Submission in response to the Department of Communications Regional Connectivity Program discussion paper

9 September 2019

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 more than 114 million customer visits each year. 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. In 2016-2017, the number of public access internet devices provided by public libraries nationally grew to 13,531.[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.

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[1] https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/aust_pub_lib_stats_report_2016-17_final_8.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
- 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.

Further information is contained in ALIA's 2017 report *Australian libraries: the digital economy within everyone's reach*.[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 egovernment 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."

3. Introduction

ALIA and APLA welcome this opportunity to respond to the Regional Connectivity Program discussion 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

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[2] https://read.alia.org.au/australian-libraries-digital-economy-within-everyone%E2%80%99s-reach

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.

So, while public libraries are well positioned to support the place-based approach described in the Regional Connectivity discussion paper, this can only be achieved with new partnerships and initiatives, and with additional funding.

3. Responses to specific questions

Question 1 Are there additional key elements that should be incorporated into the design of the Regional Connectivity Program?

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, as previously described.

We believe the key design principles should include some mention of partnerships with local community providers, such as libraries, to maximise the impact of these new investments. Instead of creating new infrastructure from the ground up, funding should focus on improving the capability of existing, well positioned community infrastructure.

Question 2 Should other parties, for example local government authorities, business organisations or industry groups, be allowed to lead a bid for Regional Connectivity Program funding? And Question 4 Are there ways that the Department can facilitate linkages between potential infrastructure providers and local communities?

With their established and trusted position in local communities as places for digital support and exploration, public libraries are uniquely placed to contribute to the Regional Connectivity Program.

With new partnerships and funding through the Regional Connectivity Program, libraries can be activated as hotspots for focused local digital initiatives, speeding up implementation. For this reason, libraries, through their councils, should be considered as important parties and potential lead bodies in funding applications.

Question 6 What type of projects should be considered for funding through the Regional Connectivity Program? And Question 8 Are there any comments in relation to the proposed Eligible and Ineligible Areas?

We recommend taking the broadest possible approach to the definition of infrastructure, to the size and scope of projects, and to the eligible and ineligible locations. In our experience, relatively small-scale initiatives and investments can make a substantial difference at the local level, in communities which might previously have been hard-to-reach.

For example, the Ideas Box is a portable learning facility created by international NGO Libraries Without Borders and trialled by the State Libraries of Queensland and Western Australia. The Ideas Box comprises six transformable containers on two pallets, providing remote communities with internet access and their own power source.

4. Recommendations

- We recommend broad parameters for regional connectivity projects and funding.

- We recommend that local government authorities be allowed to lead bids for regional connectivity program funding.

- We recommend the role of libraries as digital centres within communities be recognised and partners encouraged to approach libraries, through councils, as key partners in new initiatives.

5. 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.

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