



ALIA guidelines for special libraries experiencing service reviews

Introduction

Every special library is likely to experience the review process at some point, often triggered by changes in the parent organisation. It is important to remember that while a review is challenging, it is also an opportunity to reinforce messages about the role and value of the library and information service. The review process can result in the reduction of some library and information services, but others find themselves coming out of the process in an even stronger position.

How you and your colleagues approach the review can significantly impact on the outcomes for your library and information service. This guidance, based on the experiences of other libraries, suggests ways to navigate the process.

1. Prepare in advance

Gathering evidence over time enables you to be in a good position ahead of any review taking place. ALIA recommends keeping 10-years' worth of operational data, ideally in the form of annual reports.

1.1 Purpose

You should have an up-to-date strategy which complements the vision and objectives of your parent organisation. Be clear about the information needs of the audience you cater for and how your service has adapted over time to better accommodate these needs. Align your business and operational plans with your parent organisation as far as possible.

1.2 Scope

Be prepared to provide a profile of the service you offer – its history, size (collection, IT, staff, number of users), reach (local, national, international), context (other related library and information services) and any factors that make it unique.

1.3 Usage

Make sure you are collecting data about the use of your service and can show year-on-year trends. Data may include loans (print and electronic), hits (website and social media), information literacy sessions (number of sessions and participation), literature reviews, news alerts and the provision of decision-ready information.



1.4 Impact

Gather stories and quotes about the impact of your service. Impact can be in terms of supporting evidence-based decision-making, student exam results, professional development, due diligence, competitive intelligence (corporate), diagnosis and treatments plans (health), robust policy-making (government) and successful outcomes of cases (law). Positive results from user satisfaction surveys will bolster the narrative.

Reports that evaluate the return on investment of certain services can also be very powerful; for example ROI of literature search service and training sessions.

1.5 Efficiency

Show how you have introduced efficiencies over time. This will include digital innovation, reflected in new ways of working and improved reporting; skilled negotiation with publishers and suppliers, leading to better value; any earlier reductions in budget, staffing or floor area, which have already been incorporated into a different approach to service delivery.

Benchmarking is a useful way of demonstrating the efficiency of your service by comparing your performance with that of the sector norm. Because special libraries are so diverse, there is no single set of statistics.

There are interesting articles on this topic on the web, for example:

<http://interlibnet.org/2015/04/14/proving-our-worth-library-measurement-and-metrics/>

2. Understand the review process

Library staff who remain outside the process will find it more intimidating than those who understand and participate in the review. The level of participation will depend to a certain extent on how your organisation has decided to conduct the process. Understanding this is the first step.

2.1 Who is conducting the review?

If it is an external agency, they will be briefed by your organisation's senior team. The senior team may not be the people who directly use your service, so they may not be clear about the role and value of your library. Sometimes library consultants are commissioned, but if this is part of a wider review, it is more likely to be a team that has little understanding of the library and information world.

If it is an internal review, the team carrying it out may or may not have used the library, and they will come with preconceived ideas.

It is in your best interests for the review team to find you helpful, professional, well informed and ready to assist in the process. It is not in your best interests for the library team to be seen as defensive, recalcitrant and lacking evidence of impact.

2.2 Why is the review taking place?

There is always a reason behind a review. Often it is driven by the need to find budget cuts, but it may also be about the organisational structure (shared services) and reporting lines (the department in which library sits), change in strategic direction, space allocation, workforce skills, digital transformation and preparing for future growth. Knowing the underlying motivation for the review will help you shape the information you provide to the review team.

2.3 What is the process and timeline?

If the review is of the broader organisation, try to find out how your library fits within its scope. It will help you to know the stages of the review – desk research, visits and interviews, consultation, drafts and final report, recommendations, decisions, and implementation. It is surprising how often a drawn out review begins with great energy but dies out before it reaches the decision-making and implementation stage. Alternatively, a short review period puts pressure on all parties to make sure there is solid evidence and thorough understanding of the issues, otherwise recommendations can have unintended consequences.

2.4 Opportunities to inform and influence

If you understand the timeline, you will be able to identify opportunities for you to inform and influence the review team.

Information is best presented in an easily digestible format – charts, photographs and graphics can have greater impact than long pages of solid text or complicated tables – and when you prepare briefing documents, do so from the perspective of the review team. For example, present a description of the information needs of the organisation and how these can best be delivered, rather than a justification of your current operating model.

Influence can be exerted through the professional delivery of key messages by the library team; through the presentation of documentary evidence, and through the support of library users and third parties (interlibrary loan partners, suppliers, ALIA), with letters explaining the role and importance of the library for users, its efficiency and the unique qualities of its collection.

Be the one to provide a list of your key stakeholders for the review team to make contact with. Try to include stakeholders who are senior enough to hold credibility with the consultants/reviewers but also have an understanding and appreciation of the library. Include stakeholders from as many different areas as possible who can speak to different aspects of the library services. This can provide a powerful image of the depth of services presented and provide a window to possible opportunities for expanding services or doing things differently.

3. Participate

You may be in a position where senior management is disengaged from the library and this can cause a feeling of powerlessness when a review is tabled: the fear that the review will be “done to” the library staff, rather than carried out with their involvement. However, the review team will need information about the library service and insight into the operation, so rather than being a threat, this could be the single greatest opportunity you have to sell the benefits and excellence of your library.

3.1 Information for the review team

Make sure you have a professional presentation and supporting documents ready, along the lines already described in (1) and (2.4). Don't overwhelm the review team with hundreds of pages. Keep the information concise, with the key points highlighted on each page: use headings and pull out quotes to drive your messages home. Focus on providing information that supports or informs the objectives of the review (if known).

The information should tell the story of a library which is well used, well run, constantly looking for more efficient ways of working, has adopted digital technologies, and costs less than other alternatives.

ALIA has produced a colourful handout and poster describing *10 ways libraries power high performance organisations* and a prospectus for government libraries, but libraries need to gather their own, more substantial and specific evidence, and produce their own reports on return on investment.

<https://www.alia.org.au/node/184/special-libraries>

<https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/Government%20library%20prospectus%20updated%20June%202018.pdf>

3.2 Return on investment

It is worth considering what would happen if your library did not exist.

- Staff would “Google”, rarely going beyond the first page of responses, so the authenticity and integrity of information would be compromised.
- Highly paid executives would be searching for their own information, at greater cost to the organisation.

Librarians find information faster, are paid less (sadly) and are better able to find the latest, quality, comprehensive sources using specialist databases.

This report for special libraries shows a return on investment of \$5 for every \$1 invested.

<https://www.alia.org.au/roispecials>

3.3 How the library is perceived

You may need to make the point that perceptions of the library vary between senior management, who don't use the library themselves and see it as a cost to the organisation, and their staff, who use it regularly and wouldn't be without it. Also, with more and more content being delivered online, the library's role in information provision isn't always visible, yet it plays an essential part in sourcing and managing platforms and content.

Where information is predominantly online, libraries are often bundled with the IT division. This is a good opportunity to make the point that while IT is usually concerned with providing a robust and secure infrastructure (the hardware and operating platforms), librarians are concerned with the information that flows through the structure.

This report from ALIA explains the unique role of information professionals:

<https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/ALIA%20-%20The%20unique%20role%20and%20value%20of%20information%20professionals%20in%20special%20libraries.pdf>

4. Guide the outcome

When a review is commissioned by the senior management, it is with the expectation that the review team will return with recommendations that will increase efficiency (organisational structure, reporting lines), reduce the investment (in terms of budget, staff or space) and/or improve the bottom line. However good the current library service, the review team will be on a mission to produce recommendations to satisfy these expectations. This is where your participation and guidance is essential for a positive outcome.

4.1 Opportunities for improvement

Talk to your team about how you could do better. Even the best run library can find improvements through enhanced technologies, new partnerships, professional development, and so on. Imagine the developments you will see in the library sector and the improvements you would like to make over the next three to five years.

ALIA Futures reports may help shape your thinking.

<https://www.alia.org.au/futureoftheprofession>

Other factors to consider include topics highlighted by Telstra's Head of Technology at ALIA's Big Tech Big Ideas event in April 2018: 5G, robots, drones, artificial intelligence and the internet of things.

4.2 Opportunities for investment

The reason why improvements aren't always realised is because they need an injection of time and money to make them happen. In a one-person library, for example, there is no time to step back from the everyday tasks and think about different ways of working or new supplier arrangements.

The review is your opportunity to put forward what could be achieved with an increase in funding, staff time or some other element.

4.3 Recommendations

The review team will be looking for recommendations that are attractive, achievable, measurable and align with the organisation's overall strategy.

Think about opportunities which will improve the information flow for your users in the longer term, and those which might sound attractive to the review team, but will not meet the organisation's objectives. In this way, you can be prepared to argue for and against ideas.

You don't want to be seen as obstructive. Frame your responses in a positive way: "I understand what you're aiming to achieve. If you do it this way, it could end up costing more in the long term, but if you do it this way, it will be more efficient for these reasons"

It is also a good opportunity to think outside of the box and look at ways to partner with other organisations or libraries to share resources or service shared clients. Such recommendations may be viewed much more favourably during a review process than presented on an ad hoc basis.

5. Other considerations

5.1 Team effort

It is important for the library staff to show a united front during the review process. The review team may well talk to individuals separately or in focus groups, and before this happens, you need to ensure that everyone is across the key messages, data and preferred opportunities for improvement.

5.2 Learning from others

Many special libraries have gone through the review process and colleagues are generally willing to share their experiences, good and bad. You will probably know someone you can talk to in your own network, but you can also contact ALIA and we will try to match you up: advocacy@alia.org.au.

5.3 Long term relationships

Review discussions may become heated, if the recommendations on the table are endorsed by management but not considered to be in the best interests of library staff. There are times when taking a stand may positively affect the outcome; there are times when nothing you can do will change what happens in the end. It's always worth remembering that you will have to work with people after the review has ended, and to judge whether or not the fight is worth the potential long term damage to relationships. Pick your battles and focus on those that are the most important or where you know you can provide sound arguments around efficiency and financial sustainability.

In summary

- Be prepared well in advance of a review taking place.
- Have several years' worth of data about your library service available.
- Engage all library staff.
- Produce powerful information in an easily digestible format.
- Know what questions to ask.
- Be an active participant in the review.
- Enlist help from others.
- Do what you can to guide the recommendations.
- When you have exhausted every avenue, be prepared to work with the outcome.

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