



Australian Library and
Information Association

Submission in response to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee review into telecommunications services in Regional Australia

15 July 2015

ALIA contact:

Sue McKerracher, CEO, Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA),
9-11 Napier Close, Deakin ACT 2600
t 02 6215 8215 m 0404 456 749 f 02 6282 2249
w www.alia.org.au e sue.mckerracher@alia.org.au

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.

2. Introduction

In 2009, ALIA submitted a paper to the Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network (Appendix 2). 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'.

Specifically, we supported 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. We also noted the need for assistance from public library staff for users of electronic services, both for accessing government information and for everyday online tasks.

Six years ago, we shared the nation's hopes for the successful roll out of the National Broadband Network and we remain enthusiastic about the potential of this major infrastructure investment to return enormous benefits to communities right across Australia.

3. Internet access in public libraries

In 2013 we carried out the sixth *ALIA Internet Access in Public Libraries Survey* (published every couple of years since 2002).

The survey found that there was an average of 8.25 terminals per library in 2013, compared with 6.4 in 2008. This growth demonstrated the importance of internet access as a core public library service.

Wifi was not a feature of the 2008 survey – before the advent of the tablet and smartphone – yet in 2013, more than 70% of libraries provided wifi. Where it was limited, cost and IT technical issues were the primary reasons.

In 2013, library users loved the fact that they could access the internet in libraries and they could do so for the most part free of charge. However, there were frustrations with slow speeds, insufficient terminals and restrictions or limitations on internet access and use. Public libraries provided a range of internet training, from informal assistance on an ad hoc basis, through to sessions for seniors, toddlers, people whose first language was not English. The sessions went from beginners' classes through to advanced courses.

In terms of connection speed and cost, only 36% of libraries had broadband internet connection; the rest were still using ADSL. Costs of providing an internet service varied from \$600 per annum for a single branch, up to more than \$5,000, with 42% of libraries at the higher level. While four out of five libraries said this was affordable, it meant that libraries had to prioritise other activities.

Half the respondents thought the NBN would increase the number of library users; many saw it as creating change and providing positive benefits in terms of faster internet access, improved services and the opportunity to attract new users.

Over a third of terminals in libraries were more than three years old and would need to be replaced soon.

Overall, the survey painted a picture of a highly-rated, greatly in demand service, which was not without its frustrations for library users. It highlighted the difficult budget and resource issues facing library managers going forward, and the need to revisit strategies and policies on a frequent basis, to keep up with the rapid changes in technology and consumer expectations.

4. Digital hubs and other NBN community initiatives

Successive federal, state and territory governments have launched community-based projects around internet access that have shown good initial results but have foundered when the original funding has run out. Often there is a significant investment in new infrastructure, which proves to be unsustainable in the longer term.

We are concerned that government departments have a blind spot when it comes to the Australian public library network:

- More than 1500 physical locations across the nation
- Serving metro, regional and remote communities
- Already funded by local, state and territory governments
- Technology-enabled, with PCs for public use and often providing free wifi
- Other facilities including meeting rooms
- Online presence through websites and social media.

Not only does this network exist; people are already using it. Nearly 10 million Australians are registered users of public libraries and visitor numbers are even higher, with more than 110 million visits a year.

We have been especially frustrated when technology/communication projects such as Digital Hubs, have been assigned to other agencies that lack the physical infrastructure to deliver services beyond the cut off date for federal funding.

Taking Digital Hubs as an example, where these hubs have been established in libraries, they have enjoyed a natural fit with complementary programs, and the technology fit out/employment of digital specialists has been part of a wider delivery of services that has funding from other levels of government.

By contrast, where the Digital Hub has been standalone, and the federal government has been the only source of funding, it has been launched with great fanfare, engendered participation, raised consumer expectations and then been forced to shut its doors (see Appendix 3 for case studies).

Through the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance, made up of senior library leaders from every state and territory, we have overcome the geographic and funding barriers to create a collaborative public library network that delivers complex national programs. Successful examples of this collaboration include:

- The creation of national standards and guidelines for Australian public libraries 2010
- The delivery of the federal government increased accessibility for people with print disabilities initiative 2011 (FaHCSIA)
- The delivery of the federal government funded National Year of Reading 2012 (Office for the Arts and DEEWR)
- The annual Summer Reading Club
- Regular monitoring of internet access in public libraries.

We are working with the Alannah and Madeline Foundation and Telstra to deliver eSmart Libraries across the network, and we are a partner in the delivery of the Department of Communications Stay Smart Online Week 2014.

We have advocated for public libraries to be seen as priority locations for future NBN and Department of Communications initiatives, able to support sustainable Government communication initiatives.

5. Digital Transformation – the public library opportunity

The Australian Government is making a major commitment to delivering government information and services online, with \$95 million set aside in the 2015 Federal Budget for the establishment of the Digital Transformation Office and a further \$160 million for the broader digital transformation agenda.

While government departments and agencies can drive their own delivery of e-government, take up by the public is something which has to be encouraged and assisted. As described in the previous section, public libraries are perfectly positioned to assist with this transition and yet public libraries have yet to feature in the discussion.

6. Regional Australia

The previous sections cover generic issues relating to the NBN and internet access across Australia. Library services in regional Australia experience additional challenges and a sample of these can be found in Appendix 1, from the Northern Territory, Tasmania and Victoria. In summary:

Reliable and affordable access to the internet is critical to remote communities for access to services, access to information, 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 overstretched and cost is a significant barrier to libraries offering high speed internet access to their users.

Direct NBN connectivity, or access to business grade NBN services needs to be made a priority for every library in the nation. Connectivity to a node away from a public library is not the answer, where the last mile cost falls back to local government.

7. Summary

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.

APPENDIX 1 – RESPONSES FROM TASMANIA, NORTHERN TERRITORY AND VICTORIA

Tasmanian feedback

We see two issues with bandwidth and the NBN direction. NBN services (Fibre and Wireless) have provided great bandwidth upgrades to regional and rural areas that otherwise would not have been in previous telecommunication carriers upgrade areas. The resultant speeds are more than adequate under these service offerings, although it will be better when business grade services are offered as the current consumer grade NBN services being used have a 'best effort' SLA attached to them.

The use of NBN satellite services which are to come on stream in mid 2016 will not provide the required upload stream so will really not overcome the issue of poor bandwidth in areas where this will be the only NBN service offered – eg Bothwell, Orford, King and Flinders Island. Ideally we would like either fibre or NBN wireless to be offered in all our towns.

The other issue which NBN does not address is backhaul across Bass Strait. At present there is no real competition with Telstra having 2 links and BassLink the other. It would be good if there was additional backhaul to enable some price competition in this part of the bandwidth".

Patrick Gregory, Director, Northern Territory Library

Q1. Do people in regional Australia believe their reliance on telecommunications differs from those in urban areas? How does it differ and can you provide examples?

Many communities in the NT are physically extremely remote, being several hours drive from a significant population centre, and often cut off completely by road in the wet season. Connectivity is critical for access to emergency, health and other government services, as well as for the maintenance of family networks that are an essential feature of Aboriginal culture.

From a library perspective, the geographical challenges make it difficult to deliver physical library services such as significant print collections. Reliable and affordable access to the internet is critical to remote communities in access to services, access to information, education and employment opportunities.

Individual home internet access does not generally work in remote Aboriginal communities, with high levels of use of mobile devices. Affordable individual mobile internet plans and community wifi hotspots are correspondingly more important.

Q2. For those users already connected to an nbn network service, has the service met your expectations?

The NBN Services available in remote areas are very expensive, low bandwidth and since the enforcement of the Fair Usage Guarantee came into effect it is difficult to find a service provider that does not split provided data services over peak and off peak. Where these

the internet is accessed at a community hotspot half the expensive bandwidth is wasted as it is not available at the hours the facility is open. The bandwidth barely supports basic services such as email and banking and does not support services that provide support for learning, employment, or development of culture, local knowledge, language and tourism.

Q3. Having regard to the technical solution likely to be used in your area, do you have views on the adequacy of that solution in terms of meeting needs now and into the future?

The NBN services currently provided to remote areas of the NT are not adequate now and certainly will not be into the future.

Q8. How might new applications and services that utilise mobile networks for voice and data transform the way you live and work?

A major challenge in supporting library services in remote NT communities is in supporting staff. Training visits are expensive and infrequent and there is a strong need for connectivity that can deliver online training and support services through eg Webex and Skype.

Q9. What communications barriers have you experienced in expanding or operating your business or providing services, such as health or education? Have you been able to overcome these barriers and if so, how?

In some communities the barrier is one of infrastructure – lack of mobile services connectivity. Where internet access is available, bandwidth and data caps are nearly always an issue. For example, the NTL runs a program called Community Stories, which is a 'digital keeping place' for local community cultural and historical content – digitised photos, videos, documents etc. Content is created and digitised locally and added to the database, and other locally relevant content is 'repatriated' from the collections of other cultural institutions. In many cases this sits on a local computer, restricting access and making the collection highly vulnerable. A cloud-based version of this program is available and would make these collections vastly more accessible and safer, but the major challenge is the internet capacity to manage cloud-based services.

There are also major challenges in delivering digital library collections such as eBooks, online magazines, newspapers and journals, which are core public library services accessible across the rest of the country. In delivering library collections to remote areas in the NT, digital delivery is an obvious solution and would provide much larger and richer collections to remote communities – but this is not viable with current bandwidth.

There is also an ongoing issue about affordability of internet in remote communities. Citizens in urban areas generally have access to free wifi through libraries, and often also in commercial contexts in malls, cafes etc. Remote Aboriginal communities have some of the biggest affordability issues, but there is currently no stable ongoing way of funding free community internet access in these areas.

Q10. What communication functions (e.g. speed, mobility, reliability, data, etc) would best suit your needs, noting the limitations of each technology (e.g. mobile, wireless, satellite, fibre)?

The library sector in the NT has the need to be able to deliver a range of internet based services, including online content, videoconfering and online learning. This requires reliable, high speed access on commercial internet plans with high monthly download limits.

Chris Kelly, Chief Executive Officer, Goldfields Library Corporation

Q1. Do people in regional Australia believe their reliance on telecommunications differs from those in urban areas? How does it differ and can you provide examples?

Reliance on telecommunications in regional areas is ever increasing as government and business continue to shift services online. Often there is no longer a physical presence for a given agency in a regional area or often people are referred to online services.

Also the remoteness of a regional area requires adequate telecommunications to remain connected to the broader community. In many cases social networking has replaced the traditional methods of post and phone for remaining in contact with friends and families.

Q3. Having regard to the technical solution likely to be used in your area, do you have views on the adequacy of that solution in terms of meeting needs now and into the future?

Currently Telstra infrastructure is the only available resource in most of our communities. Even though other providers may be available they are still only reselling Telstra infrastructure. Telstra has been slow to upgrade capacity at exchanges for both backhaul to the Internet as well as ADSL ports available at exchanges. People are often rejected for connection or offered slow services such as ADSL1. The quality of the copper network in regional areas is often poor with many people often on a pair gain phone services which can't deliver ADSL. As the NBN wireless network is deployed remote users can often get an adequate service but it's those on the fringe of larger regional areas who miss out. They are too close to a regional centre to access wireless NBN but their number is too small for Telstra to invest in the required network upgrades.

Q4. Irrespective of the adequacy of your local access, are there issues with backhaul or long distance carriage that impacts on your use of telecommunications services?

There are often issues with backhaul in many of our areas. Telstra does not seem to upgrade backhaul until after it has reached capacity rather than as it approaches it.

Long distance carriage is what limits most of our areas to ADSL. Even when fibre is available the distance the fibre has to run and the limitations on backhaul puts the price of the service out of reach of the majority of individuals and organisations.

Q5. For users living in areas without mobile coverage, what priorities, other than specific locations, do you consider should be recognised in future efforts to improve coverage?

Extending coverage of mobile services improves access for everyone including visitors to a given area. Subsidized Satellite is still a viable option as long as data latency is kept a minimum.

Q8. How might new applications and services that utilise mobile networks for voice and data transform the way you live and work?

Mobile networks will never deliver the quality of service of a terrestrial connection but do allow for mobility and a cost effective option for delivery of service to remote areas. We already use mobile data services to provide a comparable level of service on our mobile library to a static branch.

Q9. What communications barriers have you experienced in expanding or operating your business or providing services, such as health or education? Have you been able to overcome these barriers and if so, how?

The main barrier has been cost. Colleges from metropolitan areas are able to invest in high bandwidth data connections for service delivery that are either not available or if available are too exorbitant in price. This can be the result of the site remoteness or lack of competition.

Q10. What communication functions (e.g. speed, mobility, reliability, data, etc) would best suit your needs, noting the limitations of each technology (e.g. mobile, wireless, satellite, fibre)?

The most critical issue is the guarantee of availability of the service. Currently only Fibre or ADSL can offer that level of reliability. Mobile networks in our area are congested, often to the point of been unusable. Satellite's latency is too high to be of practical use for many of our applications including cloud hosting of main database application.

Q11. Do we need to continue to guarantee the standard telephone service for all (or only some) consumers, and if so, to what extent?

Not if a reliable wireless network can be guaranteed in a given area.

Q13. What standards should apply to your services? How might they best be enforced?

Guaranteed availability of service. Financial penalties should apply to a provider that can't guarantee service.

Camille Cullinan, Manager Cultural Development and Libraries, Swan Hill Rural City Council

- There is no clearly apparent NBN rollout timeline on the website and no information is provided on when this service is expected to be available in either ours or other regions

when specific addresses are typed in so it is difficult to comment on how the rollout can best deliver for our region's customers.

- Infrastructure is critical to the rollout of NBN in our region due to the remoteness of many of our small agricultural communities and workers. Many of our population live in small remote towns across the region. Services within these communities are being withdrawn as general stores and schools close. One of the few services left for these communities is the Mobile Library. There is still one town where the Mobile Library cannot get connectivity to the internet which means even the library cannot provide internet service to this township. In other places to get connectivity the truck has to park in an exact spot, facing a particular direction. Sometimes being even only a couple of feet away from the correct spot means there is no connection available. Even when there is connection it is often slow and when the public are trying to access the wifi connection the mobile library's computers used to serve the public slow down so much it is almost impossible to check items out to customers or access the library's management system which relies on internet access for its operation. This has a negative impact on customer service as we have to decide whether to allow the public access to the internet or allow staff to serve customers wishing to borrow, renew or request items. The following is a report from our Mobile Library Driver in April this year when we looked into the issue of connectivity for our Mobile Library. "We have connectivity issues at the Tooleybuc School, in Berrillock, and in Nullawill. At Tooleybuc school and Berrillock we can connect sometimes and need to be in an exact position, not a meter either side. Sometimes even in the position we have no connectivity. At Nullawill no connection at all. The big one is in Robinvale when patrons access the wifi it slows our system almost to a standstill. One transaction sometimes up to a 30/45 second wait. This needs to be a priority."
- The library is an important place for people to get access to the internet, especially in remote areas where people have limited income and internet access. As the internet becomes even more crucial to daily living with more government departments and businesses making services and documents only available through the internet it is important that places such as the public library can continue to provide equitable access to everyone.
- It is critical that libraries have access to the NBN to ensure everyone has equitable access to the internet services of the future. There are many families, especially in regional areas, who are in the low socioeconomic demographics and many refugees who do not have the internet at home to still have access to the broader range of things that NBN will allow. In some regional areas the library is the only place providing internet access.
- Smaller library services do not have large amounts of funding so it is difficult to upgrade or keep up with constantly changing and developing technology. Support is needed for smaller library services to install the equipment or infrastructure required to allow full utilisation of the capabilities of the NBN.

APPENDIX 2 – Submission from the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) to the Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network, 2009

Joint submission

From Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) on behalf of:

- Public Libraries Australia (PLA)
- ACT Library & Information Service
- Public Libraries NSW - Country (PLC)
- Public Libraries NSW - Metropolitan Association (PLM)
- Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA)
- Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN)
- Public Libraries South Australia (PLSA)
- Local Government Librarians' Association of Western Australia (LocLib)

Introduction

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the state public library associations welcome the opportunity to comment on the Senate Select Committee's inquiry into 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.

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.

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 2004]
- 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).

Implications of the NBN

1. Importance of information in economic development

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.

2. Social capital and inclusion

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 recently published 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 which 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.

3. 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.

4. Extent of demand for currently available broadband services

ALIA has conducted four surveys into internet access in public libraries and the 2008 survey showed that:

- increasing and improving access to the internet remains a priority for public libraries
- the number of public access internet terminals in responding public libraries has more than doubled since the 2005 survey
- an estimated 147,474 users access the internet each week in the responding libraries – an increase of 91% over the 2005 users
- public demand and expectations for increased number of internet terminals in public libraries continues to grow.

Public libraries continue to need faster internet connections and ever greater amounts of data in order to meet community needs.

The just published 2008 public library statistics for New South Wales shows internet hours used in libraries are up to 41% over the previous year.

5. Community expectations for internet assistance

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 – eg. the Centrelink fax machine is housed in the library at Hillston NSW. 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. Ongoing funding and resources to train library staff in these areas is required so that they are able to meet users' expectations.

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."

6. Improving access to government services and publications

ALIA recommends that the NBN recognise the role of public libraries 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 NBN 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. A recent 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.

7. Availability of quality online resources

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.

8. Training and support

As an integral part of the National Broadband Network, an appropriate program must be developed to support user education and training. 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.

9. Conclusion

We recommend:

- 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 2004]
 - provision of access to e-government services and publications.
- 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
- the development by government agencies of effective actions to ensure that the Australian public has enduring access to electronic government publications

- the establishment of a new federally-funded model to provide Australians with equitable access to quality online resources in health, news and current affairs and encyclopaedias at a competitive price
- the development of an appropriate program with continuing funding to support internet education and skills training for users.

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

July 2009

APPENDIX 3 – DIGITAL HUB CASE STUDIES

DIGITAL HUBS EXAMPLES

Townsville, QLD, and Willunga, SA, were brought closer together for an hour in May 2013 thanks to the National Broadband Network, for a wine tasting with a difference. At the Willunga Digital Hub, Winemaker Colin Kay of Kay Brothers Amery Vineyards shared his knowledge and expertise via high-speed NBN video link, while 2,600kms away in Townsville's Thuringowa library, around 20 wine enthusiasts tasted the fruits of Colin's labour.

The City of Onkaparinga's Andrew Berney, Team Leader Aldinga and Willunga libraries, said this the virtual winetasting was an Australian NBN first. 'This was certainly a very enjoyable way to test the capabilities of the NBN especially for those in Townsville tasting the wines but it also demonstrates the enormous potential for the NBN is immense, not just for unique events like this, but more broadly for a huge range of education and information sharing opportunities with people across the country.'

'It's exciting to think we can now connect with people around Australia with such speed and connection quality, enjoying a richer communication experience where we can see each other and show exactly what we're talking about,' he said.

During the virtual wine tasting event, Colin spoke about the history of the Kay Brothers winery established in 1891, explained how wines are aged, how long various varieties can be cellared and how to conduct a wine tasting, starting with assessing a wine's colour and aroma. Guests in Townsville were able to speak with Colin, ask questions and taste the wines with him, quickly gaining an appreciation for his passion for winemaking and the quality of his products.

Auburn Library, NSW: In May this year we entered into a joint project with Fizzics Education, Blacktown Library and Hurstville Library. Fizzics Education believes that this was the first program of its kind in Australia. Each week, participants at each of the three libraries would log into educator at Fizzics for an introduction to a science concept, each location would then perform an experiment based on that concept before coming back to discuss the results.

We have begun putting on Government Agency talks to share via video conference with library users in other areas, which started with the Art Gallery of NSW, and also included a talk on Wills by NSW Trustee and Guardian and a talk by the ATO on preparing a personal income tax return. The Department Of Family and Community Services will provide a talk on disability services to coincide with Carers Week, followed by Diabetes Australia, the RSPCA and Alzheimer's Australia.

City of Darwin, NT: Our latest exciting project in the hub is the Digital Enterprise Project, a collaboration with University SA, Corrugated Youth Iron, a premier youth arts organisation in the Top End, AutismNT and the Digital Hub. It started in August this year and will continue until December 2015. The project deploys a range of leading technology-enhanced methods for working with young people who have Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The project involves the provision of mentoring sessions each week for participants in the project (two cohorts of

young people aged 10-15 years and two cohorts aged 16-20 years). The aim of this program is to help a specific cohort become more engaged and productive in the community and participate in an innovative program of learning and engagement.

WHEN THE FUNDING ENDS

Council here, since I last described our situation to you, has decided to offer use of the otherwise moribund Digital Hub room to a group of local volunteers. They now call the room the *Armidale Digital Learning Centre*, and open it from 10am to 4pm on Mondays and Tuesdays. I believe that Council also uses the room for occasional internal staff training sessions.

I think the comparison with our Library opening hours (10am-6pm five weekdays and 10am-1pm Saturday) bears a mention – an opportunity diluted if not entirely lost, by not situating the Digital Hub in the Library itself.