

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Tuesday, 16th March, 2010

SPECIAL MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Hartley (Chairman); and
Councillors Adamson, Austin, W. Browne, Convery,
Hendron, N. Kelly and Rodgers.

Also attended: Councillor Robinson.

In attendance: Mr. G. Millar, Director of Property and Projects;
Mr. C. Quigley, Director of Legal Services;
Mr. L. Steele, Head of Committee and
Members' Services; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Committee Administrator.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors Attwood, M. Browne, Campbell, Newton and Rodway.

Consultation – A Modern and Public Library Service for the Greater Belfast Area

Introduction

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“Purpose of the Report

To bring to the attention of the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee details of a consultation document issued by Libraries NI ‘Meeting the demands for a Modern Public Library Service within Northern Ireland, Stage 1: Greater Belfast’. The closing date for responses is Friday 2nd April 2010. This report summarises the consultation document for Members and outlines some key issues which Members may wish to consider in advance of the meeting. A draft response to the consultation document will be forwarded to Members in advance of the meeting. The intention being that this can be amended after the discussion with Libraries NI and presented for approval on 19th March.

Relevant Background Information

The consultation document was previously brought to the attention of members at its meeting on Friday 22nd January 2010. At this meeting members agreed that a special meeting be held to receive representatives from Libraries NI in relation to its consultation document on the Strategic Review of Libraries in the Greater Belfast area. Irene Knox, Chief Executive of Libraries NI will be present at the meeting on 16th March to present the proposals to Members and to answer any questions that Members might have.

Summary of Consultation

Libraries NI was created in 2009 to take responsibility for the public libraries service across Northern Ireland. One of the first tasks that the new authority is carrying out is a strategic review of its library provision across the Province. This is being done in a number of phases; the first phase includes a review of the Greater Belfast area.

The document indicates that there are presently 33 libraries within the Greater Belfast area. Each of these libraries was examined under 4 criteria which were:

- fit for purpose;
- capable of delivering on the vision of Libraries NI;
- in the right location; and
- sustainability

Using these criteria it was contended that the following libraries were considered to be no longer viable: Andersonstown; Ballyhackamore; Ballymacarrett, Belvoir Park, Braniel, Cloughfern, Dunmurray, Gilnahirk, Ligoniel, Oldpark, Sandyrow, Tullycarnet, Whitewell, Woodstock.

Libraries that meet the key criteria for future use and may have been recently refurbished and are well placed geographically to remain are Carryduff, Dundonald, Finaghy, Glengormley, Grove, Holywood Arches, Rathcoole and Whiterock.

The review indicates that libraries that require new builds or major refurbishment are Ardoyne, Chichester, Cregagh, Falls Road, Lisburn Road, Newtownbreda, Ormeau and Shankill.

Libraries that require to be clustered to consolidate provision into a single viable entity are Suffolk and Colin Glen.

**Previous response to Northern Ireland's Libraries –
A Framework for Change**

An extensive public consultation exercise was undertaken about the future of the public library service which resulted in the publication in July 2006 of a libraries policy framework, entitled 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries - principles and priorities for the development of public libraries in Northern Ireland'. The council submitted a response to this consultation and some of the comments made by the council are highlighted below:

- The Council is committed to the view that successful libraries are not simply about a formal academic understanding of education; they are also about improving quality of life through the provision of a combination of educational, social, cultural, health and general information opportunities for local people. As such they are potentially invaluable as a means of delivering the social outcomes that will be set as part of any community planning process.
- The council stressed that it would be imperative that the new library authority must work closely with other statutory organisations, particularly local government, to ensure that a collaborative partnership approach is adopted.
- Libraries have a strong role to play, in terms of building a sense of inclusion and citizenship, as well as developing an understanding of our heritage, cultural diversity and dealing with conflict.
- It is critical that libraries are seen as a public place for community interaction and they are accessible to all. Libraries are central to communities.
- Libraries are important as a community resource, particularly in disadvantaged areas. They provide a neutral and safe environment for community use and their role as part of the community should be further developed.
- The Council stressed that it believed that libraries should be community facilities and that libraries should no longer be stand alone buildings but should be incorporated with other facilities such as education and health for the ultimate benefit of the whole community – for example based on new best practice facilities such as those at the Grove Well-Being Centre.

**Previous response to the RPA –
Further Consultation Document**

The Council in response to the Review of Public Administration further consultation document made the following comments on the role we expect the libraries of tomorrow to perform:

- The Council is committed to the view that successful libraries are not simply about a formal academic understanding of education, they are also about improving quality of life through the provision of a combination of social, cultural, health and general information for local people. As such they are potentially invaluable as a means of delivering the social outcomes that will be set as part of any community planning process. In Belfast the opportunities for libraries to offer a safe and neutral environment for people from all sections of the community is also an important consideration.

Key Issues

There are a number of issues that members may wish to consider when considering the consultation document.

- There is a focus on the physical properties of the library within the consultation document. The current criteria do not look at the expanding array of services that are being provided by libraries – for example: hosting educational events, Bookstart initiative, facilitating cultural and learning events etc.
- Any plans for the closure of libraries should take into consideration access to public transport. The older population and those with physical disabilities would for example find distance to an alternative library a limiting issue.
- Libraries are regularly used as community spaces and local people use them as such. In particular, older people, younger people and migrant workers use libraries frequently.
- In some of the areas where closures are proposed the library may be the only community space available to residents.
- Some of the proposed closures are situated in areas of high deprivation, whose residents have no or low levels of qualifications.

- **There is merit in considering what other community facilities exist within the area in order to look at relocation options if feasible.**
- **Proposed mobile services to replace existing service may not be suitable for older people or people with disabilities and this needs to be addressed.**
- **Libraries are an important meeting place for social and community activities many associated with life-long learning outcomes but also just places to drop in, attend thematic events, meet socially and are used by the local community in such a way.**
- **One of the issues that Members may wish to explore with Libraries NI is the potential to explore co-location of library services within BCC-owned buildings. Particularly where BCC buildings are located in the proximity of libraries facing potential closure.**
- **In terms of planning the future provision of public estate in the city, the Director of Property and Projects is currently exploring options with the Estate Director within the Library Service.**

Recommendations

1. **To consider the draft consultation response after the presentation from Libraries NI in order that the response can be amended and presented for approval on 19th March 2010.”**

Presentation from Representatives of Libraries NI

It was reported that Ms. I. Knox, Chief Executive, and Ms. M. Bryson, Business Manager, Libraries NI, were in attendance to provide the Members with details of the proposals contained within the consultation document and they were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman.

Ms. Knox outlined the need for undertaking a strategic review of library services in Northern Ireland. She pointed out that the previous Education and Library Board boundaries were no longer applicable since the new single authority, that is, Libraries NI, had been established to provide a regional service. That meant that there was now a single budget for the whole of Northern Ireland which needed to be used effectively and efficiently. She explained that a lack of investment in the Library buildings had resulted in a deterioration in the condition of the estate, there was a low and declining usage in many of the Libraries, there had been a lack of expenditure in stock and other services, the opening hours needed to be reviewed and increased in order to reflect modern lifestyles, there was a need to deliver the efficiencies required by the Review of Public Administration and a need to investigate ways of accessing capital funding.

She explained that the review would be undertaken in three stages, with Stage One, which was being undertaken currently, to include the thirty-three libraries in the Greater Belfast area, Stage Two, to include the libraries in the rest of Northern Ireland and Stage Three, the mobile library service. She outlined a proposed three year plan for the refurbishment, rationalisation and capital development of libraries within the Greater Belfast area.

Ms. Knox then proceeded to display photographs of eight of the libraries which would be subject to rationalisation which showed the poor condition of both the exterior and interior of the buildings and the inadequate facilities which were provided. That meant that many of the libraries could not deliver the vision of a new library service which was to have the vast majority of libraries open for a minimum of 30 hours per week, of which 10 would be outside normal office hours offering: up-to-date stock in a variety of formats; sufficient computers to meet demand, with free internet access; one-to-one support from experienced staff; and space for activities to support learning, culture, information and heritage activities. In addition, there was a need for a small number of strategically placed larger libraries to be opened for a minimum of 50 hours per week, 15 of which would be outside normal office hours and, in addition to the services previously mentioned, these would host specialist collections and resources and provide meeting rooms and exhibition space.

Ms. Knox stated that the vision had been realised already in a number of libraries, including Finaghy, Dundonald and Antrim. She stressed that without introducing changes there would be a reduction in the opening hours of all libraries, ad-hoc closures, which had happened previously, insufficient funding to carry out necessary improvements to meet basic health and safety requirements and there would be implications for the purchase of new stock and other resources. She stated that Libraries NI aspired to have a network of bright, modern, well-resourced libraries which could be co-located where possible with other services. In addition, those libraries would provide proper public facilities, with disabled access, toilet provision and social, study and meeting spaces. She reminded Members that this co-location of services had been provided previously in conjunction with the Council at the Grove-Wellbeing Centre and Libraries NI was now looking at the possibility of co-locating on the new development on the Girdwood site.

Several Members expressed the view that there was a need for Libraries NI to ensure that local communities had access to libraries and that those provided a safe and neutral environment for people from all sections of the community. The reviews should take into consideration the need for shared public space, the co-location of public and community-type services, perhaps located in or near shopping centres, and whilst there was a need to avoid duplication of services, which was unsustainable and inefficient, consideration still needed to be given to the option of providing small satellite library services. In addition, any proposals to rationalise the library service needed to take into consideration the public transport system in Belfast which tended to follow the arterial routes and might not provide direct access from the communities where it was proposed to close libraries to the suggested alternative library which those users were expected to avail of.

The deputation then answered a number of questions in relation to capital development, the consultation on the Equality Impact Assessment and the provision of mobile library services in the Belfast area.

The Chairman, on behalf of the Committee, thanked the members of the deputation for attending and they retired from the meeting.

Representations from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance

The Committee was advised that Ms. J. Quinn and Mr. J. McKeegan, representing the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman.

Mr. McKeegan reminded the Members that Libraries NI proposed to reduce library provision from 32 to 16 libraries across the Greater Belfast area because the current libraries did not all fit with the vision of Libraries NI. Following several requests from the Northern Ireland Public Sector Alliance, Libraries NI had eventually disclosed that the overall savings to be realised if all the proposed closures were to proceed would be in the region of £55,000, representing mainly utility costs. Whilst the Union welcomed the fact that Libraries NI had stated that no staff would lose their jobs, the fact remained that there had already been ad-hoc closures of libraries because there were not enough staff employed currently, particularly at Library Assistant level. The ad-hoc closure of libraries had been caused by understaffing and a continual decline in investment in libraries over many years.

Mr. McKeegan explained that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure had set out its vision for libraries in its document entitled "Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries", which stated that 85% of the population should have access within a two mile radius to a static library provision. He made the point that it would be unlikely that local users would transfer to the next closest library, for example, if Ligoniel Library was to close as had been proposed, the next nearest library was located in Ardoyne and it was unlikely that the Ligoniel users would transfer to that site given the particular circumstances associated with living in Northern Ireland. For many users this would not be through choice, but as a result of access to transport, particularly the young, the elderly, the socially disadvantaged and the unemployed who, in the main, did not have the resources to afford public transport, even if such services to the alternative venues existed.

Mr. McKeegan stated that it was vital that Libraries NI listened to the public when undertaking its consultation exercise. He stated that the Union had accepted that there had been a decline in the usage of libraries but questioned what Libraries NI had done to halt that decline. One means of combating this would be to properly and actively market libraries and the services they offer in order to increase usage. He stated that, rather than close libraries, Libraries NI should be retaining all the current services and put in place a strategy for upgrading the buildings to ensure that users and staff had access to modern facilities.

Ms. Quinn advised the Members that the Union had been campaigning in the east and west of the City and pointing out the importance of maintaining branch libraries. She stated that all of the branches affected by the proposed closures were located in working class areas.

The deputation then answered a number of questions from the Members and the Chairman, on behalf of the Committee, thanked the deputation for attending and they retired from the meeting.

Proposed Response to the Consultation Document

The Director of Property and Projects tabled for the information of the Members the proposed response to the consultation document.

The Committee agreed that the draft response be revised to include the comments which had been made by the Members and resubmitted to the next meeting of the Committee, which was scheduled to be held on 19th March.

Chairman