



ALIA Public Libraries Summit 2009

16 July 2009 Canberra

Australian
Library and
Information
Association

ALIA Public Libraries Summit Summary

OPENING AND WELCOME

Senator The Hon Ursula Stephens

Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and for the Voluntary Sector

'Libraries have a rare and privileged position in the nation's heart,' said Senator Ursula Stephens, in her opening address to the ALIA Public Libraries Summit, on Thursday 16 July, in Canberra.

She explained that libraries had been very close to her own heart for many years, not only as a library user herself, but also in her various political roles, in adult education and learning, and as Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion.

Senator Stephens talked about public libraries as 'hubs of community life', neutral spaces for learning, access to the internet and e-learning. She said, 'They will remain a vital part of the future ... a neutral third place, with the capacity to connect people with the outside world.'

She confirmed, 'ALIA has a huge role in all of this', describing Love Libraries Day and National Simultaneous Storytime as clever initiatives, and the Summer Reading Club as 'a valuable way of drawing in young people.'

The goal of her department is to ensure that all Australians have the opportunity to learn, work, engage with their community and have a voice. Its priorities are jobless families, children at risk of long term disadvantage and locational disadvantage – postcodes that denote predictable pockets of disadvantage. 'Conceptually, we have a massive challenge to create the next intelligent, engaged, exciting, creative generation,' she said. 'And we need to make libraries an even greater force for social inclusion.'

Public libraries have the opportunity to participate in three specific ways:

1. In the national compact, creating a new relationship between government and the third sector – not-for-profit organisations, several of which were represented at the Summit.
2. In reform of the third sector – and Senator Stephens referred to ALIA's recent submission to the Productivity Commission.

3. In a new third sector leadership body and structure.

Jan Fullerton

Director-General, National Library of Australia

In her brief welcome speech, Jan Fullerton, Director-General of the National Library of Australia, wasted no time in stating her case. She reminded delegates that the National Library is the only library funded by the Federal Government, serving the public.

She made the point that 'public libraries are a critical part of the country's infrastructure, but have not been sufficiently recognised as such' and strongly recommended delegates to consider the funding issue as a key part of the debate.

PRESENTATIONS

Jan Richards

ALIA President

ALIA President Jan Richards announced:

- The development of new National Standards for public libraries
- The official national launch of the Public Library Ambassador campaign
- ALIA's invitation to appear at the National Broadband Network public hearing next week
- The publication of the *Little book of public libraries*
- ALIA's new 12-month contract to develop Living Libraries Australia's strategy, website and the associated network.

She described the opportunities for public libraries to work closely together on several big ideas, beginning with a united response to challenges at a national level.

In the Q and A session that followed her presentation, a delegate asked what the impediments might be. Jan Richards replied that the main one was funding, and the variety of different funding arrangements that were in place around the country. 'We have engagement at the state level, but at a national level, we need the opportunity to have the dialogue with the Federal Government.'

Robert Knight, Chairman of the Public Libraries Consultative Committee, took issue with the number of library associations. He said, 'A very clear impediment is that we have a *schmizzle* of/so many library associations, not able to work well together. We have the opportunity in this forum to aggregate our capacity, to *grab*/take that national funding we so desperately need.'

The Hon John Cain, President of the Library Board of Victoria, asked about the opportunity to collaborate with non-traditional partners, such as soccer clubs and choirs. Jan Richards replied that public libraries were keen to collaborate with any organisation that had something to offer. 'It's why Living Libraries is such a great win,' she said.

Councillor Graham Smith, Chairperson of Public Libraries NSW – Country, added, 'One of the major impediments is that many government and non-government organisations direct their clients to the public library, but they do not provide the funding for the provision of that public library service. Public libraries are the service desk for so many of our government and commercial organisations and recognition of that role is vital.'

Geoff Stempel, Deputy Chair of the Public Library Association, stepped in at the last moment for PLA Chair Sylvia Marshall, to talk about public libraries and children. He talked about passionate library people delivering reading programs on shoestring budgets and with few resources.

His recommendation for future success was based on 'the power of partnerships, expertise and funding, and working closely with all three levels of government.'

Roxanne Missingham

Parliamentary Librarian and Chair of Electronic Resources Australia

ERA Chair Roxanne Missingham quoted figures from a new report, which revealed that 36% of Australians did not have access to the internet at home, and 76% did not have broadband access. In fact, in relation to OECD countries, Australia came only 16th in terms of broadband access. 'It's not only about whether the line is there, it's also about whether it is affordable,' she told delegates.

Moving on the equitable access to quality online information, she said, 'We need to explore a national purchasing model. There is no targeted government strategy and no national funding basis.'

Frank McGuire

Pioneer of the Hume Global Learning Village

'Libraries are run by big-hearted people,' said Frank McGuire, the entrepreneur behind Hume Global Learning Village, in Victoria. He ascribed the success of the Hume initiative to this generosity on the part of library staff; the partnerships that were formed with three tiers of government, businesses, community, not-for-profit and philanthropic organisations, and making a case for funding based on 'value-for-spend'.

In just six years, 50% of the population served by Hume Global Learning Village have become members of the community hub.

Regina Sutton

***State Librarian and Chief Executive, State Library of NSW
Chair, National and State Libraries Australasia***

There were some surprising figures from Regina Sutton, Chief Executive of the State Library of NSW, about the ageing population.

- One in eight Australians is currently aged 65 and over, and by the end of the century, this will be one in four
- By 2022, there will be four million people over 65
- The number aged 85-plus, will increase five fold over the next 47 years
- By 2026, one in four of those over 80 will be from CALD backgrounds

Drawing on research that shows people over 65 visit public libraries more frequently and read more, thus placing greater demands on the service, she asked, 'Can we rely on services remaining free?'

She described librarians as 'life coaches for the digital age' and gave examples of the way public libraries serve their communities by providing government and health information in plain language.

She called for support from the Federal Government for:

- Low cost, high speed broadband access in every public library
- Funding for internet tutorial programs for seniors
- Nationwide access to health information databases via public libraries
- Partnerships with other agencies delivering services to communities.

WORKSHOPS

1. Children, early reading and a literate Australia

Julie Caddy, President of the Local Government Librarians' Association of Western Australia, said her group had reached the conclusion that the main aim of a national framework should be to reframe public libraries for the 21st century and put them higher on the public agenda.

They called for a National Year of Reading in 2010/2011, based around a national, federally-funded Books from Birth program, delivered in partnership with other agencies and organisations eg the new, federally-funded children's TV channel.

It could have a wider literacy focus, including numeracy and taking families into the digital age, and it could carry through early childhood to the teenage years.

The team of Julie Caddy, Frank McGuire, Janice Nitschke, Jan Richards, Regina Sutton and Margaret Allen, volunteered to take this idea forward as a self-appointed committee.

2. Encouraging the digital economy and digital citizenship

David West, President of Queensland Public Libraries Association, said that, assuming the National Broadband Network could be delivered, it was a question of content and the quality of content. His group recommended the creation of a baseline of what it means to be a digital citizen, and the use of this to define a national public library standard.

He explained that the current standards relate to access, not content, but if they moved into content, it would enable public libraries to go back to council IT departments to sort out blockages (for example clients being able to open pdf documents, where currently these are blocked by local government internet security rules).

3. Social inclusion and community partnerships

John Murrell, President of Public Libraries Victoria Network, said, 'We need a statement nationally on the roles of each level of government providing core public library services. One model of service delivery will not fit all Australia.

'There needs to be a discussion around the COAG level, but libraries are only one of a hundred organisations, so we must think about how we argue our case.'

He talked about the importance of developing sustainable programs, not ones with just 12 months' funding, and the need for sufficient space and facilities. He also mentioned government's interest in expanding the use of school facilities, but 'we didn't feel that this was the position with public libraries', as they were already open for longer hours and serving the broader spread of society.

'Public library services are core to a socially inclusive community in Australia ... Libraries could be a mechanism to provide the advantage to address the disadvantage – we could reduce the level of disadvantage.'

He concluded by saying that we should go back to old government reports and their recommendations and use these to challenge Federal Government for more funding in order to deliver the kind of programs that would meet these needs.

4. Health and ageing

Debra Rosenfeldt, Manager Public Libraries, State Library of Victoria, described the plethora of information and the need for public libraries to act as the conduit to reliable information. There was discussion in the group about

linking through to other government interests eg the forthcoming women's health policy.

Public libraries could be forums for awareness campaigns eg ovarian cancer, prostate cancer, diabetes. Information could be provided through print, electronically, and with federally-funded speakers on various topics touring libraries.

There was a need for federal funding for health databases through ERA – and it wasn't just about physical health, it was also about emotional and psychological well-being.

The ageing population meant more older people using libraries as a social space, for the computers and collections. 'We need to create the kind of spaces they feel comfortable in, maybe we will need bigger libraries and retro fitting.'

The group suggested a small piece of national research into how the demands on public libraries have changed as a result of other government departments sending clients their way. This could result in a simple series of statements for government that sells the message eg 'clever country = clever libraries'.

A narrative around public libraries 20 years ago, today, and 20 years into the future could provide a compelling case for government investment eg in more funding for skills development.

'Collections don't provide an adequate range of material for people from CALD backgrounds and there is a need for some form of national collaboration, with ALIA to facilitate this.'

5. National framework

ALIA president Jan Richards rounded off the day by presenting back her group's work on a national framework for public libraries. She talked about the need for a shared vision and national goals, specifically to do with:

- Broadband access, in terms of content and training
- Innovation
- Social inclusion
- Education

The group concluded that there should be one lead agency, one voice speaking on behalf of public libraries to government, and that any programs developed in conjunction with government and other partners had to be valuable to both parties (public libraries as well as the other organisations).

The group recommended a small piece of research to audit the current federal spending on federal projects delivered through public libraries.