair to say that National Museums NI stated its position as having in-depth interviews with six schools but that a significant number of questionnaires were sent throughout the education sector? Is that a fair characterisation of what was said?

**Ms Christophi:**

It may well be, but I would like to see those questionnaires. That is the first time that I ever heard mention of any questionnaires. We asked the organisation about what it has done and have never been told that before. I want to see whether the questionnaire asked about Monday closure. We do not know.

**Mr McNarry:**

You provided a letter from Belfast Education and Library Board. Do you know what the response has been from the other boards?

**Ms Christophi:**

The timescale has been a difficulty. NIPSA left it to the last moment to write out to people, because we hoped that the internal consultation mechanism would work. Unfortunately, it did not. We started sending out letters at the beginning of September. The difficulty is that the committees of the education and library boards need to meet to form a view before responding to us. Although that letter is typical of what we have heard so far — the concerns about the impact on children and educational access to the museums are shared — I do not have anything else in writing that I can show you today. I am assured that concerns along those lines are being, and have been, raised with National Museums Northern Ireland directly. I hope that that answers the question.

**Mr D Bradley:**

It does not really answer my question. I asked you what, excluding the former status quo, your preferred solution to the situation is. You said that greater consultation should be carried out with the education sector. However, what would satisfy your members?

**Ms Christophi:**

Our members would like to be reassured that the public, which the museums is designed to serve, is asked the question. The true difficulties that lie ahead can be properly recognised and known only following a public-consultation exercise. It is not up to individuals or staff to identify the problems. That is part of the process, but, ultimately, it is the visitors — tourists, the educational establishment, and so on — who should have a say in the decision-making process. That has not happened.

**Mr D Bradley:**

You want a consultation that is full and open to the public?

**Ms Christophi:**

Yes; absolutely.

**The Chairperson:**

What is the main problem with closing on a Monday from the staff's point of view?

**Ms Christophi:**

I will let the staff answer that question.

**Mr Croft:**

We have considered it from the visitors' point of view, because the proposals are based on a no-detriment position for staff. The staff will not gain or lose from the proposals as they stand. Many people visit the museums every year, and, in addition, we are winning awards for our museums. Those visitors are the people who need to be informed about the change to opening hours and, in return, to inform whether a Monday closure is an option that they want to consider.

The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum will be closing one day a week for the first time. We

have operated on a seven-day basis and have always opened at the weekends. A large number of season-ticket holders have paid for tickets that give them access to the museum at Omagh and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum for a year. Such people should have been consulted, because they have paid out the money to visit the museums. Therefore, we are considering the issue from that perspective, rather than from our own.

**Mr McNarry:**

Are you suggesting that, like the Barcelona example that was given, because of a lack of communication, people will arrive at the sites and the gates will be closed? Do you have any idea how the opening times are indicated to a wide audience?

**Mr Croft:**

The point was more that a public consultation would take people's views into account before a decision were made to close the museums on a Monday. As it stands, there is a strong possibility that people will arrive at a museum on a Monday and find that they cannot gain access to it.

**Mr McNarry:**

People who visit the museums will be directed. Your thinking is that the general public are greatly interested and are waiting with bated breath to be told whether the museums will be open or closed. I, for one, did not realise that the museums do not open on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

**Mr Croft:**

The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, where I work, opens seven days a week all day.

**Mr McNarry:**

Yes, those opening hours do not apply to some museums. How wide do you want the consultation to go to get that information across? I do not believe that people are waiting with bated breath for the opening times so that they can plan their day.

**The Chairperson:**

We shall leave that thought hanging in mid-air.

**Mr T Clarke:**

The point is not about how the message should be communicated. The message should be that the museums are for attracting tourism to Northern Ireland, and they should be open for business every day of the week. From the answers to the questions that I asked, I cannot see how a case has been built up to suggest that the museums should close on a Monday. I thought that Northern Ireland was trying to promote and sell itself and tell everyone outside of Northern Ireland that we want tourists to visit every day. We not want to put out the message that we want to put the shutters down and close every tourist attraction on a Monday.

**Mr McNarry:**

I want Glentoran to win the league every year, but things do not always happen that way.

**Mr Mulholland:**

There is no chance of that. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson:**

I thank Kim, Tom and Stephen from NIPSA for attending.