



Submission in response to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry into ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout

1 February, 2019

1. About us

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) 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.

Our members include school, academic, TAFE, special (government, law, corporate, health), State and Territory libraries, and, through the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance, we represent the nation's 1 600 public libraries.

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 Libraries Tasmania.

Australia's public library network

Australia has more than 1 600 central, branch and mobile libraries, with 9.3 million registered members and more than 113 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.

While book borrowing remains a core service, libraries have an increasing part to play in child and family community services, with baby rhyme-time and story-time and STEM activities seen as playing a crucial role in early childhood learning, language and literacy development.

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.

2. Libraries and ParentsNext

The location of public libraries and the services described above makes our library network an appealing opportunity for ParentsNext providers, however we have found that library services have been used by ParentsNext providers without contacting the libraries involved. As a result, we wrote the following letter to the Department of Jobs and Small Business on 13 November, 2018:

“An article in *The Guardian* on 6 November, ‘Single parents forced to attend storytime or lose Centrelink payment’, alerted us to the unwitting involvement of public libraries in the ParentsNext program. We have heard from several public libraries in NSW and Queensland that ParentsNext providers have been using public libraries as meeting points with clients (without alerting the library manager) and have sought the staff’s assistance in identifying parents and children attending storytimes and other children’s activities.

This is in breach of state legislation. The NSW Library Act 2018 states:

Clause 14 Proper use of a library

A person must not, without the consent of the governing body for the library, use a library for a purpose other than reading, consulting or borrowing the library material of the library or for any other library service or information service.

It also shows a lack of understanding and respect for the role of public libraries in society.

Public libraries are funded primarily by local government. They should not be used for the delivery of federal government programs without advance consultation and explicit agreement from the library and local council.

Libraries are safe, welcoming community spaces. People are free to read, study, use the internet and participate in activities, without needing to tell anyone what they are doing. Freedom of expression is at the heart of librarianship and using storytime attendance as a requirement for Centrelink payments is contrary to the ethos of libraries nationally and internationally.

On behalf of ALIA and our Australian Public Library Alliance¹, we are writing to request that your Department contact ParentsNext providers and require them to consult with library managers before making use of library facilities and programs.”

The Department acted promptly and we received a letter on 22 January advising us that:

“The department has written to CEOs of all ParentsNext providers to remind them of the need to establish a relationship with services such as libraries before referring

¹ <https://www.alia.org.au/node/184/public-libraries>

participants. We also reminded them that their staff should not ask libraries to record and report the attendance of parents and children."

3. Inquiry terms of reference

Given our experience during the trial phase of ParentsNext, our response is related to (b)(vi) and the effectiveness of communication between the Department, ParentsNext providers, and third parties, such as libraries.

We ask the committee to consider the role of third parties and the need for advance consultation at a national and local level, as appropriate.

4. Summary

ALIA welcomes the Committee's review of ParentsNext and this opportunity to address the issues of advance consultation and transparency between ParentsNext providers and third party organisations.

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