



Australian Library and
Information Association

Submission in response to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications Regional Telecommunications Review

30 September 2021

1. About us

ALIA

The Australian Library and Information Association is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support.

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance

The ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance advises the ALIA Board of Directors about matters relating to public libraries and facilitates collaboration in the public library sector. Members of Alliance are representatives from ALIA, the state-based public library associations, territory libraries and LINC Tasmania.

Australia's public library network

Australia has more than 1600 central, branch and mobile libraries, with 9.3 million registered members and, in a non-COVID year, more than 110 million physical customer visits. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, wifi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, they are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource. The number of public access internet devices provided by public libraries nationally exceeds 14,200.¹

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in the digital space, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind, particularly in terms of the ability to access government information.

¹ <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-publibstats-2019-20.pdf>

Public libraries provide:

- Support for safe online experiences
- High speed broadband internet connection in a safe, friendly community space.
- PC terminals, tablets and other devices (including technology petting zoos)
- Spaces for exploring innovative digital technologies
- Training and informal help for people to develop digital literacy skills, including media literacy awareness to counter fake news, mis- and disinformation
- Relevant and engaging content.

Our users include families, seniors, students, jobseekers, telecommuters and small businesses – people for whom digital connectivity is essential for physical, mental and economic wellbeing. Examples are contained in ALIA's 2019 report on digital inclusion.²

2. Background

In 2009, ALIA submitted a paper to the Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network. This paper, prepared on behalf of the state-based public library associations and territory libraries (now known as the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance), explained the role and potential of public libraries in delivering the national broadband strategy and advocated for 'the development of an informed society that can partake and participate in skilled decision-making'.

In 2015, we responded to the Regional Telecommunications Review noting that: "If e-government is to be a reality and if there is to be equity of access to essential information and resources, the strengths of the public library network should be recognised and harnessed, and a significantly greater investment made in faster internet access through these community hubs."

In 2018, we again responded to the call for submissions and made this recommendation: "Consideration should be given to a new funding stream to support libraries and enable them to provide digital programs and services, particularly in regional, rural and remote locations. Introducing a sustainable funding model would ensure equity of access to the benefits of new technologies for all Australians and help bridge the widening digital divide."

Our position remains the same in 2021. As public libraries' operational funding is provided at the state, territory and local level, they can be a blind spot for federal government and yet the network is an immensely valuable asset for progressing digital transformation and bridging the digital divide. During COVID we have seen an exponential growth in demand for online resources and support.

Federal government-funded programs delivered specifically through the public library network have the proven ability to make a significant difference to the digital capability and connectivity of Australians of all ages, in metro, regional and remote Australia.

² <http://read.alia.org.au/digital-inclusion-digital-incite-supplement-novemberdecember-2019>

3. Introduction

ALIA and APLA welcome this opportunity to respond to the Regional Telecommunications Review issues paper.

Reliable and affordable access to the internet is critical to regional, rural and remote communities for access to services, access to information, access to education and employment opportunities. In remote areas, where home internet access is not available or not affordable, internet access through the public library service is correspondingly more important.

Where available, faster speeds from NBN services have generated a great improvement, however, overall bandwidth is not keeping pace with citizen expectations and is not supporting a good library user experience. In remote areas, bandwidth barely supports basic services such as email and banking.

State, territory and local government funding of public libraries is already over-stretched and cost is a significant barrier to libraries offering adequate high speed internet access and digital programs for their users. Often, we have to cap access to devices and WiFi by imposing time and data restrictions because we have to stretch a limited resource across a growing number of uses and users.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for libraries to provide digital support to their communities and a recent study by Charles Sturt University³ identified specific challenges for the regions, 'Outer regional and remote libraries were less able to adapt their services and programs to meet user needs during lockdowns than were major city and inner regional libraries.'

While public libraries are well positioned to support a place-based approach to access and digital inclusion, this can only be achieved with new partnerships and initiatives, including with the telecommunications industry, and with recognition and funding at the federal government level.

4. Responses to questions in the issues paper

The generic issues we have described above are most keenly felt in remote Australia. Libraries & Archives NT (LANT) has provided responses to questions contained in the issues paper to illustrate the extent of need and opportunity in this and other public library networks.

6. How did the use of digital services change for regional consumers and businesses during the response to the COVID19 pandemic? What insights for future service delivery does this provide?

During the COVID19 pandemic, public libraries have seen an exponential rise in people seeking assistance in State Border Passes. The additional staffing and administrative

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24750158.2021.1901329>

burden on public libraries attempting to assist people navigating the complex and ever changing online government websites has been substantial. The additional burden has been felt disproportionately in regional and remote area libraries where staffing and PCs are limited.

Consideration should be provided to online only forms. The move away from requiring travellers to print out forms has lessened the need for access to PCs and printers.

7. What can be done to improve the access and affordability of telecommunications services in regional, remote and Indigenous communities?

Consideration should be provided to Improving the capability of existing, well positioned community infrastructure and partnerships. Libraries already provide digital technology hubs within communities. However, connectivity, bandwidth issues and high costs are barriers to realising the full potential of libraries as digital centres. In addition, ADSL services are being discontinued in remote areas and replaced with similarly priced Skymuster Plus services. These services have latency issues and are unable to support existing services such as Smart TVs and gaming consoles, resulting in reduced services.

Many remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory do not have their own library service. To address this issue, Library & Archives NT (LANT) provides free community Wi-Fi services in 48 remote communities. LANT works in partnership with regional councils through the Public Library Funding Agreement.

In 2020-21 these community internet services were used 275,213 times, representing an increase in usage in the last four years of over 1,000 percent from 23,326 sessions in 2016-17.

12. How can different levels of Government, the telecommunications industry and regional community's co-ordinate their efforts to improve telecommunications in regional Australia?

As noted earlier, consideration should be provided to Improving the capability of existing, well positioned community infrastructure and partnerships including Local Councils.

For example, many remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory do not have their own library service. To address this issue, Library & Archives NT (LANT) provides free community Wi-Fi services in 48 remote communities. LANT works in partnership with regional councils through the Public Library Funding Agreement.

In addition to the large increase in usage, regional councils are increasingly leveraging this connectivity to build digital skills programs. For example, MacDonnell Regional Council, which does not operate any physical libraries, uses the Wi-Fi access points provided by Library & Archives NT to develop its [MacConnect](#) programs to support digital literacy and cybersafety across its 13 communities.

13. What changes to Government investment programs are required to ensure they continue to be effective in delivering improved telecommunications?

As existing and established places of digital connectors and facilitators, public libraries are well placed to contribute to the digital agenda. With increased funding, libraries can become hotspots for local digital initiatives. Local government authorities and public

libraries, through their councils should be considered as potential lead bodies in funding applications.

14. How can regional consumers be better supported to identify, choose and use the best connectivity options for their circumstances, as well to understand and use their consumer rights?

Libraries already provide digital literacy support and education in communities – it is part of our core business. Libraries provide classes, support and access to the internet, PCs and mobile devices for our users to help our community develop and build their digital literacy skills.

One issue for libraries in providing contemporary information and advice, particular in regional and remote areas is the cost of training and keeping staff upskilled. Training visits are expensive and infrequent and there is a strong need for connectivity that can deliver online training and support services through platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

Consideration should be provided to providing libraries with a funding stream to support libraries to provide digital literacy programs and services, particularly in regional and remote locations.

5. Responses aligned with the Committee terms of reference

The impact of Government policies and programs to improve regional connectivity and digital inclusion

Be Connected is the Australian Government digital inclusion program for senior Australians which libraries have been pleased to support as delivery partners across metro, regional and remote areas. ALIA has been working with the Australian Digital Health Agency over the last 18 months to train library staff in the use of My Health Record, so they can assist community members to use this tool.

Public libraries' success with both these programs demonstrates the impact that can be achieved by activating the library network. However, this is the extent of libraries' involvement in the federal government Digital Economy Strategy.

More could be achieved by federal government working with the national public library network and providing targeted investment in connectivity. Libraries already provide digital technology hubs in communities – it's part of our core business. However, connectivity and bandwidth issues are barriers to realising the full potential of libraries as digital centres.

Insights from COVID-19 on the changing digital needs of regional, rural and remote areas

With their established and trusted position as places for digital access, skills development and resources, public libraries have been uniquely placed to support individuals, families and communities, through COVID-19. Even during lockdown, libraries continued to provide online services 24/7.

6. Summary

In summary, we support equality of access to the benefits arising from our increasingly digital society and view public libraries as having an important role in bridging the gap for those who don't have the skills, knowledge, money, devices or high speed connection to be regular and confident users of the internet.

We ask the Regional Telecommunications Review committee to reference the role and value of the public library network in its report and to encourage federal government, telecommunications industry actors and other stakeholders to approach libraries, through councils, as key delivery partners in new initiatives in this space.

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