

# PREFACE

## Terms of reference

On 25 June 2002 the Senate referred the following matter to the Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References Committee:

The role of libraries as providers of public information in the online environment, having particular regard to:

- (a) the current community patterns of demand for public information services through libraries, including the provision of such information online;
- (b) the response by libraries (public, university, research) to the changing information needs of Australians, including through the provision of online resources;
- (c) possible strategies which would enhance the wider use and distribution of information resources held by libraries, including the establishment of library networks, improved online access in libraries, online libraries, and greater public knowledge and skill in using library resources;
- (d) the use of libraries to deliver information and services over the Internet to more effectively meet community demands for public information in the online environment; and
- (e) the role of various levels of government, the corporate sector and libraries themselves in ensuring the most effective use of libraries as a primary public information resource in the online environment.

The Senate originally asked the Committee to report by the last sitting day in March 2003 but it subsequently agreed to extend the reporting deadline until 16 October 2003 to allow the Committee to give the issues raised during the inquiry its fullest consideration.

## The inquiry

The Committee invited written submissions from interested individuals and organisations by an advertisement in the national press in July 2002, with an initial request that submissions be lodged by 16 August 2002. Invitations for submissions were sent direct to each State Premier and Chief Minister as well as to some 500 local councils throughout Australia. Submissions were subsequently received from 155 submitters, several of whom provided the Committee with additional material and supplementary submissions during the course of the inquiry. Submitter details are shown in Appendix 1.

In order to gain a better appreciation of the issues, the Committee undertook a series of 15 public hearings with some 67 witnesses, which involved visiting locations in every state of Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Evidence was also taken from the Northern Territory by teleconference. Details of these hearings are shown in Appendix 2.

The Committee wishes to highlight that its program of hearings was essentially held in conjunction with its inquiry into the Australian Telecommunications Network, which was referred to it by the Senate on the same day, 25 June 2002. This approach was undertaken for two reasons. Firstly, while the terms of reference were relatively distinct, there was some element of overlap in terms of the need for the Committee to examine the proper role of Government in the delivery of online services. Secondly, the terms of reference for both inquiries had particular resonance in rural and regional areas and, as a matter of practicality, the Committee wished to maximise the value of any travel it undertook to such areas by combining the evidence-collection process.

In retrospect, this proved a sound decision with the Committee able to see at first hand how the deficiencies in infrastructure for the delivery of telecommunications services such as broadband in many rural and remote areas had impacted on the capacity of the local library to provide appropriate services. One consequence of this approach, however, was that Committee members on occasion sought comment about an issue relating to this inquiry from witnesses giving evidence to the Australian Telecommunications Network inquiry. While those contributions are not listed in the Appendixes to this report, as they will be formally acknowledged as witnesses to the other inquiry, the Committee has sought in this report to include such witnesses' contributions where relevant.

The Committee sought to supplement the formal discussions of the public hearings with site visits and associated informal briefings where possible. These are listed in Appendix 3. Given their informal nature, no Hansard transcript was taken and no specific details of these visits are included in this report.

In the course of the hearings, a number of documents were tabled for the Committee's information. These are listed in Appendix 4.

## **Acknowledgements**

The Committee wishes to express its appreciation for the cooperation of all witnesses to its inquiry, whether by making submissions, by personal attendance at a hearing or, as in many cases, by giving both written and oral evidence. It also wishes to express its appreciation to those who hosted the Committee during site inspections, which added greatly to the Committee's appreciation of the issues being discussed at the formal hearings.

The Committee also records its appreciation to the officers of the secretariat who assisted with the conduct of the inquiry and the drafting of this report.

Senator John Cherry  
Chair

