



Submission from the Australian Library and Information Association’s Australian Public Library Alliance (ALIA APLA) to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport inquiry into local government sustainability

31 May 2024

Public libraries in Australia

Across Australia, access to public library services is provided through more than 1,700 service points, including branches, kiosks and mobile outlets.¹ Across 2021-2022 (the most recent national level statistics), and despite ongoing covid impacts, almost 150 million items were borrowed from collections of 42 million items, and 3.5 million people attended at least one of the 260,000 public programs that were run. Australians love their libraries, with a third of the country holding active library membership.

Key Statistics



Public libraries play a vital role in local communities. They ensure that every Australian, no matter their economic means, is able to access information, assistance, education, community engagement and at a very basic level, a temperature controlled safe space. They support social cohesion, community wellbeing local history, the arts, culture and literacy.

¹ National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) (2023). *Australian Public Library Statistical Report 2021-2022*. Highlights. <https://www.nsla.org.au/wp-content/uploads/PLS-2021-22-final.pdf>. Infographic from *Australian Public Library Statistical Report 2021-2022* <https://www.nsla.org.au/wp-content/uploads/NSLA-Public-Library-Stats-Highlights-21-22.pdf>

Public libraries are valued and provide essential social infrastructure and services. Over the last decade the percentage of people who would rate public libraries as a “not important” local government service has consistently been 3% or lower.²

Although the funding arrangements for public libraries vary between states and territories, the vast majority of Australian public libraries are run by, and receive the majority of their funding from, local government. This funding covers the infrastructure, staffing, collections, maintenance, programs, collaborations and growth of the services. There is also some support from state governments, in funding and resourcing, normally provided through the state library in the relevant jurisdiction.

As with many services of local government, per capita funding for public libraries has declined in the last five years (in nominal and real terms) at the same time as costs and demand have risen.³ While libraries have been able to achieve efficiencies in operations, inadequate budgets will lead to diminished services.

An additional stress has been placed on public libraries who are increasingly required to provide support for federal government service delivery and priorities. From the ubiquitous directions from Services Australia staff to use the public library for printing or assistance filling in forms through to the provision of early literacy programs and basic social welfare, public libraries are helping to deliver national programs and priorities, but with the costs borne by local government.

As such this inquiry into the sustainability of local government is timely. As the national body for public libraries in Australia, the Australian Library and Information Association’s Australian Public Library Alliance (ALIA APLA) is pleased to be able to provide the committee with some insights into the challenges facing one of local council’s key services, and recommendations to ensure the continued operation of libraries which are essential for a thriving democracy and the delivery of national priorities. ALIA APLA brings together the state and territory public library associations, bringing local knowledge to the national collaboration working to strengthen Australia’s public libraries.

Recommendations

1. ALIA APLA supports the Australian Local Government Association’s (ALGA) call to increase Federal Assistance Grants to local councils.
2. Library experts are invited to participate in relevant intergovernmental committees and policy networks, and grants are revised to ensure that public library services are eligible.
3. Federal government departments proactively contact and collaborate with ALIA APLA when the delivery of government programs will impact/rely on public library services.
4. Federal government departments explore ways to partner with public libraries to deliver and fund national projects.
5. A scholarship program for regional skills shortages is established to upskill people already working in local councils, including library staff.
6. The federal government provides funding for national support programs for public libraries through ALIA APLA.

² Ryan, R., Hastings, C., Woods., R., Lawrie, A., Grant, B. (2015) *Why Local Government Matters: Summary Report 2015* Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology Sydney Australia.

<https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/WhyLocalGovernmentMatters-FullReport.pdf>;

Busbridge, R., Chou, M. & Rutledge-Prior, M. (2024) The Three Rs and Beyond: Public Perceptions on the Role of Australian Local Government Today, *Urban Policy and Research*, (42)2, 204-216.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08111146.2024.2320637>

³ National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) (2023). *Australian Public Library Statistical Report 2021-2022*.

<https://www.nsla.org.au/wp-content/uploads/PLS-2021-22-final.pdf>



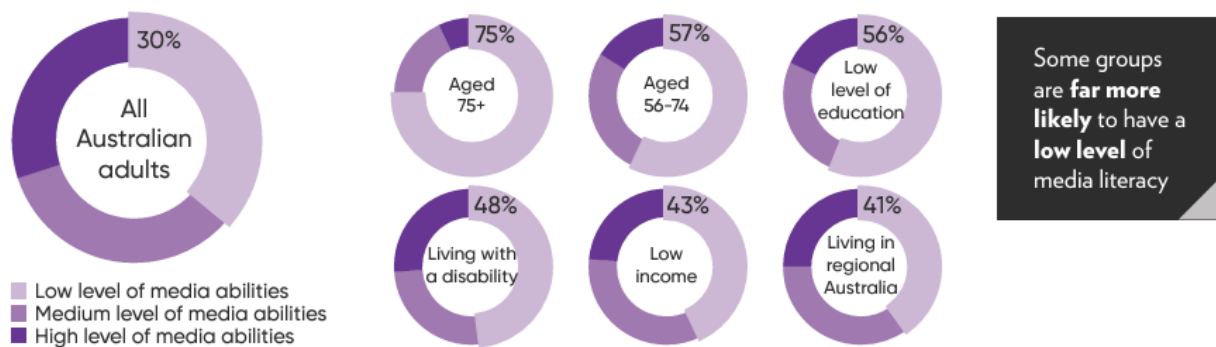
Public libraries are essential for the delivery of national priorities

Economic and social participation

People's ability to participate in society and the economy is largely dependent on having the necessary skills and literacies.

It's estimated that 44% of adults do not have the literacy skills they need for everyday life,⁴ only 56% of Australians are confident they can find information they need online and only 39% of adult Australians say they can check if information found online is true.⁵ There are significant equity gaps in Australians' literacy levels. For example, while 30% of Australian adults have low media literacy, this jumps to 41% of adults living in regional Australia and 75% of those aged over 75.⁶

Level of media literacy⁷



While most people participate in formal education at certain points in their lives, there is also an ongoing need to learn new skills and be supported to access information, across the full life span. Libraries, with their core focus on literacy and free access are increasingly picking up work to support these key literacies for the community. This encompasses everything from early literacy support through to digital skills workshops tailored to seniors, English classes for recent migrants and makerspaces to support creation and business development. Library programs often tie into the rich library collections, including local history collections, and ties with local artists, creators and community members. In 2021-2022, libraries

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies Australia, 2011-2012*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia/latest-release>

⁵ Notley, T., Chambers, S., Park, S., Dezuanni, M. (2021) *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs*. Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra. https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1824640/Australian_adult_media_literacy_report_2021.pdf

⁶ Notley, T., Chambers, S., Park, S., Dezuanni, M. 2021, *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs*. Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra

⁷ Ibid

ran over 100,000 literacy programs, 17,000 workforce development programs, and 10,000 programs dedicated to digital inclusion.⁸

Case study: MacDonnell Regional Council

This Central Australian council has come up with innovative ways to deliver programs through its MacConnect program. This Council does not have physical library branches, however Libraries and Archives NT (LANT) provides free WiFi services to the communities in the region. Two new services, 'Mpwartyeke/Palyantjaku' and 'Arrkene-Ileme/Inkanyi' leverage this partnership to deliver innovative programs.

'Mpwartyeke/Palyantjaku' means 'making' in Arrernte/Luritja and is a program designed to teach participants about creating digital media assets. Using industry standard equipment, MacConnect works in conjunction with MacYouth and MacCare to capture community life in new ways. Participants use 360° cameras, drones, field recording audio hardware, iPads and Apple Pencils, Wacom graphics tablets and lighting rigs (as well as the requisite software) to record bush trips, reading sessions, wellbeing resources and elder's storytelling, both for themselves and future generations.

'Arrkene-Ileme/Inkanyi' means 'play' in Arrernte/Pitjantjatjara and is a program using Oculus Quest 2 headsets to expose participants to the world of mixed reality technology. A typical session involves setting up safety equipment then teaching participants how to use the VR devices correctly. Each participant has fifteen minutes of free time to play a curation of VR games as well as access video resources created by the Mpwartyeke/Palyantjaku program. Using Chromecasts streaming to projectors, the session becomes a group activity sharing learning between audience and user.



Photo: Arrkene-Ileme/Imkanyi

Arts and Culture

The Federal Government's National Cultural Policy *Revive* has a tagline that speaks directly to the work of public libraries - *a place for every story, a story for every place*. Public libraries are some of the most used and enjoyed cultural institutions in Australia, and reading is consistently one of the most popular cultural activities. Libraries, to a much greater extent than other cultural institutions such as galleries, museums or

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies Australia, 2011-2012*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia/latest-release>



even the movies, are popular across all income brackets, and attendance is not significantly skewed towards higher income earners.⁹

Across the country public libraries support local, national and international author talks, seminars and events, collaborate with local artists in programming and encourage the creativity of the library community. Libraries are a place to experience and create. They play an essential role in ensuring that all Australians are able to read widely, no matter economic circumstances or geographical location. This is particularly important in regional Australia where bookshops can be few and far between. Despite this essential role that public libraries play in supporting Federal arts policy, there is no direct funding for public libraries or for ALIA APLA in their work to support public libraries. The sector does though note that the payments made by the government to authors and publishers under the lending rights scheme are important for the health of the book industry and are warmly supported by the library sector.

Social infrastructure

Australia faces some major challenges in the field of trust, social connectedness, and social cohesion. Signals from the rise of conspiracy theories through to the decline in volunteering point¹⁰ to the need to strengthen social infrastructure. Social infrastructure captures the spaces and places in our societies where we meet, build trust, and interact¹¹. As Daniel Aldrich remarks, libraries “bring people together from across the political spectrum and help us build trust in our societies and our government officials”.¹²

Case Study: Alice Springs Public Library supports community cohesion and health

In 2024 Alice Springs Public Library teamed up with the Arrente Boxing Academy during school holidays to deliver active fitness classes based on the principle of boxing and sparring, on the lawns outside the library. With Indigenous trainers delivering a safe program, all cultures and fitness levels were welcomed, with a community barbeque run at the same time allowing for intergenerational engagement.



⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, Australia. Accessed: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/attendance-selected-cultural-venues-and-events-australia/latest-release#key-statistics>

¹⁰ Davis, Amanda. (2023). *How can we bolster Australia's depleted army of volunteers to match the soaring demand for their services?* The Conversation. 16 May

¹¹ Aldrich, Daniel P. (2023). *How Libraries (and Other Social Infrastructure Spaces) Will Save Us: The Critical Role of Social Infrastructure in Democratic Resilience* (November 20). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4639061> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4639061>

¹² Aldrich, Daniel P. (2023). *How Libraries (and Other Social Infrastructure Spaces) Will Save Us: The Critical Role of Social Infrastructure in Democratic Resilience* (November 20). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4639061> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4639061>



Engagement with government services

Libraries have always provided access to information and culture, access to infrastructure such as digital technologies and internet access and assistance to those who need it. However, in recent years there has been an increasing demand on all of these services from people trying to engage with federal government services.

With the forced migration of a number of government services online, extremely limited options for in-person assistance, long waiting times for phone advice, it is no surprise that an increasing number of people are seeking out (or often being directed by federal government services) to public libraries. The assistance for government services ranges from printing documents through to navigating websites and complex applications. Often the people seeking help have lower levels of literacy, may not have access to suitable technology at home or are uncomfortable in digital environments. As noted above, there are large skills gaps in the Australian population across a range of literacies, and the inability to access one-on-one help is a significant barrier to service access.

The strains are particularly apparent in regional areas, where there are often very limited services available outside of the public libraries, where the literacy and support needs are high, and where staffing and funding levels in libraries are often at critical point and hours are reduced. Even the digital infrastructure in regional public libraries can be challenging, with older technology and slower internet connections. There are even some regional libraries with no public access computers due primarily to the scarcity of skills in local councils to ensure a safe digital environment free from malware and viruses, and services available for basic maintenance.

When government policies or programs change, these can often have substantial impacts on public library resourcing as new demands for support or resources are placed on staff. For example, when physical border passes were required to cross some state borders, the closest public libraries to the border crossings saw an astronomical increase in users requiring printing services. Despite these logical flow through effects, public libraries are rarely, if ever, consulted when policies needing local support are decided at federal level. There is a real need for public libraries, as well as local councils, to be proactively engaged by federal government departments in the early stages of planning when programs will have an impact at the local service level.

Case Study – WA Public Libraries helping people with Service WA App during pandemic

In January 2022 the State Government introduced the ServiceWA App to the community, designed to be a one stop shop for various government services including the SafeWA check-in app, record of COVID vaccination and G2G travel passes. Library staff were very quickly inundated with requests for help, and an estimated 6,000 people received either one on one or group assistance within the first couple of weeks, and many thousands more in the following weeks, until the G2G and QR code check-in requirements were removed from use.

Public Libraries WA Inc. (PLWA) successfully lobbied the State Government to provide funding for libraries to reimburse some of the costs associated with these sessions and subsequently the State Library delivered a grants program delivering approximately \$275,000 in funding to libraries across the state. This did not represent the full cost of supporting the ServiceWA App.



Frontline service provision

Libraries are also increasingly serving as a community service hub. During the current cost of living crisis, people seek out public libraries as a safe space to save on energy bills and stay warm in winter, or cool in summer. With almost a third of adults saying that they feel lonely,¹³ people come to libraries as a place of social connection. People seeking information of local support services, mental health or health information come to libraries.

To support increased demand and library visitors with complex needs and sometimes challenging behaviours, an increasing number of libraries are hiring social workers or community support workers. These staff are based in public libraries and can provide direct services to library visitors, and can also support library staff through training, debriefing, and as a point of referral for services outside the library.¹⁴ For libraries unable to invest in these or other formal measures, library staff often look to create supportive collaborations and partnerships with other service providers in the local area. While the support of people with high needs is necessary, it also comes with challenges, including threats to staff safety.¹⁵ These increasingly challenging working environments talk to the urgent need for more support for library staff on the frontline of service delivery.

Public libraries are uniquely placed to support communities in multiple ways. However, they are not currently funded in a way that recognises the cost-shifting that has happened from federal and state governments to the local level. Without an increase in funding, the demands for support with federal government services or wrap-around care risk diminishing the core library services where everyone has access to information and the freedom to learn, create and connect. Healthy communities depend on this safe space provided by a public library. This is a key reason why ALIA APLA supports ALGA's call for an increase in Federal Assistance Grants to local government.

Case Study – Library Connect Service at Fremantle Library WA

The Library Connect Service is a partnership between the City of Fremantle and St Patrick's Community Support Centre and is in place to support people facing homelessness and other disadvantages in the community.

The core of the program involves a St Pat's support worker based at the Fremantle Library who engages and connects with people in a safe and welcoming environment providing free advice, referrals and support where needed, in a free and open community space. The support worker is at the library at times that are accessible for the wider community including a mix of morning and evening and weekend availability.

The support worker has a remit to assist those at risk of experiencing homelessness or disadvantage, as well as those currently experiencing hardship. Many positive stories have come from the service including success in finding short and long term housing, assisting community members to access

¹³ Australian Institute of Health & Welfare Social isolation and loneliness, 16 Sept 2021.

¹⁴ Garner, J (2024) *Social and community workers providing care to vulnerable library users* Public Libraries in the lives of people experiencing homelessness. <https://thinkspace.csu.edu.au/librariesandhomelessness/2024/05/29/social-and-community-workers-providing-care-to-vulnerable-library-users/>

¹⁵ Garner, J (2024) *Survey of Public Library Staff – Presentation of Results* Public Libraries in the lives of people experiencing homelessness. <https://thinkspace.csu.edu.au/librariesandhomelessness/2023/04/26/survey-of-public-library-staff-presentation-of-results/>



support services that they were not aware of, and assisting people in situations of family and domestic violence to find their way out and into a safe space.

In the period from 30 September to 30 June 2022 the service supported 483 people across 924 episodes of support, the majority of assistance provided to women and a high percentage of Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community members. The most common issues presented by community members included financial difficulties, housing affordability, lack of support, unemployment and family and domestic violence.

In a time where the pressures on households are only increasing the service is an invaluable and essential service to ensure equitable and easily accessible support services are offered to the wider community, in places that they frequent, and that are safe.

Federal government investment in libraries is investment in community

The above examples only touch on the breadth of public library work and services to their communities. Public libraries are thriving hearts of their communities, but they cannot work miracles without sustainable funding.

We wish to draw the committee's attention in particular to the challenges of regional and rural libraries. These often service smaller, dispersed populations with higher needs. A recent survey of regional libraries found that more than half of the fixed library sites served a population fewer than 2000 people.¹⁶ People who live regionally and remotely are more likely to have lower literacy, digital literacy, digital inclusion and media literacy skills than people in metropolitan services.¹⁷ They are also likely to have less access to other services, across everything from bookshops to mental health professionals and digital infrastructure. In the regional library survey when probing why DVD loans were higher than might be expected, one respondent noted that library members often "cannot use digital services due to financial or connectivity constraints". The provision of physical computers, printers and WiFi is similarly highly valued in communities where there are no other alternative services.

Federal Grants

The per capita decline in public library spending needs to be reversed. Public libraries are a frontline service funded primarily by local government that is increasingly being expected to support, formally or informally, federal government priorities and service delivery.

A fair increase in the Financial Assistance Grants, as recommended by the Australian Local Government Association, would support local councils to be able to deliver the necessary services to their communities, including public library services. This is the principal funding mechanism from Federal Government to Local Government, and allows local councils to allocate funding as local priorities suggest, and in accordance with other funding opportunities such as specific grants. It is important to note that

¹⁶ Hider, P., Wakeling, S., Marshall, A., & Garner, J. (2024). Public Library Services in Rural Australia: Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 73(2), 122–147.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2024.2315338>

¹⁷ Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. (2023). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. DOI: 10.25916/528s-ny91



libraries maintain significant assets through their collections and building, and depreciation and maintenance are significant costs that are not often included in specific grant opportunities.

Regarding the specific grants, we note that there is often very little in the grants that specifically speaks to libraries or suggests that their funding needs have been considered, even in areas such as community cohesion, economic activity and liveability. Disaster preparation is often focused on physical infrastructure, not cultural collections or community resilience.

The benefits of social infrastructure are not just at the societal level but also the personal. A recent analysis of quantitative data on more than 550 neighbourhoods across the three Japanese prefectures most affected by the tsunami of 11 March 2011 shows that, controlling for relevant factors, community centres, libraries, parks, and other social infrastructure measurably and cheaply reduced mortality rates among the most vulnerable population. The study concluded that investing in social infrastructure projects would save lives during the recovery from natural disasters.¹⁸

As with the grants, there is also currently, to our knowledge, no requirement for engagement with library organisations or representation by library leaders on key committees or policy groups such as the Urban Policy Forum or Regional Development Australia Committees. While we strongly support the voice of local government in these forums, the specific expertise of public libraries would add significantly to these conversations and bring a unique perspective based on a deep understanding of the community.

Case Study: Libraries in times of disaster, Mossman Library

In the aftermath of Cyclone Jasper, Mossman, and communities to the north and across the Daintree River experienced a once in 100 years flooding event.

The Mossman Library was used as an emergency evacuation centre as the Mossman River broke its banks and inundated homes and businesses. Families arrived with pets and children and were accommodated overnight in the library. It was an island with water lapping at the rear door.



Photo Left: The main street of Mossman at the peak of the flood.

Photo Right: Mill St, Mossman – the library is in the distance on the left-hand side of the photo.

When the flood waters subsided, many homes were without water and power. The library opened with power and internet, but without water. The library was able open to people who wanted respite from the mud and a place to enjoy air conditioning while charging their phones and other devices.

As the community slowly returned to normal the extent of the devastation became apparent. The Court House, Police Station, Centrelink all suffered significant damage and are still under repair five months

¹⁸ Aldrich, P (2023) How social infrastructure saves lives: a quantitative analysis of Japan's 3/11 disasters. *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 24, 30–40 doi:10.1017/S1468109922000366



since the event. The library opened the small meeting room to community groups including the Justice of the Peace service (normally operate out of the Court House), disabled music group “The Giggles” and others. The library space operated as a recovery hub for people to get assistance from various specialist groups.

The destruction of printing machinery at our local printing service in the main street of Mossman saw many people coming to the library to photocopy flyers and other bulk jobs.

The closure of the sugar mill (which sustained \$1m damage) is another blow to the community. Cane growers who planted crop for this season (due for harvest the following months) had no transport for it to be taken to either Cairns or the Tablelands for processing.

It has been estimated that it will take at least 2 years for full infrastructure to be restored in Douglas Shire.

Workforce support

A significant strain on public library services is the ability to attract and retain qualified staff. In regional and remote areas in particular there are significant skills shortages for qualified librarians and library technicians. As with many other professional roles, local councils can find it challenging to offer comparable salaries and packages compared with metropolitan options, and the current housing crisis in many centres has only exacerbated the issue.

One option is for locally employed staff to gain qualifications while they are employed in the service. Training up locals has often seen better results for length of service to the library and council. However, the cost and time commitments in obtaining qualifications are a substantial barrier.

Scholarships to support regional workers in public libraries to gain qualifications would help address the skills gap while investing in the community.

Public libraries partnering with government for successful outcomes

Public libraries are a great partner for government. From supporting digital skills to ensuring that people can access official information about important events or changes, libraries are a trusted partner with a footprint in every community in the country. As part of the local lives of community members, public libraries are adept at tailoring programs to meet local needs and can access people who may otherwise fall through the cracks.

For example, in 2016, ALIA partnered with Australian Electoral Commission to coordinate the delivery of grant-funded community electoral information sessions around the nation in the lead-up to the federal election. Public libraries delivered 116 sessions at 64 library locations in ACT, NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia. In addition to English, sessions were delivered in 13 community languages: Gujarati, Farsi, Swahili, Cantonese, Dinka, Hindi, Arabic, Somali, Mandarin, Dari, Vietnamese, Spanish and Turkish.¹⁹ These kinds of programs can be refined and expanded to reach more Australians. More can be done to strengthen and promote partnerships between local and national governments and libraries to grow and deliver similar programs.

¹⁹ ALIA INCITE magazine. (2016) *Libraries Promote the Importance of Voting*.
<https://www8.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/inCiteALIA/2016/103.pdf>



Case Study: Aged Care Reforms

The Department of Health and Aged Care (the Department) engaged ALIA APLA to facilitate a pilot project in public libraries to increase awareness of aged care reforms in the community.

The aim of the pilot was to enable the Department to share information with older people, families and carers in their local communities, in a way that facilitates their input to aged care reform and gives them a voice in how things need to change and improve. Libraries were recognised as a safe space with trusted library staff, where people would feel comfortable asking questions and seeking out resources to better understand how the aged care system works.

Twenty-five library branches hosted a hub across 5 states and territories in metropolitan and regional areas. This pilot received a Highly Commended in the Department Secretary's Awards for Community Engagement. Based on the success the Department has decided to extend the pilot.



Photo: Double Bay Library

Case Study: Public Libraries support people using My Health Record (MHR)²⁰

In 2019 ALIA, working through ALIA APLA, was successful in becoming a My Health Record (MHR) Consumer Education Community Delivery Partner. The aim of ALIA's MHR education program was to deliver training to public library staff and relevant community partners so that they would be able to respond to enquiries about MHR, to be proactive in offering information about MHR, and feel confident when providing guidance about issues relating to community members MHRs. The intent of this program was consistent with the information literacy role played by public libraries and collaboration at the national level makes for cost effective and positive programs.

While the advent of COVID and the subsequent lock-downs necessitated some substantial changes in the program, ALIA trained 3,285 public library and other interested community staff, who in turn

²⁰ Australian Digital Health Agency, Australian Library and Information Association, State Library of Queensland, Queensland Government (2022) *Digital health literacy: Final program report February 2022*. <https://read.alia.org.au/digital-health-literacy-final-program-report-february-2022>

distributed 20,000 MHR information packs and facilitated more than 300 consumer information sessions.

Due to the structure of the program, with centralised support and local delivery, public libraries were able to tailor the program to suit local circumstances. For example, two Libraries Tasmania staff travelled to the public library in Whitemark on Flinders Island (population approx. 1000) where they guided five local Libraries Tasmania staff and one staff member from the local health hub community agency in their online My Health Record training. Participants noted the value of My Health Record for rural and remote residents and looked forward to sharing their new knowledge of it with the community

In Mackay, library staff were able to integrate the training with work with Services Australia around engaging with customers wanting to access more information about their health record status - to ensure library staff were a little more removed from managing personal information to comply with privacy requirements. Over a period of 12 months they ran 14 sessions with 273 participants for MHR and 17 sessions with 231 participants with services Australia.

National collaboration

One reason that public libraries are able to deliver such substantial services with limited resources is the strong national collaboration and support. ALIA APLA, for example, brings together all the state and territory library associations to work on common projects, set national guidelines and standards, and provide resources, information and training to libraries across the country.²¹ ALIA APLA collaborates with other library organisations, including National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA) who play an important role in supporting public library services, and through ALIA with the wider library sector and special interest groups.

ALIA APLA is entirely member funded and mainly reliant on volunteer labor, with a few hours a week of paid secretarial and administrative assistance. There is significant potential for ALIA APLA to better support Australia's public libraries with improved data and analytics, training and resources. Federal government investment in ALIA APLA, either to deliver specific projects or to deliver longer-term strategic projects and ongoing monitoring and analysis for the whole sector, would be an extremely cost-effective way to support the work of public libraries.

Recommendations

1. ALIA APLA supports the Australian Local Government Association's (ALGA) call to increase Federal Assistance Grants to local councils.
2. Library experts are invited to participate in relevant intergovernmental committees and policy networks, and grants are revised to ensure that public library services are eligible.
3. Federal government departments proactively contact and collaborate with ALIA APLA when the delivery of government programs will impact/rely on public library services.
4. Federal government departments explore ways to partner with public libraries to deliver and fund national projects.
5. A scholarship program for regional skills shortages is established to upskill people already working in local councils, including library staff.
6. The federal government provides funding for national support programs for public libraries through ALIA APLA.

²¹ I & J Management Services. (2021) *APLA-ALIA Standards and Guidelines for Australian Public Libraries*. <https://read.alia.org.au/apla-alia-standards-and-guidelines-australian-public-libraries-may-2021>

