Submission in response to the Australia Council for the Arts re-imagine discussion paper
13 October 2020

1. About us

Australian Library and Information Association

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. ALIA is the peak body for public, school, university, TAFE and special libraries. We work closely with the Council of Australian University Librarians and National and State Libraries Australia.

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance

The Australian Public Library Alliance is part of ALIA and represents the interests of the nation's 1500 public libraries. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, WiFi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, these libraries are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource.

- More than 9 million registered users in 2018 and more than 111 million visits to libraries, 51 million visits to library websites.
- More than 250,000 programs eg storytime, Be Connected, attracted over 7 million attendees.
- Per capita annual cost of $48.99, funded by councils, state and territory governments.[1]

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in the digital space, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind, particularly in terms of the ability to access government information.

2. Libraries in the time of COVID

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, libraries moved their services online.

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[1] https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-aus-public-library-stats-2017-18.pdf

School libraries made essential curriculum materials available to pupils studying remotely. Public libraries began livestreaming storytime sessions for young children, to support families in lockdown, and many rang their most vulnerable users to check on their wellbeing and help satisfy their reading needs through home delivery. National, state and territory libraries ramped up their digitisation programs to make new content available to humanities researchers.

On 28 May, ALIA released early results from a nationwide survey, which showed that after book borrowing, social interaction was the biggest loss felt by the community during the COVID-19 lockdown of public libraries. We found that while 87% of respondents missed being able to borrow print books (ebooks remained available 24/7), 44% missed having expert, friendly help from library staff; 40% missed being around other people; 36% missed participating in events and activities for adults, and 20% missed taking part in storytimes with other families (although many libraries offered pre-recorded and livestreamed virtual storytimes).

Libraries outside Victoria have reopened, but some are still limited to 'click and collect' services; others are open for time-limited browsing; many have paused their face-to-face programs, although outdoor spaces are being used to meet social distancing requirements.

3. Libraries, arts and culture

At their core, libraries are performance spaces for book people. They are where audiences gather to share their love of reading; to listen to authors explaining their work; to participate in reading adventures; to experience the sense of wellbeing from escaping into stories; to gain inspiration and content for their own contribution to the world of literature.

Libraries buy books – millions of dollars-worth of books and ebooks every year. They promote books and authors, connecting writers with readers. They help build every new generation of readers by supporting literacy at all ages. Libraries make Australian books accessible to readers today and they preserve these works for future generations.

But that's not all. In recent times, libraries have expanded into the broader arts and culture mix. We have introduced maker spaces, with media labs, music studios, 3D printers and other devices bringing professional quality systems, techniques and ideas within the reach of the whole community. Our new library buildings feature theatre, performance and exhibition areas, inside and outside. Programs have been redesigned to encourage individual and co-creation, so that any person, of any age, can engage in creative practice through their local library.

The State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria published *Creative Communities The cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries* in 2014[2]. In its overview, the report states:

'The library has become a place that actively fosters and showcases creativity, while also providing access to knowledge, ideas and discussion. These wide ranging activities bring

[2] https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Creative-communities-summary-report.pdf

varied ages and backgrounds together in the one place, creating a key public destination for diverse groups to meet.

'Library activities are cultural in both senses of the word: cultural in that they animate community life, and cultural in their dedication to the arts, books and ideas. Victorian public libraries are culture-makers and culturalconnectors – they spark creativity, inspiration, social understanding and interaction.'

4. Re-imagine response

We took the three Re-imagine questions and made them specific to libraries.

4.1 How will libraries be inclusive of all Australians

Libraries are, and will remain, free at the point of use. They are respectful of the communities they serve. They provide safe, non-judgmental spaces. They reach out to users and non-users.

We are putting diversity and inclusion front and centre of our professional agenda.

- Cultural competency training is being rolled out across our national and state libraries to help staff rethink collections and services through a First Nations lens.
- The thinking behind decolonisation of our libraries and cultural institutions not only increases the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but also increases the opportunity of people from previously marginalised groups – LGBTQI, those living with disability – to recognise themselves in our collections and exhibitions.
- We embrace the principles of 'inclusivity by design', evidenced by our active participation in the Australian Inclusive Publishing Initiative[3].
- Employers are looking at new approaches to recruitment and training, to improve the diversity of our library workforce.

Access to information and technology, two key features of library services, are human rights and enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

4.2 How will libraries play a significant role in the nation's recovery?

Post Covid-19, libraries are well positioned to actively support and facilitate workforce development and training.

- Public libraries can work with higher education and government agencies to help people gain the skills and confidence they need to return to the workforce, through guided access to online and real world training.

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[3] https://aipi.com.au/

- Public libraries provide service access points for federal government workforce services, as well as resources for job seekers.

Libraries will continue to provide free access to resources, programs and services post-pandemic. We will provide access to objective, reliable sources of information to combat misinformation and, as a founder member of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance[4], promote media literacy for all Australians.

Libraries will also contribute to recovery by providing platforms for people to tell their COVID stories, and our collecting institutions will hold the memory of our contemporary experience for future research.

There is the opportunity for libraries to be a focal point in communities, helping to reconnect artists with audiences. For example, singers, actors, writers and artists could come together to create an inspirational week of song, theatre, readings and community productions, hosted by some of our capital city and regional libraries. This would help inject energy into the streets and provide a positive vibe to help carry people through this next phase of COVID recovery.

4.3 How will libraries weather future disruptions?

Libraries have been highly agile, adapting and embracing new technologies, delivering online forums and making electronic resources widely available. As a sector, libraries have proved to be proactive and exceptionally resilient throughout the pandemic.

- We have taken a careful and considered approach to closing and reopening our physical spaces.
- We have introduced special measures to provide a clean, hygienic environment for staff and users; to quarantine and sanitise materials, and to enforce social distancing.
- We have proactively promoted existing online services and, where possible, we have adapted delivery models and moved our other services online.
- We have created new digital services and delivery mechanisms to make it easier for people to access what they need.
- We have maintained regular communication with our user groups and helped create and sustain a sense of community through the crisis.
- We have collaborated as a sector, sharing innovative ideas and best practice locally, nationally and internationally.
- We have monitored and reported these moves in order to inform our response to future events.

These actions and learnings will see us better prepared for any future disruptions, but in order to fulfil the potential of smart, hybrid (print and digital) libraries, we need to address the issues surrounding electronic resources. During the COVID-19 lockdown, electronic resources such as ebooks, eaudiobooks, online learning programs and databases were the only contact-free materials libraries could provide. Loans of ebooks were already on a growth trajectory in

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[4] https://medialiteracy.org.au/

public libraries but soared during March and April. Use of other resources in libraries, such as Ancestry.Com for family history researchers, increased exponentially.

> *Since the 23 March shutdown, the State Library of NSW has enjoyed 703,611 website visits (20% increase) and 1,500 ebooks have been downloaded (200% increase). NSW public libraries have collectively processed over 800,000 eloans (300% increase) and enjoyed over one million website visits (100% increase).[5]*

Coming out of COVID-19, public and school libraries in particular need to find an affordable way of purchasing ebooks, which continues to reward creators and publishers but does not take unreasonable advantage of market supply limitations. For ebooks, libraries seek:

- Fair pricing – popular fiction titles can cost libraries several times the retail price
- Access to the latest releases (some publishers have embargo periods for libraries)
- Simple purchasing models (ebook contract models are overly complex and do not reflect the difference between ebooks and print and the positive benefits which can be derived from the digital format)
- Remote access for products such as Australian Standards
- Copyright provisions to be maintained in electronic formats rather than library exceptions being over-ridden by contract terms.

A 2019 survey of public libraries highlighted five priorities for improved access to ebooks:

1. Wider range of content (including Australian books and authors)
2. Better lending model conditions
3. Improved cost per use
4. Improved timeliness of release to libraries
5. Improved reporting.

4. In conclusion

The library brand is strong and trusted. Our networks, both digital and physical, are well established and efficient. Our workforces are adaptable and innovative. We have a deep and meaningful connection with our communities. We have books and literature at our core, but we have expanded into support for other art forms. These are some of the assets we bring to the current situation and a nation emerging from the impact of a devastating global pandemic.

We congratulate the Australia Council on initiating this discussion. We are keen to be part of it and look forward to our continuing participation.

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[5] Percentage increases are compared to the same reporting period in 2019 (23 March to 15 May)