



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**‘Meeting the Demands for a Modern
Public Library Service in Northern
Ireland – Stage 2’: Briefing**

6 October 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

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Northern Ireland – Stage 2’: Briefing**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

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

The Chairperson:

Good morning. Thank you very much for coming this morning. Irene, do you want to introduce your team?

Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI):

If I may, Chair, I will pass straight to Nigel Macartney, who is the new interim chairperson of

Libraries NI, to do the introductions.

Mr Nigel Macartney (Libraries NI):

I hope the term “new interim” does not suggest that there are going to be more. *[Laughter.]*

Chairperson and members, thank you very much for the invitation to see you again. We are going to brief you on the consultation phase of stage 2 of the strategic review of libraries. As you are aware, I have taken over as interim chairperson of the board of Libraries NI; my appointment was confirmed by the Minister very recently. Previously, I chaired the board’s services committee and was involved in the strategic review exercise from that point of view.

My colleagues this morning are Irene Knox, chief executive; Terry Heron, director of business support; and Muriel Todd, business manager with responsibility for libraries, mainly in the south and west of the Province, and our key themes of learning and information — we like to make sure people have enough on their plate.

Originally, we briefed your predecessors on stage 2 of the strategic review in February this year, shortly after the consultation process began, and we attended the Committee, at your request, to brief you at the end of June.

The decision-making process has been delayed longer than either we or the communities affected would have wished, but that was because of the impact of local elections on the make-up of the board. As you know, the term of office of council members on the board came to an end at the time of the local government elections. Although the board continued to function during the period between the elections and the reappointment of councillors by the Minister, it was decided that stage 2 of the strategic review was too important to be taken forward without the input of elected members, and I am sure that the Committee would agree with that.

I am very pleased to say that the councillor members of the board who were re-elected in May were re-appointed to the board by the Minister at the end of July, and they attended their first board meeting of the new session on 8 September. The board meeting was followed by a workshop at which all board members were given an opportunity to begin the process of

reviewing the information collected during the public consultation process. As I think you will understand, the paperwork is very substantial and we are having to work our way through it. A second workshop was held on 21 September and a third will be held tomorrow, Friday 7 October. I really must pay tribute to my colleagues on the board, who definitely know the importance of this matter and who have devoted a considerable amount of time to it.

All board members recognise the value that communities place on their local library, and they want to ensure that they have given due consideration to all the information that has been obtained during the consultation process. At the outset of that process, we said that we wanted the public consultation to be as inclusive as possible, and it is our view that we have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the public have had an opportunity to express their views and to contribute to the way forward. Indeed, since the public consultation closed in April, officers have continued to meet with a number of library groups — at their request — to obtain further clarification on issues raised by them and, in some cases, to discuss options and proposals from those groups, including alternative approaches to the delivery of services.

We are all aware that councils are developing village plans under the rural development programme. Some of the campaign groups have been involved in that process, and the board has received reports on those activities at its various meetings.

The briefing paper details the consultation process, which included questionnaires, 11 public meetings, meetings with local councils and public representatives, consultation with staff members directly impacted by the proposals, meetings with the trade unions and deputations to the board on behalf of a number of the campaign groups. Over 6,000 responses to the questionnaire were received, which have been analysed by a statistician who is on secondment to Libraries NI from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

The briefing paper highlights the range of statistical information obtained through the questionnaire process. The report on the questionnaires also records the comments made by those who responded to the questionnaires; some were in favour of the proposals and others, quite a lot, were against them. Over 1,400 people attended the public meetings held in each of the towns or villages impacted by the proposal. Irene, myself or David Elliott were at virtually all those

meetings. The subjects tackled at that range of meetings included the proposals to close libraries and, in the case of Armagh, the clustering of the branch library and the Irish and local studies library on a single site. Records of the meetings were published on the Libraries NI website a few days after each meeting, and a contact name was provided if anyone wished to seek clarification or comment on any of the points recorded.

Some of the key points made at the public meetings included the statement that libraries are community spaces and, in some areas, are the last remaining public service. Some people questioned the vision for the future of the library service, which was subject to consultation at stage 1, and indicated that their local libraries, despite their deficiencies, were sufficient to meet their needs. It was said that libraries are seen as shared spaces and are often the only real shared space in some communities. The importance of libraries for children and young people and to the development of literacy skills was also highlighted, as was the importance of the library as a place of social stimulation for older people.

A draft equality impact assessment was published, and a focus group was held for organisations that represent people in specific section 75 categories. After the consultation process began, new guidance was published on the rural impact assessment process, and, having taken advice from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), analysis has been undertaken of the information held by Libraries NI and obtained during the consultation process, as well as from other sources such as the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS) and the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measures.

Our briefing paper highlights some of the concerns expressed during the public consultation process about the impact of the proposals in rural areas, such as the geographic isolation of some communities; the poor public transport links in many rural areas and the high cost of public transport; the fact that, given the lack of other public services and buildings in rural communities, the library is a key focal point for the community and contributes to social cohesion. Finally, the support provided through the Library Service for people who are unemployed and live some distance from job centres and use the library, particularly the free internet access, to access information, look for jobs, etc.

The board is very well aware of the strength of feeling in many communities about the strategic review. It has been heartened by the response received from communities, many of whom would admit that they took their local library for granted. Usage of some of the libraries has increased during the consultation process, but one of the key issues that the board will have to consider is whether that increased usage can be sustained. Sustainability is critical, particularly in the current financial climate in which considerable savings are being required from Libraries NI. It is even more important that the best use is made of increasingly scarce resources so that services can be affordable in the future.

Finally, I mentioned that the board is reviewing the information that it has available to it and that a third workshop is being held tomorrow. It is anticipated that the board will be in a position to make decisions on the way forward at its meeting on 20 October. Thank you for your time this morning. We will be pleased to try to answer any of the questions that you would like to put to us.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation and your briefing papers. You have indicated that the final decision should be made at the meeting on 20 October. How will that information be disseminated to affected libraries, communities, ourselves and the media?

Ms Knox:

Our meetings are public. People can attend the board meetings, so it may well be that the message will get out very quickly. However, immediately after the board meeting, it is our intention to contact each of the libraries, obviously, and their staff. We also have contact details for the people who are leading each of the action groups and each of the committees, and we intend to contact those people immediately after the board meeting. We are very happy to contact the Committee Clerk after the board meeting, so that members of the Committee can be made aware. A press release will also be issued immediately after the board meeting for the wider public.

The Chairperson:

You gave us a considerable amount of information, but there is no information on the rural

impact assessment. Do you have those findings?

Ms Knox:

We have a rural impact assessment. It is with the board and will be considered; in fact, it is one of the issues that the board will be looking at tomorrow at its workshop. As a result of the consultation process, we identified a number of issues specific to rural communities. We have identified some examples of that in the information that we sent to you in the briefing paper, and the chair referred to some of those. The issues were very much about rural isolation, lack of services generally in rural areas, and the fact that many people saw the library as being almost the last public service that was available in that community. Of the 10 libraries that are being considered in terms of sustainability, nine are in rural areas. One of them, Greystone, is an urban area; it is part of Antrim. One of the sources of information, which is a publication by the inter-departmental rural-urban definition group, shows that of the nine in rural areas, seven are defined as villages, and two of them are defined as intermediate settlements. That determines the kind of profile of those communities.

The report also includes information on rural deprivation measures in the communities and information about other services that exist. Therefore, it is a fairly detailed report that has gone to the board. It is on the agenda for the workshop tomorrow, and they will be looking at that. They will be looking at what possible mitigation measures there could be, in the event that they do decide on closures, because that has got to be part of the process.

The Chairperson:

In relation to the section 75 groups that you have identified, 46% identified age as an issue. Can you be more specific on the breakdown of that? Do older people feel that they will be disproportionately isolated as a result of this? Or, is it younger people?

Ms Knox:

It is a combination of both. Forgive me, but I do not have that level of detail with me. From our analysis, we are very aware of who are users are. The highest percentage of library users are either the very young or older people. We recognise that there are issues for both categories around the potential closure of libraries, because they are very much customers of the Library

Service. It includes children and older people.

The Chairperson:

That is obviously reflected in the manner in which users of the library get to the library. Some 52% said that they walked to the library.

Ms Knox:

Yes. Those are obviously issues that are interlinked in this. Of those who responded to the questionnaire, 20% were senior citizens and 12% junior members. Some 52% who responded walked to the library, and 41% travelled by car. So, there is not a huge difference between the numbers, with just a 10% or 11% difference between those who travelled by car and those who walked. However, we recognise that quite a lot who walk may well be local young mothers with children, or may be elderly people. It is difficult to link up all those issues, but we recognise them and the board is very conscious of them.

Mr Swann:

It is good to see you again. I declare an interest as being involved in the Save Kells and Connor Library campaign. I welcome that the rural impact assessment is being considered at your third workshop. I am still concerned that it was not initiated at the start of the consultation. That was a weakness in the entire consultation process and of stage 2. The criteria used for stage 1 were applied exactly for stage 2. At our last meeting, I asked whether any cognisance was being taken of the number of visitors compared with the number of loans as a measurement, rather than just straight numbers about item borrowings because that is part of the vision document that libraries are setting out. We want to make libraries social centres rather than for just book borrowing.

Ms Knox:

We discussed the issue of the rural impact assessment last time, and I appreciate what you say. Obviously, the guidance changed after we started the process. We took advice from DARD, and it has been aware of how we have been doing the rural impact assessment. You will see that we have taken a different approach to, for example, opening hours.

The criteria used were the same as we used in stage 1 because it was important to be

consistent. However, the fact that we have, for example, done a rural impact assessment means that we looked specifically at the needs of rural communities. The board will be looking at those tomorrow. There is obviously a slight difference in that because we are looking largely at rural areas. We have updated figures, and the Committee has a copy of them, that cover visitors, loans and active members. All those are important issues. They are key indicators of the use of the library. It is the sort of information that we publish annually.

I agree with you that libraries are about more than just lending books. Lending books is very important; it is our core service. However, a substantial number of people will come into the library to read newspapers or use the computers. There is a social aspect for a lot of older people, dealing with the isolation that many people feel. A lot of young mothers with children attend rhyme times, which allows them to socialise with other young mothers and helps to develop children's skills. All those issues are part of the consideration throughout the process.

Mr Swann:

I welcome the fact that the board has taken all those issues into consideration. You are fully aware that there was a concern at the start that just the stage 1 criteria would be applied with cold, hard statistics, rather than taking into consideration the social impacts that will affect rural libraries. I also mentioned last time the issue of libraries being a membership organisation. It still concerns me that there is no detail of a membership drive being driven centrally by Libraries NI to support those libraries under threat of closure or decreasing numbers. Is there not an obligation on the board to support its own, for want of a better description?

Mr N Macartney:

The board is very aware of that. Several of us attended the public meetings, and the point was made by members of the public that, in some cases, they would hold their hands up and clearly recognise that the library was in their back yard, as it were. Equally, we recognise the point that was made to us, which was that we need to find ways, perhaps new ways, of promoting the library to the local community as well as across the whole of Northern Ireland. You will find that there are plans; indeed, there are activities already in operation to attract membership and drive up awareness.

Ms Muriel Todd (Libraries NI):

This year, as part of our business plan, each library has to put its own plans in place to increase membership. In the past, we have perhaps been guilty of not always ensuring that people are members of the library and are using its services or activities such as rhythm and rhyme, for which a lot of young children come in with their mothers or carers. We never made it a point that they had to be members of the library to make use of those activities. People can come in and read papers and magazines without necessarily being a member, but we are now more aware of the need to increase our membership, and we are addressing that specifically. We are also doing a lot of outreach programmes in shopping centres, educational establishments and colleges — wherever things are going on in the local community, such as local fairs, and so on. We go there and push the idea of membership.

Ms Knox:

We have also looked at the kind of big recruitment activities that have happened elsewhere, such as the Love Your Library campaign, which ran UK-wide three years ago under the auspices of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), to some degree. However, when those campaigns are evaluated, they do not necessarily bring about sustained usage. You get people who join because it is in their face. The issue for us is the sustainability. We are finding that, through the more targeted marketing that we are doing now, it is about trying to get people in and to continue to use the library rather than join, come once, maybe not bring their books back — that has been an issue recently — after which we do not see them again. It is about achieving more sustained usage through targeted marketing, which is proving more successful.

Mr Swann:

Will we be able to see that more targeted marketing in future?

Ms Knox:

I can give you an example. Last Saturday was fair day in Rathfriland, and we had a stall where we gave out membership leaflets. We held an event a few weeks ago in one of the shopping centres. That is very much about using our existing resources rather than a marketing budget, as such.

Mr Swann:

This is my final question, Chair. Are those activities that you mentioned the result of learning from stage 1 and stage 2, or were you always involved in that, but nobody recognised it?

Ms Knox:

There probably would not have been as much of that kind of activity before. A year ago, we employed a marketing professional who came to us from the private sector. He has been working very closely with us in order to ensure a more focused approach to marketing than we or our predecessors would have done in the past. We are even analysing lapsed membership to determine why people do not come back to use the library.

Mr Swann:

Was he involved in any of the 10 libraries that are under threat in a bid to increase their memberships?

Ms Todd:

Not specifically, but we have asked him to look at that.

Mr D Bradley:

Good morning. Given the fact that a decision has not been taken on the closure of any libraries outside of greater Belfast, the review into opening hours has included libraries that are currently under threat. Is there not a danger that you are sending out mixed messages to those communities? Would it not have been more prudent to wait until the board made a decision on that? Surely that would have provided you with you more certainty as to the level of savings you were required to make through reduced opening hours.

Ms Knox:

I understand what you are saying about the possibility of sending out mixed messages over opening hours and the potential closures of libraries.

Mr D Bradley:

For example, when I looked through your proposals for reduced opening hours, I got the impression that libraries that were previously under threat of closure are now relatively safe, and I am sure that some staff and community members got the same impression.

Ms Knox:

The first thing I will say is that we had a business plan for this year, which timed the opening hours because we need to move that issue forward, and I know that we are going to talk about that just after this session. We needed to have a review of opening hours completed by 1 April, in order to make the savings that need to come out of that review. We had timetabled that to happen at this time because we had assumed that the stage 2 review decision would be done by now because, initially, it had been planned for June. However, it was delayed.

We recognised that there was potential for confusion, but to try to ensure that that confusion was minimised, all staff in libraries that are in stage 2 were talked to beforehand to ensure that they understood that we were assuming that those libraries would stay open because no decision had been made. Therefore, if they did stay open, the new opening hours would begin next April. In the document that we put up on the website, we also said that, at this stage, it was being assumed that the stage 2 libraries were staying open, and we contacted the campaign groups of each of those libraries and told them that was the position. Therefore, we understand the possibility of sending out mixed messages, but we tried our best to inform them that that was the case. As far as savings are concerned, I will hand over to Terry.

Mr Terry Heron (Libraries NI):

The stage 2 review was not designed to make savings, whereas the review of opening hours is about savings and nothing else. In the stage 2 review, the guarantee was given, as it was in the greater Belfast review, that any staff who were released as a result of any libraries being closed would be redeployed elsewhere. Therefore, there were no savings to be made from staff. The savings that might arise through stage 2 are quite small. They are to do with premises costs only, and we have not assumed any significant savings at all from that because no decision has yet been made about that stage 2 review.

Mr D Bradley:

I have a question about rural libraries. You said that there are 31 rural libraries. What are the criteria used to decide which libraries are rural and which are not?

Ms Knox:

We used the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Statistics, which were produced by NISRA, which define a rural population. There are various categories, and I think F, G and H are defined as rural, and there are population parameters within that. We use those statistics because they are recognised statistics that NISRA produce. That is how we defined “rural”.

Mr D Bradley:

Would it be possible to get a copy of that?

Ms Knox:

Yes. The information is available on the NISRA website, and we can give you the link to that. It is quite a large report, but I am sure that we can do that.

Mr Irwin:

I agree with Dominic. In the mix, the proposal for reduced opening hours has created some confusion, and some will see it as an indication that the libraries will stay open. There may have been a better way of doing that.

From your submission, I see that £176,000 was spent on marketing and promotional activities in 2009-2010, and that amount was almost halved in 2010-11. Was that spent centrally or was it allocated to individual libraries?

Mr Heron:

The marketing budget is a central budget. It is used to promote all libraries, and it is not allocated to the 100 individual libraries for them to spend. It is a central budget under the control of the marketing professional who has now been employed.

Mr Irwin:

I was on a previous Committee that looked at a number of issues, one of which was that the numeracy and literacy levels among adults in Northern Ireland are a problem, with a high numbers of adults having problems. Given that fact, should more not have been done to promote libraries to the general public in the past number of years, before we got to this stage? We are now at panic stations as a result of the cuts.

Mr N Macartney:

We are a new organisation. We have been in existence for only two and a half years, and we had to deal with the integration of the five previous library services, each of which did promotion in its own way. However, do not forget that we have lived through an extraordinary time in which financial pressures emerged quite suddenly, and that we are faced with a rapidly shrinking budget over the next few years. Indeed, that is a theme this morning. At the same time, there has been recognition by the board and this Committee that we need to increase the accessibility of libraries, and we are trying to steer between those two difficult demands.

If one were to write the history, one would say probably say that, over the past few years, the library services — in the plural — have probably not been promoted as actively and as effectively as they might have done. We are now taking forward a range of carefully calibrated plans to promote individual libraries in particular areas and the generality of services. That is a priority for the board, and a thread that runs through the business plan for the coming year and our corporate plan over the next three or four years. We recognise that that must be a high priority. We might have done more, but we cannot amend the past and we must move forward.

Mr McMullan:

Nigel, I am pleased to meet you again. Congratulations on your elevation.

Mr N Macartney:

It is only temporary.

Mr McMullan:

Do you agree that you have put the cart before the horse in announcing the closures of the

libraries before announcing the reduced opening hours? Did you take what you learned when you looked at the Belfast libraries into your examination of the rural areas and your proposals for closures in those areas?

I am a wee bit surprised and worried that the rural development programme did not figure in the psyche when you looked at a rural programme for libraries. Did the board — it is not the same board now that started out —

Mr N Macartney:

It is the same personnel.

Mr McMullan:

In fairness to everyone, everything seems to be weighted against the campaigns. The goalposts have been moved a few times, and the public has a strong argument. Did you enquire about the rural development programme and, in particular, the village plan section of that programme?

Mr N Macartney:

There are a couple of issues there. The first is the timing of the two major exercises. We are a victim of circumstance, as I think we have made plain. The Belfast strategic review took place 18 months ago. We planned stage 2 and announced it in December last year. At that stage, we knew that there were clouds on the financial horizon, but we did not know the scale of the reductions that we would have to make. As Terry Heron said, the opening hours review that we very reluctantly had to undertake was forced on us at a time that we would not have chosen. We are where we are, and we are not the only service the Committee is looking at that got caught in the jaws of this financial difficulty.

On the rural aspect, I think it was pretty clear from day one of the launch of the consultation that people responding both in writing and at public meetings had an acute sense that this was a rural issue. After we started the consultation we got the guidance from DARD that had just been released. All members of staff, me included, went on training courses on the way the new guidance should be interpreted. As Irene said, we have a very full rural appraisal document that the board has had since its meeting on 8 September. It has returned to it, and will do so again

tomorrow. My argument is that we have taken the rural issue very seriously. We have a rural appraisal, it will be published, and it is informing our decisions that we will have to take on 20 October.

Mr McMullan:

Does the board know how many villages on the stage 2 list for absolute closures have actually been accepted into the village plan and the rural development programme?

Ms Knox:

We do not know the exact figures because every council is at a different stage of the process. We have been linking with local councils and we have also asked for a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who has overall responsibility for the rural development programme, to discuss it with her. That was done at the suggestion of our Minister. We want to discuss with her potential opportunities that that might produce. Unfortunately, the first date for that meeting with the Agriculture Minister had to be cancelled because she had other commitments, but we now have another date to a discussion with her. We are aware of the various stages of the rural development programme that councils are in. We have seen some village plans, there are other village plans that are in the process of being developed, and we have had discussions with groups and local communities about those village plans where they are either in existence or being developed.

Mr McMullan:

Yes, but the point I am making is that some of those are coming on stream, but those that have been accepted and put that into the village plan now have their finances worked out and, in some cases, buildings that would incorporate the library are included in that plan. Do you not think that it is time to stall that date of 20 October until we find out what is happening with those village plans? There are some cases here that involve £100,000. Budgets are set aside there, although we do not know the budgets for the libraries. We are arguing here about some libraries under the threat of closure that have a budget worked out that would greatly enhance and help their upkeep.

It would be very unfair at this stage if the libraries did not afford that opportunity to those villages that are in the process of bringing that to the fore and firming up the rest of their budgets.

In some cases those budgets are sitting at nearly £100,000, and they can go further into the funding stream. I put it to you that, on 20 October, it would be an absolute tragedy for those villages not to be given that opportunity or ability to access the rest of the money and become, in your eyes, a viable unit.

Mr N Macartney:

As the Committee knows, we have been in consultation since December last year. After the close of the formal consultation phase in April, as Irene has said, discussions have continued with a number, though not all, of the communities. Whether we can take matters forward is dependent on the energy and the ability to form a team with whom we can discuss matters.

I take Mr McMullan's point that, if you assume that 20 October is a "black or white" day, it sounds a bit difficult in terms of closing off opportunities.

Mr McMullan:

That is your date.

Mr N Macartney:

I know. We have made some progress with a number of groups, and we have some understanding as to whether there is a likely prospect of, for instance, a new site in a proposal under the rural programme. In the board's final judgement, it will take into consideration whether there is an active prospect of something else coming over the horizon in the next year or so. It is not just "open or close"; it may well be that we continue the discussion and see whether we can move to a new location in co-operation with a local development.

Mr McMullan:

Are you saying now that 20 October is not the definite date?

Mr N Macartney:

There will be a decision, but that decision may be that there is a dialogue with a community that has already started to show fruit and that could reasonably be expected to deliver a solution that is satisfactory to the community and that meets the requirements of Libraries Northern Ireland.

Mr McGimpsey:

Sorry; I just missed a word. You said that there may be a dialogue with someone, and I missed it. With whom?

Mr N Macartney:

With the various parties representing that local community.

Mr McMullan:

Will the rural development programme be one of those dialogue groups?

Mr N Macartney:

Oh yes. One or two are already there. However, I must make it clear that there has to be a realistic prospect, from our understanding of the discussions, of something happening. We have had a number of presentations from local groups who have been very persuasive, but they have not got the resources, opportunity or buildings available to them for us to see a solution emerging.

Mr McMullan:

So on 20 October some of those groups on that list may be afforded the possibility of further discussions on their future?

Mr N Macartney:

It is possible.

Ms Knox:

We need to be careful. The board has not made any decisions yet. It will make decisions on 20 October, and it would be very wrong for us to prejudge those decisions. However, there are options that the board can look at.

Mr McMullan:

That is the point I am making. I do not want to labour it any longer. We are playing about with words here. I just want to find that, on 20 October, there could be libraries within that group

afforded the possibility of further discussions after that date on a viable future.

Mr N Macartney:

It remains a possibility. Irene is right to remind us that the board will have to make a decision. That decision will have to depend on whether there is a real, genuine, serious prospect of a solution that is suitable for all of the parties concerned.

The Chairperson:

Mr McMullan, I think that is probably the best that we are going to get at this stage in relation to that question, regardless of how many ways you ask it.

Mr McMullan:

OK.

Mr N Macartney:

Do not forget that we have three more meetings. We have a workshop tomorrow, a services committee meeting on the morning of 20 October and the board meeting that afternoon. No one here can predict what will come out of that. I do not have the authority to say that this or that will happen.

Mr Hilditch:

Most of the issues have been touched on, however a matter arose in the previous Committee, prior to the election, in relation to mileage. In the report, it gives mileage to the nearest library. That was established at that stage to be the mileage as the crow flies. Has that changed in any way? I am involved with the campaign to save the Carnlough library and, the Antrim coast road being what it is, there was major concern that the mileage did not reflect the hardship involved in travelling to it.

Ms Knox:

I confirm that the final report includes mileages from one location to the other, not just as the crow flies, but from Google Maps, which is in many cases a longer distance.

Mr Hilditch:

Another thing has emerged: have there been any discussions with local libraries and other property owners? Has that developed in any way? Have there been offers to improve libraries, even though there may not have been offers of new buildings?

Ms Knox:

There have been discussions, as part of this process, with other organisations and individuals about such possibilities.

Mr McGimpsey:

This is stage 2 of the strategic review, so effectively my specific constituency interest in South Belfast ended with stage 1. I have to say to colleagues that that was a massacre, and you shut 10 libraries, which were primarily in areas of economic disadvantage. Some of them, such as Belvoir, served a predominantly elderly population. Community cohesion, and so on, should have militated against the decision to shut them.

Therefore, it seems to me that Libraries NI will go through the process, but the bottom line is the resource that is available to you. What is your annual resource; what money do you need; and what have you to shave off your budget? That tells you how much you have to spend and how many libraries we will end up with. That is the harsh reality. The criteria relating to community cohesion and so on should have operated in places like Sandy Row but did not. Effectively, how much money are you looking to find?

Ms Knox:

I will answer this point and then hand over to Terry to address the resource point. I understand the point that Mr McGimpsey has made about Belfast. We initially consulted on 14 libraries in Belfast and we closed 10; but the situation now, over the past year, is that the libraries in Belfast, which we indicated were mitigating libraries for the closures, have shown a sustained and increased usage, in some instances by as much as 15% to 20%. There has been increased membership, loans and public access terminal (PAT) activity in the Belfast area over the past year. I understand that it is difficult for communities in that situation, but the strategic review in Belfast was about trying to improve services. As a result of that strategic review in Belfast, we

have been able to invest in three libraries — Shankill, Falls and Whiterock — as a result of money that came from the Department on the back of that.

Terry can answer your point about the resource.

Mr McGimpsey:

You mention the Shankill, Falls and Whiterock libraries, and that is very good; but it does not help people in south Belfast. You shut libraries in Belvoir and in Sandy Row, which is one of the most economically disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland.

The service started this 15 years ago. It is nothing to do with you, Irene. The service shut the Carnegie library, turned the library into a shop, reduced visiting hours again and again, and then declared the library redundant because it was not viable. That kind of step concerns me. The bottom line, as far as I can see, is the resource you have available to run your libraries. That will be a big factor. You are 100% funded by the Department. The Department has to find money; how much is the Department telling you to find?

Mr Heron:

The strategic review was not a cost-cutting exercise but a review carried out to ensure equity across all libraries. The savings that we are required to make over the next four years, as a result of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) process, equate to a cumulative amount of £10.285 million. The strategic review of libraries achieved minimal savings. The largest cost in libraries is staff costs, and a guarantee was made that staff would be redeployed to other libraries with the possibility of providing a better service overall. Therefore, there were minimal savings out of the strategic review in Belfast.

Mr McGimpsey:

I am simply trying to get a handle on how many of these libraries you will shut. Belfast was a disaster, and I am concerned for colleagues around the table. I am trying to get a rough handle on where we are going with all of this. As far as I can see, you have a hit list of six or eight or 10. However, you have a number of other libraries that are sustainable if they get significant investment, and that significant investment is not going to be forthcoming. I am just trying to see

where you are going with all of this. I am not sure that I am getting an answer. If I were a colleague sitting here looking at those libraries, I would be very concerned having looked at your track record.

That leads me on to my other point, which I have made in the past. The libraries are valued by local communities, and local communities are represented by local councillors. Surely, therefore, local councils would be best placed to look after those libraries. A strategic decision was made to set up a libraries board rather than have the libraries run by the councils. Again, that was nothing to do with you. Bearing in mind the fact that we are looking at smaller numbers, is there an option for local councils to step in and take over libraries and, therefore, work by partnership, such as we have seen at the Grove, for example?

Ms Knox:

The issue of whether local councils could take over libraries is not a matter for us. It would be a matter for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Assembly and the Executive. At the moment, the legislation states that Libraries NI looks after libraries. We are part of the development at the Grove. Libraries NI said at the outset that it wanted to work in partnership with others, and we are working in partnership with others to develop the facility.

Mrs McKeivitt:

I want to go back to the issue that MLA Irwin raised with regard to the improved membership and usage budget and the decrease in that of about £80,000 from 2009-2010 to 2010-11. If you look at the visitor numbers, business is booming in Northern Ireland libraries. However, given the fact that visitor numbers have increased in only a handful of those on the list, do you think that making the cut of £80,000 in that promotion for improved membership and usage was a mistake, or would those results not be that reliable?

Mr Heron:

I am not exactly sure what you are including in your figures for an £80,000 reduction.

Mrs McKeivitt:

The sum of £176,834 was allowed in 2009-10, and only £92,000 of that was used in 2010-11.

Mr Heron:

The budget for this year has increased again. Part of the 2009-2010 spend may relate to the launch of Libraries NI, and part of the promotion material may relate to a new organisation starting off with the requirement to establish its letterhead, its brand, its usage and its place. A lot of that may have been a one-off spend to deal with the establishment of Libraries NI.

As Eileen said earlier, a lot of the promotional spend is not additional spend: it includes the time and effort of our staff going to shopping centres or stalls to engage with the local population to try to enhance membership at their local libraries. The budget you are talking about with regard to promotional materials is an additional spend over and above that. It is not the full amount of spend in terms of trying to improve our membership. A lot of staff time is devoted to that, which is outside that budget.

Mr Ó hOisín:

The date of 20 October will weigh heavily for a number of people, and none more so than for those in the communities and villages where substantial work has been done in looking at alternatives to the option appraisal that was given to us here.

A number of the libraries being considered are possibly beyond redemption, and people have recognised that. However, for others, local councils, community groups, individuals and the private sector have all been looking at viable alternatives to what is in place currently. Something more than a possibility that those libraries will be looked at is needed. There needs to be a commitment that they will be looked at. I have talked to a few groups whose plans have been worked up incredibly well and would be almost “good to go” if they were looked at realistically. Is that a material consideration? As my colleague Mr McMullan said, there are plans at a very advanced stage of preparation. Would you not agree that those have to be considered by 20 October?

Mr N Macartney:

I have commented on that already. The board will take very seriously proposals that have been put to it. However, I have also said that those proposals must have community support. They

must be well worked out and be of benefit to all parties. It is not clear that all the proposals that have been put to us are well found. We have to make a judgement on each, and each case will be considered in its own right.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Are you giving a commitment to do that?

Mr N Macartney:

Each case will be considered in its own right; yes.

Mr McMullan:

May I ask that, before you take your decision, you contact the local councils again? There are councils that, because of confidentiality, cannot tell you that they are at an advanced stage in enhancing some of the buildings that are on your list. I ask that you contact the local authorities.

Ms Knox:

As a result of the workshop discussions that have already taken place, I have written to some of those local councils in the past couple of weeks.

Mr McMullan:

It is vital that they give you that information before you make your decision on 20 October. If that information is not included by 20 October, we will lose a weight of argument.

The Chairperson:

Is there an appeal process for libraries where there is discontent?

Mr N Macartney:

We have not provided an appeal process. Given the time that we allowed for the consultation process and the dialogue since the closure of consultation in April, we believe that we have all the information that we require to make a decision. I have indicated that there are possible ways forward in a number of cases, which gives us some flexibility. However, someone somewhere has to make a decision. We cannot leave people hanging on. Our decisions will be as well

founded as we can possibly make them.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for taking questions.