



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Impact of Spending Plans: Libraries NI

23 September 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr Declan O'Loan (Deputy Chairperson)
Lord Browne
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Billy Leonard
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Terry Heron) Libraries NI
Ms Irene Knox)
Cllr Evelyne Robinson)

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

I invite the representatives of Libraries NI to join us at the table. Good morning. I welcome Irene, Evelyne and Terry. Thank you for coming. Irene, before you make your opening statement, will you introduce your team and outline their various remits?

Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI):

I am going to ask Evelyne to start.

Councillor Evelyne Robinson (Libraries NI):

Good morning, Mr Chairperson and members. Thank you for the opportunity to come along to brief you on all the implications for Libraries Northern Ireland of the Budget 2010 process.

I am a councillor member of the board of Libraries Northern Ireland and chairperson of the business support committee. That committee's remit includes responsibility for setting and monitoring Libraries Northern Ireland's budget. Irene Knox is the chief executive of Libraries Northern Ireland, and I am sure that most of you will know her already. Terry Heron is the director of business support and is also the authority's finance director.

We submitted a paper to the Committee that sets out in some detail the work that has already been undertaken by Libraries Northern Ireland in the 18 months since it was formed. That undertaking has been to look into the delivery of efficiencies and the implications for the services that we provide to the public of the proposed budget cuts associated with the comprehensive spending review (CSR) process.

Ms Knox:

Good morning, Chairperson and members. Thank you for receiving us this morning. As you know, Libraries NI has been in existence for almost 18 months. Therefore, in relative terms, we are still a very new organisation. I recall being present during the scrutiny stage of the Libraries Bill, as it was then, when this Committee decided to recommend the inclusion in the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 of the phrase

“comprehensive and efficient public library service”

to describe the statutory duty that is placed on our organisation.

I hope that our submission demonstrates that, over the past 18 months, we have taken many difficult decisions that have delivered significant efficiencies. I will pick out a few examples. In 2009-2010 — our first year of operation — we delivered £600,000 worth of efficiencies, which had already been factored in to the public library service budget for that year as a result of the 2008 CSR process.

This year, we will deliver £1.2 million of CSR efficiencies and a further £600,000 of savings

as a result of the 2010-11 Budget settlement. We have already reduced by 34 the number of staff in senior and middle management posts, and we are going to lose a further 20 to 22 posts in management and administration this year.

We have reduced the number of stock departments from five to one. We have streamlined our administrative services and we have closed one of the library headquarters buildings that we inherited from the five boards. We are in the process of relocating my unit and the business support unit from rented accommodation to spare capacity in branch libraries as a cost-cutting measure. We will review the operation of the remaining former library headquarters buildings this year.

At the same time, we have diverted resources to front line services. We spent more on stock last year, for example, than the five boards together did in the previous year. We are increasing the range of learning, information, heritage and cultural activities and resources for adults and children. We carried out phase 1 of the strategic review — we have talked to the Committee about that — about rationalising provision in the greater Belfast area. Phase 2 of the strategic review will start later this year and will encompass the rest of Northern Ireland. Phase 3 will also start later this year and will look at mobile library provision and other services that are not specifically delivered in library buildings.

We recognise that there are difficult times ahead and that more difficult decisions will have to be taken. We have played our part already and will continue to do so. One important point that needs to be recognised, however, is that in the current CSR period, the budget for library services has been reduced, and we have delivered efficiencies at a time when other organisations have had their budgets increased. We have grave concerns, therefore, about the impact of the proposed level of savings on the other part of the statutory duty that I referred to earlier — our responsibility to deliver a comprehensive public library service for people living, working or studying in Northern Ireland.

The Budget 2010 proposals provided to the Committee by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) are based on a reduction of 17% in the baseline, which is this year's budget, or cumulative savings of £12.44 million over the four-year period. However, those projections do

not take account of the effect of the efficiencies that have already been made and delivered by Libraries NI. When they are added in, the cumulative savings required of Libraries NI over the six-year period from 2009-2010, when we were established, to 2014-15, are, in fact, over £22 million, or 23% of our 2009-2010 baseline — our opening budget when we were established.

There is no doubt that budget cuts of that magnitude will have a detrimental impact on the public library service in Northern Ireland. Because of the efficiencies that we have implemented already through the establishment of the single library authority, there is little, if any, scope left for further savings in the infrastructure, management or administration. Consequently, the Budget 2010 savings plans will impact directly on the delivery of front line services. They will certainly result in reduced opening hours, significantly less spending on stock and the maintenance of buildings, less frequent mobile library stops, and, possibly, the closure on affordability grounds of well-used, viable libraries.

In our submission, we have outlined some of the work that is ongoing in libraries across Northern Ireland every day — work that is even more important at a time of economic uncertainty, when people are struggling financially and need help. Improving children's and adults' literacy, promoting lifelong learning, teaching people to use computers and giving them information skills and access to information are critically important for the individuals concerned and for society as a whole. It is work that is often done in partnership with other providers who recognise and value the reach of libraries, and not just because of the seven million plus visits that are made to libraries annually. The 99 libraries across Northern Ireland are recognised as neutral, stigma-free environments. The Budget projections mean that much of that work will be severely curtailed.

The public library service is not one of the big beasts of public expenditure, but it is a key service which has the capacity to contribute significantly to an individual's quality of life and support a range of other government priorities, such as the economy, education, health and well-being, social inclusion, a shared future and community development.

Each year the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) carries out what is known as a CIPFA PLUS — a public library users survey. That is carried out across a

large number of library authorities in the UK, and we have extracted and included in our submission just one table from that CIPFA survey relating to Northern Ireland in 2009. It shows that, of the sample of 21,000 users that were surveyed in Northern Ireland, 35% of those who responded said that libraries provided them with assistance with work; 46% said assistance with study; 44% said assistance in relation to house and home issues; 23% said assistance in relation to health; 61% in relation to leisure; and 22% in relation to family and relationships.

The value placed on libraries by the general public is evident from various consultations that have taken place regarding library services and, indeed, from comments that I personally receive regularly from users. I will give you two or three of those written comments to let you know the kinds of things that people are saying to us. One user said:

“I do not have a computer at home and cannot afford one. I have no way of continuing my education, other than to use the local library.”

A mother said:

“I have four children aged nine and under, and we find the library a wonderful resource. It is very important for children to read as much as possible, but books are too expensive to buy. Borrowing makes it much easier.”

Another user said:

“I am unemployed, and I have no access to the internet at home. The local library helps me with job searching.”

Another said:

“I am a pensioner with low income. I cannot afford to buy books. Reading is important to me. The library is also somewhere safe to go.”

Those are the kinds of comments that our users make to us on a regular basis.

Books, literacy and reading underpin all of our work and are the mainstay of libraries. In the same way that people will not return to a shop that cannot supply what they want, customers will not return to a library if there are not sufficient numbers of up-to-date books and other resources to meet their needs. You will see from our submission that this year we intend to spend £2.853 million on stock. That equates to 9.3% of our budget, or £1.60 per head of population in Northern Ireland. We would like to spend more, but we are constrained not only by the fact that our budget has been reduced over the last two years but by the fact that there is very little flexibility in our budget. Some 61.8% of the budget is spent on staff costs, 14% on premises and 14.3% on two PFI contracts that we inherited from the boards, one of which provides the Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland (ELFNI) system, which is the 1,200-plus computers that are in public libraries for use by the public.

Our projections at this time, based on the level of reductions shown in the DCAL briefing paper, are that, after implementing all possible efficiencies — including a recruitment freeze, pay freeze, closure of non-viable libraries and possibly also some viable libraries, reducing opening hours and so on — it will still be necessary to make significant reductions in the stock budget. We have shown you the figures in the submission. Over the next four years, the stock budget is likely to go from £1·60 a head to £1·47 next year, £1·04 the following year and, worryingly, 28p in the third year and 64p in the final year of the CSR process.

In order to try to at least maintain a reasonable level of new stock in libraries, we need to spend no less than £1 per head of population. We could do that in years three and four if the currently projected level of efficiencies were reduced by the equivalent of what we have already saved over the previous two years in our budget. Doing so would at least mean that the general public could expect to find some new books on the shelves.

Cllr E Robinson:

Our chief executive has painted a depressing, but realistic, picture of the impact of the proposed budget cuts on the library service. We know that the situation could get worse, and that a 17% reduction over the four-year period is the minimum expected at this time. The board of Libraries Northern Ireland, which I am representing today, has worked hard over the last 18 months and taken difficult decisions that have delivered efficiencies and improved the service. Unfortunately, it appears to be the case that, in the future, our difficult decisions will not be about delivering better services for the public, but about reducing core front line services that are valued and needed by the community.

At a time when unemployment is likely to increase and people need information, advice and support, the place to which they often look for that help may well not actually be there. Thank you very much, members, for your time. We are now anxious to answer all of the questions that you may want to pose.

The Chairperson:

I thought that you going to say that you would be happy to answer questions.

My questions are about delivering on an equality agenda. In your briefing paper, you say that the cuts that are forecast will most effect people who are housebound. How can you deliver your statutory duty under section 75 to ensure that you continue to provide a proper service for people who are housebound? Secondly, you say that there are 28 mobile libraries, 10 of which are dedicated to services for people who cannot access any other form of library provision. What plans do you have to provide added protection to mobile libraries in this difficult environment?

Ms Knox:

The equality agenda is important to us in libraries. We believe that libraries are about delivering an equality agenda and ensuring that people have, for example, access to the information that they need in order to be able to exercise their responsibilities and their rights. We provide services to housebound people, and we will continue to do so, recognising that that is an important role. The equality agenda is about people who are housebound and who are disabled, and it is also about ensuring that, across the whole of Northern Ireland, we can deliver equity of provision to the general public.

In the current economic situation, we are concerned that we will have to make very serious cuts in our services. For example, we will have a recruitment freeze so that, if someone leaves the staff of Fintona library, we will not be able to replace that person. Because that library is staffed by only two people, we might not be able to open the library for health and safety reasons. The cuts will not happen in any sort of systematic way; they may well happen in an unplanned way simply because we cannot move staff around, particularly in country areas, where they might have to travel a long way, involving excess mileage costs and so on.

There are a lot of equality issues associated with this, and we will have to address those. We have 28 mobile libraries, 10 of which provide services to people who are housebound, disabled and so on. We will have to look at how we maintain mobile services to people who are housebound. It may mean that we are unable to offer the same level of frequency of service as we currently do; we may have to reduce the frequency. We will certainly have to reduce the opening hours of branch libraries, and we may have to close some branch libraries.

Mr O’Loan:

In many ways, your position is summarised in the last paragraph of the document that you sent us. It states that you have already:

“delivered significant efficiencies in relation to infrastructure, management and administration. There is little, if any, scope left for efficiencies in these areas; consequently the level of budget cuts being proposed in Budget 2010 will impact directly on frontline services at a time when they are even more important”.

Sometimes I think that not quite a game but something close to it is being played out, including in the political arena, around how we will address the situation of serious budget cuts. I guess that no one expects you or any other public sector organisation to appear before a Committee such as this and say that you can make dramatic savings and still deliver everything that you do. That would almost invite the cuts that might come your way. Quite a number of Departments have not yet offered any savings plans.

Nonetheless, for those of us who look to the whole public sector to make itself much more efficient, it is a disappointing stance to say that, even over a three- or four-year period, you can offer nothing except blood, toil, sweat and tears — in other words, seriously cutting front line services. Are there no indications that you can offer of ways of altering how you do things in the medium term that will still protect your front line service?

Ms Knox:

Thank you for that. We are a new organisation and when we brought together the five public library services into one organisation 18 months ago, we took a hard look at administration, management levels and the whole infrastructure side of things. By the end of this year, we will have taken 54 posts out of the senior management and administration levels that existed before Libraries NI was created, and will have made £1.8 million worth of savings, mostly as a result of a reduction in staff costs and administration. While we are not saying that there is absolutely no scope for further savings, there is little scope. We will be looking at pay and recruitment freezes and a reduction in travel costs. However, a lot of those things are peripheral, and the level of savings that we are being required to make are such that we will have to cut into core services.

A total of 61% of our costs are staff costs. However, the vast majority of those staff members are in branch libraries delivering services at the front line. There are very few staff members who

are not delivering services directly to the public. Approximately 14% of our costs are for branch library premises. We will review this year the remaining library headquarters buildings that we inherited. A further £4 million is associated with ELFNI, which is the 1,200-plus computers in libraries for public use.

More than 90% of our costs are spent on the front line delivery of services. It is difficult to find the level of savings that are being asked for without cutting into those services.

Mr O’Loan:

I am sure that you try to relate your staffing provision to demand. Is there sufficient flexibility in your staffing to do that?

Ms Knox:

We have a large part-time workforce. Because we are open on late nights and Saturdays, we need the flexibility of part-time staff. However, all of our staff are on contracts with specified hours. If, for example, we were to reduce opening hours we would have to get into negotiations with staff about reducing their contracted hours. We are tied into the terms and conditions of the contracts that people have and there will be a big job around renegotiating with staff if we have to reduce opening hours and close libraries. A large percentage of our staff work part-time and earn less than £21,000.

Mr K Robinson:

Thank you very much for your presentation. Irene, as you know, the Committee wrestled long and hard with the confines of the Northern Ireland Library Authority in the early days. We thought that we had a fairly lean machine and you have proved that to some extent with some of the changes that you have brought in, which, incidentally, we did not always agree with.

Recently, I made an unannounced visit to Cloughfern library. That library was on your hit list, and I am glad to see that you saw the error of your ways and withdrew it. I was fascinated to see the number of young people who were in there — preschool children with mothers and helpers and all sorts of folk working with them. There was also a constant stream of what you refer to as silver surfers — I could not possibly refer to them as that. I tried to speak to the staff but I could

not, such was the demand on their time and services. That library is a neutral venue in an area where it is very much appreciated and is the last remaining library.

The Chairperson:

I had a similar experience during a visit to Fintona library, which you mentioned earlier. It was very busy and, as you say, it was difficult to talk to the staff as they were so busy.

Mr K Robinson:

That is the situation and the pressure that is on the front line staff.

Given that your costs are mainly associated with staff and buildings, with 61% directly attributable to staffing, how on earth will you bring in the proposed reductions without impacting on the services that the Chairperson and I have seen and the community needs? Would a possible alternative be to put a freeze on some of your potential building programmes, rather than hitting the front line human services which everyone appreciates and which are so necessary?

Ms Knox:

I am delighted that what you have reflected is the situation in our libraries. Last year, they had more than 7 million visits. The majority of our libraries are busy, and they do an important job.

Implementing this level of cuts will be extremely difficult because we are talking about staff, premises and so on. Putting a hold on capital does not make any difference because the capital is a separate budget and it cannot vire from capital into recurrent. The costs and savings that we are talking about are all in our recurrent spend. We recognise that some of our capital programmes will be hit by the cuts. However, although we hope that we get enough money to do some improvements to libraries, from our perspective the important thing is that we can continue to deliver the services that people want and use, even if it is in buildings that are not perfect.

Mr K Robinson:

You have taken 54 senior and middle management posts out of commission, which is very impressive. Is there any flexibility in that area for further trimming, rather than the front line staff?

Ms Knox:

We have taken out so many posts. By the end of this year, 54 senior and middle management and administrative posts will be out of the system. We have diverted so much of the time of the staff remaining into the front line that there is not an awful lot of flexibility left. I would begin to get worried that we would be starting to cut into what we need to be able to do, which is to provide proper management of the service. We need to have proper structures for governance and accountability in order to manage the delivery of the services that we provide.

Mr K Robinson:

Given that lack of flexibility that you have across the board, we are concerned as a Committee and as individuals that the inner-city areas, the areas of high social need, were the areas that appeared to have been hit strongly in the first phase, and perhaps Wallace will mention that later. Are you likely to revisit those areas, or can they be given almost a by-ball this time round because they have taken their hit, which has been pretty mighty in some cases? Are you able to look at some other areas? I assure the Chairperson that I am not looking particularly at rural areas. Can you approach the situation in other ways without hitting those vital things? If we are ever going to turn our education system round, it will start there.

Ms Knox:

I agree with you. We have closed 10 libraries in Belfast, and we will have to close other libraries elsewhere in Northern Ireland as part of our review. The cuts in the budget will have an impact on that. Obviously the figures are all projections at the minute, and we do not know what the final budget will be. However, I cannot give guarantees: it would be wrong for me to sit here and say that I can give you a guarantee that we will not have to revisit reviews that have happened already. We have to make our budget tie up at the end of the day. It would be wrong for me to say that we will not have to go back and look at things again.

Lord Browne:

We have gone through the first review, especially in greater Belfast, and we have seen the proposed closures. You are now saying that you will have to return and look at those libraries that have, supposedly, been saved in the first review. You are saying that you will have to return

to those and that they could be in the front line for closure.

Ms Knox:

I am not saying that we will have to. I am saying that when we know what our budget is going to be and what exactly we are going to have to do in terms of making savings, we may have to look at our whole service again with regard to what is and what is not affordable. I am not saying that we will or we will not: I am saying that we may have to.

Mr K Robinson:

Have you already drawn up criteria for looking at potential libraries for closure?

Ms Knox:

We have done our phase 1 review, which was greater Belfast. We are currently starting to prepare proposals for the phase 2 review, which is the rest of Northern Ireland.

Mr K Robinson:

Will you be using the existing criteria?

Ms Knox:

We will be using the same criteria that we used for greater Belfast. It is only fair to do that.

Mr McCarthy:

Thank you for your presentation; it was very depressing. You may have noticed that the Committee is proud of the service that the libraries have provided for us all. We do not know what the future holds. I refer you to paragraph 17 of your submission, which states:

“As recognised neutral venues, libraries play a key role in promoting equality, diversity”

— etc, etc.

Can you tell us — I probably know the answer, but I will ask anyway. As you know, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has, at last, produced a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, which is out to consultation. If, as the result of a reduced budget, you are forced to go down the road of further closures, and we hope that you are not, how will you provide for what is included in that consultation report? How will library closures affect the neutral venues, people coming together to read and all that sort of stuff?

Ms Knox:

As I have said already, we are concerned that closing substantial numbers of libraries could well have an impact on our well-recognised ability to provide neutral venues. Libraries are seen as neutral venues, and they are used by people from all sides of the community and all strata in society. In many instances, libraries are, perhaps, the only real neutral venue in an area. That issue will be extremely difficult for us, and we will have to look carefully at it as we work through the process. My concern is that a lot of the good work that we do in promoting a shared future and cohesion will suffer because a lot of the programmes that we offer — we have given a sample of the programmes in our paper — are about trying to build a shared future. If we do not have the libraries and the money to do the programmes, it will impact on our ability to deliver.

Mr McCarthy:

Will you be making a strong case in your response to the consultation? If people are really committed to the shared future document and to cohesion, they will listen and ensure that your budgets are not reduced further.

Ms Knox:

We will certainly be responding to the consultation document.

Mr Leonard:

Thank you for your contribution. I want to confirm a statistic before I get to the main meat of my question. You said that 54 staff will be gone by the end of the year — what is that as a percentage of your original grouping?

Mr Terry Heron (Libraries NI):

Under 1,000 people transferred across from the education and library boards.

Mr Leonard:

What percentage do the 54 management and administrative posts represent?

Ms Knox:

I do not have those figures, but we can get them.

Mr Leonard:

I would appreciate that. When we are talking about 54, it maybe helps to know if it is 1%, 10% or whatever. It would help us to know the scale of what is being achieved.

Ms Knox:

We can provide that.

The Chairperson:

Billy, you are always good at asking two questions.

Mr Leonard:

I know. My second question is to drill down that pound principle. I am not sure whether I missed any of it as you went along, but you gave figures on what you will be producing over the years. You indicated that it could level out at £1. Perhaps you cannot go into detail, but what hurt would it cause if it went to that £1 level throughout?

Mr Heron:

The savings plan that we submitted to the Department looked at what we can achieve in the four-year period. In terms of staffing, which is our biggest cost, we are talking about the implications of a pay freeze and a hiring freeze. If people leave the workforce, for whatever reason — to get other jobs, to leave the workforce through retirement or ill health — we will be trying not to replace them to make the savings that are required. That will affect service delivery where those people are delivering services. Being unable to replace staff will affect front line services.

We are also looking at reducing opening hours. There is a working group looking at that. We like to open at times that are convenient for the public, and we will need to see what the busiest times are and whether there are times that are not as busy, and consider whether we can manage to reduce opening hours. To make savings out of reduced opening hours, we will have to renegotiate staff contracts, and there will certainly be a cost involved. First, we will try to look at

voluntary means of doing that by introducing more family-friendly policies and offering additional summer leave. If anybody volunteered for reduced hour, we would take it.

If libraries open for fewer hours and if less staff are available, it will have an impact on front line services. The other implication is that the non-replacement of staff is not a planned reduction. We do not know when it will happen, and we will have to try to react to that. In a busy library, we will have to manage how we can cope with that. If there are less busy libraries close by we can maybe transfer staff. However, there is a limited scope for that, because of the associated additional costs.

Our last option is to look at stock reduction. Stock is the lifeblood of the library service; if we do not have a good stock turnover available for our customers they will not come to us. Currently, we are faced with significant reductions in stock in years three and four. Even if we reduce opening hours and close premises as a result of phase 2 of the strategic review, there are little savings to be made unless we dispose of the premises, and it is not a good time to be doing that. If we have to reduce the stock spend to 28p per capita we will lose customers totally and the situation will be useless.

We made savings last year and this year of £1.8 million. If those savings were factored into the savings that are being demanded of the public library service it would allow us to increase our spend on stock in years three and four from 28p and 64p per capita respectively to approximately £1. That is still only half of the recommended target of £2, which was recommended in 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' and was our target last year. If the savings we have made were taken into account then rather than starting the clock now we could start it from two years ago. We have reduced our base for maintenance and stock to live within our reduced budget over the past two years, and it is unfair to start the clock from now.

The Chairperson:

You have emphasised the fact that you are a new body and the efficiencies that you have already achieved.

Ms Knox:

Absolutely. From our perspective, that is very important. We are 18 months old and within the period of our existence we have delivered efficiencies — £1.8 million by the end of this year. Our budget decreased during the past two years while most other organisations in the public sector had their budgets increased. Therefore, factoring in more savings at a time when we have a reduced budget is a double penalty.

Mr Burns:

We all appreciate the tremendous value that local libraries provide; they clearly are on the front line. How many libraries will have to close under the current proposals? What effect will that have on rural areas?

Ms Knox:

At this stage we have no idea how many more libraries will need to close. We have to go through the same process as we did for phase 1 of the strategic review, and assess the remaining estate on the basis of whether the buildings are fit for purpose, well used, etc. It would be very wrong for me to make any assumptions at this stage about how many more libraries will close. We hope to have some further information on that by the end of this calendar year, which we will then take to our board. We are happy to come back and brief the Committee on that, as we did before.

Mr Burns:

I am absolutely horrified at suggestions that a library in a rural area could close because a member of staff left or became sick and had to retire. It would be a great shame if you did not replace that member of staff. How long could that freeze on your staff go on?

Ms Knox:

A recruitment freeze will go on for as long as is necessary. It comes from the centre; we are told if there is a public sector recruitment freeze. My concern is that if we close a library as a result of having to make savings, it is unlikely that that library will reopen, even if things get better in four years' time; the service will have been decreased.

One of the difficulties with a recruitment freeze for a service such as ours, with 99 locations

across Northern Ireland, is that a library in a small rural town may be staffed by two people. If one of those people is off ill, from a health and safety perspective, or just to keep the library open, we probably need to put another person in. To transfer someone there from another location means paying extra travel costs, or it may be that that person may be unable to move. There are all sorts of issues. We are not saying that we cannot necessarily move someone, but there are big issues around vacancies that arise and cannot be filled because of recruitment freezes.

Mr Burns:

My local library, to which I take my children, is staffed by ladies. There is a young lady there who is expecting. What happens when she is off having the baby? That reduces the staff in the library to one.

Ms Knox:

If there were to be a recruitment freeze, we would have to seriously consider not replacing that person.

Mr Burns:

If that lady happens to be off having a child, it puts tremendous pressure on the other person, especially from a health and safety perspective, which is an utterly crazy and intolerable situation to be in. Once the library is closed, how difficult will it be to get it reopened? The library could be tremendously well used, in an area of growth. If that young lady becomes pregnant and the library has to close because it is understaffed, how can we, as politicians, justify that to our electorate?

Ms Knox:

I share absolutely the concerns that you are expressing. We have those concerns. The difficulty that we face is that, if, cumulatively, over the next four years, £12.44 million is taken out of our budget, we cannot continue to provide that level of service. We may have to look at reducing opening hours in that library. We may have to find some other way of providing a service in that area. At this stage, we have to put all of that into the melting pot and say that, as a result of the efficiencies that we have made already and the additional efficiencies that are coming forward, there is no doubt that there will be implications for front line services. It is not a situation that I,

as a chief executive who has a passion for libraries, want to be in. Given the level of cuts that are being projected in our budget, I do not know what else we can do, other than affect libraries in that way.

Miss McIlveen:

I am not going to rehearse the points that have already been made. You mentioned the review of the former library headquarters. Where are those buildings? What were the terms of reference of that review?

Ms Knox:

We have already closed one of the former library headquarters buildings in Ballynahinch. That was done in year 1. Some of the remaining library headquarters buildings, such as Omagh, also have a branch library, so we will include the library headquarters buildings in our phase 2 strategic review. We hope to have proposals for consultation by the end of this calendar year.

Miss McIlveen:

Have any lessons been learned from the consultation on phase 1 that can be applied to phase 2?

Ms Knox:

We will look at all the feedback that we received. We had public meetings and meetings with politicians and the Committee. I am not sure that consultation cannot always be better —

Miss McIlveen:

I am conscious that —

Ms Knox:

We will try our best.

Miss McIlveen:

I am conscious that we had a number of representations from the Northern Ireland Public Sector Alliance (NIPSA) and so on as well.

Mr Heron:

One of the main issues that was raised by NIPSA was that perhaps we should use the Ballynahinch headquarters as Libraries NI's headquarters, but we decided that that was too costly, and we are moving to Lisburn library in order to save money. That issue, which was raised by NIPSA, will not be an option this time.

Ms Knox:

We engaged with NIPSA and others during the previous consultation. I have to say that proposals to close libraries will result in a very difficult consultation exercise. No one wants their local library to close. In many ways, from our perspective, it is quite heartening that people value their libraries so much that they want to keep them open and they will come out to meetings and so on about keeping them open.

Unfortunately, we are being faced with very hard choices, which is not something that any of us like. I am sure that Evelyne, as chairperson of the business support committee, can speak from the board members' perspective. It is not something that any of the board members came into the Library Service to do. However, we have to look at how we rationalise our service and make the required cuts. We will take advice from all sorts of sources during that consultation process.

Miss McIlveen:

We are all conscious that cuts are not exclusive to Northern Ireland but across the UK. We heard some very worrying predictions about stock budgets. What are the comparable figures for other regions?

Ms Knox:

Libraries elsewhere in the UK are very different from ours because they are part of local authorities, in most cases. In fact, a lot of the library services elsewhere are looking to what has happened in Northern Ireland as a model of good practice for libraries. At the moment, they are looking at how they can come together into a bigger organisation and, therefore, reduce their overheads and administration to enable them to focus on the front line.

There are different pictures across the rest of the UK. However, in all cases, they are talking

about significantly reducing stock budgets. They are trying to look for examples. We have a fairly big purchasing power for library stock; therefore, we get a very good deal from our suppliers. That is not always the case elsewhere in the UK, because they are very small. They are trying to come together into bigger consortia to try to increase their purchasing power.

Stock is one of the areas of concern to everyone. Libraries across the UK are facing big cuts in services. They are talking about closures of libraries and reductions in the level of services, which is the same kind of issues that we are talking about. Therefore, there are comparisons, and we have looked at what is happening elsewhere.

Lord Browne:

You mentioned local authorities. Are you looking at the possibility of co-location and integration of services, particularly at community level? Have you had serious discussions with local councils about the use of premises such as leisure centres? In Belfast, we did that with the Grove Wellbeing Centre. There is also the possibility that the former Templemore Avenue Primary School could be used as a library. Are you coming together with other agencies to look at the possibility of using buildings that have spare capacity?

Ms Knox:

Yes; for example, we are talking with Ards Borough Council about a library. We are also talking with Coleraine Borough Council about a library and museum. We are also talking with other organisations that see our premises, because of their neutrality, as being important for the location of services. Others are talking about the possibility of locating their services in libraries. For example, we were talking about going to Citizens Advice about its services and how we might work together. There are ways in which we are trying to co-operate with others. We already have other income. However, unfortunately, everybody is being faced with the same problems at the moment in terms of retrenchment.

The Chairperson:

We welcome the creative thinking that you are demonstrating.

In terms of the equality agenda and reaching ethnic minorities, we have heard previously that

libraries, with their computer access and other services, often offer lifelines for ethnic minorities. That is another category of society.

Ms Knox:

Absolutely. Ethnic minority communities are very heavy users of libraries, particularly the computers, for keeping in touch with family and so on at home. We purchase stock, for example, in ethnic minority languages. If our stock budget is reduced, it will affect all the stock that we purchase. There are big issues and implications.

Mr McCarthy:

You mentioned that in Ards you were going out and getting a commitment. You said that you were still talking. I thought all the talking was done and that it is action that we are looking for.

Ms Knox:

We are involved. We actually have a project board at the moment with the council to develop the business case for the library. However, that will depend on whether there is capital funding.

The Chairperson:

There is always more than one MLA on this Committee who stands up for Strangford, no matter what goes on. At the end of November, we are having one of our Committee meetings in Antrim library, which I think was Michelle's suggestion.

Thanks very much, Irene, Terry and Evelyne.