Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into the rollout of the National Broadband Network

Submission from: National & State Libraries Australasia

31 March 2017

In response to **Terms of Reference Item 2** re monitoring and reporting on the 'utilisation of the national broadband network in connected localities in both metropolitan and regional areas, and the identification of opportunities to enhance economic and social benefits':

This submission highlights the essential role that libraries play in providing public access to the internet, a service that is increasingly in demand. As the rollout of the NBN is being monitored, libraries must be recognised as a crucial part of the infrastructure underpinning the ability of communities to successfully use and interact with online content and services.

National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) represents the ten national, state and territory libraries of Australia and New Zealand. These major institutions work closely with their diverse communities and with the public library sector in each jurisdiction. Across the Australian network there are more than 1500 public library services and more than 39 Indigenous Knowledge Centres.

Public libraries are civic places that provide infrastructure and connectivity, especially for people who do not have access to the internet at home, and for rural and remote communities. As well as providing online access – for government services, commercial, recreational and other purposes – libraries support the development of digital capability, and provide portals to the broader world of information that supports research, education, innovation, productivity and culture.

Access

In 2014-15, Australian public libraries provided more than 12,500 public internet devices for patrons to use. The number of internet-capable devices, which includes desktop computers, tablets and other smart devices, increased over 13 per cent on the 2013-14 figure, and is 32 per cent greater than in 2009-10. These increases are a reflection of the demand from patrons for libraries to provide fast and reliable access to online services and information.

Connectivity

In the rural and remote parts of Australia libraries serve populations that often have less home connectivity, less alternative access options and high needs. These are areas of particular disadvantage in terms of access to the internet and they rely on public libraries. Stable and effective connectivity is essential for public libraries to support their community's digital access.

Barriers to digital inclusion exist on a number of levels: infrastructure/access, affordability, skills. Whilst the 2016 launch of Skymuster NBN services has continued to improve infrastructure, libraries play a critical role in providing access for those who cannot afford commercial internet plans, and for those who wish to develop the skills to use the internet effectively.

Whilst Skymuster offers greatly improved satellite services, latency issues mean that these services will never provide the same quality as fixed line connections.

Digital literacy and citizenship

The ability to meaningfully navigate and function in the digital environment is essential for effective citizenship. Digital literacy is vital to using e-government services. Digital literacy improves quality of life: a person is more likely to have a job, to earn an income, to be in good health, and to be involved with the community if they have functional literacy skills. Libraries provide practical and flexible digital literacy services to allow the whole community to access services and improve their skills.

Digital inclusion is particularly important to addressing remote and Indigenous disadvantage in the NT. Online access to government and banking services is critical, particularly as government services increasingly shift online. If this is the preferred channel for interaction with government departments it is critical to ensure that all citizens have appropriate internet access available.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index still under-reports digital exclusion as it doesn't include remote Indigenous community data.

The household internet access model doesn't work well in Indigenous communities, and the internet is generally used on mobile devices. This can be particularly challenging for people without the capacity to pay for mobile plans (eg children), making the availability of free community wi-fi provided by libraries even more important.

The Northern Territory Library's NBN community wifi points have been classified as Public Interest Premises plans which is extremely helpful, particularly the capacity to use the allowance at any time of the day. But whilst the 150GB per month data allowance through PIP is an improvement, it is still inadequate shared across an entire community over a month, so communities where library internet connections are delivered via satellite still receive lower levels of service.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. We hope that in monitoring the rollout of the NBN, public access to the network through libraries will be prioritised and regularly reported.

Kate Torney
Deputy Chair
National & State Libraries Australasia

www.nsla.org.au
nsla@slv.vic.gov.au

About NSLA

National & State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) is the active collaboration between the ten National, State and Territory libraries across Australia and New Zealand. We achieve more by working together, delivering greater value to our jurisdictions through collaboration.

During the 2015-2016 financial year:

- 12.1 million people visited our library buildings
- 46.2 million visits were made to our websites, including Trove
- 12.7 million visits were made to library catalogues
- 5,958 terabytes of digital collections were stored
- $41.3 million was the total spend on collections
- $5.4 billion was the asset value of our collections
- $1.1 billion was the asset value of our buildings/sites.

Please note: Each of the ten NSLA member libraries works within different government jurisdictions. The National Library of New Zealand is part of the Department of Internal Affairs, a New Zealand government department. The views expressed in this letter should not be taken to reflect the views of the National Library of New Zealand nor of the New Zealand Government.