Submission from the
Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)

to the House of Representatives
Committee on Infrastructure and Communications

_____

Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network

Introduction

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry into the role and potential of 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.

Support for other Submissions to the Inquiry

The Submission by the Australian Library and Information Association supports the submissions made by the National and State Libraries Australasia and the National Library of Australia. These two submissions clearly outline the need for digitisation funding and support to ensure access to Australian content.

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.

"With an attendance rate of 34% of the population aged 15 years and over (5.9 million people) in 2009-10, national, state and local libraries were the fourth most attended cultural venue or event in the 12 months prior to interview behind cinemas (67%), zoological parks and aquariums (37%) and botanic gardens (35%). Unlike most other cultural activities included in the survey, people tended to make multiple visits to the library. Whilst 15% of all attendees reported going to the library once or twice in the 12 months prior to interview, the majority (64%) visited more than five times. One in four people (26%) attended a library more than 20 times."
Australian Bureau of Statistics- 4172.0.55.001 - Perspectives on Culture, March 2011

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 2011]

☐ 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).

In the world of the NBN, libraries play a significant role in the access and support for learning in our communities. Libraries provide access to technology, to PC's and other equipment that many in our society cannot afford. For those who might 'have it all', libraries often provide a place of convenience and community. You might be a wealthy 60-something Grey Nomad travelling around Australia, living the 'Australian dream'. Grey Nomads are already visiting local libraries for access to PC's or wireless, to print out documents and catch up on emails with friends and family.

For many who work in a capital city in a technological work environment where the tools are provided, it is hard to believe that some people in our Australian community are not connected in some form to an internet based machine or hand held device. It is the unemployed, pensioners, the homeless, single-parents, people with a terminal illness and families already struggling financially who use public libraries. These are the people that should and could benefit from access to the Internet but more importantly they need ongoing training and skills development to ensure that they are not left behind as a digital citizen.

Impacting regional economic growth and employment opportunities

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.

Libraries are an important component of improving the nation's literacy rate. Literacy improves life chances, employment opportunities and therefore citizens that usefully contribute to the economy. The Productivity Commission's 2010 report *Links between Literacy and Numeracy skills and Labor Market Outcomes* is clear on the need to improve literacy for all Australians. To this end, the libraries of Australia are collaborating to undertake the National Year of Reading 2012. ALIA already organises annual literacy campaigns such as National Simultaneous Storytime.

An example of an initiative that would suit the technology and advancements for the NBN and during National Year of Reading would be Digital Storytelling. A national or state-wide simultaneous skype storytelling session could be conducted regularly.

Facilitating community and social benefits

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 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 that 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.

Libraries play a key role in social inclusion, community culture and a sense of safe public space. They can also be a place to showcase opportunities that the NBN can offer, through community information displays, rooms with advanced technology demonstrations or a meeting location for regional broadband planning.

Access this video here.

http://www.alia.org.au/governance/committees/public.libraries/summit09/
http://www.alia.org.au/governance/committees/public.libraries/summit09/clips/3%20safe%20democratic%20uplifting%204%2025.mpg

Young people seek out community spaces such as libraries for equity of access. Access to broadband could also potentially see our youth stay in regional areas and be able to work online from a rural community rather than moving to the city.

Libraries through engagement have excellent networks and resources. Libraries work with job-seeker networks and other information networks to facilitate access to employment resources for the unemployed.

Libraries provide a social benefit through the use of a group community space for accessing technology and information. Libraries provide meeting spaces, research and information sources for local businesses. Libraries have connections to enable special projects in the community using the NBN that are relevant to that local community.

Library staff have knowledge and skills in internet searching and technologies that can enable community identity capture and curation. Libraries already facilitate sharing of resources and local knowledge through NBN applications. Library assist their communities to share local resources, local histories, link to national databases and keep cultural collateral, especially indigenous materials.

Libraries are willing to work with all levels of government to ensure the broadband takeup means that every member of the Australian community is engaged, digital literate and can access broadband no matter what their socio-economic status may be.

ALIA encourages NBN Co, DBCDE and all government departments and agencies to utilise the contacts and communication methods within the library sector to distribute information about the NBN, its benefits and uses.

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.

Broadband use is often lowest amongst lower income earners, the older population and those with health difficulties. At present, therefore, many of those who would potentially benefit most from digital technology - whether from the financial savings available from online shopping, access to public services, or simply from increased employability and confidence – do not have the inclination or opportunity to use it.

The Broadband for Seniors initiatives, while not funded directly, has seen the program enter many public libraries in Australia, duplicating the work that public libraries were already delivered in those libraries.

Libraries are already conducting hundreds of training programs for our community on how to use the Internet - for free – as a community service.

Public Library 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."

Delivery of government services

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. 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.

ALIA recommends that all Australian Governments as part of the rollout of the NBN recognise the role that public libraries play 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 government, through NBN programs, 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. The 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.

Improving educational resources and training for teachers and students

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.

As an integral part of the National Broadband Network, an appropriate program must be developed to support user education and training, not just for educators or business people, but for all Australians. 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.

ALIA also notes that the House of Representatives Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians included many submissions that discussed the importance of access to broadband for school libraries. With the tabling of the final report of this Inquiry in 2011, ALIA hopes that the federal government will note the need for further funding for school libraries to enable access to digital resources and qualified teacher librarian staff to operate new *Building the Education Revolution* libraries.

Australian Content for the NBN

Further work and funding is required to ensure that there is sufficient Australian content available online. Digitisation of Australian collections, such as those in libraries and museums is essential for quality content for the Australian curriculum and for all Australians to access their cultural history. The submissions by the National Library of Australia and National and State Libraries Australasia outline digitisation requirements in more detail.

Literacy

As Ian Oppermann in his opening presentation to the CSIRO Broadband Summit in November 2010 noted, there are still 1% of the Australian population that is illiterate. Literacy rates have an impact on technology usage and uptake.
http://www.csirobroadband.com

ALIA along with libraries and library associations are the founding partners for the National Year of Reading 2012. http://www.love2read.org.au We continue to seek government support for this important initiative, however as at March 2011 federal government funding support had not yet been confirmed.

Digital Literacy and Digital Inclusion

Following on from basic prose literacy, digital literacy is the next set of skills required to be a part of a society where broadband presents great opportunities.

In March 2010 the United States FCC launched the National Broadband Plan and within that plan a key goal is:

- Ensure every American has the opportunity to become digitally literate.
    - Launch a National Digital Literacy Corps to organize and train youth and adults to teach digital literacy skills and enable private sector programs addressed at breaking adoption barriers. http://www.broadband.gov/plan/

The Institute of Museum and Library Studies is conducting an important roundtable during 2011 to discuss how community organisations and governments can work together to create a digital inclusion framework http://www.imls.gov/news/2011/031011.shtm

ALIA would welcome the opportunity to work with the DBCDE on a similar project in Australia based on the research from the IMLS http://tascha.uw.edu/research/inclusionframework/

Strategy

A cornerstone to ensuring the potential of the NBN is reached is a clear national plan – an Australian Digital Strategy.

There are a number of examples that Australia can learn from:

United Kingdom   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_Britain http://raceonline2012.org/
Scotland http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/enquiries/Digital_Scotland/index.htm
United States http://www.broadband.gov/plan/

We call on the Australian Government to release the draft national Australian Digital Strategy as soon as possible.   We need to move further than the current discussion on 'pipes and fibre', to what will be delivered, used, and created.

We would like to see from the government the delivery of a strategy and framework that will guide the Australian community to work with all three levels of government, the corporate sector and not-for-profits on using the internet and broadband connections to enhance the quality of life for all Australians.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ALIA recommends:

1. That the Australian Government release the draft Australian Digital Strategy for consultation and comment as soon as possible.

2. 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 2011]
· provision of access to e-government services and publications.

3. That public library internet costs are funded through a national subsidy therefore minimising costs for public information accessed through public institutions such as libraries and for non-commercial purposes on an ongoing basis. (This model has been successfully implemented in the United States.) ALIA will continue to work with the Department of Premier and Cabinet on proposals for suitable funding arrangements. (2011 estimated funding of $8Million per annum)

4. The development of programs by government agencies to ensure that the Australian public has enduring access to electronic government publications. This includes sufficient funding for the National Library of Australia's Pandora and Trove services.

5. That databases and e-book packages are funded through the National Library of Australia's Electronic Resources Australia initiative to ensure all Australians are provided with equitable access to quality online resources in health, news and current affairs and encyclopaedias at a competitive price.

6. That ALIA work with the Australian Government to develop a range of programs through Australian libraries to support internet education and skills training - digital literacy skills for all Australians - to ensure greater use of the National Broadband Network.

7. That the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations note recommendations in many of the submissions to the Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians relating to digital literacy and digital citizenship skills to be embedded into the Australian curriculum and notes the import role of teacher librarians in enabling these skills with teachers and students.

8. That all Australian public libraries, irrespective of the 1000 population limit be provided with a dedicated NBN link of a minimum of 100megabits per second (expandable).

9. That the federal government work with local government to ensure that all public libraries are funded to provide wireless facilities to the community in addition to direct broadband connections from council facilities.

11 That with government assistance, public libraries be provided with special low cost broadband packages that ensure all libraries can afford the ever growing demand for broadband in a public setting, on an ongoing basis.

12. That the Australian Government develop national programs like the UK *Race Online 2012* where libraries are utilised to encourage greater uptake of the National Broadband Network and that programs for digital skills development are delivered through public libraries.

13. That the Australian Government support the National Year of Reading 2012 and fund activities with key NBN Stakeholders to showcase online and internet-based reading and literacy activities during the year.

14. ALIA's *Beyond a Quality service Strengthening the Social Fabric – Standards and Guidelines for Australian Public Libraries 2011* contain guidelines for systems infrastructure for public libraries. Delivery is reliant on a well maintained and fast broadband service. We recommend that federal, state and local governments acknowledge and support the infrastructure required for national standards of service delivery for Australian public libraries.

15. That ALIA work with relevant Government Departments to seek specific options to be developed for public libraries as the one source of free broadband access to regional communities.

16. That the Australian Government provide funding to all Australian public libraries for basic internet access costs.

17. That the Australian Government through DBCDE forms a Digital Inclusion Group (similar to the US) to ensure an Australian Digital Inclusion Framework is developed by 2014.

18. That the Australian Government provides funding to the National Library of Australia for digitisation projects to facilitate access to a greater range of Australian content.

19. ALIA recommends that all Australian Governments, as part of the rollout of the NBN, recognise the role that public libraries play in providing access to e-government services and public sector information and provide appropriate support for IT infrastructure and staffing costs for libraries.

Sue Hutley
Executive Director
sue.hutley@alia.org.au

March 2011