



ALIA submission in response to the WA Inquiry into Local Government

13 September 2019

1. About us

1.1 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.

1.2 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.

1.3 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

The contribution of local government to public library funding varies by state. For example, the percentage of local to state government funding in South Australia is 75% to 25%, while in Western Australia it is 83% to 17%. Over time, the percentage contribution of state governments has decreased and local governments have stepped in to fill the gap, recognising the essential and valued services libraries provide to their communities.

Over the last 20 years, the role of public libraries has seen significant change. While books and reading are still at the heart of the service, 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.

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.

2. Introduction

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the WA Inquiry into Local Government. Our response relates to (2b) and (2e) of the terms of reference: *the scope of activities of Local Governments and the funding of Local Governments*.

3. The scope of activities of Local Governments

Public libraries across Australia are transforming their facilities, programs, services, technologies and staff skills to meet the changing needs of our communities. The 242 public library service points in WA are no exception:

- There has been impressive investment by local government in new and refurbished buildings, notably City of Perth and City of Cockburn, recipients of Australian and international library design awards.
- The State Library of WA has developed a world leading, internationally award-winning, library-based early literacy program in Better Beginnings – also an excellent example of a Public-Private Partnership, with Rio Tinto providing valuable support.
- In the 2016-2017 annual reporting statistics for public libraries nationally², WA is seen to spend \$59.19 per capita on its public libraries. WA public libraries have 37% of the population as registered or active members and experience nearly 10.5 million physical visits each year, with 4.3 million website visits.

In Community Scorecards and other satisfaction measures, WA public libraries regularly appear in the 'higher performance' area of the matrix, or as one of the top ranked services.

In 2018, the WA Public Library Working Group produced a new WA public libraries strategy³ with consideration of WALGA's Vision 2025⁴.

² https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/aust_pub_lib_stats_report_2016-17_final_8.pdf

³ https://www.slwa.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/WA_Public_Libraries_Strategy.pdf

We welcomed the inclusion of the adoption of the ALIA *Guidelines, Standards and Outcome Measures for Australian Public Libraries* (2016) as one of the priorities in the new strategy; the opportunity to develop new legislation reflecting the contemporary environment; greater flexibility in the allocation of state government funding; better tailored support for regional and remote libraries; investigation into a one library card system across the state, and a marketing campaign to promote the value of public libraries and encourage even more people to take advantage of the collections, programs and services available in their community.

4. The funding of local governments

4.1 Sustainability of current library support

The State Library of WA provides a floating collection of books and other resources, which enables metro, regional and remote libraries to provide their communities with a contemporary library service and regularly refreshed content.

The State Library contributes to public library strategy development at the state and national level; offers professional development for public library staff, as well as providing specific training and resources in the early literacy arena through Better Beginnings.

These services rely on adequate, consistent funding from state government. Reductions in State Library of WA funding over the last 10 years have inevitably had a detrimental effect on the level of support available to public libraries across the state and we are concerned about the future security of this important element of local government library service funding.

4.2 Funding for new initiatives

The WA Public Libraries Strategy includes the following priorities:

2.2 Introduce a system for the allocation of annual State Government funding. Funds are not limited to the purchase of physical library stock; portions can be allocated for technological infrastructure, implementation of innovative programming, administration or other priorities.

2.4 Investigate ways in which to foster innovation and experimentation in public libraries through the introduction of a competitive innovation grants system, using the available annual State Government funding allocation.

The approach is to make funding at the current level more flexible in its application. However, for the strategy to be effective, this funding needs to be *in addition* to the current expenditure on print, electronic resources, training and other services, which is made available through the State Library of WA (4.1).

⁴ <https://walga.asn.au/getattachment/Policy-Advice-and-Advocacy/Community-Development/Arts-and-Culture/Public-Libraries/Public-Library-Services-in-2025-Research-and-Consultation-Findings-25-06-2015.pdf.aspx>

At the very least, the current investment needs to be protected by a return to annual CPI and population based adjustments.

The new public library strategy proposes an investigation into a move to a single library card, something which is now a reality for South Australia and the Northern Territory (as well as ACT and Tasmania, where there is only one library service). While there are operational difficulties to overcome, the benefits for users are indisputable. This investigation and any resulting implementation will need both state and local government funding to make it a reality.

5. Conclusion

ALIA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry into Local Government in WA.

We have two concerns. One is for ongoing and sustainable funding of resources and services through the State Library of WA. The second is for the significant *additional* investment in innovative new approaches which is needed in order to maintain a successful public library network across the state. This new funding cannot come exclusively from local government and there will need to be a substantial contribution from the state government.

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