



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND
LEISURE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Library Opening Hours

8 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

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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
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Terry Heron)
Ms Irene Knox) Libraries NI
Mr Nigel Macartney)
Ms Helen Osborn)

The Chairperson:

I welcome Irene Knox, chief executive of Libraries NI; Nigel Macartney, the chairperson of the services committee; Helen Osborn, the director of library services; and Terry Heron, the director of business support. You are all very welcome. None of you is a stranger to us. Nigel, would you like to make an opening statement? We will follow that with questions. I understand that you are happy enough to take questions on the outworkings of the previous consultation, but we

will leave that until after we have taken questions on the opening hours.

Mr Nigel Macartney (Libraries NI):

Chairperson and members, thanks for the invitation to return to the Committee. You will recall that we initially briefed you on 6 October 2011 and highlighted that the proposal to reduce opening hours was just one of a number of measures that we have to take in our savings delivery plans. Those were published by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in draft form last December and were subsequently revised following the Budget 2010 consultation process.

Taken together, the savings delivery plans set out how we propose to achieve the cumulative savings required of Libraries NI in this comprehensive spending review period. As you know, those savings amount to £10,285,000. We indicated to you last time that the proposal to reduce opening hours is about delivering savings and living within our budget. There is nothing else that we wish to pursue in cutting opening hours. There is no other rationale for it apart from the need to achieve savings. No one in Libraries NI, neither the board nor the senior staff, really want to do it, but we have very little choice if we are to get anywhere near the £10 million that we need to save.

Given the quantum of savings that has to be found — in fact, we have already found £2.7 million of savings by cutting our back-office functions and, with those, the number of back-office staff — the delivery of front line services really cannot be spared any more. We recognise that our proposals would have a detrimental impact on front line services; that was highlighted in the draft and final savings delivery plan.

As you know, a wide-ranging public consultation process closed last Friday. As you would expect, the level of response from library users, public representatives, statutory, voluntary and community organisations was very significant. As well as over 7,000 completed questionnaires, detailed submissions have been received from a range of organisations and individuals in addition to a considerable number of e-mails, postcards, letters and petitions. We are aware, of course, of the Assembly debate and the fact that the Committee received its own representations; you forwarded those to Libraries NI, and we thank you for that. DCAL has also forwarded to us a

significant number of letters, postcards and e-mails that the Minister received.

Given that level of response, analysis continues. As we state in the briefing, the work that has been carried out so far indicates that respondents share the concerns of the board and senior staff about the impact of reducing opening hours. Submissions, letters and comments received, both in writing and at meetings that officers attended with a number of groups, served to reinforce the board's view that people value very highly their library and the services that it provides. We all recognise that budget cuts and reducing opening hours and staff numbers will curtail our ability to provide as wide a range of services as we have been able to offer in the past two years and limit the opportunity for people to use them.

I know that Committee members recognise that libraries provide more than just books, as fundamental as that service is, particularly for those who cannot afford to buy books. Respondents also commented on, among other things, the importance of libraries, particularly at the present time, in facilitating access to information via the internet provision. They mentioned the support provided to learners of all ages but, in particular, for preschool children and their parents and carers through the rhythm and rhyme sessions and for school-age children who do class visits and get support with homework. They also commented on the value placed on libraries by older people, which I hope includes me, who see it as a place of security and warmth and for social interaction. The importance of libraries as a shared space that contributes to community cohesion and social inclusion is another key factor that was drawn to our attention.

A number of general concerns about the proposals have also been expressed: that the spread of activity levels within bands — particularly band 4 — is too broad; that small libraries were being impacted disproportionately; that the use of key indicators — such as active members issues, computer usage, and visits — to assess activity levels was something of a blunt instrument and did not take account of the wider educational, economic and social value of libraries; and that reducing opening hours in small libraries would impact on their viability in the long term and threaten their ongoing operation. Detailed submissions have also been received in relation to the individual circumstances of specific libraries and of the community served by particular libraries. All of the information collated during the consultation process will be considered by the board in detail before any decisions are made.

Our board has demonstrated through its previous actions that public consultation processes are genuine; I am personally very keen on that. The board has demonstrated that it wants to hear the views of library users and that, as far as is possible and realistic, it tries to respond constructively to those views. I have no doubt that the board will wish to do so again. As I said at the beginning, we also have to recognise that the proposal to reduce opening hours is just one of a number of measures to achieve the savings that have to be delivered if we are to live within the current budget allocation.

As you know, we anticipate that the board will consider the results of the consultation process on 21 December. At that stage, it will need to determine the way forward if the savings required are to be achieved in the next three years.

Thanks for listening. We will now try to answer your questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. You indicated that the decision will be taken on 21 December, after which there will be a consultation on how each library should adapt for the determined number of hours. How long will that consultation take?

Ms Helen Osborn (Libraries NI):

There will be consultation with library customers over a three-week period. That is the general cycle of library use; it is how long books are issued for. We see most of our regular customers within that period.

The Chairperson:

That will be a very condensed piece of work.

Ms Osborn:

It is condensed local engagement.

The Chairperson:

As well as engagement, will library usage be monitored?

Ms Osborn:

We already have those statistics. The consultation will be local engagement with our customers.

The Chairperson:

Will a response be made to each of those who have responded to the initial consultation? The number is in excess of 7,000 people. Will you respond to them?

Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI):

We do not always know who those 7,000 people are. Some of them will not have put their names or details on the questionnaire, whether online or written. They did not have to do that if they did not want to. We will certainly make it public that we are consulting with people at an individual library level, and we will put it on our website, as we did before. We are on Twitter and Facebook, so we will make that information as widely available as we can.

The Chairperson:

You have never made a secret of the fact that this is about efficiency savings and that there will be job losses. Where are you with moneys being required for the redundancy packages?

Ms Knox:

In the past couple of weeks, we have received confirmation from DCAL that it is making available about £700,000 to us to help us to fund a voluntary redundancy programme. That money has to be spent in this financial year, so any voluntary redundancies have to be implemented by 31 March 2012. We have already issued a trawl notice to all our staff at all grades right across the organisation, and we have received expressions of interest from quite a substantial number of people. Obviously, we cannot progress that until we know what the outcome of the consultation will be and what the implications will be for individual libraries, but we have that information. We have to give staff three months' notice of termination of employment on voluntary redundancy grounds. Therefore, we will issue protective notices to all staff who applied at the end of December, but we will make it very clear that no decisions have

been made; it is simply to make sure that they get their statutory notice period if they are then accepted for voluntary redundancy.

Mrs McKeivitt:

Thanks for coming this morning. Do you reckon that the letters about the three months' notice will go out before Christmas since the decision is to be made on 21 December? Is that when they will go out?

Mr Terry Heron (Libraries NI):

They will probably go out before that. They will go out to all staff who have expressed interest. The letters will make it very clear that they are general letters sent to everybody who expressed interest, to comply with our statutory requirements. The letters will also make it clear that no final decisions will be made until after the board considers the issue and decisions are made in December or whenever.

Mrs McKeivitt:

A lot of meetings have happened, and you have made yourself very available for public meetings and for library users to express their concerns. You said at a few of those meetings that you were quite willing to look at individual libraries and the response to them. Can you see a change in any of the libraries, from band to band, perhaps? I will use the example of Kilkeel library, because I know that you have been there. I know that you have had a lot of letters, e-mails and representations from people. The people are concerned about that the band that the library was put in, considering that a proposal for a new library had gone out to tender and it was going to double in size. Can you foresee that, in the context of the consultation, there will be a change to some individual libraries?

Ms Knox:

The whole point of going out to consultation, which we demonstrated in our stage 2 consultation, is that we do not have all the answers. We go out with the information that we have at a particular time. The point of consultation is to go to the public and to library users to ask them whether there is anything else that we need to know and take into account so that the board can make an informed decision.

As you said, I met a group of people from Killeel who represent a whole range of organisations, as we did in lots of other areas. People made very good points. I cannot say at this stage what the outcome of that will be; what I can say is that we will look in detail at the responses concerning individual libraries and that the board will get a full report on the points that have been made. In some cases there are issues that the board will want to take into account that could impact on individual libraries, but we are still working through that process.

As Nigel said in his introduction, there has been a huge volume of response to the consultation, which is good, and we wanted that. However, a lot of work is ongoing to analyse those responses. Nigel can speak for the board, but the board, based on its past record, will want to look at all those responses in detail.

Mrs McKevitt:

I want to ask about lone-manned libraries that have a computer. Do you see a problem if an incident were to happen in which a member of staff had to ask a member of the public to leave because of inappropriate use of the computer? How would a member of staff who is on their own be protected, particularly in a band 4 library, which is only open for a few hours a week?

Ms Osborn:

Clearly, in our lone-working policy, the security of staff is paramount. We have a substantial number of single-staff libraries in which staff already deal with that kind of incident quite routinely. The type of activity that you describe is already dealt with in single-staff libraries.

Mr Swann:

Thank you, folks. I want to return to the issue of voluntary redundancies. I know that you talked about cutting the equivalent of 33 full-time jobs, and we realise that, with efficiencies, there has to come some sort of pain. Irene, you said that there has been a significant interest. Is there enough interest to cover that requirement to shed 33 jobs so that you will not have to impose compulsory redundancies?

Ms Knox:

Absolutely. Many more than 33 people have shown an interest, and some members of staff may be disappointed as a result. We have a lot of staff in the service who are over 50. There has never previously been an opportunity for staff, particularly those at the front line, to avail themselves of voluntary redundancy opportunities. When we implemented voluntary redundancies over the past two years to achieve the saving of £2.7 million, those were taken up by middle- and senior management staff who were not working in branches. There are people in branches who would be keen to avail themselves of the opportunity.

Mr Swann:

The PR for Libraries NI will be very important when those protective notices are issued, because, as you reflected in the previous two consultations, it has been a bit patchy. We need to make it clear to the public and the unions that those are people who want to go. There is a danger there of more negative PR.

Ms Knox:

We have been in consultation with unions about the process, and the unions are very aware that we are looking at voluntary redundancies of people who want to avail themselves of the opportunity; not compulsory redundancies.

Mr Swann:

It might be good to get a wee bit of pre-emptive PR out on that, just to cover yourselves.

The consultation on the reduction of hours included all the libraries that were up for closure in stage 2. Two libraries were marked for closure at that stage, so, by my reckoning, you have a minimum of 44 hours to play with. Can you guarantee that those 44 hours are at least a minimum starting block that you can use to increase more libraries somewhere else?

Ms Knox:

There are 44 hours of opening there. Staff who worked in those libraries still have to be redeployed. In the stage 2 process, not stage 1, we said that those staff can avail themselves of the voluntary redundancy process if they want to. We are talking about 1,200 staff hours being

saved, which is the equivalent of around 600 opening hours. So, there are 44 staff hours there. I think all of those staff are indicating that they want to be redeployed.

Mr D Bradley:

Good morning. How will the resulting decrease in the number of staff impact on the working conditions of the remaining staff with regards to leave and sickness leave and so on? You said that you want to avoid ad hoc closures of libraries, but will that not be an inevitable consequence of that reduction in staff levels?

Ms Knox:

Helen will pick up on ad hoc closures, and I will speak about working conditions. All of our staff have terms and conditions that are agreed by the National Joint Council. Staff will continue to work to those conditions. The whole purpose of this is to make sure we have enough staff cover for libraries when they need to be open. The number of staff in each library will depend on a range of factors; for example, a library that is on two floors could not open both floors unless it had a minimum of two staff. All those factors will need to be looked at on an individual library basis.

Staff are entitled to annual leave, or, if they are sick, they are entitled to sick leave. The purpose of this is to try to make sure that we have enough staff to make sure that all of those conditions that apply to staff continue to apply and that there will be no difference in that.

Ad hoc closures are a real difficulty, because they could potentially happen. If we have a library with two members of staff, and, for whatever reason, both those members of staff were off sick, it is possible that that library may close for a very short period until we can get cover in from another library. We are trying to make sure that we still have enough staff in the system to be able to avoid ad hoc closures as far as is possible.

Ms Osborn:

I am not sure I can add anything about ad hoc closures; that has been covered.

Mr D Bradley:

It is not an entirely satisfactory situation, to say the least. Going back to Mrs McKeivitt's question, are the four bands set in stone?

Ms Knox:

The four bands were put in place in order to deliver the required level of savings. That is the rationale behind that. As Nigel said in his introduction, in the consultation exercise people commented that, for example, band 4 is too broad in that there are libraries doing over 60,000 activities and libraries that are doing over 20,000 activities. The question is whether those libraries should be in the same band with the same number of hours. That is the kind of thing that the board will be looking at.

No, the bands are not set in stone, but unless there is more money, we will still have to find that level of savings. So, if it is possible to play around with those bands to, for example, put an extra band in somewhere or even to divide band 4 into more hours, we still have to find the savings from somewhere else. The bands are not set in stone; they will be looked at. What is set in stone is the fact that the savings have to be delivered.

Mr D Bradley:

I am concerned about the criteria that you used. You have mentioned that many respondents to the consultation reflected that this is a blunt instrument. My concern is that many libraries that were operating effectively and efficiently and as well as or possibly better than some of the bigger libraries that have benefitted in hours have, because of this exercise, lost hours and are no longer able to operate in the effective and efficient way in which they were heretofore able to.

Ms Knox:

No library has lost hours yet. No library's hours will be changed before 1 April. This is still at the proposal stage, so there is no change as yet. Helen might want to pick up on the point about the other activities and the fact that this is a blunt instrument, which it is.

Ms Osborn:

It certainly is a blunt instrument, and, clearly, if opening hours are reduced, access to services, the

number of activities, the social space that libraries provide, the cross-community activities and so on will almost inevitably be reduced. That is coming through very strongly in the response to the consultation, and we are extremely mindful of that.

Mr D Bradley:

You did not refine it even on the basis of the information that you got from libraries. You are proceeding on the basis of the total number of activities, and, when those are broken down and compared library to library, it creates a totally different picture, and you then have a more refined tool for deciding which library should go in which band. That is what led me to ask whether those bands are set in stone, because it is my belief that libraries that were operating very effectively and efficiently will now be punished rather than rewarded, when they should be rewarded.

Ms Knox:

You make a fair point, and I come back to what Nigel said at the outset. This is a tool to save money. Much to the distress of everyone on the board and us as officers of the board, it is not about improving the service or recognising the very good work that goes on in all our libraries, small and big.

Mr D Bradley:

I accept that.

Ms Knox:

As a result of the consultation, points such as yours have been made. The board and I need to look at what that means for this proposal and what needs to happen to this proposal, as far as the hours are concerned, to continue to deliver the savings. Perhaps we could tweak or look differently at some of the parameters that have to be taken into account. That work is ongoing.

Mr D Bradley:

At this stage, Libraries NI should make every attempt to ensure that the good practice that existed before the consultation continues to the greatest extent possible post-consultation.

Ms Knox:

That is our intention based on the resources that are available to us.

Mr Irwin:

Thanks for your presentation. I welcome the fact that because of the previous consultation, some libraries were retained, especially Richhill library in my area. I see, if I have got it right, that five libraries in my area are earmarked for reduction. A number of them are to open for 18 hours a week, which is slightly more than three and a half hours a day. Will they be able to open at times when the statistics show that they have the highest footfall, or will it be dictated to them when they can open? The latter could mean that some libraries will be open at times that are not advantageous to them. What is the situation?

Ms Osborn:

The purpose of the local engagement in January will be to make it known that, if a library is to be open for 18 hours, there are, for example, four or five potential patterns of opening hours. Each library's customers will then be asked which of the patterns they want. The patterns will include daytime, evenings and Saturday mornings, because we clearly need to provide access outside of the normal working day. We currently have a number of 18-hour libraries. Although I accept that 18 hours is a limited amount of time, the libraries are open for an evening and on a Saturday morning to try to get a spread of customers.

Mr Irwin:

Will that situation not create staffing problems?

Ms Osborn:

We will have to work through the staffing issues that result from the engagement with customers.

Mr McMullan:

I declare an interest in Carnlough library. I thank Libraries NI for this reprieve for the libraries, to give them a chance within the two- to three-year time frame. I realise that there is pain in everything to do with this rationalisation.

I welcome the fact that opening hours will be tailored to suit each library. That in itself is heartening to hear. When you go out to review in the new year and talk to individual libraries, I ask that, for example, when you talk to those libraries that have council involvement, you make a point of seeing councils first. At the moment, councils are at the beginning of looking at their rates budgets for the coming year. The possibility of their continued involvement in those library buildings will have an effect on what they leave behind in their budgets. Will you ensure that they take that into account when they review their budgets for the coming year?

Ms Knox:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

I appreciate that the consultation has closed, but a number of concerns have been raised today, and, if the Committee is content, we will write to you with those concerns. Hopefully, they will then be fed into your process.

To go back to the previous consultation, it is disappointing that any service has to close, but we would be in a very different situation today if you had not taken into consideration the views of those library users whose local library service had the sword of Damocles hanging over it. I am also mindful of the fact that, for some of the libraries, it really is just a reprieve and that their continued opening is conditional. Killyleagh library in my constituency is no different. More broadly, my concern is that the onus is placed on the groups that have come together as a reaction to your original proposals. I am concerned about what type of support you will be giving them for the task ahead. Come March or October when the review is looked at again, those groups should not feel that they have fallen short because of a lack of capacity or because too much pressure was placed on them to deliver.

Ms Knox:

We understand that concern, and we recognise that the groups in some areas have more capacity and may have been involved in things for longer than groups in other areas. We have now developed a high-level action plan. The first stage is to meet with the groups and agree with them how we will work together; what will be expected from each party; what each party will have to

contribute to the process; and what is the groups' modus operandi. Out of that, we will agree an action plan. This is not about us imposing some sort of action plan on the groups but about creating a partnership, working together and agreeing the steps that each group will put in place. It is also about putting in place the targets that we will work to and deciding how we monitor the process and feed everything back into the relevant board's decision-making process. We do not want any surprises down the road. We genuinely want to go out and garner support for the retention of those libraries.

One of the factors that has arisen from the consultation is that there are those out there who genuinely want to work in partnership and who, perhaps for the first time, see opportunities to work in partnership to take forward and develop their library. We have begun to call those people "library advocates". There is an onus on us to work with those people to promote libraries. That is something that we have talked about and that we will certainly be doing over the next period

Our resources are limited. We are not community workers, but we want to try to facilitate, help and work with people, within the limits of our resources.

The Chairperson:

I welcome the fact that you are working to an action plan. My next question was going to be about whether you are drafting some form of engagement policy. This is a change in mindset for you and the communities. It is entirely new.

Ms Knox:

We have developed a high-level action plan that will go to our board's services committee in the next few weeks for agreement. It will then be published on our website. We are also putting together an engagement process that will set out the responsibilities of each party in the process. That will be part of the action plan, and we will take that to each of the action groups.

We have met some of the action groups, and other meetings have been set up over the next couple of weeks. I am meeting the Killyleagh library action group next week and a meeting has been organised with the action groups from the Kells and Connor and Carnlough libraries in the next couple of weeks. The process has started.

The Chairperson:

We have previously discussed the role of volunteers. Given the change that you have outlined, there will be have to be a role for volunteers. Have you looked at how that will operate within your working practices?

Ms Osborn:

We have a volunteering policy, which was agreed with the unions. As Irene said, we see the action groups as library advocates. They can get to places in the community that we cannot, and there is a huge voluntary role in advocacy. Our volunteering policy says that volunteers should add value to what library staff do, but they should not replace the work of core staff. We will be sharing that policy and talking through it with each of the groups, some of whom have ideas about how they can add value and bring additionality to what the core library staff do. That work will be within the scope of the volunteering policy.

The Chairperson:

We have discussed the reduction in opening hours. There may be a misunderstanding whereby action groups think that they may be able to supplement additional hours through volunteering, essentially becoming librarians. The boundaries need to be made much clearer, so that no expects more than what can be delivered.

Ms Knox:

That is absolutely where we are coming from with the volunteering policy. That will form part the discussion that we will have with the groups.

Mr Swann:

I declare an interest in Kells and Connor library, and I am sure that the board members will be aware of that interest. Following the consultation, eight of the 10 libraries were able to be retained for a short period, although much will depend on what happens next. I thank the board for its decision. It proves, as Nigel said, that there was a genuine consultation, and the outworkings have shown that. I hope that it was a genuine consultation and not just a stalling process. I welcome what Irene has said in her answers to the Chair's question about that. Overall

engagement will now take place to ensure that the libraries are there for a longer time. Irene, your words put an onus — more than an onus, a responsibility — on Libraries NI to do everything you can to ensure that those libraries now succeed. It should be a part of your modus operandi. I look forward to seeing the outworkings of your engagement. I hope that there is genuine engagement, because this Committee has questioned previously whether there was enough outreach by Libraries NI in regard to recruitment and promotion.

Ms Knox:

Let me just pick up on that. Yes, there is an onus on us to do our part and play our part in making sure that those libraries remain viable. However, there is also an onus on people in the areas who said that they would work with us to make those libraries viable. We cannot drag people from the street into libraries, but we can promote our services. In many ways, as Helen said, we are looking to people who are involved with communities, such as yourselves, to help us to find how we can promote libraries best and what we need to deliver in those libraries to bring people in. It is very much about a partnership approach.

Mr Swann:

I am glad to hear that. One of the things we were highlighting, and the previous CAL Committee also highlighted it, was the promotion of libraries. The previous Chairperson highlighted that you may not have done right, but, possibly through this working partnership, there is an opportunity to do that.

If you will allow me, Chair, I want to ask about your next consultation about mobile provision. How will it be affected by the outworking of this process?

Mr N Macartney:

The board and senior staff are very conscious that we have launched a number of very difficult consultations in the last few months or couple of years. I will suggest to the board, when it meets, that we postpone the formal consultation on mobile libraries for a period so that we can let the new structures and arrangements settle in.

We are also particularly conscious that the public are probably consultation-tired and it is

appropriate to give them, as well as our hard-working staff, a rest. Obviously, we will use the mobile service to plug any gaps left by library closures. However, at some stage in the future, we will need to complete the whole process of reviewing all our services and all our plant and assets, and the mobile services will feature in that. However, now is probably not the time.

I trust that the Committee will agree that a pause for breath would be appropriate as we enter 2012.

Mr Swann:

One last point; in the previous monitoring round, £568,000 went to Libraries NI for book stock. Would that be how you would have spent the money, had you the choice?

Ms Knox:

Book stock is the lifeblood of the library service. No matter how long our opening hours are, if we cannot purchase resources, people will not use libraries. It is always a very fine balancing act. Yes, there is money proposed for book stock, but we have not yet had formal confirmation of that.

Mr Heron:

I believe that it requires Executive approval.

Ms Knox:

It does. We had heard that we might get some money for that.

Mr Heron:

It has also to be spent in-year.

Ms Knox:

Yes. It has to be spent by the end of March.

Mr Heron:

It is a one-off allocation, not a part of our base allocation.

Ms Knox:

If it is a one-off allocation to be spent by the end of March and we get notification on it in January, we can buy books, and that is something we need to be able to do, because we are spending less on stock this year than we have in previous years.

Mr N Macartney:

There is plenty of evidence that a regularly refreshed stock in branch libraries is important in attracting users and readers. If the stock begins to look past its sell-by date, readers become very conscious of it. So, it is important to keep that flow going. We cannot have stop-starts; there has to be a steady flow.

Mr Swann:

Nigel, if I remember correctly, your last set of accounts showed a considerable financial loss in regard to stock losses. Have you something in place now that can ensure that, if you are bringing in new books, that will not reoccur and affect your balance at the end of next year?

Mr Heron:

An ongoing problem in all library services is that people do not return books. They are described as lost. We know who we lent the books to, and we try to get them back. No one has ever managed to solve the problem of unreturned library books.

Mr Swann:

Your accounts showed stock discrepancies.

Mr Heron:

Yes, there was a stocktaking discrepancy, which, with the turnover of stock, can cause problems. Part of that is an historical problem inherited from the education and library boards, and we have put in place additional security measures to prevent that happening.

Mr Swann:

You have processes in place now?

Mr Heron:

Yes.

Mr McMullan:

I am glad that the consultation will be rural-proofed and that the conditions and problems with rural areas have been built into that. What is your view on the Minister's comments yesterday about adding more money to axis 3 of the rural programme and her view on broadband in isolated rural areas? Will that be factored into your consultation?

Ms Knox:

I presume that it was the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development who mentioned that yesterday?

Mr McMullan:

Yes.

Ms Knox:

I am sorry that I did not hear that. We have had discussions with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) about rural libraries and about issues such as broadband coverage in rural areas, particularly towards the west of the Province, and we will pursue anything that we can to help to give people access to broadband and the internet. Helen will be involved in a working group that we are setting up with DARD to look at how we might co-operate on some issues that are particularly relevant to rural communities.

Mr McMullan:

If the likes of that comes in but there is a delay of a few months or whatever, would the timescale of your review allow that to be taken into consideration?

Ms Knox:

We would have to look at all that information, but we are always willing to look at any way in which we can improve our services.

The Chairperson:

No other member has indicated that they wish to ask a question. I thank you once again for presenting to us and taking questions this morning. We will see you, no doubt, in the new year.

Ms Knox:

We will become regulars.

Mr N Macartney:

We take this opportunity to wish you a happy Christmas and New Year.