



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries': DCAL
Briefing

25 October 2012

A further contextual factor for the review is the economic environment. It has changed considerably in the past four years, and there is now increased competition for available resources. That situation does not appear to be getting any better. Libraries NI has undertaken a number of strategic operational reviews of provision. Those involve widespread public consultation. The operational reviews produced a significant amount of information on the expectations and requirements that library users and the general public have. Furthermore, we have had advances in technology, which have gathered pace. In the past few years, there have been significant shifts in the way in which people access books and information. The evolving digital environment is changing the expectations of library users. Even though libraries are popular, the pattern of usage is changing. That was highlighted, as you will all know, in the responses to recent public consultations.

David will now talk you through the genesis of the policy framework, work that has taken place to implement it and the process of the review.

Mr David Polley (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' sets out DCAL's commitment to modernising and improving our public library services. It states that our vision for the public libraries service is to provide:

"A flexible and responsive library service which provides a dynamic focal point in the community and assists people to fulfill their potential."

We wanted a library service that could renew and reinvent itself to meet changing needs. We want libraries to be dynamic and active in how they meet those needs. We want libraries to reach out, form partnerships and find new ways of becoming relevant to their communities. We recognise that libraries help people to do things for themselves. They do not do things for or to people. In that way, they are not like a lot of other public services, because people have to choose to use libraries, and that is both a strength and a challenge for libraries.

'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' contained the first set of library standards for the public library service here. The idea behind the standards was that they provided a means of encapsulating the statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient public library service. The standards are now showing their age. For example, the reference to information and communication technology (ICT) provision does not take into account increased ownership of personal computers or the demand for wireless internet provision in libraries. It might also be appropriate to reconsider the stock target.

Significant investment was made in implementing 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries'. That work included changing how public libraries were managed by setting up Libraries NI; launching an extensive capital programme; moving resources to the front line by, for example, increasing spend on library stock; and making associated savings from administration and middle management. Libraries NI is an organisation that was created and has evolved entirely in the context of 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries'. The larger organisation is more able to focus attention on the areas that are identified in the policy.

Mick has outlined the potential drivers for review. More detail on how we plan to do that is set out on the written briefings that we have provided. I will outline some of the key steps for you now. The first step in the process will be an assessment of the success of the previous interventions in delivering the desired policy objectives. We need to see whether we have managed to bring about improvements in areas such as spending on stock, opening hours, spreading good practice around Northern Ireland, more partnership and outreach work, and increasing the use of the library service. We will be looking at available research and statistical evidence to inform the review, supported by the Department's research and statistics branch. There will be an examination of what is happening elsewhere, locally and internationally. We will undertake a high-level and focused key stakeholder consultation to inform our review.

With that in mind, we have identified a number of key policy questions. The first relates to the purpose of the library service as set out in 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries'. It is clear from many of the responses to recent consultations on library closures and opening hours that libraries are seen as prized community assets. They contribute to community cohesion and provide a valued shared space, irrespective of the reading and IT services that are provided in the libraries. We need to consider whether that is a core function of the library service. The second relates to the rapidly developing area of electronic library services. We need to be sure that we understand the challenges and opportunities from changes in the electronic delivery of books and information in the wider context of how the internet and the World Wide Web is changing the way in which we interact, communicate, do business and live.

The third relates to how library services are delivered in rural areas. In that instance, our work on the review has been taken forward in very close alignment with the ongoing Libraries NI review of mobile library services. The final question relates to targeting library services and outreach. We need to get our heads around why the people who stand to gain the most from using the library service are the ones who use it the least and what we can do to change that.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure is clearly a key stakeholder in the process. We are keen to include your views in our review. I ask you to consider the best way in which we might do that.

Mr Cory: The Department has established a small steering group, which I chair, to oversee the work on the review. That group includes representation from Libraries Northern Ireland's senior management. We have held our first meeting already, and we will hold regular meetings over the next five months. That work will ultimately allow a view to be taken on the existing framework policy. At this stage, we see two possible outcomes. The first is that a full policy exercise is required to formulate a replacement policy. That process would include a full public and stakeholder consultation, equality impact assessment and rural impact assessment. The second is that the policy direction that is contained in the document is sufficient and only the public library standards require updating.

As the project plan sets out, the Minister should be in a position to make that decision early next year. You may wish to invite us to meet you again at that point. I hope that the presentation has been helpful. We are happy to answer any questions that you may have.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Mick, the current framework suggests that performance will be assessed against public library standards every year, a report will be placed on the departmental website and standards will be reviewed every three years. I do not believe that that has been done. Can you tell us why?

Mr Cory: The idea was that the standards would be reviewed every three years. However, we have only now been able to get around to do that. It was largely due to the resource capability in the Department to undertake that aspiration. David, would you like to talk about the assessments against the standards on an ongoing basis?

Mr Polley: Again, it turned out that the requirement to produce a report every year, and gather the information, required a much larger resource than was available. We gathered data on the standards in three towns since the policy was brought into place, but we were not able to finish the reports or prepare them. There were many reasons for that, including technical difficulties, because some public library standards are extremely difficult to measure. This is something that we need to look at, and it is one of the main reasons why we need to review them now.

Mr Cory: It is also true to say that, following the establishment of the single authority, our priority was largely to try and ensure that it settled down and became an organisation that would make the difference envisaged in the original document. I think that we are now in that place.

The Chairperson: You have given a rationale for that. However, surely you still need that information to inform you on your way to developing a policy or to making sure that what you have in place works or does not work.

Mr Cory: Yes.

The Chairperson: That analysis is critical.

Mr Cory: Absolutely. The very first chunk of work that will be carried out as part of the review will be to pull all that information together. That will give us a statistical picture of how libraries have been performing against those standards, in as far as we can establish and measure them. As David said, we set our aspirations to measure certain things, but the methodology perhaps should have been thought through a little more carefully.

Mr Polley: To give you an example, about a year after we published the first public library standards, the organisation carrying out the customer satisfaction survey changed the question. We were unable to use that information any more.

The Chairperson: Was that the result of a lack of communication?

Mr Polley: No. The organisation operates at a UK- and Ireland-wide level. It changed the question across all library services.

The Chairperson: Without consultation?

Mr Polley: It was actually after consultation.

The Chairperson: As a Committee, we have been very involved in what will happen with libraries and the reviews that have taken place. You have stated your appreciation of the data that has been collected as a result of that. How does a review sit alongside the ongoing review of the provision of library services?

Mr Polley: Do you mean, specifically, the review of mobile library services that is going out for public consultation?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Polley: It is absolutely aligned and incorporated with that review. The senior management member of Libraries NI who is working on that, Helen Osborn, is on the project board for the review. Essentially, the key questions about the review of mobile library services are around how and where mobile library services are delivered, how often and how long they stop for and what the public library standard is for that. When we are reviewing our public library standards, all the questions about that public library standard are being very thoroughly answered within Libraries NI's review of the mobile service.

Mr Cory: The outcomes from that will feed into this; they work in parallel. The review that we are undertaking will establish whether we need to do a more fundamental policy review, which will take a significantly greater amount of time. This review is really about trying to assess whether some of those contextual things that I outlined in my opening remarks are significant enough to warrant a rewrite of the whole document, or whether we just need to look at the standards. Clearly, a complete rewrite would be a significant piece of work. However, this piece of work and the review of mobile library provision will feed into that. We are really just trying to assess whether that contextual change is significant enough to warrant a really quite substantial policy review.

The Chairperson: You mentioned a substantial amount of time. What are you suggesting?

Mr Cory: In any policy area in the Department or any part of public policy development, it can take between 18 months and two years to undertake that sort of thing. For example, the sports strategy and the museums policy took that sort of time as a minimum. It involves a much broader public consultation exercise and opens up the whole gamut of equality impacts, rural impacts and so on.

The Chairperson: You have indicated that you will include the views of stakeholders during the period of research you are now entering into. How will you go about that? Who are the stakeholders? You mentioned the Committee.

Mr Cory: It will be at quite a high level, and it will be quite a focused consultation. As we are required to do, it will, obviously, include, the Committee. At present, we are compiling a list of stakeholders, but it will include government and bodies outside government. We are in dialogue with Libraries NI about how best we can use information it has about library users, rather than, necessarily, having to run a whole public user-type consultation.

The consultation will focus on about half a dozen groups. We have not finalised the list yet and the strategy, or approach, to the consultation will probably be in three tiers. One might be to give stakeholders a document and ask them for their views, a second might involve a more targeted questionnaire, through which we would ask stakeholders specific questions, and a third will involve face-to-face consultation. Depending on the group, we will decide how best to engage. However, the face-to-face consultation will certainly be with half a dozen groups.

Mr Hilditch: During your presentation, you mentioned the voluntary sector. Mick, wearing one of your other hats, you will probably have seen a great improvement in delivery in museums, where there is a much increased voluntary policy and inclusion of that sector. It would bring a greater local interest to libraries, and could provide a springboard for other groups to be informed about libraries. As you know, that happened in the museum sector. Do you wish to further develop communications with the voluntary sector to perhaps not replicate but certainly look at how its involvement could add to libraries?

Mr Cory: It is not just in museums. We saw it with the numbers who volunteered for the Olympics, and we are using it to feed into the World Police and Fire Games. As an aside, there is a great degree of interest in volunteering for the World Police and Fire Games next summer, and this is about how we can build on that interest to help deliver services across government. It is an area that would be worth examining and that we would work closely with Libraries NI on. Clearly, it would bring operational reasons and considerations to bear, but it is well worth looking at.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you for your presentation. Some of the wards that I represent are among the most deprived in Northern Ireland, if not the United Kingdom. The statistics you gave in your presentation were that six or seven computer workstations are being provided per 10,000 people. Is that right? When you are looking at areas of high deprivation and economic inactivity, are the deprivation statistics taken into consideration, and is consideration given to providing more workstations? Obviously, the ability of parents in such areas to purchase computers and retain computer and IT linkages in households are much less in difficult times such as these.

Mr Cory: You make a very good point. One of the reasons for undertaking the review now is that the pattern of technology usage has shifted. Looking at the general population, there is no doubt that people own more computers. Many quite happily bring in their own computer and just want Wi-Fi access in a community centre, for example. However, that does not address the needs of people who do not have access to such technology.

The target is an average across the piece. We recognise the need to consider how libraries can offer a facility for those who do not have day-to-day access to technology to do whatever it is that they wish to do. That is a key reason why we are undertaking the review now. The Minister sees targeting areas of deprivation and economic inactivity as a very high priority. We will factor that into the review.

Mr Humphrey: So, at the moment, the answer is no.

Mr Cory: The answer is no to what?

Mr Humphrey: To the question of whether you currently factor it in.

Mr Polley: In choosing where computers are located?

Mr Humphrey: There are six or seven computers per 10,000 people. Do you look at the deprivation statistics and consider that more computers might be needed in areas of high deprivation and economic inactivity?

Mr Cory: Departmentally, we do not. However, operationally, I am sure that it is something that libraries look at.

Mr Polley: The decision on where terminals are located is an operational one that is taken by Libraries NI. However, there are some constraints, and we have been trying to work on some of them. One is that when they brought in computers, libraries were not designed for them and there was no space for them. Therefore, in some instances, they ended up putting them where there was space and not necessarily where they were needed. One of the things that we have done over the past five or 10 years is invest, through the capital programme, in libraries such as Shankill, Falls and Whiterock to improve the space for computers. We can now match computer provision more exactly to need.

Mr Cory: Absolutely. The other point is that I cannot tell you where those terminals are situated compared to areas of deprivation and economic inactivity. However, we will want to look at where they have been put, how that maps against those areas, and whether we are prioritising resources appropriately.

Mr Humphrey: To be honest, you absolutely need to look at that.

The Chairperson: Will you be able to provide that information? Will you speak to Libraries NI and get that information to the Committee?

Mr Polley: We could certainly do that; yes.

Mr Humphrey: Linked to that, you talked about the departmental steering group. Are the Department of Education or any of the education and library boards represented on that steering group?

Mr Cory: No; but we intend to engage with the Department of Education.

Mr Humphrey: If the issues and concerns that members have raised are to be addressed, and having listened to your presentation and the presentation that we got from the Assembly's Research and Information Service before that, I think that it is essential that the Department of Education and the education and library boards are represented on such a steering group.

Mr Cory: We can invite them to attend.

Mr Humphrey: I find it astounding that they have not been invited to date.

Mr Swann: Thanks for your presentation, gentlemen. The establishment of a project board and a fundamental policy review means that the Department is doing quite a serious bit of work in respect of Libraries NI. Libraries NI was not included in the Department's review of arm's-length bodies, was it?

Mr Cory: No, it was not.

Mr Swann: Are you now doing it through another means?

Mr Cory: No. The rationale for Libraries NI not being included in the review of arm's-length bodies was because it was a new body. The decision to establish it was quite recent, and it would have been too soon after the body's establishment for it to be reviewed as part of an arm's-length body review. This is not an organisational review of Libraries NI. It is a review of the policy and standards that are delivered by Libraries NI, but it is not a review of the organisation. It is not a review by another means.

Mr Swann: You talked about the possibility of a complete re-write of the whole document.

Mr Cory: Of the policy framework; yes.

Mr Swann: If you change the policy to that extent, surely you would change the ethos and delivery of the organisation.

Mr Cory: It is slightly speculative, to be honest, as to what might be contained in it: first, whether the full policy redevelopment exercise is carried out; and, secondly, what that may throw up, because that would indicate that we are making some assumptions about the organisation that is there to deliver this policy. At this stage, I do not see that as part of the review. That would be my view. However, if, as a result of any consultation, people were saying that we really need to look at the way in which the policy is being delivered by the organisation, then the Department would have to consider that, but that is not part of this agenda. It is to look at the policy framework. Libraries NI is the organisation that is there to deliver it. This is not a review of the organisation.

Mr Swann: The library service is available in places and at times to enable as many people as possible to use it. We have a research paper showing that Wales has nearly twice as many libraries per head of population than Northern Ireland. Is there a problem with the direction that Libraries NI took in building better or all-service libraries? Could there be a change in policy at some stage stating that it would be better delivered with small libraries based in local communities rather than superstore libraries in the middle of towns?

Mr Cory: Possibly. When the Department reviews all the evidence and looks at not just Wales but provision in England, Scotland and the South, as well as, perhaps, wider afield internationally, it will consider all that. As a result of the recent consultations on opening hours and closures, we have seen

quite a demand for libraries, not just for the ability to borrow books, but for use as community centres. However, such a big shift would have consequences financially down the line, so we would have to think that one through quite a bit. That is not to say that we would not do so. Traditionally, libraries have been concerned with lending books, but the new bit for us is the sense that it is not just about the books, and it is important for us to find the best way to deliver that. However, we have 96 branch libraries across the North, plus the mobile provision. There could be different ways in which that could be provided or enhanced where there is demand.

Mr Swann: The Welsh figures interested me because they have a lower spend per head than we have. They are increasing their library visitors by 3.27%, and they are increasing borrowing. Is there something that Libraries NI could learn from best practice in Wales? Is it a fact that smaller libraries spending less money are attracting more people?

Mr Cory: It is interesting that you use the statistic for visitors rather than members, and there may be a clue in there. However, it is certainly something worth looking at.

Mr Swann: It is something that I have noticed in the documentation provided to the Committee. When we looked at the second stage of the library review, Libraries NI stressed the importance of the number of visitors, rather than just the complete number of book borrowings. I have not seen that mentioned again recently. There seems to be a revision back to the fact that libraries are about lending books and not about getting people across the door, which was the big drive of Libraries NI eight to 12 months ago.

Mr Cory: Exactly.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cathaoirleach. Thank you for the presentation. We have probably touched on it, but my question relates to targeting social need. You said that the people who would probably benefit most from using the libraries would be those who use them least. Are there more imaginative ways of trying to reach those people and turn them into library users?

Mr Polley: We need to find them.

Ms McCorley: Are you looking for them?

Mr Cory: That links back to the earlier question. It is not just about putting a library somewhere and expecting people to come to it. That is not the solution. There has to be outreach and encouragement. We have to be clearer. It is worth looking at what Mr Swann said earlier about libraries having visitors, rather than just being there to lend books. There is that emphasis that could warrant greater creative thinking around how and what the library is about and what it does.

Ms McCorley: I am reminded of Andersonstown, the area in west Belfast that I come from. We had a library and it closed, which was very regrettable. I was really young and it had always been there. It probably just got jaded and appeared to be out of date. It probably became unused because of the perception about it; it did not seem to be an appealing place in the present day, and that might have added to it. It probably could have done with being jazzed up a bit. That may be one of the reasons why people feel that they do not want to go there any more.

Mr Cory: As part of the investment strategy in our libraries infrastructure, we have invested quite significantly over the past four years in an attempt to make them more attractive. However, it always comes down to affordability. The decision as to which libraries are kept open or closed is one for the board of Libraries NI, as are the decisions on which libraries it invests its money in. We have to recognise that the financial circumstances of the past number of years could be very different. Therefore, how that prioritisation is undertaken will be even more important. It is not just about the books; it is about the facility. People will find it more attractive to go to libraries if they are welcoming, comfortable and nice.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mick and David. We will revisit the subject again in February.