

LIBRARIES NI

The Northern Ireland Library Authority

Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Board of the Authority held in Lisburn City Library and by remote video link (Zoom) on Thursday 1 June 2023 at 10:30 am

PRESENT

Professor Bernard Cullen
Councillor Julie Gilmour

Chairperson
Vice-Chairperson

Councillor Cheryl Brownlee
Councillor Alistair Cathcart
Councillor Peter Johnston
Mrs Deirdre Kenny
Councillor Andrew McAuley
Councillor Martin McRandal
Mrs Wendy Osborne OBE
Mr John Peto
Miss Linda Wilson

IN ATTENDANCE

Mr Jim O'Hagan
Mr Desi Miskelly
Ms Adrienne Adair
Ms Stefani Millar

Chief Executive
Director of Business Support
Director of Library Services
Boardroom Apprentice

1. APOLOGIES FOR NON ATTENDANCE

Dr M Ward

2. MEMBERS' DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- 2.1 The Chairperson reminded Members and Officers of the need to declare any actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest associated with any item on the agenda either now or at the relevant stage during the meeting. No interests were declared.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

- 3.1 The Chairperson welcomed Members and Officers to the Special Meeting of the Libraries NI Board which had been convened to consider the Libraries

NI response to the Department for Communities Budget 2023/24 Equality Impact Assessment which is to be submitted by 7 June 2023.

- 3.2 The Chairperson congratulated Councillor Members who had been re-elected following the local Council elections which had taken place on 18 May 2023.

4. CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S BUSINESS

- 4.1 The Chief Executive informed Members that Joint Trade Union Side (JTUS) had unexpectedly moved to ballot their members for industrial action in relation to the long-running Branch Library Manager (BLM) dispute. Following the ballot which closed on 16 May 2023 JTUS had advised that their BLM members had voted in favour of two motions i.e. Strike Action and Action Short of Strike. Notification had been received from JTUS of their intention to commence Action Short of Strike from Friday 2 June 2023. He added that the Chairperson, along with the Chief Executive and the HR Manager had agreed to meet with JTUS on 8 June 2023.

- 4.2 The Chief Executive drew attention to the letter received from the Department for Communities (DfC) dated 12 May 2023 indicating that Libraries NI had received a revised indicative resource budget allocation for 2023/24 of £29,013,000. It was noted that this matter would be discussed further under Agenda Item 6: Update on Indicative Financial Allocations 2023/24 and Expenditure Control Proposals.

5. DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES (DFC) BUDGET 2023/24 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EQIA) LNI 01.06.23

- 5.1 The Chairperson reminded Members of the confidential nature of this paper.
- 5.2 The Chief Executive explained that on 10 May 2023 DfC had published an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) setting out its initial assessment of the impact of the Draft Budget on spending proposals for the 2023/24 financial year and the potential impact on a range of public services, including libraries. The Department had invited comment on any aspects of the document and encouraged interested parties to respond by 7 June 2023. Responses would be used to inform the Department's allocation of 2023/24 funds with any further consultation responses received between 7 June 2023 and 2 August 2023 being used to inform further mitigation measures and reallocation of any additional funding available during 2023/24. In relation to its Arm's Length Bodies, including Libraries NI, the EQIA proposed that 'Funding would have to be curtailed by reducing the 2022/23 baseline position by 5%.'
- 5.3 The Chief Executive drew attention to the draft Libraries NI response to the EQIA which set out the impact a 5% reduction on the 2022/23 baseline figure would have on the provision of library services. He reported that the absence of sustainable and stable funding for the library service would result in a

reduction in the scale and scope of library provision to the extent that it would not be possible to continue to deliver the service in line with statutory obligations and the existing library policy and standards. Continued under resourcing of the service could result in a negative impact in a number of areas and on several Section 75 groups and for those living in rural areas.

5.4 He stated that a 5% cut in funding would result in reductions that would impact across the entire library service and particularly on book stock. Delivering the public library standard for investment in book stock and related resources requires expenditure of some £4.3 million annually and the funding level proposed in the DfC budget EQIA would allow for an allocation of £0.26 million which would result in insufficient funds to purchase books for the library service during 2023/24. This reduction in library stock provision would impact directly on participation levels, as the scale, scope and relevancy of materials offered diminished and would disproportionately impact on a number of Section 75 groups reducing the provision of material in ethnic minority languages, languages other than English, large print and audio book formats which are heavily used by older people and those with visual impairments and children's materials in general. A failure to invest adequately in book stock would have a direct adverse impact on the provision of the library service, with a likely longer-term impact on the public's perception and use of the library service. He added that these negative effects reach far beyond libraries causing long-term harm and damage at the intersection of library services with other priority areas such as education, health, social inclusion and societal well-being.

5.5 Members discussed the paper in detail and suggestions included:

- at Question 6.3: state more clearly about protecting the 2022/23 baseline budget figure
- at Section 4: Add some tables/graphs to visually show the trends for reductions in funding and book stock resources over the last number of years
- the addition of statistics to reflect the impact of a reduced library service on Section 75 groups
- the addition of examples to 'humanise' the document e.g. sharing customers experience of using the library service and how it has helped them through difficult times
- explain how cuts to the library service would feed into the wider series of cuts across the public sector
- look at Libraries NI's statutory responsibilities and indicate the areas which would not be met / adversely impacted.

5.6 The Chief Executive thanked Members for their views on the response and agreed to revise the submission based on the suggestions above.

5.7 On a proposal by the Chairperson of the Board, Professor B Cullen, seconded by Mrs D Kenny, Members agreed to delegate authority to the Chairperson to

approve for submission to the Department for Communities, the Libraries NI response to the Budget 2023/24 Equality Impact Assessment. A copy of the final submission would be circulated to Members for information.

6. UPDATE ON INDICATIVE FINANCIAL ALLOCATIONS 2023/24 AND EXPENDITURE CONTROL PROPOSALS LNI 02.06.23

- 6.1 The Director of Business Support introduced this paper reminding Members of its confidential nature. He referred to the discussions which had taken place at the last meeting of the Board held on 27 April 2023 at which initial indicative allocation figures for resource and capital funding had been £27,486,000 and £3,631,000 respectively.
- 6.2 He explained that simultaneously to publishing its EQIA DfC had issued on 12 May 2023 a revised indicative resource allocation to Libraries NI of £29,013,000, an increase of £1,527,000 from the April position and an updated indicative capital allocation of £5,531,000, an increase of £1,900,000 from the position in April. The current indicative resource allocation creates a funding gap of £1,157,000.
- 6.3 He reported that while considering possible measures to control expenditure it was recognised that there were factors which limited the scope of action that could be taken within the time available. Changes to policy which would normally require public consultation or be subject to Ministerial consent could not be implemented within the financial year or in the current public sector environment. Therefore attention has been focused on those areas of business and service delivery which fall within the Board's delegated authority to act on and their remit of promoting the efficient, economic and effective use of resources by Libraries NI.
- 6.4 Members noted that Libraries NI continued to operate on the basis of an indicative financial allocation and that a resource budget for the organisation could not be set at this time. However the revised indicative financial allocations and proposals as set out in the Department's EQIA required that previously agreed Interim Spending Plans were revisited and revised and actions put forward to allow the organisation to remain within the current indicative resource allocation envelope.
- 6.5 Members noted that as a public service many of the operating costs were inescapable and that no single area of the business has been identified as capable of delivering the quantum of spending reduction required.
- 6.6 The current business environment and impacts of macroeconomic factors and local political instabilities had further limited the areas to which we could realistically look in order to balance expenditure against the 2023/24 indicative allocation.

- 6.7 The situation has been exacerbated over time by an inadequate level of baseline funding being supplemented each year through ad hoc in year allocations to meet funding shortfalls.
- 6.8 The Department has previously acknowledged the difficulties and challenges created by these historic funding patterns and the negative impact this has had on the effectiveness of planning and service delivery.
- 6.9 An in-depth discussion of the report took place and Members suggested the following:
- the title 'Unfunded Service Elements' be amended at paragraph 5.06 to reflect that section related to 'Library Stock Funding Shortfall'
 - the word 'suspend' be removed in relation the Mobile Library Service provision at paragraph 5.02
 - when the budget has been confirmed if Libraries NI finds itself in a position where it cannot live within budget it may be necessary to be more proactive and engage in discussions with elected representatives and the public.
- 6.10 Members expressed concern at the low level of funding for book stock and that the Department may misinterpret the message i.e. that Libraries NI were managing to maintain a service with such a low level of funding. Members felt that this diminished the importance of the stock budget and it was agreed that wording in the document should be amended to reflect that 'stock spend is not discretionary' and to state that the Board does not regard book stock as a discretionary spend area for the public library service and that the decision to allocate a low level budget for the stock fund was being driven by the Department.
- 6.11 On a proposal by the Chairperson of the Board, Professor B Cullen, seconded by Mrs D Kenny the Board considered the information provided and gave approval for Officers to implement and / or progress expenditure control measures as set out in the report at Sections 5.02 to 5.06.

7. ANY OTHER NOTIFIED BUSINESS

- 7.1 There was no other notified business.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

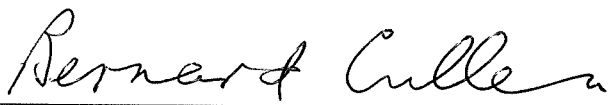
- 8.1 Members noted that the next scheduled meeting of the Board would take place on Thursday 6 July 2023 at 10.30 am in Lisburn City Library and / or remotely via video link.

9. MEMBERS ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE TIMES

9.1 The meeting ended at 12:36 pm

9.2 All Members arrived for the commencement of the meeting and remained until it ended with the exception of the following:

Councillor A McAuley left the meeting at 11.48 am
Councillor C Brownlee left the meeting at 12:21 pm

Signed: 
Professor Bernard Cullen, Chairperson

Date: 06/07/23