



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Savings Delivery Plans:
National Museums Northern Ireland

14 May 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Nelson McCausland (Chairperson)
Mr Gordon Dunne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Leslie Cree
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mrs Karen McKeivitt
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mrs Jude Helliker	National Museums Northern Ireland
Dr Jim McGreevy	National Museums Northern Ireland

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): We are glad to have with us Dr Jim McGreevy, the acting chief executive, and Jude Helliker, the director of people and performance. You are welcome to the meeting. I invite you to proceed with your opening statement.

Dr Jim McGreevy (National Museums Northern Ireland): Thank you, Chair and Committee. The Committee has received a briefing note from us already. I will begin by dealing with the headlines.

Since 2011-12, we have delivered savings delivery plans equating to more than £6.6 million, which is quite a substantial sum, given our budget allocations. Inevitably, that has led to staffing reductions, and we have sustained a reduction of almost 60 full-time equivalents in that period, which has an obvious impact on our capacity and resilience. However, whilst we have worked hard to deliver those savings, we have demonstrated, I believe, an absolute commitment to ministerial and government priorities, and we have achieved some significant successes in that regard. In overall terms, our performance, if we look at visitor numbers, has been very successful. In fact, last year, we achieved a 6% increase on the previous year in visitor numbers across all sites. This year, we face a further reduction in staffing, which, because of the position of library funding, results in our facing an 11.2% reduction to £11.14 million — the current allocation. By the way, that excludes Armagh County Museum, which, as the Committee is aware, has moved to local government control as of 1 April.

In that context, we face a number of pressures. Inflationary pressures include the pay award and issues with pensions, rates, utilities and so on, which are outwith our control. We need to address an additional, unforeseen pressure of an increase of £200,000 in pension costs. We are working through those pressures and have been giving quite detailed attention to a number of scenarios in recent months. There is a big reliance on the voluntary exit scheme because payroll comprises a large element of our budget, over which we have no control. We are working through scenarios that are

dependent, to varying degrees, on the voluntary exit scheme and on the timing of that scheme during the current year and possibly into next year. We will have to look at scenarios that consider month-by-month delays in the introduction and implementation of the scheme and what effect that has on the remainder of the budget.

I advise the Committee that payroll, at 72%, is by far the highest percentage of our cost and budget; 25% is for some of the areas that I have already mentioned — rents, rates and so on; and the remainder is for programming, the public activities that are one of the *raison d'être* of the museums. We are looking at in the region of a 48% reduction in our programme costs this year. Accordingly, we have reduced our visitor target from last year's figure of 770,000 across the sites to 665,000. However, our commitment is absolutely to maintain front-line services, and we are working closely with the Department on that.

I will summarise the issues that we face over the coming year. Essential capital maintenance is very important in supporting our programmes and some of our core activities. This year, we have been given an allocation of £18,000 for capital across all our sites, which, as I am sure you will appreciate, is not a significant amount. That said, we submitted bids to June monitoring equating to £5.8 million.

I referred to our dependence on the voluntary exit scheme. Internally, we will look at a change management programme that takes the various scenarios into account, and we will develop approaches whereby those scenarios might be delivered. I stress that, in recent years, in order to achieve the savings delivery plans, we scrutinised, and we continue to scrutinise, every element of our business to try to make sure that the value for money is optimised across all our activities and, ultimately, to ensure that the public offering — the front-line services — is not in any way compromised or reduced.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): Thank you.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thank you, Jim. You said that one of your savings aims was to reduce visitor targets. By the same token, you had a 6% increase in visitors last year. How do you square that circle?

Mrs Jude Helliker (National Museums Northern Ireland): We need to try to balance having an ambitious target for visitor numbers, which impacts on the income that we bring into the budget, with not wanting to find ourselves with a shortfall against that target, because that puts more pressure on our other income stream — the grant-in-aid. We have set what we believe is an ambitious enough target but one that can deal with any potential further scenarios that arise through the year. We may then have to seek to reduce services, which will impact on visitor levels. We have, for example, been given an indication by the Department that we will have to plan for further scenarios, particularly any potential delay in the voluntary exit scheme, both for our body and in the wider Civil Service. If we were to face a further in-year reduction, it is fair to say that our service levels would have to be reviewed again, and visitor numbers would potentially be affected.

Mr Ó hOisín: One of the areas in which you identified the possibility of cuts is collections management and care, and, of course, that received some quite adverse publicity recently. How can you assure us that the artefacts in your care will be properly cared for in the future?

Dr McGreevy: The Committee wrote to me at the beginning of this week asking for a response to that question and another specific matter by 25 May, and I will provide that information by the due date. Without wishing to diminish the fact that we face challenges in storage, I would say that the overall situation that we will evidence for the Committee is nowhere near as bad as was portrayed in the recent coverage. I think that I need to say that. I ask the Committee to recognise that I am not aware of any museum that does not face problems in the storage of collections.

Across the collections, we have somewhere in the region of 1.4 million objects, which are the result of collecting over a period of almost 200 years. It is quite a sizeable collection and presents obvious legacy issues for us. The issue of storage was scrutinised in some detail nine years ago by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster. I will give you some headline figures that I hope will allay your concerns and show that we have made demonstrable improvements in that period and are moving in the right direction. At that time, the Audit Office looked at the quality of the footprint of our storage estate. It came to the conclusion that 60% of that footprint was either poor or unacceptable for the storage of collections and that 40% was acceptable, good or excellent. Those are the categories that they applied. There were some discussions over those

classifications. Whilst we accepted those findings, by and large, we argued at the time that the vast majority of the collections were acceptable, good and excellent.

Since 2006, we have invested a considerable amount through and with the Department to bring about some major improvements across all of our sites. We now estimate that in the region of 99% of the collection is held in acceptable, good or better conditions. Unfortunately, the other 1% is the 1% that the article focused on. That relates to large objects that bring very particular problems and, by definition, occupy a big footprint. Since 2006 — indeed, since 2010, which is the date on which the photographs were taken — we have made improvements in the stores in question. Two of the vehicles that featured in that coverage are now on display. One, in full working order, was used in an event and features in one of our videos. The other is under consideration for restoration. We are making strides and have achieved quite a lot in the last eight or nine years by improving the care.

Mr Ó hOisín: I am happy to hear that. I hope that you publicise that when you bring the report to the Committee. Bad news travels

Dr McGreevy: Jude may be able to comment on this. We endeavoured to balance the story, but that was unsuccessful.

Mrs Helliker: It was, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): You said that visitor numbers were up by 6% last year. Was that spread evenly across the three main sites, or was it focused more on one than another?

Mrs Helliker: The Ulster Museum continues to attract the largest proportion of visitors. Last year, the Ulster Museum had 462,000 visitors, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum about 167,000 and the Ulster American Folk Park 128,000. As you can see, the Ulster Museum is the biggest hitter of all. We anticipate a decline in visitor numbers. That is partly to do with the level of programming that we can deliver with a reduced programming budget. As Jim referred to earlier, our programming budgets were reduced during the current four-year comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. We reduced it by 48% into this year, so, across all the sites, we are down to only about £400,000 to deliver excellent programming to between 650,000 and 700,000 visitors. That is a big ask, particularly with reduced staffing. We get a lot out of the people who work for National Museums and derive a lot of benefit through our partnerships with other museums, libraries and partners in the DCAL family.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): You referred to programming costs. There is a difference between the long-term exhibitions in the museums and one-day events that are quite popular and draw in extra numbers. What is the balance or breakdown? How much is spent on one versus the other?

Mrs Helliker: The programming budget for exhibitions and events is predominantly for exhibitions at the Ulster Museum because they tend to require a much longer lead time to develop and are quite often done in partnership. The events programme has a relatively small budget. That is, essentially, for the two open-air sites, the Ulster American Folk Park and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. However, they derive massive impact in visitor numbers. Probably between 30% and 40% of visitors to the two open-air sites come specifically for the events. It is really important that we maintain and develop the events programme because it drives new and repeat visitors.

Dr McGreevy: You make a very good point about the exhibitions. Increasingly, it is an imperative that, when we consider exhibition proposals, part of the proposal is the public programme that goes with it. Virtually every exhibition now has an associated series of events that happen in the Ulster Museum. That adds to it.

Mr Dunne: Thanks very much for coming today and for your presentation. A number of the points that I wanted to raise have already been raised. Some people have made points about charging: what about introducing charges to museums and the buildings that do not charge? What about a nominal charge? Have you looked at that? When we go to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, which is a great treasure here in the north Down area, we are charged a nominal sum. Some people think that it is excessive and complain, but, for what you get, it is good. Have you considered the option of a nominal charge for other properties?

Mrs Helliker: We have. It has been a perennial debate that does not ever seem to be resolved. First, we try to maintain charging at the two open-air sites at a very competitive level. The offering at the open-air sites tends to be quite different from that at the Ulster Museum, as the Committee will be aware. It tends to be more of a day out, and people with families are more prepared to pay for a day out because they are getting good value for money.

The Ulster Museum has always had free entry, and our view and that of the board traditionally has been that free entry should be maintained. The reasons for that include tackling poverty and disadvantage, promoting equality and trying to increase our audiences, particularly hard-to-reach audiences, which we have been incredibly successful at doing since the reopening of the Ulster Museum in 2009. Charging would go against all the values that are held very dear, but, clearly, that has to be weighed against financial imperatives.

The Museums Association recently did work on the impact of introducing free admission across all the national museums throughout the UK, which the Labour Government did when they came to power in 1997. The policy has been incredibly successful, but what would the reverse impact be if free entry were withdrawn? It is inevitable that visitor numbers would go down and that the numbers from our target audiences in areas of multiple deprivation and hard-to-reach communities would go down too.

To offset that, recognising that it is important for us as an organisation to develop new income streams, we have looked at how we can increase donations from our visitors. We have had a very active campaign on donations and have increased donations to the Ulster Museum immeasurably over the past 18 months. Moreover, working with partners and trying to increase the venue-hire opportunities and catering and retail opportunities at the Ulster Museum helps to offset the lack of admission fee. It is one of those things that we probably continue to have to consider or discuss.

Mr Dunne: You have given a good answer. I commend the good work on promoting events at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. It hosted the Circuit of Ireland, and it runs the Cultra hill climb, which brings in a huge number of people. I am all for that and think there should be more motor sport, but that is by the way. It has used the events process to bring people in. It runs events all year and has themed events, such as at Halloween. It has done a lot to bring people on site.

I have raised this on a number of occasions, but we have so many visitors from across the world coming to Titanic Belfast. What are we doing to get them to come two miles up the road to the folk museum? It is a real treasure, and American tourists in particular would love to sample it. Have we driven that and had a real focus on it?

Dr McGreevy: When we developed the Titanic exhibition at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, which I am sure you are familiar with —

Mr Dunne: Yes, it is very good.

Dr McGreevy: Thank you. That was in 2011, and we were very alert to the possibilities for cross-marketing and cross-ticketing, because it was a year in advance of the signature project. We have worked closely with the signature project to provide images from the archives of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, but that cross-marketing has been extremely limited, to say the least. It is not something that we have taken our eye off. In fact, later today I will be meeting people from Titanic to discuss possible areas of future collaboration and mutual support. So, we are continuing to look at that.

Mrs McKeivitt: Nelson has already raised a few things about the 48% reduction in the programming. There is an essential capital maintenance budget of £18,000, is that what you said?

Dr McGreevy: Yes.

Mrs McKeivitt: You have a bid in for £5.8 million in the June monitoring round. Could you give us examples of what that would deliver?

Dr McGreevy: The £5.8 million?

Mrs McKeivitt: Yes.

Dr McGreevy: I have the bids here, to give a sense of the areas that we are looking at.

Maintenance is an ongoing requirement, considering the diversity and scale of the various sites. There are a lot of maintenance issues in the round: rewiring and relighting projects, environmental control projects for stores, all of which are necessary for the facilities, but they also to allow us to comply with health and safety requirements.

We have a bid in for modest storage improvements. We have reached the stage in storage where we have literally no room for manoeuvre. A lot of the improvements that I referred to, and which I will bring to the attention of the Committee in correspondence, are about rationalising what we have and moving collections from here to there and so on. There is a lot of rotating, and we are literally running out of room to manoeuvre; therefore we have asked for a modest sum to give us a bit more scope to continue that activity.

There is ICT and audiovisual maintenance. As Jude said, there is a heavy reliance on gallery refreshment at the Ulster Museum, and gallery maintenance is an ongoing issue for us due to the age of some of the equipment. Bearing in mind that the Ulster Museum reopened in 2009, six years on we need to be looking at refreshment and upgrades.

The protection and upgrade of exhibitions is about looking at the public face of what we do. We are also looking to bring about improvements to our website as part of the digital offering for the public. There are other, relatively minor, things, but they tend to be in the broad area that we are talking about.

Mrs McKeivitt: OK, thanks for that information. You spoke about the free entry to the Ulster Museum and the increase in visitor numbers there: how do you collect your data?

Mrs Helliker: We have a magic eye that counts people into the Ulster Museum, so we can collect pretty accurate data. We have data on the EPoS system for retail and catering. At the open-air sites, visitors are counted through the ticketing system.

Mrs McKeivitt: I have just one more question; it is about the voluntary exit scheme and the staff experience that might be lost. How do you plan to retain that experience through workers who might not be thinking of taking it up? It will be difficult.

Mrs Helliker: That is a difficult one and one that we experienced in previous years. We had a voluntary early retirement scheme from 2006 to 2009, when we lost 40 members of staff. With that loss, came a lot of loss of knowledge and experience, so it is a difficult one. We will continue to do as much as we can to up-skill people. We are looking at partnerships and traineeships and trying to ensure that curatorial knowledge skills continue to be developed, albeit at a much reduced level.

Mrs McKeivitt: Sorry, Chair, but I have one final, important question. Would the £18,000 budget that you were given for essential capital maintenance cover the rewiring if you did not get anything in the June monitoring round?

Mrs Helliker: No.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach. Thanks very much for your presentation. Where do the budgetary constraints that you face leave your community engagement and social responsibility strategies?

Dr McGreevy: I will say something about community engagement, and Jude may say something about social responsibility. We believe that we are doing quite a lot on community engagement. I can give you some figures. In the last year, we have worked closely with 68 community partnership organisations across Northern Ireland. We have delivered outreach programmes in local communities, targeting over 5,000 people who have been directly involved in them. One of the areas that we are looking at in particular is vulnerable older people. Just under half that 5,000 total are vulnerable older people. We have been working with 48 groups from the top 20% areas of multiple deprivation in Northern Ireland. We have accommodated almost 300 visits to stored collections and answered over 2,000 enquiries on collections.

We have plans that we will realise during the current year. We are working with libraries, because libraries are positioned and rooted in communities. To give you a sense of the geographical spread, we are looking at libraries in Ardoyne, Falls Road, Shankill Road, Cregagh, Tullycarnet, Lisburn, Lurgan, Omagh, Carrickfergus and Strabane. There is a reasonable spread in Belfast and beyond Belfast and around Northern Ireland. We are also working with local museums to take advantage of the infrastructure that is there as a route into communities. We are sending exhibitions to museums in Ballymena, Armagh and Carrickfergus.

Beyond those exhibition and outreach initiatives, we are about to launch a project in conjunction with the Derry Museum Service, which is using the Arts Council collection that was recently acquired by National Museums Northern Ireland. We can do that through funding that we have secured from the UK Museums Association; we will launch that this year to run over a two-year period. The idea is that, through the Derry Museum Service, we will be working with disadvantaged communities in Derry/Londonderry. The conduit for that is the Museum Service itself. We are also involved in a project called Living Legacies, which is a partnership with the two universities. The focus in that is on World War I. We are looking at developing a community engagement dimension in and around the decade of centenaries and World War I, working, for example, with the east Belfast World War I project and the Connaught Rangers research project in west Belfast.

That is a flavour of the range of activities that we are doing across communities in different areas. The nature of the activities is quite diverse. Resource continues to stretch us because, as Jude said and as I think the Chair was getting at, there is a big reliance on sites such as the Ulster Museum to keep visitor numbers up and to make a contribution to self-generated income. Inevitably, the people who are required to deliver a changing exhibition programme at the Ulster Museum and a changing events programme at the open-air museum sites are also the people who are involved in this. In certain areas, it is getting difficult to maintain the level of service that we are doing. However, we feel that we are offering a wide range across communities and across the various counties.

Ms McCorley: Are there things that you want to provide or places that you want to go in your outreach work — socially deprived communities, for example — but cannot?

Dr McGreevy: One of the issues for us is making that connection and getting it into communities, which is why we are working with libraries and museums that are already there. As recently as yesterday, we discussed this issue with DCAL. The Department is arranging a meeting of its other arm's-length bodies to see how they can help us. One of the areas that we want to look at with the Department is how we can tap into the urban villages initiative. Obviously, there is a strong cross-community dimension to that initiative. Our understanding is that community leaders are involved who could provide us with a conduit to the areas into which we want to reach. A step change in that direction requires a strong partnership and resource dimension.

The Committee Clerk: Before we move on, we have phone interference with the sound. If anyone has high G on their phone near the microphones, could they turn it off, please? It is interfering with the sound. That is my own made-up phrase, by the way: "high G".

Mrs Helliker: Just on social responsibility, Ms McCorley, we established our social responsibility strategy a couple of years ago, and it progresses from strength to strength. We have just completed our two-year programme with Autism NI as our charity of the two years. We should be giving it £15,000, which has all been donated through our own staff events. We are up for two awards with Business in the Community at the beginning of June; one for biodiversity and the other for employability schemes. We continue to develop our museums to work scheme, which I think we have spoken to the Committee about before. We continue to work across all sites. Each site has its own particular targets for delivering social responsibility in the community.

Mr Cree: I have two points. You mentioned your capital budget of £18,000 and your June monitoring round bid, which is significantly larger than that: is any of that financial transactions capital?

Dr McGreevy: Sorry, is any of it financial transactions capital?

Mr Cree: That says it all. You have answered the question. Is any of it financial transactions capital? You have never heard of it.

Do you have a budget and a time frame for the voluntary exit scheme? Are there ongoing meaningful discussions with the Department on it?

Mrs Helliker: We continue to have meaningful discussions with the Department on it, but I think that it has told us as much as it knows. We have submitted a business case to the Department on the voluntary exit scheme for which we hope to obtain approval. It is to facilitate about 24 or 25 exits in this financial year, which would release savings of about £420,000 or £450,000, depending on who goes. The Department has asked us to consider scenarios that may mean late implementation — even non-implementation — of the scheme, so it is very dependent on the wider picture. However, we continue to work towards scenarios that will, no doubt, come through in due course.

Mr Cree: That is really the Stormont House Agreement that you are talking about.

The Chairperson (Mr McCausland): I thank Jim and Jude for their presentation and answers. You will appreciate that there is considerable interest in museums and support for them. People value them. We enjoyed the visit to Heron Road to see the storage facilities there. Thank you very much. We wish you well.

Mrs Helliker: Thank you very much.