



Australian
Library and
Information
Association

Submission from the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)

to the Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network

Joint submission

From Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) on behalf of:

- Public Libraries Australia (PLA)
- ACT Library & Information Service
- Public Libraries NSW - Country (PLC)
- Public Libraries NSW - Metropolitan Association (PLM)
- Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA)
- Public Libraries Victoria Network (VPLN)
- Public Libraries South Australia (PLSA)
- Local Government Librarians' Association of Western Australia (LocLib)

Introduction

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the state public library associations welcome the opportunity to comment on the Senate Select Committee's inquiry into the National Broadband Network.

ALIA is the peak body representing the Australian library and information services sector and represents 6000 members, and the interests of over 12 million library users.

The Australian library and information services sector operates in the local, state, territory and federal government, school, TAFE, tertiary, research, health and business sectors. As a major player in Australia in delivering access to electronic information to the community, the sector is strategically placed to ensure that all Australians have fair and reasonable access to broadband and its benefits, particularly with regards to price and location barriers. Library and information professionals have a great depth of expertise in providing access to electronic resources and services, building electronic resources content, and developing users' skills.

We believe that, with its high usage of electronic information services and public access points, the library and information services sector is a major stakeholder in the national broadband strategy.



The role of public libraries in the national broadband strategy

The goal of connecting 90 percent of all Australian homes, schools and workplaces must recognise the role of public libraries in providing vital infrastructure for Australia's digital future.

Australia's public libraries build safer, stronger, sustainable communities; promote social inclusion; support early literacy; make citizens healthier; facilitate lifelong learning; assist people to find jobs; promote innovation; provide facilities and skills to expand the digital economy; and, contribute to prosperity.

Located in every local government area across the nation and at the heart of their local communities, public libraries are perfectly positioned to deliver results in Australia's digital future. Australia's public libraries continue to address the need for equitable community access to a wide range of educational, information, cultural and recreational services which are dependent on online information services.

ALIA notes that not only is high speed broadband required for regional Australia to support improved education, health, social and economic conditions, it is critical that high quality information be made available with local support, particularly through public libraries.

Public libraries have the potential to significantly increase reach and user access.

- There are over 1500 public libraries across Australia with over half the population as registered users
- Public libraries are attended more frequently and by more people than any other cultural and sporting venue [ABS 4172.0 2004]
- The introduction of internet access services in public libraries has seen an increase in attendance and library use; in NSW over the past 5 years, there has been a 60% increase in internet hours accessed through public library computers
- Public libraries have infrastructure and ongoing budget streams through their local councils, unlike many ICT or technology access centres and commercial providers set up under specific government programs
- Public libraries play an important role in ensuring equity of access in the delivery of online resources to all Australians
- Qualified and experienced public library staff deliver training and assistance to users in accessing electronic information. Often this is targeted at the most marginalised groups in the community.

All libraries have been working together to increase access to quality, reliable information resources. In 2009 approximately 7.5 million Australians have access to

quality online resources through cooperative purchasing for best price and products (Electronic Resources Australia).

Implications of the NBN

1. Importance of information in economic development

The Australian Library and Information Association advocates the development of an informed society that can partake and participate in skilled decision-making.

Accurate, relevant and timely information is the key ingredient to effective decision-making. Australia's long-term economic development is dependent on its ability to use information to make decisions and harness innovation that enables growth, progress and productivity.

The library profession contributes to an informed society by acquiring, organising, archiving, retrieving, using, synthesising and analysing information and thereby empowering users so that they can utilise this information in their decision-making and innovation processes.

Investment in libraries can be expected to generate economic as well as social, cultural and environmental benefits. Libraries sustain the community in social, cultural and environmental terms and contribute positively in terms of economic value, benefit and activity.

ALIA supports the development of a 21st century information infrastructure with libraries as the conduit for a sustainable knowledge economy.

2. Social capital and inclusion

Public libraries are community hubs within rural, regional and metropolitan areas. They are at the heart of local communities. They are key providers of free access to information and services, and are recognised as trusted, friendly, neutral and non-threatening spaces for individual or group social inclusion.

Public libraries play a major role in developing sustainable, socially-inclusive communities. They are the original 'street corner universities' -- they are the new village green.

Public libraries are for everyone. They bring people together and foster strong community partnerships, involving local councils, businesses, community groups, not for profits, state and federal agencies, schools and individual volunteers.

Unemployed and low income people are much less likely to have internet access at home compared to those in work and so are dependent on institutions such as public libraries for their access.

There is considerable evidence in Australia and in other countries that public library usage increases during periods of economic downturn. For example, the recently published 2008 public library statistics for New South Wales shows that internet usage in libraries is up by 41% over the previous year.

Public libraries offer:

- an environment which is language rich, stimulating, non-threatening, respectful and welcoming
- quality settings with trained library professionals
- early literacy and storytelling: early intervention and transition from home to formal learning setting
- storytelling visits to communities to engage those who may not take part in a more formal setting
- mobile libraries visiting remote and rural communities
- home library services in the metropolitan areas
- active involvement of the family with parent-child interactions and a partnership approach with professional library staff
- single entry point to e-government services
- a range of services to deal with differing needs
- support for adult literacy programs and practitioners
- involvement of the community in the development and delivery of culturally-aware programs, and employment of Indigenous staff
- programs to enhance community harmony and cultural understanding
- lifelong learning opportunities
- internet skills training for library users
- availability of computers and skills training and assistance in using them
- access for disadvantaged families to job websites and computers, and skills training and assistance in using them, including resume preparation courses
- essential health information
- programs and resources for non-English speakers
- services to people with a print disability.

3. Service availability and costs

ALIA supports the development of a new model for minimising broadband data transmission costs for public information accessed through public institutions such as libraries and for non-commercial purposes. Public libraries are part of local government organisations and the development of a new model would have to work with this context.

ALIA strongly opposes the imposition of any conditions or limitations on equitable access and freedom of access to information through schemes in public or educational libraries, such as the requirement for the use of filtering systems.

The demand for IT resources in most locations still exceeds supply. The potential of the public library network as a major access point for broadband connectivity is yet to be fully realised.

4. **Extent of demand for currently available broadband services**

ALIA has conducted four surveys into internet access in public libraries and the 2008 survey showed that:

- increasing and improving access to the internet remains a priority for public libraries
- the number of public access internet terminals in responding public libraries has more than doubled since the 2005 survey
- an estimated 147,474 users access the internet each week in the responding libraries – an increase of 91% over the 2005 users
- public demand and expectations for increased number of internet terminals in public libraries continues to grow.

Public libraries continue to need faster internet connections and ever greater amounts of data in order to meet community needs.

The just published 2008 public library statistics for New South Wales shows internet hours used in libraries are up to 41% over the previous year.

5. **Community expectations for internet assistance**

The national broadband strategy must include recognition of the huge demand and exponentially growing expectations in communities for assistance from public library staff in using electronic services, not only for government information, but for everyday living skills. This includes e-banking, setting up a mobile phone, online shopping, and setting up an e-mail account.

A large part of this demand comes from people from lower socioeconomic levels, or from the unemployed and elderly.

In some rural and regional communities, the public library is the **sole resource** for access to government services and publications – eg. the Centrelink fax machine is housed in the library at Hillston NSW. Government agencies are sending people to the local public library for government information such as social assistance forms, income tax forms, car/licence renewals, practice driving tests, etc.

There is an expectation that public libraries have staff on hand to train people in all kinds of electronic access requirements. This is causing a significant strain on resources and capability to meet demands in other areas of service provision.

Ongoing funding and resources to train library staff in these areas is required so that they are able to meet users' expectations.

Case studies

1. "I have been meaning to write for some time to thank you for all your help and guidance you gave me, and the other computer illiterates, when we attended the internet classes you ran at [the] library. It was good to be able to learn in a group and benefit from others' questions and experiences without feeling overawed by this technology that was new to us."
2. "A man in his early sixties came into the library with an internet address in his hand. He had written it down from the TV. It was going to give him all the information he needed to attend a reunion of workers on the Snowy Mountain Hydro-electric Scheme. He has become a keen reader and a regular patron."
3. "Not long after we introduced email to the library, an elderly gentleman asked if we could help him send an email to his daughter who was travelling in Vietnam. The man had no knowledge of computers and no typing skills. A friend of his told him that the library had email facilities and that he would be able to obtain help from the library staff. He had written down what he wanted to send so a staff member offered to type it for him. He kept coming back every day to see if he had any reply, sometimes twice a day. This went on for several weeks. He finally received a reply from his daughter. By that time too, he was confident enough to use the email facilities himself."

6. Improving access to government services and publications

ALIA recommends that the NBN recognise the role of public libraries in providing access to e-government services and public sector information.

Significant improvement is required in connectivity and content for acceptable access to government services and publications. The NBN must resolve the existing barriers to good access to electronic government publications.

Delivery of government services online is fundamental to local, state and federal government. While cost savings can be achieved for government agencies by providing these services online, not all Australians have the skills or knowledge to take advantage of these services. For many Australians, public libraries provide a vital role in providing internet access and supporting those wishing to use online government services and searching for public sector information.

Finding government services and information online is very difficult. A recent ANAO report, *Online Availability of Government Entities' Documents Tabled in the Australian Parliament*, noted that 10% of Australian parliamentary documents

were not online. In addition, there is a lack of both metadata and a reliable government information search service.

Government information needs to be available to the public for long term access. Current information must be accessible so that the public can use government services and participate in public debate. Historical or non-current information is equally important particularly for research purposes and must be made available for legal, cultural and historical reasons. At present agencies may simply have only current annual reports and other information online, limiting access by the community to information and programs of government activities beyond the current year. Access is also made difficult when elections are called as Ministerial statements are often removed from web sites. A permanent national archive is required for long term access, such as the National Library's Pandora service.

7. Availability of quality online resources

Broadband is significant not just for the infrastructure it provides, but for the rich information resources which can be accessed. Access to online information is fundamental to a well-informed, educated, economically competitive and democratic society.

The Senate committee report into *Libraries in the online environment* (2003) highlighted the importance of developing government policy to improve access to information for Australians. Through Electronic Resources Australia (ERA), launched in May 2007, 7.5 million Australians have access to resources such as online encyclopaedias and journal article collections through libraries of all types including national, state, public, university, TAFE, school and special libraries, can purchase quality online resources in health, news and current affairs and encyclopaedias at a competitive price.

Australians, however, will only be able to have broad equitable access to these and other resources when a new funding model is implemented.

8. Training and support

As an integral part of the National Broadband Network, an appropriate program must be developed to support user education and training. Without training in basic internet skills, many Australians will continue to be disadvantaged and will miss out on benefitting from access to digital services.

It is critical that funding be made available on a continuing basis to ensure adequate skills training. For sustainability, such training should be conducted by organisations such as libraries which are part of the long term community infrastructure rather than a short term project.

In addition to user training, ongoing funding and resources to train library staff in the diversity of internet and e-government products and services are required so that they are able to meet users' expectations.

9. Conclusion

We recommend:

1. that the Australian library and information services sector, and in particular public libraries, is recognised as a major stakeholder in the national broadband strategy in providing vital infrastructure for Australia's digital future for the following reasons:
 - recognised as trusted, friendly, neutral and non-threatening spaces for individual or group social inclusion
 - huge increase in usage of electronic information services and public access points
 - exponential increase in community expectations of internet assistance
 - existing network of over 1500 public libraries across the country
 - ongoing budget streams and infrastructure
 - qualified and experienced staff
 - delivery of skills training and assistance to users
 - libraries are attended more frequently and by more people than any other cultural and sporting venue [ABS 4172.0 2004]
 - provision of access to e-government services and publications.
2. the development of a new model for minimising broadband data transmission costs for public information accessed through public institutions such as libraries and for non-commercial purposes
3. the development by government agencies of effective actions to ensure that the Australian public has enduring access to electronic government publications
4. the establishment of a new federally-funded model to provide Australians with equitable access to quality online resources in health, news and current affairs and encyclopaedias at a competitive price
5. the development of an appropriate program with continuing funding to support internet education and skills training for users.

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