

Opening Hours Policy and Proposals

Rural Impact Assessment: Final Report

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Libraries NI is committed to adopting best practice in its approaches to policy development and review and in accordance with guidance¹ on rural proofing, issued in February 2011, sought views on the impact on rural dwellers of a draft policy on opening hours, which sets out the overarching approach to establishing opening hours, and proposals for opening hours in the context of the 2015/16 budget.
- 1.2 A draft Rural Impact Assessment was published as part of the consultation process and comments were sought, particularly from library users in rural communities, about the implications for them of the draft policy and the proposals. The draft Rural Impact Assessment was made available on the Libraries NI website and was forwarded also to the Rural Community Network, the Rural Development Council, DARD, Local Rural Support Networks and other rural stakeholders.
- 1.3 The purpose of the draft Rural Impact Assessment was to present preliminary findings in relation to the impact on rural communities and to seek information on additional sources of data or research which should be considered by the Board in making decisions on the draft policy and on the proposals for opening hours.
- 1.4 A number of individuals and organisations commented either directly on the draft Rural Impact Assessment or included comments on the implications for rural communities in general responses to the consultation. The Board of Libraries NI, at its meeting on 13 May 2015 considered a final draft of the Rural Impact Assessment, together with a final draft of the Equality Impact Assessment and a report on the outcome of the consultation process on the draft policy and proposals. The Board, having considered all the information provided, agreed an Opening Hours Policy together with proposals for opening hours in 2015/16.

2. Background

- 2.1 As a result of the 2015/16 budget, Libraries NI is required to make savings of 7.5% (which equates to £2.385 million) compared with the initial budget for 2014/15. One of the measures being put in place in order to achieve this level of savings is a reduction in the opening hours of libraries (to save on staff

¹ Thinking Rural: the Essential Guide to Rural Proofing (DARD, February 2011)

costs and premises related costs). In order to ensure a consistent approach to determining the opening hours of libraries a draft policy was devised, setting out the overall approach that will be used.

3. Policy

3.1 The agreed Opening Hours Policy is shown below. Substantive changes to the draft policy are highlighted in bold.

In establishing the opening hours of libraries, Libraries NI will seek to ensure:

- *a consistent approach is applied across all libraries; exceptions may be made for libraries serving areas of substantial social need **and/or rural libraries***
- *opening hours relate to the historic level of use of a library*
- *the allocated hours are used in a way that best meets customer need*
- *the allocated hours in every library are sufficient to provide a range of opening hours to suit different customer groups and to allow a minimum range of programmes to be delivered in line with Libraries NI's priorities*
- *the opening hours are affordable*
- *the opening hours are be sustainable i.e. ad hoc closures due to staffing shortages should be avoided other than in exceptional circumstances.*

3.2 In the context of the 2015/16 budget the Board agreed the following (substantive changes to the original proposals are shown in bold):

- *libraries will open for 54, 50, 45, 40, 35, 28, 25 or 18 hours depending on their level of use in 2013/14*
- *no library should be open for less than 18 hours per week. If a library is open for less time than this, it is difficult to implement the policy of providing a range of opening hours to suit different customer groups and to allow a minimum range of programmes to be delivered in line with Libraries NI's priorities*
- *no library serving areas of substantial deprivation (as listed in the Libraries NI Business Plan 2015/16²) and no rural library should have its hours reduced by more than 10%.*

3.3 Many of the libraries which are currently open for 18 hours per week are located in rural communities. For the purposes of the draft Rural Impact Assessment, rural communities were defined as those in Bands F, G and H

² The libraries serving areas of social deprivation are Ardoyne, Chichester, Colin Glen, Creggan, Falls Road, Hollywood Arches, Shankill, Shantallow, Suffolk, Waterside, Whiterock and Woodstock

(i.e. communities of 4,500 or less) in the Report of the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements (NISRA, 2005). After the publication of the draft Rural Impact Assessment, NISRA published a review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements³, based on the results from the 2011 Census, and recommended some amendments to the classifications. These included:

- raising the boundary between intermediate settlement (Band F) and small town (Band E) from 4,500 to 5,000 people
- defining settlements with a population of at least 10,000 (i.e. Bands A, B, C and D) as ‘service centres’ on the basis that the town centre of such a settlement is a robust proxy for locations providing sufficient service provision
- showing the drive-times (both 20 minutes and 30 minutes) from settlements within Bands E (small town), F (intermediate settlement), and G (village) to a service centre.

3.4 While the recommendations in the Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements (2015) have not been formally adopted as yet, they were taken into account in finalising this Rural Impact Assessment. As a result Bessbrook Library (which falls within Band F, intermediate settlement) and Strathfoyle Library (which falls within Band G, village) have been included in the definition of a library serving a rural community and Crumlin Library (which now falls within Band E, small town) has been excluded. Table 2 (below) has been amended accordingly.

4. Available Data and Research

4.1 In developing the Rural Impact Assessment, various sources of information were considered in respect of the rural impact of the proposed policy on opening hours, namely:

- Libraries NI data
- Delivering Tomorrow’s Libraries (DCAL, first published 2006, revised 2014)
- Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2010 (NISRA).

4.2 As part of the consultation, Libraries NI sought information on any additional sources of data or research which it should consider in making decisions on

³ Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements (March 2015, NISRA) accessed at <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/geography/review-of-the-statistical-classification-and-delineation-of-settlements-march-2015.pdf>

the impact on rural communities of the proposed policy regarding opening hours.

Libraries NI Data

- 4.3 Public libraries are delivered via a network of 96 branch libraries, 2 heritage libraries, 16 mobile libraries and 10 homecall vehicles, as well as online and outreach services.
- 4.4 It is recognised that all libraries have a number of users who are rural dwellers. This information was confirmed by an analysis undertaken by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in conjunction with Libraries NI to map the postcodes of library users to Output Areas⁴. Using this information, an analysis was undertaken of the active borrower details for each of the 96 libraries to determine the percentage of active borrowers in each library who are rural dwellers. This information is shown in Table 1 below. In 31 libraries, 51% or more of the active borrowers live in rural communities. It should be noted that this information was collated prior to the recently published Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements and does not reflect the differences in that document.

Library	% Rurality	Library	% Rurality	Library	% Rurality
Antrim	18.84%	Ardoyne	0.59%	Armagh	40.34%
Ballycastle	28.36%	Ballyclare	42.70%	Ballyhackamore	2.20%
Ballymena	40.69%	Ballymoney	46.64%	Ballynahinch	57.99%
Banbridge	36.56%	Bangor Carnegie	5.43%	Bessbrook	36.01%
Broughshane	94.68%	Brownlow	17.39%	Carnlough	91.13%
Carrickfergus	10.33%	Carryduff	23.79%	Castledearg	94.49%
Castlewellan	93.54%	Belfast Central	6.21%	Chichester	0.93%
Cloughfern	2.00%	Coalisland	48.68%	Coleraine	23.48%
Colin Glen	2.85%	Comber	33.75%	Cookstown	49.88%
Cregagh	3.34%	Creggan	2.04%	Crossmaglen	82.52%
Crumlin	97.12%	Cushendall	90.68%	Derry Central	10.91%
Donaghadee	33.57%	Downpatrick	54.19%	Draperstown	99.08%
Dromore	41.72%	Dundonald	3.45%	Dungannon	43.29%
Dungiven	97.34%	Enniskillen	49.25%	Falls Road	2.32%
Finaghy	4.73%	Fintona	91.81%	Fivemiletown	94.81%
Garvagh	97.28%	Glengormley	7.30%	Greenisland	2.09%
Greystone	15.66%	Grove	2.54%	Hollywood Arches	1.72%

⁴ Output Areas (OAs) were designed to have similar population sizes of around 125 households and 350 people; they are also as socially similar as possible. There are 5,022 OAs in Northern Ireland

Library	% Rurality	Library	% Rurality	Library	% Rurality
Hollywood	5.53%	Irvinestown	88.24%	Keady	89.56%
Kells & Connor	93.49%	Kilkeel	50.51%	Killyleagh	95.43%
Kilrea	98.08%	Larne	21.51%	Limavady	42.68%
Lisburn	32.17%	Lisburn Road	7.38%	Lisnaskea	92.96%
Lurgan	32.15%	Maghera	95.30%	Magherafelt	55.93%
Moira	96.17%	Newcastle	35.50%	Newry City	38.51%
Newtownards	17.04%	Newtownbreda	5.04%	Newtownstewart	90.33%
Omagh	50.50%	Ormeau Road	3.62%	Portadown	28.72%
Portaferry	97.70%	Portglenone	96.30%	Portrush	16.71%
Portstewart	6.43%	Randalstown	39.50%	Rathcoole	1.79%
Rathfriland	97.55%	Richhill	94.40%	Saintfield	93.92%
Shankill Road	0.88%	Shantallow	2.41%	Strabane	28.76%
Strathfoyle	24.91%	Suffolk	3.59%	Tandragee	96.31%
Tullycarnet	2.26%	Warrenpoint	40.40%	Waterside	24.40%
Whitehead	94.49%	Whiterock	2.05%	Woodstock	2.45%

Table 1: Percentage of users who live in rural areas

- 4.5 Rural areas are served by a combination of mobile library services and library branches in some rural towns and villages. The mobile library service is not impacted by the proposed policy.
- 4.6 Using the new boundary definitions in the Review of Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements which defines settlements of less than 5,000 (Bands F, G and H) as rural communities, 29 branch libraries are located in rural communities. The impact of the proposed policy on opening hours on these libraries is shown in Table 2 below.

Library	Opening Hours / week (April 2014)	Proposed Opening Hours / week	Difference
Bessbrook	25	25	0
Broughshane	18	18	0
Carnlough	18	18	0
Castleberg	25	25	0
Castlewellan	25	25	0
Crossmaglen	18	18	0
Cushendall	18	18	0
Draperstown	18	18	0

Library	Opening Hours / week (April 2014)	Proposed Opening Hours / week	Difference
Dungiven	25.5	25	- 0.5 hours
Fintona	18	18	0
Fivemiletown	18	18	0
Garvagh	18	18	0
Irvinestown	30	28	- 2 hours
Keady	33	28	- 5 hours
Kells and Connor	18	18	0
Killyleagh	18	18	0
Kilrea	18	18	0
Lisnaskea	30	28	- 2 hours
Maghera	40	35	- 5 hours
Moira	18	25	+ 7 hours
Newtownstewart	18	18	0
Portaferry	18	18	0
Portglenone	18	18	0
Rathfriland	25	25	0
Richhill	18	18	0
Saintfield	25	25	0
Strathfoyle	30	25	- 5 hours
Tandragee	25	25	0
Whitehead	30	28	- 2 hours

Table 2: Rural Libraries: proposed opening hours

4.7 In a further four libraries (Ballynahinch, Crumlin, Downpatrick and Magherafelt) 51% or more of the population are rural dwellers. The impact of the proposed policy on these libraries is shown in Table 3 below.

Library	Opening Hours / week (April 2014)	Proposed Opening Hours / week	Difference
Ballynahinch	40	35	- 5 hours
Crumlin	18	18	0
Downpatrick	48	45	- 3 hours
Magherafelt	48	45	- 3 hours

Table 3: Libraries with more than 51% of active borrowers living in rural communities

4.8 Libraries NI has carried out previous consultations in relation to policy decisions regarding a strategic review of library provision in Northern Ireland and a review of opening hours due to budget cuts in the 2011 – 2015 Comprehensive Spending Review. On both occasions Rural Impact Assessments were undertaken and consideration was given by the Board to comments received on the impact on rural communities of the proposals.

4.9 A summary of comments received in these consultations, and which were reiterated in the 2015 consultation on the draft opening hours policy and proposals, is included below:

- the costs associated with public transport and the fact that public transport routes and timetables often make it impossible to access the next nearest library, especially in the evening
- the public library is one of the few, if not the last, remaining public services in their community and contributes to the social cohesion of the community
- the public library provides important shared social space, particularly for young mothers and elderly people
- the important role that the public library plays in supporting children and young people and the fact that the library is seen as a safe place for young people to meet in a constructive, educational and leisure environment
- the important role that the library plays in supporting people who are unemployed and seeking work and who use the library, and in particular, the free access to the internet, to access information, look for jobs and build their skills
- rural poverty manifests itself very differently from poverty in urban areas:
 - it is not spatially concentrated
 - it exists amongst relative affluence
 - people in rural communities are less likely to identify that they are in poverty and there is a culture of “making do”
- rural dwellers face significant difficulties accessing employment and basic services that other people take for granted
- rural households must earn significantly more than their urban counterparts to reach a minimum standard of income due to the need to maintain a car and the higher cost of heating a home in rural areas.

Delivering Tomorrow’s Libraries

4.10 *Delivering Tomorrow’s Libraries*, DCAL’s policy framework, recognises that within resource constraints, the library service should be available in the

places, at the times and in the ways that enable as many people as possible to use it. The policy states as follows:

“The working week of libraries should include opening hours which extend beyond the normal working day, and include evenings and weekends, when people who work can most easily use libraries and when families can use them together... The views of the community, users and non-users alike, should be sought in determining opening patterns in local areas.”

- 4.11 Libraries NI has agreed, as part of the process for implementing new opening hours, that the pattern of opening hours in each library should be determined in consultation with users and that the available hours should be used in the way that best meets the customer need. Libraries NI is of the view that the proposals will enable a mixed pattern of opening hours, including morning, afternoon, evening and weekends, to be implemented.
- 4.12 DCAL has developed Public Library Standards 2014 – 2019 setting out standards and targets against which Libraries NI will be measured. Public Library Standard 6 (Access) specifies that 85% of households should have access to a static or scheduled mobile stop within two miles. Research⁵ carried out by DCAL’s Research and Statistics Branch in 2014 showed that 89% of households were within two miles of a static library or mobile library stop. It is not envisaged that the proposed policy will have a detrimental impact on this statistic.

Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2010

- 4.13 The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2010 comprises seven domains of deprivation, each developed to measure a distinct form or type of deprivation: income, employment, health, education, proximity to services, living environment and crime. The domains can be interpreted individually or combined to assess deprivation in more than one domain.
- 4.14 The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has produced area profiles, based on the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2010, for the 11 new Local Government Districts that will come into existence on 1 April 2015. The relevant information for each of the Local Government Districts can be accessed at the following link:
http://www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/archive/Updateof2005Measures/NIMDM_2010_Local_Government_District_Profiles.pdf.
- 4.15 During the consultation process Libraries NI sought comments on any specific issues in relation to the information available on the NIMDM 2010 for the new

⁵ Mapping the library service in Northern Ireland (DCAL, Research and Statistics, 2014)

Local Government Districts which may be relevant to consideration of the proposed policy on library opening hours. No specific comments were received in relation to this information; however responses from a number of individuals and organisations made reference to the particular needs of rural communities. The responses are summarised in Section 5 below.

- 4.16 The main output geography for the NIMDM 2010 is the Super Output Area (SOA). There are 890 SOAs in Northern Ireland, with an average population of 2,000 people, of which approximately one third are classified as rural.
- 4.17 Table 4 below shows the 20 most deprived rural SOAs in Northern Ireland. All rural SOAs are outside the most deprived 10% when all SOAs in Northern Ireland are considered.

NIMDM 2010 Rank (1 = most deprived)	Super Output Area	Local Government District
97	Castledearg	Derry City and Strabane
112	Crossmaglen	Newry, Mourne and Down
126	Glenderg	Derry City and Strabane
134	Newtownstewart	Derry City and Strabane
136	Ardboe	Mid Ulster
141	Sion Mills	Derry City and Strabane
159	Portaferry_2	Ards and North Down
170	Dunnamanagh	Derry City and Strabane
178	Ardglass_1	Newry, Mourne and Down
179	Finn	Derry City and Strabane
180	Pomeroy	Mid Ulster
82	Silver Bridge_1	Newry, Mourne and Down
84	Creggan	Newry, Mourne and Down
189	Dungiven	Causeway Coast and Glens
191	Keady	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon
197	Clare	Derry City and Strabane
198	Armoy & Moss-side and Moyarget	Causeway Coast and Glens
200	Fintona	Fermanagh and Omagh
202	Irvinestown	Fermanagh and Omagh
215	Ballylough & Bushmills	Causeway Coast and Glens

Table 4: NIMDM: The 20 most deprived rural Super Output Areas

- 4.18 In relation to the rural libraries identified in Table 2 above, in five libraries serving the 20 most deprived SOAs (Castledearg, Crossmaglen, Fintona, Newtownstewart and Portaferry), the hours remain unchanged, with Castledearg remaining at 25 hours per week and the other four remaining at 18 hours per week. In the other three libraries serving the 20 most deprived SOAs, Dungiven would reduce from 25.5 hours per week to 25 hours per week; Irvinestown would reduce from 30 hours per week to 28 hours per week; and Keady would reduce from 33 hours per week to 28 hours per week.
- 4.19 In considering rural deprivation the research would indicate that consideration should be given not only to the overall Multiple Deprivation Measure, but also to the Proximity to Services domain which is particularly relevant in rural areas.
- 4.20 It is mainly Census Output Areas in the west of the province (constituencies of West Tyrone, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Mid Ulster) which rank as the most deprived in relation to the Proximity to Services domain. Rural libraries in these areas (Castledearg, Draperstown, Dungiven, Irvinestown and Lisnaskea) have a substantial number of active members who reside in one of the top 10% most deprived OAs as measured by the Proximity to Services domain. However other libraries, such as Carnlough, Castlewellan and Rathfriland also have significant numbers of active members from OAs which have low rankings in relation to Proximity to Services.
- 4.21 The Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements recommends consideration of drive-time to a services centre (i.e. a medium town or larger) as an alternative means of defining proximity of services and calculates drive-time boundaries from the geographic centroid of the town centre of a settlement with a population of at least 10,000 using MapInfo Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and an add-on product called 'Drive-time'. The Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements indicates that 93% of the population lives within a 30 minute drive-time of the town centre of a settlement containing a population of at least 10,000 and 80% live within a 20 minute drive time. Table 5 below shows whether the settlement in which a rural library is located is within the 20 minute and / or 30 minute drive-time of a settlement of at least 10,000 people (a services centre)⁶.

⁶ Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements
<http://www.nisra.gov.uk/archive/geography/review-of-the-statistical-classification-and-delineation-of-settlements-march-2015.pdf>

Settlement in which library is located	2011 Census Population	20 Minute Drive-time from a settlement of at least 10,000	30 Minute Drive-time from a settlement of at least 10,000
Bessbrook	2,739	Yes	Yes
Broughshane	2,851	Yes	Yes
Carnlough	1,512	No	Yes
Castledearg	2,985	No	Yes
Castlewellan	2,792	No	Yes
Crossmaglen	1,608	No	No
Cushendall	1,276	No	No
Draperstown	1,772	No	Yes
Dungiven	3,286	No	Yes
Fintona	1,160	Yes	Yes
Fivemiletown	1,243	No	No
Garvagh	1,274	No	Yes
Irvinestown	2,264	Yes	Yes
Keady	3,036	Yes	Yes
Kells and Connor	2,053	Yes	Yes
Killyleagh	2,928	Yes	Yes
Kilrea	1,679	No	Yes
Lisnaskea	2,960	No	Yes
Maghera	4,217	No	Yes
Moira	4,584	Yes	Yes
Newtownstewart	1,547	Yes	Yes
Portaferry	2,514	No	Yes
Portglenone	1,174	No	Yes
Rathfriland	2,472	No	Yes
Richhill	2,821	Yes	Yes
Saintfield	3,406	Yes	Yes
Strathfoyle	2,412	Yes	Yes
Tandragee	3,486	Yes	Yes
Whitehead	3,786	Yes	Yes

Table 5: Drive-times from settlements in which a rural library is located to a services centre

5. Response to the Consultation

5.1 The consultation questionnaire on the opening hours policy and proposals included questions designed to seek the views of respondents on rural impacts. In total, 3484 adults and 317 children completed questionnaires:

- 25% of adult respondents described the place where they live as a rural location (i.e. country village or a farm/home in the country)
- of those who live in a country village, a farm or a home in the country, 62% said that they or their local community would be affected “A lot” (32%) or “Quite a bit” (29%) if the opening hours in their nearest branch library or the one they visit most often were reduced
- 29% of the children who completed a questionnaire describe the place where they live as a rural location (i.e. country village (17%) or a farm/home in the country (12%))
- of those children / young people who live in a country village, farm or home in the country, 41% said that they would be affected “A lot”/ “Quite a bit” if opening hours in their nearest library or the one they visit most often were reduced.

5.2 A small sample of comments, taken from these questionnaires, on the impact of reducing opening hours in rural libraries is shown below:

Children of the local primary school and nursery will not have easy access to a library and it is extremely important to encourage reading and research in young people.

There is no broadband availability which I can afford. No terrestrial service. Satellite available at a cost!

The libraries are now a very important place for meeting people - for many the social hub of the village.

It is important to have the library open at times when rural dwellers can get transport to the library.

A country village library provides more than just a place to borrow books: meeting people, using computers, consulting references, help with research, children's groups, reminiscence groups for older people, a resource for visitors to the area...the library becomes the heart and focus for all in the community.

Access not easy...poor transport links.

As a shift worker the times do not suit.

As a rural user of the library I will be affected as it is only after work/school we (my son and me) can go to the library as we have to go on the way home from work/school as by the time we get home, the library would be closed when we

would return to our nearest one. With the library already only opening one evening a week this would stop us from using the library completely. The only other time we can possibly use it is a Saturday morning, which we do as often as we can, but again being in a rural area, this is not always possible.

If my local library had reduced opening hours I would probably be unable to use the library as I currently do. Although libraries in Lisburn & Antrim are within 15 miles, with the commitments I currently have, 4 kids aged 8 & under I would find it too much to squeeze this journey in as well. Library closures would make the rural community more isolated.

Limiting my ability to access my library. Reducing my chance to allow my children to meet and mix with other children. Reducing my chance to mix with adults and remain engaged in community activities. Limiting my opportunities to study in a quiet environment.

Limited public transport, less facilities than city or towns.

Quite long hours in agriculture and 6 miles from library.

Taking the children regularly to the library in Coleraine - over 10 miles away will be impossible to manage. I have six children. The children I care for would probably rarely/never visit a library with parents. Our weekly trips are so important in the development of language and social skills which are the foundation for learning.

The reduction of services in general tends to hit rural dwellers more than cities; this is true globally and is as relevant to Northern Ireland, which is in part largely rural. Rural bus services, post office, and now library services have reduced gradually over the last couple of decades. It is not only exclusion based on income, but exclusion based on access to services

There is a high level of unemployment in my local area and the community rely on the library as a vital resource for learning, social interaction, cultural interaction and business tool.

There is no broadband available in my area, and I use the library for this purpose, but when my children were small we used the library all the time for books.

We have no community centre! The library is our community centre!

We need to use rural transport to attend the library, 8 miles away, and odd opening hours will not coordinate with our bus timetable.

- 5.3 The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) Sustainable Rural Communities Branch made a written submission to the Rural Impact Assessment. It recognised the valuable contribution that libraries make to the social fabric, community cohesion and sustainability of rural communities. It regretted the reductions in opening hours but welcomed the fact that no

libraries would close and noted that it was important to take account of the view of rural dwellers.

5.4 Written responses were received from a range of other organisations to the public consultation on the draft opening hours policy. A summary of comments relevant to this Rural Impact Assessment are noted below:

- Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council: Could impact adversely on rural dwellers; rural transport is very limited
- Arlene Foster MLA: Basing opening hours of the new library in Lisnaskea on the historic use of the old library at Drumhaw would be misleading. New library is in a better location with enhanced services and much better parking and is accessible to pedestrians. Use has increased and will continue to increase. Enniskillen is the only full time library in Fermanagh. Lisnaskea is a hub for surrounding rural communities. Few alternatives if the local library is not available to them. The current hours should be maintained and usage reviewed. Increased hours would be better.
- Derry City and Strabane Council: Rural areas are particularly dependent on libraries
- Disability Action: Lack of accessible public transport in rural areas
- Enagh Youth Forum: An extensive list of comments was provided as a result of questions asked by Enagh Youth Forum at a local public engagement day (one of a series in the Derry City and Strabane council area as part of community planning). 82 respondents considered Strathfoyle a rural community; 84 respondents thought there was a social need in the community; 82 people thought the library was an essential service locally.
- An Individual respondent: Libraries are the lifeblood of a local community, especially small communities
- NIPSA: Libraries have a strong link to local communities, especially in rural areas. Different approaches needed in rural and urban areas to ensure need is met.
- Séan Lynch MLA: Difficult to disagree with the principle of a consistent approach based on levels of use with exceptions in designated areas of social need. But makes case for Lisnaskea to be an exception. New library is very impressive and in a better location. Very busy in its first few days open and will remain so. Consultation proposes a reduction of 2 hours based on levels of use in the old library. This was “off the beaten track” with poor parking. The new library is centrally located with parking to the rear. Lisnaskea use is only 1,484 below the next band. Fermanagh only has 3 main towns and 3 libraries. Public transport is

poor so it is not necessarily possible to travel to the library when you want to. Reduced opening hours restricts public access disproportionately in these circumstances and increases isolation for those living in rural areas.

- UNISON: Libraries have an important role in rural communities as other public services disappear. Cost of public transport and potential loss of public transport services makes it more difficult for people in rural areas to access a service that is only open for 18 hours per week.

6. Assessment of the Proposed Policy on Opening Hours for Rural Areas

6.1 This section of the report considers the potential impact of the policy and proposals on rural communities.

A consistent approach should be applied across all libraries; exceptions may be made for libraries serving areas of substantial social need.

6.2 The policy has been applied consistently across all libraries, with the exception of the following:

6.2.1 In four libraries (Ardoyne, Creggan, Suffolk and Whiterock) serving areas of substantial deprivation, historic levels of use, as measured by issues, renewals, visits, public access computer sessions, participation in activities and active borrowers, would provide that opening hours should reduce by more than 10%. Accordingly it was agreed that these libraries should not have their opening hours reduced by more than 10% because they serve a number of Super Output Areas with significant social deprivation (i.e. in the top 10% as measured by the NIMDM). This means that these libraries would be in a higher band of opening hours than pure levels of use would suggest.

6.2.2 It is recognised that these libraries are located in urban areas and that the vast majority of their active members live in an urban setting. Libraries NI is of the view, however, that these exceptions are justified, given that tackling poverty and social exclusion is a key priority of the Programme for Government and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, our sponsoring body.

6.2.3 No library serving rural communities has Super Output Areas within the top 10% most deprived. However, responses received to the draft Rural Impact Assessment recognised the differences between poverty and disadvantage in rural communities, compared to urban communities and a strong case was made for recognition to be given to rural disadvantage. Accordingly it was agreed, in the context of the 2015/16 budget, that no rural library, as identified in the Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements

(2015) should have its opening hours reduced by more than 10%. This would impact on three libraries as identified below.

Library	April 2014 Hours	Proposed hours (per consultation)	% reduction	Proposed revised opening hours
Keady	33	28	15.1%	30
Maghera	40	35	12.5%	38
Strathfoyle	30	25	16.7%	28

6.2.4 Two local MLAs made written submissions arguing that it would be inappropriate to base the opening hours of Lisnaskea Library, which opened on 8 April 2015, on the level of use of the old library which had limited facilities and car parking and was in a much poorer location, away from the town centre and up a steep hill. This view was repeated in a number of the questionnaires returned.

6.2.5 Having considered the responses received in relation to the new library in Lisnaskea, it was agreed that an exception should be made also in this case and that the existing opening hours should be retained during 2015/16 and that usage should be monitored.

6.2.6 The consultation report noted that an exception would be made also for Heritage Libraries which are primarily reference libraries on the basis that it would be inappropriate to use the full range of indicators that apply in branch libraries to determine opening hours. The Board agreed this recommendation and that further consideration should be given to the opening hours of the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies, with a report being brought to it, via the Services Committee in due course.

The allocated hours should be used in a way that best meets customer need.

6.3 Libraries NI will engage with customers at an individual library level in May and June 2015, in order to develop a pattern of opening hours that best meets customer needs. This approach will apply across all libraries; therefore there is no differential impact on rural libraries. However, in developing proposals for the pattern of hours in rural libraries, as far as possible, consideration will be given to other factors that could impact on rural dwellers' ability to use the library e.g. public transport timetables, market day.

Opening hours should relate to the historic level of use of a library.

- 6.4 The opening hours of all libraries (with the exception of those noted in 6.2. above) have been determined by totalling the number of issues, renewals, visits, public access computer sessions, participation in activities and active members in 2013/14. All libraries were assigned to a Band depending on the total level of use in that year. A consistent approach has been applied to all libraries, based on historic patterns of use, with the exception of the libraries identified in paragraph 6.2 above.
- 6.5 Some respondents felt that this approach disadvantaged rural libraries and that it ignored the qualitative issues and the true impact of a local library, particularly in rural areas. Consideration will be given to developing a more refined and robust methodology to be used in the future to distinguish between the needs of urban and rural communities.

The allocated hours should be sufficient in every library to provide a range of opening hours to suit different customer groups and to allow a minimum range of programmes to be delivered in line with Libraries NI's priorities.

- 6.6 Based on implementation of the policy in 2015/16, of the 29 libraries located in rural areas:
- the opening hours of one library (Moira) would increase
 - the opening hours of seven libraries (Dungiven, Irvinestown, Keady, Lisnaskea, Maghera, Strathfoyle and Whitehead) would decrease
 - the opening hours of the remaining 21 libraries would remain the same as in April 2014.
- 6.7 Libraries NI is of the view that the opening hours of each of these libraries are sufficient to provide a mix of morning, afternoon, evening and weekend hours to suit different customer groups and to allow a minimum range of programmes to be delivered in line with Libraries NI's priorities. Local consultation will be used to determine the best pattern of hours to meet local needs. In developing proposals for the pattern of hours in rural libraries, as far as possible, consideration will be given to other factors that could impact on rural dwellers' ability to use the library e.g. public transport timetables, market day.

The opening hours should be affordable.

- 6.8 Based on the 2015/16 budget the opening hours are deemed to be affordable. Some respondents argued that additional funding should be found to provide a library service that meets the needs of its customers and that not to do so is short-sighted.

The opening hours should be sustainable i.e. ad hoc closures due to staffing shortages are avoided other than in exceptional circumstances.

- 6.9 Libraries NI is of the view that the policy should have a positive impact for all library users, including those in rural areas, in that the opening hours at each library will become sustainable so that ad hoc closures due to staffing shortages will be avoided, except in exceptional circumstances. Certainty about opening hours is particularly important in rural areas, where people may have to travel some distance to access their local library.

7 Conclusions

- 7.1 Responses to the RIA show that the public library is a valuable and valued service in rural communities. Rural dwellers experience a number of constraints which restrict their ability to access their nearest public library, including costly and limited public transport and deprivation. Given the lack of other facilities in many local communities, the library is viewed as an important space for learning, information, leisure and social engagement. The responses indicated a need for long and varied opening hours in libraries. Unfortunately, because of the budget situation this is not possible within available resources.
- 7.2 The key mitigating measure identified by Libraries NI is the flexibility to determine the optimal pattern of opening hours for each library in conjunction with library customers. It is intended that all libraries should offer some morning, afternoon, evening and weekend hours, unless local consultation indicates that an alternative approach is preferable.
- 7.3 Libraries NI will engage with customers at a local level during May and June, after a decision has been made by the Board on the overarching policy, in respect of the pattern of opening hours in individual libraries. Libraries NI will seek to ensure effective communication takes place in relation to any changes to opening hours to allow library users to plan their visits accordingly.

8. Further Action

- 8.1 The Final RIA will be published on the Libraries NI website.
- 8.2 The impact of the policy decisions on library use, including in rural areas, will be monitored and will be reviewed on an annual basis.