

Libraries NI

The Northern Ireland Library Authority

Minutes of the Board Planning Meeting held in Lisburn City Library
and by remote video link (Zoom) on Thursday 14 September 2023 at 10:30 am

PRESENT

Professor Bernard Cullen	Chairperson
Councillor Julie Gilmour	Vice Chairperson
Councillor Alistair Cathcart (Remotely)	
Councillor Peter Johnston	
Councillor Andrew McAuley (Remotely)	
Councillor Martin McRandal	
Ms Wendy Osborne	
Mr John Peto	
Miss Linda Wilson (Remotely)	

IN ATTENDANCE

Mr Jim O'Hagan	Chief Executive
Mr Desi Miskelly	Director of Business Support
Ms Adrienne Adair	Director of Library Services
Ms Margaret Bell	Head of Service
Mr Sean Beattie	Head of Service
Ms Kim Aiken	Deputy Head of Service
Ms Julie Reid	Deputy Head of Service
Ms Finola Guinnane	Boardroom Apprentice
Mr Tony O'Neill	Department for Communities
Ms Fionnuala Elliott	Department for Communities
Ms Gillian Clarke	Minutes

The Chairperson welcomed Board Members and staff to the meeting. He particularly welcomed Mr T O'Neill, Acting Head of Museums and Libraries Branch and Ms F Elliott, Museums and Libraries Branch, Department for Communities (DfC). He extended a welcome to Ms F Guinnane as this was her first meeting since she officially became Libraries NI's Boardroom Apprentice.

1. APOLOGIES FOR NON ATTENDANCE

Councillor C Brownlee

2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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. ORAL UPDATE ON BUDGET POSITION

- 3.1 The Director of Business Support reminded Members that at 1 April 2023 a funding gap of some £1,200,000 had been identified between the budget allocation and projected cost of delivering the service throughout 2023/24. Financial control measures had been approved by the Board and implemented and while these measures had significantly reduced the potential deficit as of 31 August 2023 a projected overspend of some £236,000 remained.
- 3.2 The Director of Business Support sought interim Board approval to continue to apply the existing financial control measures, including reduced opening hours until 31 October 2023. A further review of the financial position would be undertaken in early October and detailed proposal for actions required to manage expenditure for the remainder of the financial year would be brought to the meeting of the Board on 12 October 2023.
- 3.3 Councillor J Gilmour thanked the Director of Business Support for managing this difficult and hard job and commented that it was positive that the projected overspend was so reduced but disappointing that there was no funding for book stock.
- 3.4 Councillor P Johnston enquired if there was scope to extend library hours with remote access to other locations.
- 3.5 The Director of Business Support advised that the Out of Hours Service operated in seven locations and was available to those over 18 years. The Department for Agriculture had provided the funding for the infrastructure for this service. There was currently no funding to support extending the scheme.
- 3.6 The Director of Library Services advised that the reduced opening hours would impact customers, which was disappointing but unavoidable.
- 3.7 Mrs W Osborne endorsed Councillor Gilmour's comments regarding managing well in difficult circumstances and commented that there wasn't sufficient funding to run library services which would impact Libraries NI's customers.
- 3.8 Mr J Peto enquired if the KPIs reflected the impact on library services.
- 3.9 The Chief Executive advised that in the first quarter KPIs indicated some adverse impact, it was likely that complaints would increase, and staff morale would be affected. Library numbers and participation had not fully recovered from the Covid pandemic and being underfunded would make this harder. Management would continue to discuss this with DfC.
- 3.10 On a proposal by the Chairperson of the Board, Professor B Cullen, seconded by Councillor J Gilmour, the Board approved the extension of expenditure control measures including reduced opening hours to 31 October 2023.

4. BOARD PLANNING DAY EVENT - PROGRAMME

Welcome and Introductions

- 4.1 The Chairperson reminded Members that the focus of the planning day was to allow the Board an early opportunity to discuss the development of a new Corporate Plan for 2025 – 29 adding that discussion would cover the following areas:
- the development of the Corporate Plan 2025 - 29 and authorisation for the Senior Management Team to take forward work on this during 2024
 - process and approach to developing a new Corporate Plan
 - strategic context, priorities and challenges facing Libraries NI
 - key planning assumptions and underlying principles.
- 4.2 Mr T O'Neill thanked the Board for the opportunity to provide the Department for Communities perspective and advised that Libraries NI was regarded as a trusted partner. The Libraries NI Team continued to lobby for sustainable funding, the Department appreciated their concerns and would continue to work in partnership to deliver the library service. It was an opportune time to work together to deliver a new public library strategy for Northern Ireland. The strategy would have a common thread of literacy, creativity and supporting the economically disadvantaged and DfC hoped that within 12- 18 months they could substantively progress development of the strategy.
- 4.3 The Chairperson commented that development of an updated public library strategy had fallen behind schedule, nine years ago Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries had been recognised as being out of date. The Board Strategy and DfC Library Strategy needed to dovetail to adequately support development of a world class library service. The way in which the service had been funded had been unsatisfactory making effective planning particularly difficult and creating a volatile environment with a reliance on supplementary funding being made available in year and last year there had been a major cut back even to baseline funding.
- 4.4 Mrs W Osborne expressed concerns regarding the amount of the budget and how it comes down to Libraries NI and enquired if there was a definitive timeline for developing a public library strategy.
- 4.5 The Chief Executive reported that he had written to John McCord, DfC regarding the current situation and the systemic underfunding. In doing so he had suggested that it would be appropriate for the department to commission an Independent Review of public library service funding which could form an important strand to inform the development of a library strategy. Libraries had historically managed the very challenging funding environment however pressures continued to mount and there was a now a real danger that a breaking point had been reached.

- 4.6 Mr T O'Neill advised that responses to the DfC Budget 2023/24 EQIA would provide information, DfC would review the current and historic underfunding of libraries within their Arms Length Bodies Review. There was no definitive timeline for developing a public library strategy currently. There had been an internal restructuring of Museums and Libraries Branch Team which it was anticipated would provide the resources to progress work on a library strategy, once up and running a run time of 12-18 months was envisaged.

Presentations

- 4.7 The Chief Executive set the scene with a presentation on the process and approach to developing the Corporate Plan for 2025-2029. The framework for planning and delivery should set out Libraries NI's Purpose, Vision, and Mission, feed into Corporate Plan and the Annual Business Plan, advising how this contributes to government priorities and our values.

The Corporate Plan would need to consider structure and delivery under the new pillars of Library Network, Collections, Online Services and Service Support and Customer Experience and Customer Groups and align these to Libraries NI's outcomes and strategic priorities. The Corporate Plan would require approval from the Minister and DfC and would inform Annual Business Plans, Service Delivery Plans and Business Support Plans. The Plan would need to take cognisance of and be influenced by the library world including the UK and ROI. To develop the Plan it would be necessary to consider the key planning assumptions and principles which had been circulated along with the Programme.

- 4.8 The Director of Library Services provided a presentation on the Service Delivery Challenge, reporting on how the service had changed, adapting during pandemic, was recovering post Covid and the need for a clear strategic direction from DfC. In planning for the future it would be necessary to consider how society and the world had changed, the transformation needed to provide a public library service for all including the physical spaces, different delivery models, re-imagining spaces and a re-imagined mobile service. Consider the customer landscape to ensure the customer base was inclusive and accessible, the service offer needed to provide what the end user wanted, exploit collections, align to the Reader Strategy for NI, include culture, creativity and digital choices. The recruitment and development of staff would also be important, building skills, processes, systems and capabilities of a diverse workforce. Advocating for the service, strategic marketing and engagement for an ambitious library service.

- 4.9 The Director of Business Support provided context in terms of resourcing. Highlighting the almost £20,000,000 (2011 baseline adjusted for inflation) gap between the current level of funding and the level of actual funding required to provide the comprehensive public library service as set out in legislation. This did not take account of the increase in population. Between 2011 and 2023 there was only one year (2019/20) when the PLS target for stock expenditure had been achieved.

- 4.10 The Chief Executive advised that the presentation slides would be made available, this was the start of conversations around the Plan, a very important piece of work and drafts would be brought back to the Board.

Discussion

- 4.11 The Chairperson thanked the Directors and Chief Executive for their informative presentations.
- 4.12 Councillor P Johnston thanked the Directors and Chief Executive for the presentations which provided a good overview, illustrating the wide range of services provided including access for disabled users, warm spaces, services to upskill people, services for refugees and asylum seekers. Library funding was an investment in services that compliment strategic priorities and catch problems early reducing the burden later.
- 4.13 Mrs W Osborne endorsed Councillor Johnston's comments; advised that literacy for young children was an important resource, she was struck by the aspiration and ambition and the reality of the funding deficit and policy vacuum and felt that DfC had a huge part to play.
- 4.14 Mr J Peto commented that setting out a reading strategy would be hugely positive. Book stock funding was provided at the least strategic time, if it were received at the beginning of the year the funding could go further and provide better value for money.
- 4.15 Councillor J Gilmour enquired if modern apprenticeships had been considered as part of recruitment.
- 4.16 The Director of Library Services reported that the libraries professional body was considering recruitment routes including apprenticeships and when further information was available, she would provide an update.
- 4.17 The Chief Executive advised that he had sat on the Culture, Arts and Heritage Task Force and there had been initial challenges regarding recognition of literature and storytelling in the context of culture, arts and heritage, partly because it was regarded as a statutory funded service. In other jurisdictions there was an advocacy body on behalf of libraries, which was not part of their governance and could advocate in an unfettered way, and this has been highlighted to the Department as a missing piece in the configuration of the public library service here.

Concluding Remarks

- 4.18 The Chairperson thanked everyone for their contributions and in particular the presenters, encouraged Members to continue to lobby for resourcing for Libraries NI.

5. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

5.1 The next Board Meeting will be held on Thursday, 12 October 2023 at 10:30am in Lisburn City Library.

6. MEMBERS' ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE TIMES

6.1 The meeting ended at 12:55 pm.

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

Miss Linda Wilson left at 12 noon.

Signed: Bernard Cullen
Professor Bernard Cullen, Chairperson

Date: 12 Oct 2023