

Cuts to Library Opening Hours (Enniskillen and Omagh

Public Consultation

[Libraries NI]

Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the public consultation on the possible reduction in opening hours of the libraries in Enniskillen and Omagh.

Brief Background for Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people (as of 30 June 2014). The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km², or 20% of NI - and the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km² is the sparsest in NI. This is a feature of the region which also provides challenges to service delivery.

Consultation Feedback

Whilst the Council understands the pressures that are facing public authorities with the constant demand to make services more efficient and cost effective, it is vital that the needs of the local community are paramount in any decisions affecting service delivery.

The Council believes that Libraries NI should explore every available option of streamlining service delivery before confirming any reduction in Library Opening Hours, with the consequential negative impacts upon the local community within the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area.

The Council notes that there is no indication of the likely level of cost savings which would be achieved by the proposed reduction in hours, and would welcome clarity in relation to this question.

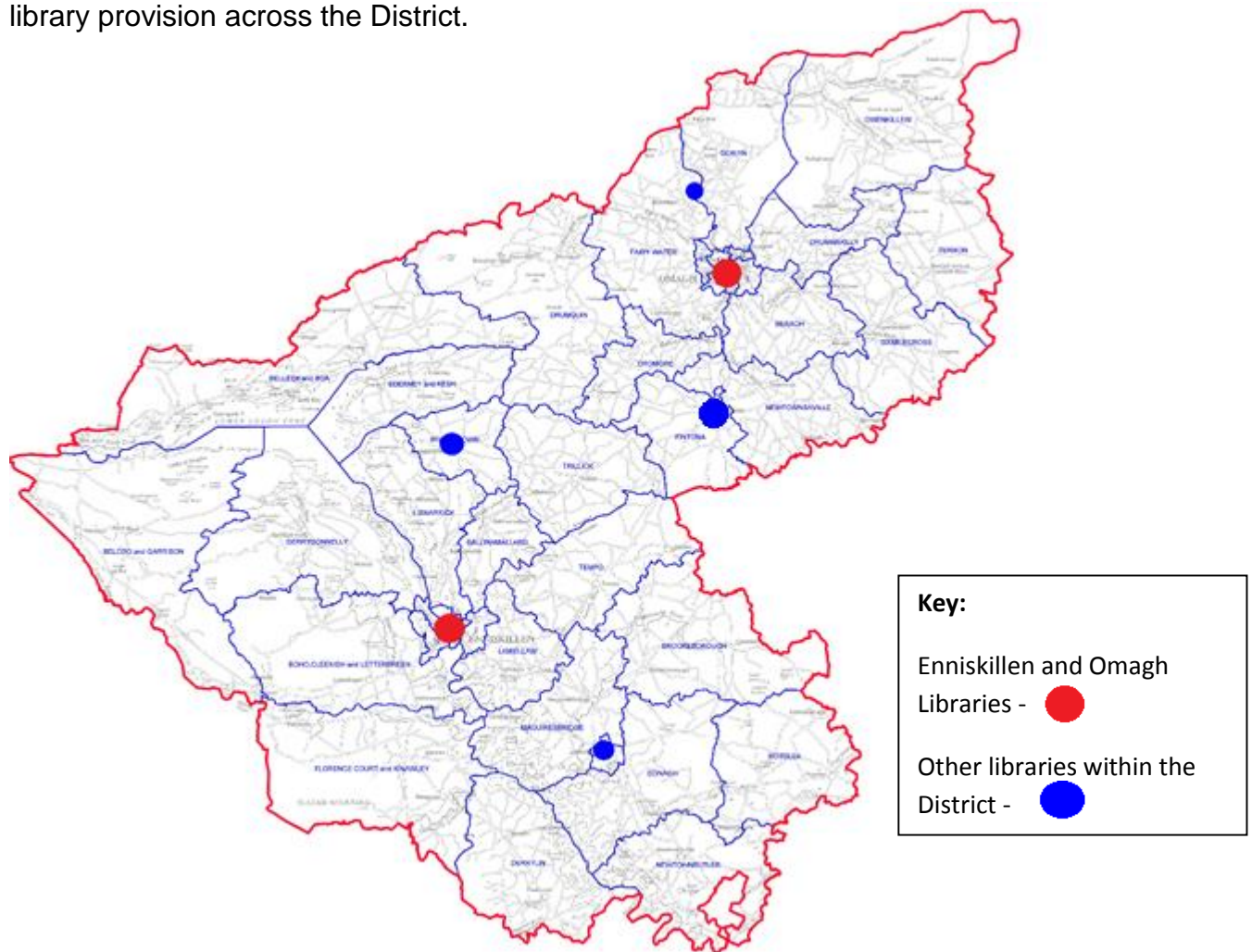
Within the Fermanagh and Omagh District, there are a total of six libraries. Within the District, there are also two mobile libraries which visit various areas once every two weeks. The Council believes that for a District, which is quite rural and isolated in parts, this service is insufficient as it currently operates. Rural areas such as Belanaleck, Leggs (outside Belleek), Cashel Cross, Lack and Kilskeery can avail of library services for varying periods of time up to 30 minutes (some as little as 10-15 minutes) every two weeks. This should be re-examined, with an attempt made to increase mobile library provisions for rural areas in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area.

With regards to the reduction in opening hours to both Enniskillen and Omagh Libraries, the Council has particularly significant concerns.

Firstly, as stated above, the Council area is the largest Council by area of land mass in Northern Ireland. Couple this with the fact that it is the sparsest Council in terms of population density, there is a clear imperative to at least maintain the current services available to the local community, if not improve upon them.

The Libraries NI website states that there are 98 libraries across Northern Ireland, and six of these are situated within the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area.

The map, of the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area shows the current library provision across the District.



Whilst the map indicates that the six libraries are spread out quite evenly throughout the District, there are certain Wards which are quite isolated with regards to library provisions – such as the Belcoo and Garrison Ward, the Belleek area, the Owenkillew Ward and the Termon Ward. Residents in some rural/isolated areas can only avail of library services, other than the bi-weekly mobile library service, by travelling to their nearest facility.

Library Services

The Council questions the logic behind the fact that the hours of the busiest libraries across the District, and indeed across Northern Ireland, are being reduced, and

would have particular concerns in relation to the potential implications for the business case for the proposed new library in Enniskillen.

Library Hours

Currently Enniskillen Library is open for 50 hours per week, whilst Omagh Library is open 54 hours per week. The proposed reduction in opening hours would see the opening hours of both fall to 45 per week. The Council strongly believes that such a reduction is unacceptable. This would equate to an average reduction of 1.5 hours per day, across a six-day week, for the Omagh Library.

A more acceptable proposal would be for alignment of the opening hours of both libraries i.e. that both are open 54 hours per week.

Importance of Libraries within the Community

The Council believes that the provision of library services is vital to many members of the local community. Within the Council District there are areas which have very poor (if any) broadband coverage and accordingly residents are reliant on the services of the local libraries in order to do what most would consider to be normal, daily activities. Five of the ten most remote wards are in the Fermanagh and Omagh District council area.

As indicated in the Libraries NI previous Corporate Plan, libraries are considered by the local residents to be 'Community Hubs', particularly important in rural areas. For people who don't have easy access to a computer, tablet, smartphone or the internet at home, libraries are a place where they can read the news, apply for a job or participate in online banking. They are also a repository of specialist resources for people with particular access needs, stocking a wide range of books in large print, or "talking books".

The local libraries represent an important public and social space, serving cultural and educational functions. They provide an important resource for pupils and students, both in terms of access to resources, to the internet and also provide a safe area in which to study. Whilst its core function is to provide access to books, reading and other materials, the local libraries provide an opportunity for so much more, including:

- Formal/informal education.
- Integration of communities and members of minority groups.
- ICT development and upskilling.
- Public information.

Omagh Trade Union Council

Council would also wish to support the views of the Trade Union Council in relation to the proposed closure. The content of the email is attached to this response.

Conclusion

To conclude, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to this public consultation, with particular reference to the libraries in both Omagh and Enniskillen.

The Council strongly opposes the reduction in the Opening Hours (to 45 hours per week) for both facilities, and urges Libraries NI to take note of the comments contained within this Consultation Response document.

From: "**Omagh Trades Union Council**" <omaghtradescouncil@fastmail.fm>
Date: Wed, Jun 29, 2016 at 5:54 PM +0200
Subject: From Omagh Trades Union Council - re Libraries
To: "Brendan Hegarty" <brendan.hegarty@fermanaghomagham.com>

Omagh Trade Union Council
c/o Anton McCabe (Secretary) 7 Sunningdale, Meetinghouse Hill, Omagh
BT78 1JX
Tel 077 134 16 234 or 028 82 250133 e mail
omaghtradescouncil@fastmail.fm

June 20th 2016
Brendan Hegarty
Chief Executive
Fermanagh and Omagh Council

Dear Brendan

Omagh Trades Union Council is very concerned at proposals to cut opening hours at Omagh Library, and also Enniskillen Library.

We believe the proposed shorter hours will only represent a limited saving of money. We are very concerned, though, that the proposed reduction in hours will make the service less accessible to the public, and thus less viable in the long term.

We believe the proposed cuts in hours will particularly hit the most vulnerable in society. Internet access is increasingly necessary to access benefits, in particular. Many people do not have internet access at home, and are dependent on Libraries for such.

We would ask the Council to add its voice to that of the NIPSA, UNISON and UNITE trade unions in opposition,

Yours

Anton McCabe (Secretary, Omagh Trades Union Council)