CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1   Perhaps the most striking impression the Committee has formed in this inquiry is that Australia is remarkably well served by its current library services. Constrained for space and funds and beset by technological problems though some of them may be, their representatives gave considerable time and effort in assisting the Committee by way of submissions and oral evidence. Most have given considerable thought to the issues confronting libraries in the online environment and have already taken many practical steps not only to survive but to prosper and to better serve their communities into the future. They are strongly committed to serving their users and their propensity to band together and to share resources was an object lesson in what can be achieved by cooperation across jurisdictional boundaries.

5.2   A common refrain was the lack of recognition library services receive for the valuable role they play in the community. Libraries are merely taken for granted, not valued. Sadly, the Committee has to concur that this is the case. Amongst some sections of the populace, there remains the perception that all libraries do is lend books. The reality is far different. Particularly in rural and regional Australia, the library is in some cases the one remaining piece of infrastructure so it takes on the role of technology access centre, meeting place, social support system.

5.3   The Committee cannot stress more strongly the importance of the role of libraries in Australian society. The perception that private access to online services would replace, or at the very least radically reduce, the need for libraries was regularly reported to the Committee. This is clearly not the case. In the first instance, libraries contain a wealth of information that will never be digitised and available online. And secondly, even with an increasing level of online access in the home, public Internet access will continue to be required in perpetuity on equity grounds. In the Committee's view, it is preferable that that provision be in an environment where professional assistance in finding information (rather than strictly ICT assistance) is available – namely, in libraries. That so many library users with personal Internet access continue to use library resources is testimony to the value-adding role libraries play in the online environment.

5.4   While it is probable that some kinds of library usage will drop off in the future as more services and more content are provided online, the library's role as a safety net for those Australians without personal Internet access will continue in perpetuity, and must be supported. Libraries too will be involved in providing assistance, either in person or through websites, to the world wide web.

Connectivity

5.5 Perhaps the most significant practical issue confronting all libraries today is their capacity to make suitable provision for their users' online access and to sustain that provision. There are still technological black spots which need to be addressed; and there is the pressing need to provide greater bandwidth to enable users to make full use of the ever-increasing range of online services. While it is almost certain that raw bandwidth price will continue to fall, it is likely to be more than offset by demand growth.

5.6 In view of the pressing need for improved broadband access in the nation's public libraries, the Committee recommends:

(a) that the Government negotiate with telecommunications carriers to establish an 'e-rate' or discount rate for broadband access to public libraries and that, if negotiations are not successful, consider imposing a requirement on carriers under the Universal Service Obligation arrangement; and

(b) that further funds be allocated under an expanded National Broadband Strategy for expanding broadband access in libraries. [see paragraph 4.35]

Content

5.7 As the Internet is largely unregulated, libraries have a role in negotiating for, selecting and promoting worthwhile online content for their users while at the same time balancing online provision with the more traditional resources. To be affordable, online content will increasingly have to be purchased through consortia arrangements.

5.8 The Committee recommends that the National Library of Australia receive additional funding to provide improved access to Kinetica for all Australian libraries and end users. [see paragraph 3.14]

5.9 The Committee recommends:

(a) that NOIE continue to consult closely with the library community over the development of the register of Australian Government publications;

(b) that NOIE publicise the availability in public libraries of the online register; and

(c) that NOIE commission research to ascertain the level of public awareness of government information and the means of access thereto. [see paragraph 4.65]

5.10 The Committee recommends:

(a) that the National Library of Australia identify a number of key databases for which national site licencing might be desirable; and

(b) it recommends that additional Australian Government funding be extended to the National Library for this purpose. [see paragraph 4.56]

5.11   The Committee recommends:

(a) the continuation of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Community Heritage Grants digitisation program; and

(b) the addition of a new National Heritage Grants program for peak cultural institutions to assist in the digitisation of their collections. [see paragraph 3.34]

5.12   The Committee recommends that the Australian Research Information Infrastructure Committee consider the question of the availability online of Australian postgraduate theses as a matter of priority. [see paragraph 3.37]

Promotion

5.13   Although public libraries are used by a majority of the Australian population, their ability to assist their users to harness the potential of online services has not been adequately recognised. There should be much more promotion of what libraries have to offer, above and beyond their role as a supplier of recreational reading.

5.14   The Committee recommends that whenever the Australian Government advertises its electronic services, it adds a statement to the effect that further information can be obtained from the local public library. And it encourages the states to do likewise. [see paragraph 3.24]

Skills

5.15   The Internet is a dynamic and ever changing medium. Library staff need ongoing skills training to stay up to date and to be able to assist their users efficiently. The Committee is impressed with the profession's commitment to training and with the efforts it is making to promote skills in users. Technology is advancing so quickly that ongoing and regular professional development will be necessary. In particular, developments to assist disabled Internet users are constantly being upgraded. If there are no alternative funding mechanisms for ongoing research into the identification and testing of adaptive technologies for the use of online equipment in public libraries by persons with disabilities, the Committee recommends the funding of another round of AccessAbility grants. [see paragraph 3.64]

National leadership

5.16   The Committee recommends:

(a) that the Cultural Ministers' Council appoint a standing libraries working group to provide regular reports on library and information matters which need to be addressed as a priority;

(b) that the proposed Cultural Ministers' Council standing libraries working group develop, in consultation with other interested parties, a national information policy; and

(c) that NOIE be required to consult with the appropriate national library representatives on all matters of substance affecting the library community and the online provision of services. [see paragraph 4.10]

Legal deposit

5.17   In its inquiry, the Committee did not consider the question of legal deposit in sufficient detail to form a definitive view on the matter of its extension to digital material. Noting the requirement that the Copyright Amendment (Digital Agenda) Act 2000 be reviewed after three years of operation, the Committee recommends that that review consider the Act's extension to digital material. [see paragraph 4.47]

Funding

5.18   The Committee concludes that local government is now carrying a disproportionate share of public library funding, compared with the more equitable situation of the 1970s, when state governments contributed up to 50 per cent in some cases. It is incumbent on state governments to recognise the important role public libraries play in providing equitable access to online information by ensuring that they receive adequate support. Where there is shared responsibility for public library funding between state and local government, the Committee recommends that the States significantly increase their share of public library funding, moving towards matching local government levels of contribution. [see paragraph 4.104]