



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Libraries NI

30 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Libraries NI

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)

Mr Dominic Bradley

Mrs Karen McKeivitt

Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Dr David Elliott)

Ms Irene Knox) Libraries NI

Mr Nigel Macartney)

Ms Helen Osborn)

The Chairperson:

I welcome the following officials from Libraries NI to the meeting: Irene Knox, the chief executive; Dr David Elliott, the chairperson; Nigel Macartney, the chairperson of the services committee; and Helen Osborn, the director of library services. Good morning; you are all very welcome to the Committee. Thank you very much for making the trip to the Arts Council. This is a little bit different to our usual meeting room. David, would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr David Elliott (Libraries NI):

Chairperson and members, thank you for your invitation to come to the Committee meeting this morning. We appreciate the opportunity to meet with the new Committee so early in its term of office, and we look forward to working with it into the future.

With me this morning is Nigel Macartney, who is a board member and chairperson of the services committee, Irene Knox, whom I am sure you all know very well, and Helen Osborn, who is the director of library services.

I know that the Committee received a written submission from us about stage 2 of the strategic review of library provision in Northern Ireland. If I may, I will make a short statement by way of introduction, and we will then try to answer your questions. As you know, Libraries NI, which is the Northern Ireland library authority, was established on 1 April 2009. The previous Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure played a very important role in the scrutiny of the draft legislation that proposed the establishment of Libraries NI. Indeed, a number of changes were made to that draft legislation as a result of the Committee's deliberations, and some of you will be familiar with that work.

Libraries NI brings the public library service in Northern Ireland into a single organisation. The service was previously under the control of the five education and library boards. In the first two years of our existence, we have been faced with many challenges, not least having to make a number of efficiencies as a result of the previous comprehensive spending review (CSR). In our first two years, we delivered £2.4 million of efficiencies, mainly through the voluntary redundancies of senior staff at senior- and middle-management levels. We also diverted funding to the front line, including spending over 10% of our recurrent budget on stock in each of the past two years. Stock is the lifeblood of the service, and that spend was more than had ever been spent on stock historically. We also delivered a substantial investment programme, including new libraries in Antrim and Dungiven; extensive refurbishment of the libraries at Newtownstewart, Carrickfergus and Newry; capital schemes in Comber, Carryduff, Keady, Whitehead, Ballynahinch, Holywood and Dungannon libraries; the repair and restoration of the roof and stonework in Belfast central library, which, as many of you know, is a grade B listed building; and, finally, major capital schemes to completely modernise the Whiterock, Shankill Road and Falls Road libraries.

We will continue to face a number of challenges over the next four years as we seek to meet our statutory requirement to deliver a comprehensive and efficient public library service in the context of the significant savings that we need to make as a result of the current CSR settlement. Cumulatively, those savings amount to approximately £10.3 million over the next four years, and,

like other arm's-length bodies (ALBs), we have submitted savings delivery plans to the Department to show how those efficiencies will be delivered.

One of the other major challenges that we have faced and that we continue to face results from the target that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) set for us, which was to undertake a strategic review of library provision across Northern Ireland, with a view to securing an equitable distribution of fit-for-purpose library buildings. That strategic review is even more important in the current financial climate of reducing budgets to make sure that the best use can be made of increasingly scarce resources and that services are affordable and sustainable into the future.

As you know, we completed stage 1 of the review this time last year. That considered 33 libraries in the greater Belfast area, and we initially proposed the closure of 14 libraries. Following consideration of the responses to the public consultation process, the board of Libraries NI decided to keep four of those 14 libraries open, and the staff, stock and computers of the other 10 libraries were redeployed to improve services in the remaining libraries. We know that the decision to close libraries is a difficult one, and the board did not take it lightly. However, we can report that, as a result of the action that was taken in the greater Belfast area and the subsequent redeployment of resources to remaining libraries, we have seen an overall increase in use, thus ensuring their sustainability in the longer term.

We also followed through on the commitment that we made during that review to invest in libraries. As a result, we secured £2.3 million from DCAL to refurbish the Whiterock, Shankill Road and Falls Road libraries, and the work on those libraries was completed in the past few months. We made a commitment to carry out that work, and we fulfilled it.

Proposals resulting from the second stage of the strategic review, which considered the remaining 77 libraries in the rest of Northern Ireland, were published in December 2010. The criteria that were used to assess the libraries are included in our submission. Those 77 libraries were grouped into four categories. A total of 44 libraries were assessed as fulfilling the criteria for future use. They are well placed geographically, well used and capable of delivering library services in the twenty-first century. A total of 21 libraries were found to be capable of delivering on the vision, but they require some money to be spent on them. Unfortunately, in the current financial climate, in which our capital budget has been reduced significantly, it is not possible to

identify a timescale for that work to be carried out. There are two libraries in Armagh city, the branch library and the Irish and local studies library. Both are well-used facilities that are valued by their customers, but we believe that the provision in Armagh would be consolidated and improved if those two libraries were clustered or combined on a single site.

Ten libraries, which are noted in our submission, give cause for concern, not because of any single criterion but because of a combination of factors. The board decided to consult on the possible closure of those libraries. The public consultation on the proposals ran for 12 weeks, from 14 January this year until 8 April. The consultation process was extensive and included 11 public meetings, many of which were well attended, I have to say. I recognised many of the faces who attended, and, as you all know, the meetings were very lively. Questionnaires were also available online and in printed format. There were meetings with local councils, public representatives, trade unions, community groups and action committees. A draft equality impact assessment was done and a meeting with an umbrella group that represented section 75 consultees was held, and the board received a number of delegations in support of individual libraries. A substantial amount of information was gathered during the public consultation process, including information on the impact of closure from a rural perspective. That information is being collated and analysed and will be made available to the board to inform its decision-making process. I assure members, as I have assured everyone in every public meeting that we have held, that no decision has been taken.

The board of Libraries NI comprises council and lay members. Council members' terms of office came to an end on the date of the local government elections in May. We understand from a response that the Minister gave recently to an Assembly question from Mr Swann that it is her intention to reappoint the councillors who were re-elected. Therefore, depending on that reappointment, we anticipate that it is likely to be September before the board is in a position to consider all the information that has been gathered during the consultation process. The decision, therefore, is likely to be made in October this year. The consultation process began in December 2010, and the decision is likely to be made in October 2011, which is some 10 months later.

In conclusion, all board members, the chief executive and senior management team take their responsibilities in the matter very seriously. They will consider all the information carefully and thoroughly before making any decisions. We have brought along a short synopsis of progress that we will make available to members as we leave. Thank you again for inviting us this

morning. We would like to take any questions that you may have.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. The first question that I was going to ask was about the board membership and the impact that that has had and will continue to have on any future decisions that you make and on the timescales for those decisions. I am a little bit disappointed that you had to rely on an Assembly Member for your information. Have you had any discussions with the Minister at all about this?

Dr D Elliott:

We have indeed. It was raised at the first meeting that we had with the Minister. The Department and Minister are fully aware of the situation, and we made the Minister aware of it as well. There were a number of discussions during that meeting. There is a process that has to be gone through, and we are aware that the Department has papers available for the Minister to send out to members.

Ms Irene Knox (Libraries NI):

The chair and I met the Minister, and I think that she had been in post only about a week at the time. The reappointment of the board members was certainly one of the issues that we raised with her. She said that she was aware that that was an issue that needed to be addressed as quickly as possible.

The Chairperson:

The concern is probably greater, given that it took so long on the previous occasion to recruit board members. Are you aware of whether the process will be just a matter of filling gaps, or will it be for the entire complement of councillors?

Dr D Elliott:

My understanding is that nine members qualify for reappointment. The condition has to be that, as long as they are an elected councillor, they can be reappointed to the board should they and the Minister so desire. Unfortunately, two of the locally elected members were not re-elected, so we are going from 11 down to nine members. However, the nine council members who were re-elected and are suitable for reappointment still form the majority of the board. We understand that the desire of the previous Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee and of the Minister was that

elected members form the majority of the board, and we hope that that will be the case.

The Chairperson:

Under normal circumstances, it would probably not make an awful lot of difference to the time that it would take to do that, but, given that there are 10 libraries and 10 communities that are incredibly anxious about the future of their facility, that makes it more important. Hopefully, it should be resolved as quickly as possible.

Ms Knox:

We are conscious that this is a difficult time for the communities concerned and for the staff in the libraries that are subject to the proposals. We understand that. We made sure that all the action groups, and, indeed, the MLAs and MPs and so on who had made representations to us during the consultation period, were told as soon as we knew that there would be a process after the elections for the reappointment of the councillors. We made sure that we told them at that stage that it would be at least September before any decisions were made. We were not sure how long the process of reappointing councillors would take, because, even at that stage, the new Minister had not taken up her post. So, we have tried to keep people informed about the process as much as possible.

We hope that the councillors will be back for September. We are very conscious that July and August are almost dead months, because of holidays and so on. We still need to do a fair bit of work on gathering, analysing and collating all the information. We hope to have that ready so that, when the councillors come back in September, as we hope they will, we can use September with the councillors and the rest of the board to make sure that everybody is completely up to speed with the information before a decision is made. That is why, as David said in his introduction, we think that it will probably be October before any decisions are made. There will probably be a number of workshops and so on with board members, just to make sure that, before any recommendations or decisions are made, they understand all the information that has been gathered as a result of the process.

The Chairperson:

It is an understatement to say that it was disappointing to learn that there was £19 million of slippage in the capital base programme over the previous three years. I assume that you will address that. Given that additional resource was allocated to libraries in this budget, does that go

any way to address some of the issues with the proposed closures?

Ms Knox:

I will take your first point about the £19 million slippage. It is a point that the Department is very well aware of. As you know, we came into operation only two years ago. A capital budget had been established at the start of the previous CSR process for libraries. That was in the time of the five education and library boards. I have seen some of the information, and it was predicated on those education and library boards having done a lot of preparation work that would have allowed new buildings to move forward quickly.

As all of you know, there is a long lead-in time to any new capital project. For example, it included, in the greater Belfast area, a new library in north Belfast. When we took over as Libraries NI, no one had even considered where that new library in north Belfast might have been. There was not even a site identified for it. The budget also included provisions for a new library in south Belfast, but, again, there were no sites. So, a lot of that money that was supposed to be around for libraries at that stage was actually almost aspirational, in that there were no plans.

When we came into operation, we moved very quickly to take forward what we could within the timescale that was left to us, which was really two years. As the chairman said in his introduction, we took forward a number of big projects and delivered them very successfully in that period of time. Although we would have loved to have been in a position to spend that £19 million, it was never realistic. Even before Libraries NI was established, when I was involved in the implementation team, I made it very clear to the Department that, given that the preparation work had not been done, there was no way that it could be delivered.

Turning to the additional resource that was allocated following the consultation on the budget, there was £2 million on top of the initial budget for Libraries NI for resource and £2.5 million for capital. That reduces the level of savings that we are required to make in resource terms from £13.5 million to £11.5 million cumulatively over the four-year period.

All that we had in the initial capital budget allocation was funding to replace the Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland (ELFNI) system, which runs the Internet access for the public, our library management system and everything else. Basically, we had very little other capital. If

there had been a major issue over the winter period and a library needed a heating system or boiler replaced, for example, we would not have had any capital money in the budget. So, we made representations, and, as a result, we received some additional money.

As far as the resource is concerned, the £2 million is spread over four years. There is some money in 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15. The majority of it comes in 2013-14, which is the year in which we have to make the biggest amount of savings where the indicative allocations over the four years are concerned. Our stock budget in that year, from the point of view of introducing savings, was reduced from what we spent last year, which was £1·90 per head of population, to 24p per head of population. As Dr Elliott said in his introduction, stock is the lifeblood of our service. If we do not have new books, online resources and so on, and if we cannot keep that going, people will not use the service anyway, because we will not be able to meet their demands. The money that will come in the third year will have to be used to supplement that stock budget. It is an issue that the board will have to consider, but it would be hard for me to say that that money will stop libraries being closed. I do not know what the decision about libraries will be. The board will have to consider it, but, to go back to your initial point, it simply reduces the level of savings from £13·5 million to £11·5 million.

The Chairperson:

I knew that before you even started to answer the question, but I just wanted it for the record.

Mr D Bradley:

Good morning, or good afternoon — whatever time it is.

Ms Knox:

It is now afternoon.

Mr D Bradley:

You lose track of it in here sometimes. I was up at Stormont yesterday, where I went for a walk at lunchtime and met a policeman sitting in his vehicle. He was reading a novel on some sort of electronic device called a Galaxy brick or pad or something or other. He gave me quite a lecture on how it worked, and he showed me all the apps and so on that were on it. I believe there is one that Amazon owns called Kindle, and there is another thing called an iPad, on which you can read books. I saw in one of the papers last Sunday that there is an app for T S Eliot works and that you

can get all the literary papers and manuscripts on your phone. Things are changing very rapidly in the literary world, as Myles na gCopaleen would have said.

I notice that your policy framework was devised around five years ago. Is that policy framework any longer fit for purpose in what I will call that a rapidly changing literary world that is becoming more electronic and digitalised all the time? Rather than considering libraries as the quiet and passive places that we were used to in the past, should we be looking forward to more dynamic places that are more actively engaged with their local communities? Sometimes, libraries are that quiet and silent, you would be excused if you did not notice them. I notice that the previous Committee placed some emphasis on the improved marketing of libraries to increase usage. I would be interested to hear your comments on that.

Ms Helen Osborn (Libraries NI):

The policy framework 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' is DCAL's, and we are working within that. Libraries NI agrees wholeheartedly that libraries should be dynamic focal points in the community. Indeed, that is our vision and mission. We agree that libraries should not be silent places. I wish that you could have visited Omagh library with me yesterday, where 45 children and their parents and carers came along for a rhythm and rhyme session. If you had been there, you certainly would not see libraries as quiet and old-fashioned places.

What libraries should be about, and what we are about, is providing access to the widest range of information in the widest range of formats possible. We have to bear in mind that our customer base ranges from the person who you were talking to yesterday who has an e-book reader to somebody who is perhaps not comfortable with technology and enjoys their large-print books and so on and so forth. That is why our stock budget is so important.

We seek to provide stock in the widest range of formats. We have made an e-book service available very recently. So, we are making electronic books and downloadable talking books available. I think that this is the correct jargon, but we are at the soft-launch stage: the service is available, but we have not formally launched and marketed it. That will be happening shortly. So, we are making e-books available, and they can be used on a number of the devices that you mentioned. It is also important that we make resources that we hold available electronically through digitisation. That is very much part of our heritage strategy.

Marketing is extremely important, as you said. We have a marketing team in place, the key role of which is to help us to increase use of libraries, including their services and events, and to hammer home what the library service is about.

It is interesting that you mentioned Myles na gCopaleen, because one of the events that the marketing team will be focusing on this year is the anniversary associated with him in the autumn. That is part of our events calendar for this year. So, I hope that I have addressed your points.

Mr D Bradley:

I will move on to a more localised issue. As you know, I represent Newry and Armagh, so you will not be surprised that I am asking you about the planned clustering of Armagh library and the Irish and local studies library in Armagh. At the moment, the Irish and local studies library is based at the back of the old hospital and not all the collection is available to the public at that site, because some of it is in storage at library headquarters at Newry Road, if memory serves me right. Can you tell me more about the proposed clustering of those two libraries? Will that provide the opportunity for stock that has mothballed to be taken out and made available on the site with the other material?

Ms Knox:

I will start by answering that, and Helen can perhaps give you more details. I am very aware that the Armagh library and the Irish and local studies library are of interest to you. I hope that Newry library is also of interest to you, because we recently refurbished it, and it is doing tremendously well. We hope that you will come along to see it.

Mr D Bradley:

I am happy enough with Newry for the moment.

Ms Knox:

Our proposal is to cluster the Armagh branch library and the Irish and local studies library on one site. We are consulting on the principle behind that. Our view is that neither of the current buildings would be totally suitable for that to happen. We have said that the cluster would be either on a current or a new site in the area. If we can reach agreement on the principle, we will have to look into the future about what it would take to deliver that.

We have been having discussions with the local council and others in the area about what else might be happening in Armagh city that we could perhaps be part of. One of the reasons behind the idea of clustering the two provisions is that we want to be able to give more people access to heritage collections, and we know that the Irish and local studies library has a tremendous collection of material. However, it is still perhaps best known by those who have a particular interest in it and who know about it. One of the things that we have delivered in the past year is what we call the heritage gallery in Downpatrick library. That holds the County Down collection of local studies material, which used to be kept in the library headquarters building in Ballynahinch, where it was accessible only to the people who knew about it. We have increased the usage of that material by moving it into the branch library and creating space there for it. That also means that, for example, whenever a class from a local school visits Downpatrick library, it is shown the heritage collection, and the interests of the schoolchildren are extended. That is the kind of thing that we want to do in Armagh city as well, but it means that we must get the right building for that.

So, at this stage, the consultation is very much around the principle of bringing the collection together with the branch library, which would mean that we would be able to promote the collection to a much broader range of people in the area.

Mr D Bradley:

I am not against the notion of clustering, but I would like to have more information about the site and how it would work in practice. So, I would be interested in being kept up to date with developments with that.

Ms Knox:

We would be very pleased to keep you up to date. As I say, at this stage, that is the principle, and a lot more planning is needed.

Mr D Bradley:

I agree with what you say. The current location of the local studies or heritage library is inaccessible. I do not think that Newry Road, which is where the headquarters is located, would be any improvement, and I think that the present branch library site is also a bit restrictive. It would be good if that collection were made accessible to more people, rather than to the small

number of experts who access it at the moment.

Ms Knox:

Thank you for that comment.

Mr Swann:

I know most of you already.

Dr D Elliott:

I think that I have answered most of your questions. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Knox:

The previous time we met it was the other way round — you were coming to our meeting.

Mr Swann:

It is great to have you here at the other end of the table. I declare an interest as a co-chair of the Kells and Connor library's Save the Library campaign. As David said, a lot of my questions have been asked in the Assembly. I could take up a lot of the Committee's time on the issue of the 10 rural libraries, because I have a strong passion about the need for rural libraries. NI Libraries' vision is to provide:

“a flexible and responsive library service”.

In those few words, you need to take back the feedback that you have had from all your consultations, because they have been vocal and quite in-depth.

Dominic raised this earlier, but I do not think that the question was answered. The previous Committee suggested that Libraries NI should consider taking measures to encourage greater use of the libraries before closure. My main concern, folks, is that I know from personal experience that that did not happen in any shape or form. The marketing that I have heard referred to was more about defence than the promotion of the library service in Northern Ireland.

Libraries NI is a membership organisation, so, without members, it does not exist. You can have as many books and collections as you want, but, without membership, Libraries NI is nothing. In all the research that I have done, I have never seen a recruitment campaign for the library service in Northern Ireland mounted in a local rural area. That disappoints and worries

me, because you were given this recommendation on 30 June 2010, and you have had time to try to gather support and work to save the libraries in question.

I have a couple of points to make about the cost provision. We have been told that the 10 rural libraries are being closed because they do not meet the vision or the criteria. It would be interesting to know why you used the four benchmark areas that you did and why the methodology that was used to assess the libraries against these performance criteria was chosen.

This is something that I am very passionate about, as I am sure you are well aware. Dominic mentioned the use of Kindles and all the rest of it. I already asked you for statistics for usage of, and visitors to, libraries rather than figures solely for book issues. I also asked for the amount that Libraries NI has spent on marketing and recruitment. You could not give me those figures, because you did not have them.

Dr D Elliott:

We will come back to that.

Mr Swann:

That is the answer that came from the Minister. If you come up with anything else, I will let the Minister know that you told me before you told her.

There is a lot to consider. Going back to Kindles, you talked about moving to the modern era with downloads and apps and all the rest of it. Part of your consultation process involved the next step, which is about providing more mobiles. That was going to be the panacea for the closure of rural libraries. How will that work, given the level of broadband and Internet access in rural communities? Mobile phone coverage is poor in some of the villages that we are talking about, never mind people there being able to download books. You are taking a step too far.

I have probably given you enough to get on with. I hope that you actually answer everything and do not skip over some of those questions, like you did with some of Dominic's.

Dr D Elliott:

We will do our best, Mr Swann. We will start with Helen on the marketing aspect, then we will talk about the usage and visitors' aspect and mobile provision, and the chief executive will then

talk about the vision and criteria.

Mr Swann:

What about recruitment?

Dr D Elliott:

Yes, we will talk about recruitment. Some of the talk about marketing will involve recruitment.

Ms Osborn:

We promote libraries at a number of levels. At a general level, we promote the services that we provide through the media and websites. That is about getting messages out about what the services are and the benefits of using them. We also link with national high-profile events. For example, we had Silver Surfers' Day recently. The majority of our libraries participated in that, and it received high-level media coverage.

Mr Swann:

I do not want to interrupt you, Helen, but I will go back to the previous CAL Committee's recommendation to encourage greater use of the libraries before considering closure. Do you have any examples of that?

Ms Osborn:

I will move from the general level to how we promote individual libraries, which is done in two ways. At a very local level, it is done through contact with schools, playgroups and community groups and by trying to be at the heart of the community. It is also about bringing to a local level the general initiatives that are service wide or, indeed, linked with something outside libraries. For example, the summer reading challenge is just starting. It challenges children to read a number of books over the summer. It is themed, and, this year, it is called Circus Stars. We normally have 10,000 children participating in that challenge across Northern Ireland. It is about being both fun for children and avoiding the reading dip that can happen over the summer. It will happen in every library, and it is promoted across Northern Ireland through the media but also, locally, through the branch library contacting the local schools and so on. So, it is a dual approach.

The Chairperson:

Helen, the point is that 10 libraries are now on a list for proposed closure. I do not think that it came as any surprise to anyone, particularly in Libraries NI or the former library boards, that there were issues with those libraries. Was a concerted effort made to do something in advance of the consultation so that this is not the last stage? For example, I know that Killyleagh library in my constituency is under threat of closure. You take for granted that a local library is there, very much like a local post office. Were the libraries made aware in advance that they were perhaps underperforming, and were they consulted about what could be done in the community? Was any effort made with groups such as community associations to highlight that there was an issue with their library and to tell them that if they did not use it, they would lose it? That would have been better than what is perceived, at this stage, to be a fait accompli.

Mr D Bradley:

To the communities concerned, this process seems to have been a chopping exercise. As the Chair said, instead of carrying out that exercise, you should have told people that their libraries were at risk and that they needed to do something to ensure that their use was maximised and so on and so forth. You should have given the local community a chance to respond to that. If it did not do so, it still would have had the opportunity, even if it did not use it. From the responses that we received, we are getting the general idea that people in the areas affected are strongly desirous of the libraries continuing.

The Chairperson:

Similarly, the Committee received a representation from the library in Gilford. That library is in an identified area of need, the Department for Social Development (DSD) has invested £120,000 in it, and it has a full-time community worker. However, that was not taken into consideration in any aspect of your criteria.

Mr Nigel Macartney (Libraries NI):

I will respond to that by saying that Committee members may be labouring under a misapprehension. All along, we have said that those 10 libraries present a series of issues, difficulties and problems. Those issues may not be only the result of the use of those libraries, although that will almost certainly be part of it. The buildings may be in a rotten condition or there could be other issues to consider, such as funding.

We have been open all along to saying that the outcome may not be closure. Through the dialogue that we had with the communities — not just the well-attended public meetings that we held but all the other meetings that Irene, Helen and others held with the local communities concerned — ideas were put forward, and members of those local communities got more involved with their local libraries, although sometimes they did not. We now have a lot of information which the board will need to tease through when making a decision about the future of those libraries.

Closure is not inevitable, and, in that sense, it is not a question of placing the cart before the horse but of having dialogue to explain the problems that we have in providing the service and in getting the community to respond with its views and suggestions. Many of the suggestions were that the bloody thing should be kept open. That is fine, and we received that message loud and clear. However, the decision has not been made to close those libraries, and, in that sense, the dialogue is live. We can now look forward with a bit more information from the community on how it sees things.

Mr Swann:

Can you also understand why concerns were raised when, in the paper that you presented to the Committee in January 2011, you identified the closure of libraries as a saving? I understand that you said that it is not a fait accompli, but you have listed a saving of £0.8 million from the closure of libraries.

Ms Knox:

As I think the chairperson said, we understand that a proposal to close libraries is very concerning for any community. We have told the public the same thing that we told the Committee, which is that this is a genuine consultation. We also tried to demonstrate that in Belfast. As the chairperson said, in stage 1 of the strategic review, we proposed the closure of 14 libraries. We closed 10, because four communities made very good cases as to why their libraries should not be closed.

The idea of conducting a public consultation was to highlight the issues that concerned us about those libraries. Usage is not good in most of them, but there are other issues with the buildings and with other libraries being in close proximity. We went to the communities involved and highlighted the issues that concerned us and the criteria that we used to come up with that

assessment. Those were the same criteria that we used when we looked at Belfast in stage 1. We asked people to tell us whether there were other issues, concerns or things that we needed to know about their communities that we did not know.

For example, one issue that came up was that Gilford was a DSD area at risk, which none of us knew. We now have established relationships with, for example, the community worker there, who came on a deputation to the board with some other people from the action committee. We have spoken with them about what that worker is doing and about what else is happening in the area.

Some of the other groups have come to us with positive suggestions about how they would like to work with us to improve usage of the library in the area and about how they can contribute to what the library does by finding volunteers or whatever. We are saying that there is a lot of information to consider. After the public consultation finished, we met with any campaign group that asked to talk about particular issues. All the information from those meetings is also being fed in to the process.

It may be that people are coming forward with other information or ideas that we simply were not aware of. For us, that is what public consultation is about. It is about us saying what we know and people telling us what we do not know. We will then make sure that all that information is considered as part of the process. If someone has positive ideas about what needs to be done in an area — perhaps one community has particular issues, for example — we would be very happy to discuss that. In fact, just this afternoon, Helen and I are meeting representatives from Killyleagh again, because they want to talk to us about some issues. We have said that that is perfectly fine and that we are happy to do that.

One side issue that has come about as a result of the consultation is that people in lots of these communities have become very aware that there is a library and that they can use it, so, in a roundabout way, it has been a bit of a marketing issue as well.

Dr D Elliott:

It is perhaps ass-about-face.

The Chairperson:

I do not think that that was the intention.

Ms Knox:

It is important to remember that this is not the first time that some of these libraries have been considered for closure. The former education and library boards looked at some of those libraries in the past and did not close them. The issue for us is that there has been a lot of activity in those libraries over the past few months because of the publicity and the action group. In some cases, but not all, usage has increased. However, if usage has increased, we need to be sure whether it can be sustained into the future.

In the past, through some of the work that was done by the education and library boards, we have seen that usage of a library may have increased around the time that there may have been a proposal to review or close it. However, it would then drop off again, because people did not see that they wanted to come back into the future. So, it is about sustainability, and that in turn is about working with local communities. It is about making sure that local communities also play their part in keeping the library in question busy.

We are very conscious of the kinds of issues that Mr Swann raised. Those are the kinds of things that the board will have to take account of when coming to any decision. It will need to think about the other things that we have been told we did not know beforehand and about the weight that is given to them vis-à-vis other information that we have.

Dr D Elliott:

What I would say, Mr Swann, is that this has been a 10-month conversation that started in December 2010, so no decision is being rushed into. We are very aware of the nature of the dialogue that we need to have. You were at the Kells and Connor meeting. You saw the packed assembly hall and the abuse that I got from various members of the public during the meeting. There is a lot of passion behind this. A lot of people are concerned about their library, and that is what we want to see. We want people to be concerned about their library.

However, we have also been measuring usage over that 10-month period to see how it has changed. Hopefully, it has increased, and, as the chief executive said, we need to be sure that that usage increase is sustainable into the future. As Helen said, we have a new marketing team in

place that is beginning to do things such as produce brochures, but it is up to the communities to engage with us and to use their libraries. So, this is not a snap decision; it involves 10 months of dialogue.

The Chairperson:

David, are you saying that usage is about books that have been borrowed, or is it about the number of people going into a library, perhaps seeking information, such as tourist information, or hiring rooms or using computers?

Dr D Elliott:

Yes, yes, yes and yes. Usage is about not only borrowing books but the use of computers, visits and children's activities. Helen can articulate that much better than I.

Mr Swann:

So, that is in contrast to last year's performance data, which was based solely on the cost of borrowing. Will you take visitor numbers into consideration now?

Ms Knox:

Visits were taken into account as part of the original consultation.

Mr Swann:

Will that be measured pro rata to the hours of opening?

Ms Knox:

It is difficult to do it pro rata, because there are busy and less busy times of the day.

Mr Swann:

Some libraries have reduced opening hours.

Ms Knox:

Yes, some libraries have longer opening hours than others, and that is another issue that we have to look at.

Mr Swann:

I know that that was not referred to anywhere in your previous data.

Dr D Elliott:

I assure the Committee that this was a genuine consultation. We are here to listen and to learn, and we go into communities to listen and to learn. No decisions have been made, and we are genuinely listening to what communities have to say. That information will all be collated, and we will make a decision in October. No snap judgements will be made. I always say that I did not join the board of Libraries NI to close libraries, but we have an obligation to be an effective and efficient organisation, and that is what we are about.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Perhaps I come at the issue from a slightly different angle. I met Irene and David at the opening of Dungiven library. If someone were looking for an example of best practice, that library could be held up as such. It is a tribute to the staff.

Dr D Elliott:

That library is mentioned in our brochure.

Mr Ó hOisín:

I also have to mention my colleague Anne Brolly, who is quite an engine power behind that.

Dr D Elliott:

Superb. She is a member of the board.

Mr Ó hOisín:

I cannot remember the name of the film that has the strapline, "If you build it, he will come", but that has certainly been relevant to the phenomenal way that the membership and usage numbers have gone through the roof. That includes the example that Helen gave of the children's activities. My nine-year-old has taken part in those every year for the past five or six years. People are precious about their local libraries, and they are worth fighting for locally, but I realise that there has to be some sort of rationalisation.

On the other side of my constituency, Coleraine library has been on the long finger for some

time. Mr Bradley said that the Irish collection is virtually all in storage and is lost to research. I think that some of it is in Ballymena, and some of it is in Coleraine, but very little of it is accessible. Can you give me some sort of timescale on that, because I have not heard anything about it recently?

Ms Knox:

Thank you for your comments about Dungiven library. We are very pleased with that library. What we have done there illustrates how we want to deliver library services in the twenty-first century, with the space to be able to deliver them.

I turn to Coleraine library. As I said earlier when I was talking about the budget, we have no capital budget for the next four years for any new libraries. Last year, we had started planning, and we had discussions with the council about a joint project with the museum on the market yard site in Coleraine, and designs and so on have been put together for that. An economic appraisal had been produced with DCAL. It had some issues with that economic appraisal that was to do with costs and so on, and we were working through those with the Department. Unfortunately, we have had to put that on hold, because we have no capital budget for the next four years that would allow us to proceed with that.

Our board still has that as a priority, and it is still conscious that there are issues on which we need to be able to deliver into the future, including the Irish collection that used to be in County Hall in Coleraine. Over the next period of time, one of the things that we have to look at is how we give people access to that collection in the interim until there is a new library in Coleraine. One of Helen's responsibilities is the heritage side of things, and that is one of the issues that is on the agenda for our heritage over the next period of time.

Mr Ó hOisín:

Does that mean locally as well?

Ms Knox:

Yes, we are very conscious of that.

The Chairperson:

Obviously, I would like a library in Ards.

Ms Knox:

Yes, and that was one of the libraries that we were involved in planning with Ards Borough Council. We had a number of meetings with the council on developing the current site for a joint council and library project. Again, because of the budget situation, that is not being taken forward at the moment.

We are very keen to work with other statutory organisations on Coleraine and Newtownards libraries, because the concept of joined-up facilities is good from everybody's point of view. Grove library in Belfast is a fantastic example of a joined-up facility, where health and leisure services and the library are on the one site. In the past year, usage of Grove library has increased by over 15%. That is about organisations working together. That is why, for us, Coleraine and Newtownards were so important, because they were with the council. We also have a number of other capital contracts that have had to be put on hold for the time being.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for taking our questions.