



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Progress of Priorities

15 September 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Michael McGimpsey
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Ms Carál Ní Chuilín)	Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Mr Mick Cory)	
Mr Arthur Scott)	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Ms Cynthia Smith)	

[The first 27 minutes of proceedings were not recorded due to technical difficulties.]

Ms Caral Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

That is a fair enough question to ask. Can you remember when the most recent evaluation was presented to the Committee?

Mr Arthur Scott (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

I cannot remember offhand.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

We will get the most recent one to you, along with a due date for the next evaluation.

Mr Sheehan:

I want to ask about the World Police and Fire Games. I know that you visited New York recently to attend the games. Did you learn anything during your trip, and is there anything that can be applied to the games when they come here in 2013?

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Unfortunately, owing to the weather, we were able to attend only the opening event. It was quite a big occasion, and there were lessons to be learned about the timing of the event and organising initiatives around it. The number of athletes involved meant that the opening ceremony took hours to complete. Team USA comprised almost 4,000 athletes, while Australia and Canada each sent thousands of competitors. Many hours had passed by the time the parade was completed. It is anticipated that 10,000 athletes will compete in the World Police and Fire Games here, so the opening ceremony will not take as long. Lessons have been learned as a result.

Communication among the World Police and Fire Games board of directors, athletes and the Department was quite good. It was only when we got to New York that we saw that things really began to count down from then. We anticipate having very regular meetings about the games. There are things that we will hope to exploit but did not get a chance to in New York. We talked to some of the athletes' families, who were quite prepared to travel from New York to Philadelphia to see the Liberty Bell, and to tourist events in the surrounding areas. I assumed that

they were prepared to spend some money. Therefore, I wish to see a good, robust tourism strategy that will promote opportunities outside Belfast. It is nearly four hours from New York to Philadelphia, and people were prepared to travel for that length of time when they were in New York. If we look at what is available in the radius from Belfast around the whole of the North, we will have good tourism opportunities as a result of the World Police and Fire Games.

Mr Mick Cory (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

We met the company this week to discuss New York and the lessons learned. I am aware that the company is preparing a report for its board, which is due to meet shortly to build on those lessons. To add to the list, no one expected the weather that occurred. There should have been a contingency for a major weather event out there, but there was no plan B, and that is something that we should take on board.

The members of the company's team were each there for a specific purpose and to oversee a specific activity. For example, how did the registration system work? How did the promotion system work? How did the liaison with the athletes work? Each of those people is expected to produce a report for the board so that it can ensure that it learns from what has happened.

Ms Cynthia Smith (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure):

It was not just about learning lessons but about taking the opportunity to promote the games here in two years' time. We were talking earlier about the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games. Looking ahead, there is a fantastic opportunity to promote our place on the world stage. I will remind the Committee of the economic benefits that we are talking about: up to 25,000 people, between athletes and other participants, will bring in more than £15 million, which is a fantastic opportunity. We are really keen to maximise the benefits.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Even £15 million at this stage is a very conservative estimate. The Committee will be informed about this throughout, but we hope to use joined-up approaches for events such as the World Police and Fire Games so that several Departments can combine physically and actively to promote tourism and economic potential for the North, and even for the island. From talking to some of the athletes, I gather that they are interested in seeing iconic sites, even in the South.

There is huge potential for this, which so far has all been very positive.

Mr Swann:

Minister, I notice that the chairman of the board of Libraries NI, Dr David Elliott, has recently resigned. What is the intended timescale for replacing David? Have you appointed a further two councillor board members yet? What is your timescale for doing so? We have been waiting since May for that board to be filled completely. Are you having difficulties appointing two councillors? Are you concerned at the resignation of the chairman in a time frame in which there are two consultations under way on the long-term sustainability of libraries? One concerns the closure of 10 libraries and the other is the newly launched consultation on the reduction of library hours. Is the board not content with what is happening?

Ms Ní Chuilín:

I have heard of no discontent on the board, although that is not to say that there is none. If people are discontent, we normally hear about it in the media. You are right. We are looking at a process of appointing an interim chairperson. The board's membership has been filled.

Ms Smith:

On the chairman's position, we want to fill it as soon as possible, and we are taking steps to do so. In the meantime, an interim chairperson will be appointed to manage that process. None of that should impact on the important job that the board has ahead of it. As you have said, Mr Swann, the consultations on opening hours and library closures are ongoing. The board will look very carefully at the results of the second stage of the consultation on closures. It has just initiated the consultation on opening hours. We are very keen that the process be as inclusive as possible.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

The consultation started on 12 September and is open until 2 December.

Mr Swann:

To clarify, have a further two councillors have been appointed to the board?

Mr Cory:

No.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

We have, however, taken every step to enable that to happen.

Mr Swann:

There is concern and scepticism, Minister, that the second consultation — the one on the reduction of library hours — has been commenced at the same time as the consultation on rural closures is going on. There will now be additional pressures put on the councillor members to —

Mr Cory:

Let me clarify that. The consultation on the rural closures has already taken place.

Mr Swann:

The board has not —

Mr Cory:

The board now needs to look at that.

Mr Swann:

The board has not made its decision.

Mr Cory:

Exactly.

Mr Swann:

Councillor members may now be coming under pressure for their local libraries to have reduced hours.

Mr Cory:

There is a lot of public interest in the matter, of course. It is a matter for the board, obviously.

On the councillor appointments, we have nine councillors on the board. Replacements are needed for two, and that process is under way. If the Committee wants, we can set out the timescale and give Committee members a better understanding of when these things will be dealt with.

Similarly, with the position of chairperson, the process is under way to appoint the interim chairperson. We can give you an indication as to the timescale for appointment of the permanent chairperson, if you want.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

I am very aware of the interest that you in particular, Mr Swann, have raised on the libraries issue. Libraries NI needs to satisfy all the board members, current and new, should it be through two awaydays or any other format, such as lengthy planning meetings, on the implications of the review that has happened. Correct me if I am wrong, but it would be unfair to expect new members, without any experience or information, to go through the process without that happening. The board should at least bring new members up to date on what has happened. I am sensitive to that.

Mr McMullan:

Minister, I congratulate you and your Department on your list of priorities. It is very detailed and forward-thinking.

I have a question on the promotion of social interventions, including community-based arts and community festivals. Communities categorised as being deprived areas, whether they are thought of as such or are categorised as being so under the Noble index, should not in any way be victimised in their applications for grants. Some of them have been in the past because the Noble index has been used as a yardstick, and some groups that have applied for funding have no guarantee that communities in those deprived areas will get their share.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

I thank the member for his question. I think that it is fair to say that the Arts Council in particular

has been very good. It has a substantial budget going into areas that experience multiple deprivation levels. The issue of not so much protecting but ensuring that community festivals and arts groups receive the funding that they need has been raised at this Committee and through questions in the House. They will never receive the funding that they need, but the Arts Council, through the annual support for organisations programme (ASOP) and the infrastructure that has gone into the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC), the Lyric Theatre and others, has undertaken extensive consultation with groups from deprived communities in surrounding areas about how they access it.

Access is one thing; continued funding is another. I think that all Departments have to be mindful of TSN objectives when they award funding.

Ms Smith:

The major method of funding through the Arts Council is ASOP. The Committee will be aware that we recently undertook an evaluation of the programme, and we will be presenting the findings to the Committee later in the term.

Mr Swann:

Minister, one of your priorities at paragraph 14 in the briefing paper is “To develop the Creative Industries”. Will you and your Department ensure that, before undertaking any development in this important area, balance is given to all creative industries?

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Do you mean urban and rural? I know where you are coming from.

Mr Swann:

Not just urban and rural, Minister, although I am glad that you take that concern on board. There have been some indications that there has been a bias towards digital over the craft-based industries. Those priorities should be looked at in any forward work programme.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

I understand that there will be a presentation to the Committee on creative industries. I spoke this

week with people who are trying to advance and develop the creative industries, and I have been very mindful of a question raised by a member of your party around the differences between urban and rural industries. Although all Departments have to be mindful of it, the issue is around the criteria for applying for the scheme.

Ms Smith:

As the Minister said, we are mindful of the potential of the creative industries and what they can do to stimulate an innovative economy. We are very conscious of the need for the joined-up approach that you spoke about. We have been looking at how we can develop a strategic framework and have committed to bringing that to the Committee later on.

The Chairperson:

You will understand that the Committee is considering an inquiry into the creative industries, and we were wondering what the status of that framework is.

Ms Smith:

We can liaise with you on the timing so that it fits in best with your investigation and review. We are hopeful of bringing the framework to the Committee later this autumn, after the Minister has had a chance to look at it as well.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

After the initial meeting that I had this week, I anticipated that being done by either the end of October or the beginning of November.

The Chairperson:

Is that for a completed framework or for initial findings?

Ms Smith:

We can do it for initial findings and look at the options for developments.

The Chairperson:

It would be useful for the Committee to have input into that as well.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Absolutely.

Mr Scott:

It is driven by the creative industries and seeks to stimulate a culture of innovation and collaboration. Through the projects that it supports, it will seek to secure provision of long-term value for the region. The prioritisation in some of the subsections for the digital economy, which the member mentioned, is because it is best placed to access international markets and enhance the region's global reputation. That ties in with the Executive and the Assembly's commitment to try to rebuild and balance our economy.

Each round of the creative industries innovation fund (CIIF) is subject to an evaluation, and lessons are learned. The scheme has moved on. It does not forget the importance of supporting those who are involved in the crafts, but the economic potential and job creation potential in some of those sectors have to be recognised in how the fund is prioritised. The fund is a moving feast, and it will adjust as lessons are learned as the evaluation is carried out.

The Chairperson:

Has the evaluation of the most recent round of funding been completed?

Mr Scott:

There would have been an evaluation of the most recent round of funding, yes.

The Chairperson:

Has that been completed?

Ms Ní Chuilín:

It would be helpful to share. Are you asking for that evaluation?

The Chairperson:

It would be helpful for us, given the fact that we are looking at that in particular.

Ms Smith:

We are very happy to work closely with you and share whatever information we have from previous evaluations of the fund.

Mr Swann:

Thank you.

The Chairperson:

To round up, I have a few short questions. Do you have any update regarding pre-training camps for London 2012?

Ms Ní Chuilín:

None, but we met the Jordanian Paralympics team, who are still quite interested. You were at that meeting, Chairperson. We are still hearing that the Chinese are very interested in coming to the Salto centre in Lisburn. We are led to believe that that same interest is still being shown and the same questions still being asked in a positive way by the Indonesians. The Australian boxers are coming, and we are hoping to pursue many others.

I am sure that you will appreciate that I am not trying to withhold information from the Committee, but there is a difficulty in that the process is hugely competitive. It is almost as if some sort of commercial sensitivity is being applied.

The Chairperson:

We understand.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

We have met regularly with Sport NI and have insisted that it use every best effort to try to attract people here, not only for pre-games training but for qualifying events. The Lisburn Racquets Club is hosting the Yonex Irish International Badminton Championship qualifying event in December. We are aware that there is a lot of media interest in the subject, notwithstanding the interest coming from elected representatives, including you.

The Chairperson:

On the back of the questions that Mr Swann asked about the appointment of an interim chairman of Libraries NI, will decision-making on phase 2 be delayed while an interim chairman or a permanent chairman is found?

Mr Cory:

No.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

It is not likely to.

Mr Cory:

The board has a quorum and is in a position to make decisions. There should be provision to take forward a decision on the appointment of an interim chairperson.

The Chairperson:

There are, obviously, concerns in the communities that will be affected by potential closures, because the delay has already had an impact.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Absolutely.

The Chairperson:

Finally, a lot of your paper is predicated on the Programme for Government. To what extent have you and your Department had input into the Programme for Government?

Ms Ní Chuilín:

All political parties are now looking at the Programme for Government. To be frank, our Department's input cannot be finalised until those discussions have been concluded. We anticipate that happening quite soon, but I cannot say when. The pressure to deliver a Programme for Government is with us all. We have done some work on a draft Programme for Government,

but we cannot conclude that work until all the discussions have been finalised.

The Chairperson:

No other member has indicated a wish to ask a question. I thank you all for your attendance this morning.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Thank you. Further information will be provided on some of the questions that were asked today. I restate my genuine offer for anyone to make suggestions on any aspect of the Department's work. That was raised in the first instance about Líofo 2015, and again during a subsequent question on Ulster Scots. If there are things that I or my Department can do better with Líofo 2015, and people have genuine suggestions to make, I am genuinely open to hearing what those are. If the Committee feels that I was discourteous by not coming to it in advance of launching Líofo 2015, I apologise. That was not my intention. However, I take on board what has been said, and I thank the Committee again.