



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Strategic Review of Library Provision in
Greater Belfast**

20 May 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Strategic Review of Library Provision in Greater Belfast

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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 Billy Leonard
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Raymond McCartney
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Ken Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Anne Connolly)	
Dr David Elliott)	Libraries NI
Ms Irene Knox)	
Mr Nigel Macartney)	

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff):

I welcome the Libraries NI team and hand straight over to Dr David Elliott.

Dr David Elliott (Libraries NI):

I thank the Chairperson and members for the invitation to return to the Committee to brief you on the consultation process on our strategic review of library provision in greater Belfast. My colleagues alongside me this morning are Nigel Macartney, chair of the services committee that was charged with leading on the work; Irene Knox, the chief executive, whom I believe you

know; and Anne Connolly, director of planning and performance. I will speak for a few minutes to give you an outline and then hand over to Nigel.

One of the targets that DCAL set for Libraries NI in its first year of operation was to undertake a strategic review of library provision. Our initial focus has been on greater Belfast, because of the number of libraries in the area; about 30% of the Northern Ireland total. Many of the libraries in greater Belfast are in close proximity to one another. Some of the buildings are in very poor condition and usage is very low in some cases.

This is not the first review of Belfast libraries. In 2005, DCAL wrote to each of the education and library boards asking them to take forward the process. A number of them developed and implemented programmes of change that included rationalisation and newbuilds. However, although reviews were undertaken in greater Belfast, the resulting recommendations were not implemented. Indicative funding was set aside in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, (ISNI) 2, for a programme of newbuilds and major refurbishment in Belfast. However, as plans had not been taken forward, the money was not able to be accessed.

In December 2009, the board of Libraries NI considered proposals for the future of public library provision in greater Belfast and agreed to consult the public on those proposals. The public consultation process had just commenced when we last spoke to the Committee about the matter in January, and it ran from 11 January to 5 April inclusive. The consultation process sought views on three issues: the strategic direction of libraries as outlined in our vision; a three-year development plan, which included newbuilds and refurbishment of a number of libraries in greater Belfast; and the potential closure of a number of libraries that, in our view, are not fit for purpose, do not have the potential to meet the Libraries NI vision or are not sustainable in the longer term.

The consultation process was multifaceted and included a number of steps. The first was the publication, in hard copy, and on the Libraries NI website, of the consultation document and supporting statistical information on not just the 14 libraries being considered for rationalisation but the other 19 libraries in greater Belfast. The second step was to provide questionnaires to be completed by the public, which were available in hard copy and on the public access computer terminals in every library and on the Libraries NI website. The questionnaires and the consultation documentation were translated into Polish at the request of that community.

The third step was to hold seven public meetings in greater Belfast. I chaired those meetings, and they were addressed by the chief executive and other members of the senior management team. Nigel, as chairperson of the services committee, and other board members, attended some of the meetings. The meetings gave members of the public an opportunity to question us on the proposals and for us to hear their views, and I know that some Committee members also attended. Officers addressed a further public meeting that was called by a community association in east Belfast.

As a fourth step, the chief executive and others in the senior management team attended meetings at both member and official level with the four councils in whose areas the libraries are located, namely Belfast City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council, Lisburn City Council and Newtownabbey Borough Council.

There were meetings with public representatives, local community groups, staff and trade unions. Letters were also sent to all the schools in the Belfast Education and Library Board area and to schools in the South Eastern and North Eastern Board areas, which are near the libraries included in the report. Our board also received a number of deputations, we responded to correspondence, and we received a number of petitions.

Finally, in tandem with the public consultation, an equality impact assessment was undertaken with consultation on the draft EQIA report. That ran from 25 February to 26 April. The draft EQIA report was published on our website, and letters were sent to section 75 consultees. A focus group was held for umbrella organisations representing section 75 categories. To ensure objectivity, we engaged some external experts in the field of equality to assist with the EQIA process. They also attended public meetings to record their comments. The record of each public meeting was published on our website a few days after the meeting. At this stage, I am going to hand over to Nigel, who is the chairperson of the services committee. He will brief you on the responses that we received as a result of the whole consultation process.

Mr Nigel Macartney (Libraries NI):

At the outset, we said that we wanted the consultation process to be as inclusive as possible. It is our view that we have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the general public have had an opportunity to express their views and to contribute to the way forward. I understand that you

have received a briefing paper, which summarises the responses received, so I will take a few minutes to pick out some of the main statistics. Some 2,913 completed questionnaires were received from the general public, which is rather disappointing, considering the number of people who live in the greater Belfast area. Just over 70% of those who responded agreed with our first proposition, which is that the recommendations in the consultation document, if implemented, would lead to an improved service. Those recommendations were: modernised and upgraded buildings; a move towards extended opening hours during evenings and weekends; more staff time available to provide one-to-one assistance; improved stock; improved facilities to support lifelong learning and access to information; and greater access to a range of activities and events to support culture and heritage. Some 17.78% of the public disagreed with that proposition and 12.19% did not answer the question.

Secondly, almost 64% of the general public agreed with our vision for two types of libraries, that is, those that would open for a minimum of 30 hours per week offering our standard service, and a smaller number of larger libraries with an enhanced offering. Just over 21% disagreed, and nearly 15% did not answer the question. So, while a substantial majority of respondents agreed with both the proposals that the recommendations, if implemented, would lead to an improved service and to the vision which was set out, fewer people, understandably, agreed with our development plan, which proposed the closure of a number of libraries and the redevelopment of others. Some 38.59% agreed with the proposal, 44.15% disagreed, and 17.26% did not answer the question. Therefore, it is heartening that people value their library service and not surprising that people do not want to see closures. However, the difference between those who agreed and those who disagreed with the development plan was less than 6%. It was much less than the difference between those who agreed and disagreed with the first two proposals, which was much more.

The variety of views and sentiments expressed in the following comments received on questionnaires is typical of the responses received.

“Closing down smaller libraries is not in the community’s interest. What about members of the public who cannot travel to larger libraries. A lot of unemployed people use libraries for the Internet service in order to seek employment. What happens when they are not able to use library facilities? Many older people cannot afford to travel.”

Another quotation was:

“It is important that people understand how underused many of these branch libraries are. When closures are mooted, people spring to the defence of their local resources without realising that it is their reluctance to engage with these services that has necessitated their closure. Mobile library stocks will be sufficient to fill the needs of many users of these branch libraries.”

A third quotation from the consultation reads:

“It is important to keep local libraries, even if they are a bit smaller. It would be nice to have big libraries, but not at the expense of smaller, local ones. In some areas, it could be worth investigating whether the library could be merged into another service, eg, a community or leisure centre, etc. It also appears that the libraries that have been marked for closure are largely in more deprived areas which need them more than others. Libraries NI should also be lobbying for more money for libraries.”

I will share one final quotation with the Committee:

“These are wonderful recommendations and extremely important for our community, especially for the less well-off, the elderly and children. I absolutely agree wholeheartedly, the sooner the better. I am a working mum and sole wage-earner for five children and the library is invaluable to me and to them.”

It has been made obvious through conversations with members of the public at some of the meetings and through reviewing comments made in the questionnaires that people value the service provided by their local library. We received many positive remarks about the quality of support provided by our staff.

David referred to the fact that we have held seven public meetings, which have been attended by 193 people. In some cases, people attended more than one meeting. The figure is fairly low. Some of the key points that arose at the public meetings include the following:

“Libraries are community spaces and in some areas are the last remaining public service. Where previously the library had been co-located with a health facility, such as a GP surgery, that facility no longer existed.”

The importance of libraries as shared or neutral spaces is another point. Some libraries are located in areas that are, or are perceived to be, largely one community or another. A third point raised was the continuing need to retain smaller libraries as a focal point in local communities.

The importance of books and reading and the library service’s role in promoting literacy particularly in areas of educational under-achievement and social deprivation was also highlighted. A major concern was public transport difficulties in Belfast, as bus routes are largely

from the suburbs to the centre rather than crossing the city. The important role that libraries play for older people, children and migrant workers was also stressed.

Some of those issues are also reflected in responses to the draft EQIA, which was published recently. By the closing date, written responses had been received from the office of the Older People's Advocate, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), the Committee on the Administration of Justice, and a member of the public. We also received a response from the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities after the closing date, and those comments have been taken into account. Only one organisation, Disability Action, sent a representative to the focus group meeting.

The EQIA found that some of the proposals may have an adverse impact on some of the section 75 groups in some areas. The main reasons for that are loss of shared neutral space; loss of sense of involvement and integration with the local community; loss of a specialist Irish language collection; and increased distance to libraries. The board of Libraries NI will consider all of the information collected during the consultation process, including the information collected through the EQIA, at its meeting at the end of the month, and will make a decision on the way forward.

Thank you for your time. We will be pleased to try to answer any questions on the consultation process.

Lord Browne:

Thank you for your interesting presentation. It is clear from the consultation document that east Belfast is going to be targeted disproportionately for the proposed cuts. We have 14 libraries, six of which are in east Belfast. The excellent Assembly research paper that has been commissioned shows that those cuts would result in 64% of the Catholic community being within one mile of a library, which is a decrease of 12% on current provision. It also states that 46% of the Protestant community would be within one mile of a library, which is a decrease of 20% on current provision.

Furthermore, the proposals would mean that 5% of the Catholic community would be over two miles from a library, which is an increase of 1.5% on the current provision, while 14% of the Protestant community would be over two miles away, which is an increase of 6%. I accept that

every group will be affected by the closures, but the EQIA report shows that members of the Protestant community are likely to be twice as disadvantaged. Do you agree that the proposals have serious equality implications?

Dr D Elliott:

Thank you Lord Browne. Our chief executive will answer that question.

Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI):

When we carried out an initial equality screening of the proposals, we identified that, given the historical provision of services in east Belfast, there could be a disproportionate impact on the Protestant community, and the community in east Belfast in general. That was one of the reasons why we undertook a full-blown equality impact assessment, and we will be taking account of the EQIA report as part of the decision-making process.

The East Belfast constituency is an area partly controlled by Belfast City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council, with four libraries in the Belfast area and four in Castlereagh. Of the four libraries in Belfast, three — Ballymacarrett, Hollywood Arches and Ballyhackamore — are situated on the Newtownards Road, and it is less than one mile from Ballymacarrett to the Hollywood Arches, and approximately 1.5 miles from the Hollywood Arches to Ballyhackamore. Therefore, there are three libraries within a very small area.

Lord Browne:

You have just said that there are three libraries on the Newtownards Road, but you do not seem to have taken account of transport difficulties. Pensioners, in particular, rely on public transport to get around or travel long distances, and I know that you also propose to close the libraries at Gilnahirk and Braniel. If people there want to visit the nearest library then it could be the one at Hollywood Arches, and to get there would involve a bus journey of 15 to 20 minutes followed by a 10 minute walk. On the other hand, if they go to the library in Dundonald; that would involve a journey of two buses, which would probably take up to 40 minutes. Do you believe that those journeys would be difficult for pensioners, as many of them have mobility problems?

Ms Anne Connolly (Libraries NI):

We will take that into account, and should a library close there will be mitigating factors to be considered. Pensioners receive free transport, and we have explored the use of community area

transport in those areas, which provides a door-to-door service. Furthermore, if someone is unable to avail of a library service, we will provide a library service to them, and we also have a door-to-door library service.

We have examined bus routes and the nearest libraries to those routes. There was an example of one area where people thought they would have to take two buses journeys, when, in fact, only one was necessary as there was a library in another area that was not formerly a Belfast library. We are considering all libraries, and if a library closes will we consider the nearest library to it, bus routes, the use of mobile libraries and the provision of libraries in community centres.

Lord Browne:

Ms Knox, the last time you were before the Committee, I enquired whether you had considered applying the model used in the Grove Wellbeing Centre, and you told me that consideration was being given to that. Is there any further information from enquiries that you have made?

Ms Knox:

Certainly, we believe that libraries should be co-located with other services where possible. It brings about increased footfall for everyone. Grove Wellbeing Centre is a good model of that.

During the past number of months, we have had several meetings with a range of organisations, including Belfast City Council, to look at the potential for co-location of services. To pick up your point about East Belfast; one of the groups that we have spoken to is the East Belfast Community Development Agency, which is looking at redevelopment of Templemore Avenue School. We met that organisation and have been in contact with it. We certainly want to look at that.

Mr R McCartney:

As regards the equality impact assessment, is the full report available to the Committee?

Ms Knox:

The full report will be available after our board meeting next week.

Mr R McCartney:

Will the report provide further explanation of points that are made in paragraphs 6.3 and 6.4 of

your document?

Ms Knox:

The EQIA has found that there are potential adverse impacts. We have to look for mitigating factors, which will be built into our decision-making process.

Mr R McCartney:

The final bullet point in paragraph 6.4 states:

“increased distance to libraries, which has implications for those who find travel physically demanding, too time-consuming or too expensive.”

Lord Browne mentioned that. During your consultation, did you consult Translink about your decisions? If you are making a decision and you are thinking about closure, would it impact on your thinking if Translink said that it could provide an extra bus, or if someone had to take two buses?

Ms Anne Connolly:

That is part of what we have been doing. As well as Translink, we have looked at Community Transport. One problem is that in some areas where a library was co-located with a medical service, the GP services have moved some distance. Therefore, people do not have the need to go there for GP services. The bus route will have changed to facilitate the GP service’s move. It is not easy to persuade Translink to move it back for a library. However, we are exploring all of those options.

Mr R McCartney:

Do you speak directly to Translink?

Ms Connolly:

Yes.

Mr R McCartney:

That is fine. As regards the timeline, will the decision be made at the board meeting on 27 May 2010?

Dr D Elliott:

Yes.

Mr K Robinson:

Thank you for your presentation. Nigel, you made a comment about people's reluctance to use facilities in some instances. Can I turn that back on you to some degree and suggest that that is, perhaps, indicative of your failure as Libraries NI and that of your predecessors to inspire people to use the facility?

Mr N Macartney:

I think that there is truth on both sides of that question. Yes: I think that as an authority, we have inherited a number of buildings that feature on that list of potential closures that are in a sorry state of repair. Some of them were not designed to be libraries. The building at Ligoniel, for example, is handsome and was the public baths. However, it is highly impractical. Some of those buildings are in such a poor state of repair or are in such a location that people are not tempted to use them. Inevitably, people will drift to newer buildings that we have opened around the city in recent years.

One thing that struck me about the consultation was that the number of responses from people who turned up at meetings was considerably less than the number of active borrowers for each library. Therefore, there is a sense that people did not come out or submit comments. We have asked ourselves why. To some degree, of course, as we have mentioned, people are — to repeat a phrase that we have used among ourselves — “consulted out”. As David said in his introduction, although the Belfast Education and Library Board has consulted twice already, it did not implement any plans following those exercises. Perhaps people believe that the same rota is being gone through again to a certain extent. Perhaps they also believe that there is a degree of inevitability this time. We are dealing with communities that are faced with the provision of a poor service in many cases. Libraries, such as Whitewell library, that open only six hours a week in a school that is surrounded by barbed wire and high fences do not provide an incentive for people to use them. People will, therefore, go elsewhere or not use libraries at all.

Ms Knox:

I will pick up on the point that Ken made and follow on from what Nigel said. There has been a

disincentive for people to use certain libraries because of the condition of the buildings and the lack of investment in resources and stock, which is our lifeblood. We have plans for how we want to improve library usage in the future.

The new Antrim library was opened to the public on 1 February 2010. In the first month of operation, 500 new users joined, and, in that first month, the number of issues was double what it had been in the old building the previous year. If you go into Antrim on any given day, you will see how well used the library is. The people who use Antrim library tell us that it is modern, attractive and spacious and that it has good stock, activities and meeting rooms. Those are the reasons why people want to use that library. Libraries with lots of space, such as Antrim library, are inundated with students studying for their GCSEs and A-levels. Unfortunately, there is no space for that to happen in some of the libraries in greater Belfast that we are talking about. Those are the kinds of issues that we need to be looking at for the future.

Mr K Robinson:

I am glad that you mentioned the situation with Antrim library. We would love such a library in Newtownabbey, but the chances of us getting that are pretty remote.

Ms Knox:

You should always remain optimistic.

Mr K Robinson:

Anne Connolly knows what is coming next. We are talking about co-location. Cloughfern library in Newtownabbey is located in the grounds of King's Park Primary School. Not too long ago, it replaced a burned-out mobile, and I know that because I was involved in the replacement.

An elderly population lives in that area. You are telling me that if they were crows, they would be two miles away from Rathcoole library, but they are not crows. Ms Connolly, you know that transport in Newtownabbey is less than adequate in any direction other than central Belfast. How on earth can we provide for the elderly population and the school population in that area of deprivation if not only Monkstown community library, which was located in the high school, but Cloughfern library, which was to accommodate the overspill of folk displaced by the closure of Monkstown library, is closed? We now must tell them that they can go to Rathcoole library.

The documentation also states that Glengormley library is two miles away from Rathcoole library. You failed to point out that Glengormley library is about 500 ft further up the hillside, so people will face mobility and transport difficulties as well as educational underachievement. Wallace has already pointed out that the proposals have an adverse impact on the Protestant community. Most of the estates surrounding Cloughfern library are predominately Protestant and unionist ones. How can Libraries NI justify continuing with those closures given the educational underachievement in the various schools in those areas? The bones of a fightback — access to books, computers and more modern facilities — are being denied to those people yet again.

Ms Connolly:

Cloughfern library is an interesting case. During the consultation, we discovered that many of the people who use Cloughfern library also use Rathcoole library or Glengormley library. However, one of the interesting points that was picked up on in the EQIA was that it is difficult for people who use Cloughfern library to go to Rathcoole library, not because of transport issues but because the two communities are very different, even though they are perceived to be the same community. Cloughfern library is one of the few libraries for which that point was picked up on in the EQIA, and we will look at that.

We have also talked about our long-term view for Newtownabbey. We met Newtownabbey Borough Council and talked about that with the councillors. The board will take into consideration the fact that Cloughfern library is one of the libraries that was specifically mentioned in the EQIA. Something that cheered us up was that, even though we had been told that people using Cloughfern library came predominantly from one community, we received a strong petition from St James' Primary School, which said that it used the library. That is another factor that the board will take into consideration.

Mr K Robinson:

I hope that you have taken into consideration the alleyway that joins the Glenville Road with the Bleach Green estate, which means that nationalist communities in Whiteabbey could also have access to Cloughfern library. We talk about shared spaces, and here is an opportunity for a library in a private housing area to merge the nationalist and unionist estates through its use. It appears that that opportunity will fall by the wayside.

Ms Connolly:

Cloughfern library was originally considered for closure because it is small, which is a factor that the board will look at. The EQIA found that there was a lot of support from both communities for the library, which will be taken into account —

Mr K Robinson:

Sorry to interrupt, but I refer you back to Cloughfern library's running costs. They are quite low.

Ms Connolly:

That will also be taken into account.

Mr K Robinson:

I refer back to David's point about people being "consulted out". That is the case, but people also have a feeling of inevitability that the steamroller is coming and that you will simply squash them if they continue to stand in front of it, so what is the point in turning up?

Dr D Elliott:

We heard quite a lot of comments like that at the public meetings. We had an excellent public meeting at Rathcoole library, when people from Cloughfern came to visit. That was probably the most insightful of all seven public meetings, because much more light than heat was generated. As Lord Browne knows, more heat than light was generated at some of the other public meetings. *[Laughter.]* Through their petition and their engagement with the public meeting and the questionnaire, the people of Cloughfern have stated the case, as Mr Robinson just did, for the retention of the library.

Mr K Robinson:

You are well aware of the case. We look forward to a new library in Newtownabbey that will be on a par with the library in Antrim.

The Chairperson:

Obviously, there is a lot to play for yet. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Loan:

Some of the libraries that you are proposing for closure have high demand, low cost per book

issue and are efficient. In contrast, others have low demand, high cost per book issue and are inefficient. What was the rationale for determining which libraries would be closed?

Ms Knox:

When we set out on the process, the first thing that we had to consider was the fact that there are a large number of libraries in the greater Belfast area compared with elsewhere in Northern Ireland. As a regional organisation, we felt that we needed to address that and to ensure equity of provision.

We assessed the libraries by using four main criteria. No single criterion was used to put libraries into the category for potential rationalisation. We considered whether a library was fit for purpose and whether it was sustainable, and we looked at the condition of the building and usage. We assessed each library on the basis of those four criteria. No single criterion was used; there was a combination of factors. The Chairperson mentioned Whitewell library, which is attached to a school, is tiny and is surrounded by barbed wire. It can be opened only when the school is open, and it has no staff toilets. There are other libraries housed in much better buildings, but they may not be well used. We had to take everything into account before going out to consultation.

The consultation process has been extremely useful, because local communities have been able to tell us why particular libraries are popular or unpopular. All of that will form part of the board's decision-making process. The board will go back to review those four criteria and to apply them in the context of having had a public consultation and having received responses to the EQIA.

Mr O'Loan:

Some Committee members referred to evidence in an Assembly research paper that was submitted to DCAL, which covered the differential impact on the Protestant community, for example. I presume that you have had sight of that.

Ms Knox:

Yes, we have.

Mr O’Loan:

Did you find that that paper provided significant new evidence that might make you rethink your proposals to some degree?

Ms Knox:

It was gratifying to see that the paper reinforced some of the information that we had. For example, DCAL has set a standard that 85% of the population in Belfast should live within two miles of a library service, and the paper shows that, even if all 14 closures were to go ahead, more than 85% of people in Belfast would still live within two miles of library provision. In fact, I think that the figure was 93%. The paper confirmed information like that. It also confirmed some of the information that we picked up in the EQIA and that we will take into account. The paper also poses a lot of questions. For example, it is not clear to us how some of the measurements have been carried out or what the basis is for some of the assumptions made. It is not detailed enough in that respect. However, overall, there is nothing in the paper that we have not picked up as part of our consultation process.

Mr O’Loan:

The dynamics of accessibility across communities are complex. Did you take detailed expert advice on that issue? I know that people such as Dr Peter Shirlow have written extensively on the subject. It is much more complex than the distance as the crow flies or even simple statements about areas being Protestant or Catholic.

Ms Knox:

The first thing we did was to engage consultants who are experts in the equality field. We also had conversations with the Community Relations Council, and we talked to local communities, community organisations and the councils. We did not take any other expert opinion, but we are very conscious that, in the greater Belfast area, there are particular issues about communities having difficulty interacting.

Our aspiration is that libraries should be shared spaces. In many areas, they are shared spaces; in others, they are not. Any developments that we would want to undertake in the future would, as far as possible, involve placing libraries in areas where they could be used by all sections of the community. In many instances, libraries are neutral venues, and people from different communities use libraries elsewhere in Northern Ireland, where there may also be difficulties

between communities.

Mr McCarthy:

My question is simple. Irene, the last time you appeared before the Committee, you gave a commitment that there will be no redundancies in the library service regardless of the outcome of the review. Is that still the case?

Ms Knox:

Yes, that is still the position. We did release some staff at the end of March on voluntary redundancy, but those were staff members in middle management positions, not staff members involved in the direct delivery of library services. We are not proposing that there should be any compulsory redundancies as a result of the review. If someone wants to take voluntary redundancy and we can facilitate that, we will consider it, but there will be no compulsory redundancies.

Mr McCarthy:

That is good.

I apologise for not being here when you appeared before the Committee last week. I would have made my voice —

Ms Knox:

We missed you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCarthy:

Of course you did. I must express my deep disappointment at the decision to close Ballynahinch library headquarters. The only consolation is that the local studies section will remain as a unit, although it will move from Ballynahinch to Downpatrick.

Ms Knox:

You very kindly came along to our drop-in day at Ballynahinch. That was a very useful day, during which we met 45 people. The main issue that came through in that consultation exercise was that people wanted to retain the County Down collection as a single entity. Although some people would have preferred that the collection be kept in Ballynahinch, others were quite content

with the idea of it being located in Downpatrick. That proposal will be made to the board.

Mr McCarthy:

That is one consolation. You had earlier proposed to split it all over the place, which would have been no good to anyone.

Dr D Elliott:

We do try to listen.

Mr McCarthy:

I would have preferred it had you listened and kept Ballynahinch as the headquarters, but there we go.

The Chairperson:

I remind you, Kieran, that neither Ballynahinch nor Downpatrick is in greater Belfast.
[Laughter.]

Mr Leonard:

The witnesses are very welcome. Irene, I appreciate the point that you made about 85% of the population in Belfast being within two miles of a library service. However, the net result of what is proposed leaves quite a stark area to the west of the city. I am not putting west against east — there is no cold war or anything like that. Obviously, there are factors down through the decades, and we are where we are. The Assembly research paper shows that there is quite a swathe of west Belfast where the nearest library is more than three miles away. Even with the mobile service included, there is still quite a gap. There is a great swathe of west Belfast that depends on the mobile service and needs to be included in a greater way.

You may want to challenge my point and to provide more information, but please bear with me. If that picture is accurate and reflects how the situation will end up, it seems to me that the sense of involvement — a phrase that I picked up on and totally agree with — is more strained. My gut feeling is that that may hit ethnic minority groups harder. It will certainly hit the Irish language sector harder. I return to the Antrim example. If people have to travel a greater distance and have to depend on a mobile service, the specialist Irish language sector will not be catered for. One of my closest friends always tells me about the value of Irish language books

and works.

There seems to be a problem if you decide to go ahead with what is in the pipeline. We must ask whether there is a radical answer to that or a series of answers, including co-location. There is a vibrant Irish language community in west Belfast. Could a co-location idea be worked on there? I am also talking about ethnic minorities and about a general sense of involvement with your services. I do not want to pit west versus east or anything like that. There is a series of questions that needs to be fed in.

Dr D Elliott:

We had a public meeting in Andersonstown leisure centre at which a number of issues were raised, especially in relation to the Irish language.

Ms Knox:

I will pick up on the Irish language issue first. The EQIA process was very useful, as was the consultation, because it identified that there could be an impact on the specialist Irish language provision in west Belfast. If we go ahead, that is one of the things that we will have to address. How do we provide what I hope will be better support for the Irish-speaking population in that part of west Belfast? We have been engaging with the West Belfast Partnership Board to look at the needs of that area and its plans for the future. It goes back to the issue of co-location. How can we provide better services in that area in future?

You made a point about the colourful maps that are contained in the Assembly research paper. We have not had a chance to look at the paper in detail, but I must point out that the big red area that you mentioned includes Divis Mountain. The map does not make that clear, but we think that that is the case. We have to bear in mind that there are issues of geography, but I take your point.

Mr Leonard:

Even allowing for good old Divis Mountain, there is still a swathe there.

Ms Knox:

I take your point. We are aware of that.

Mr Leonard:

I would not want it to be recorded that Divis Mountain took up that entire area. That would be unfair to the people who live there.

Ms Knox:

We do take your point.

The Chairperson:

OK. We will bring this section of the meeting to a close. I thank David, Irene, Anne and Nigel for their engagement.