



DEVELOPING A VISION AND NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

September 2009

A collaborative response,
led by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA),
in partnership with Public Libraries Australia (PLA),
Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA),
National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA),
and the state and territory based public library associations

<http://www.alia.org.au/summit09/>

Background

Discussions prior to and during the ALIA Public Libraries Summit, held at the National Library in Canberra on 16 July 2009, clearly demonstrated the desire among public library managers and practitioners for a national vision and framework for public libraries. <http://www.alia.org.au/summit09/>

Friends of Libraries Australia made a powerful case for the need for a strategic framework in its paper *'Investing in Australia's future through its public library system – why, who, how'* published in January 2008, and in its 2009 Summit submission, Public Libraries Australia put forward a strong argument for a national public library service delivery model.

There is no doubt that individual library services and, indeed, branches, should develop the services that best suit their community. It is a fact that public library management and funding practices vary between states and territories.

Despite the resulting broad definition of a public library service, we all recognise the weakness in continuing to present public libraries as fragmented and incapable of speaking with one voice.

While funding may come from local and state or territory governments, public libraries must have a place at the Federal Government table. We have so much to contribute to government priorities – social inclusion, community partnerships, fairness and equitable access, support for working families, health, safety, well-being, life-long learning and the digital economy.

Objectives

The aim of a shared vision and national framework is to provide the Federal Government with proof that public libraries, although managed locally, are able to speak with one voice at a national level and can be invited to take a seat at the table.

We need to ensure that politicians and ministers at the highest level have a clear understanding of how public libraries currently contribute to government priorities, and provide a well-structured, considered and itemised proposal for investment in national programs, which will enable public libraries to increase their contribution to these government priority areas.

One of the workshop groups at the Summit said, '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.'

Process

ALIA has already begun work on the national framework and has produced a project plan to guide the process:

	Activity/output
August Research and planning	Project plan prepared (w/c 24/8/09) Review of Summit submissions, presentations and workshop papers
August – October Draft vision and strategy	Draft vision and strategy prepared, based on Summit submissions, presentations and workshops
October – December Consultation	Draft vision and strategy circulated for comment; PLA conference in Townsville (11/10/09); feedback used to refine content
January – April Mapping provision	Research and map existing provision around priority areas eg health and ageing, services for children
May – June Submission to government	Produce a proposed national framework and action plan for public libraries, signed by each of the state and territory public library services

This document represents stage two, the draft vision and strategy.

Considerations

The draft ideas which follow are based on discussions and feedback from the ALIA Public Libraries Summit 2009; papers submitted by the key Australian public library organisations in advance of the Summit, and public library vision and strategy work carried out in other parts of the world.

Vision

Our draft vision, for comment and further development:

‘Australia’s public libraries, united behind common goals and ambitions, sharing best practice, contributing to strong communities, valued by people and government, continuing to provide universal free access to information, knowledge and ideas, and confirming the importance of their role for future generations.’

Elements of the vision

The characteristics of public libraries we feel it is important to include are:

- **United**

Public libraries are connected in formal and informal ways, not only within states and territories, but also nationally. Although it may not be immediately obvious, public libraries are part a cohesive whole.

‘United’ represents our desire for a new level of interstate cooperation.

- **Common goals and ambitions**

Not only are we connected, there is also a commonality of thought. We are all pulling in the same general direction. Our services may differ, but the desired outcomes are the same. Where one library may focus on after-school clubs and another on silver surfing, the desired goal of providing the community with life-long learning opportunities is shared.

‘Common goals and ambitions’ means agreement on a set of priority outcomes and the development of national programs that can be applied and shaped according to local need.

- **Sharing best practice**

We don’t duplicate effort. We communicate with each other and share our experiences, which makes us faster and more effective. And we don’t only share best practice amongst ourselves. As early adopters of new technology, libraries are well-placed to lead the way for other government agencies.

- **Strong communities**

Public libraries’ role in social inclusion has been articulated, for example in the State Library of Victoria’s *Libraries Building Communities* reports, and acknowledged by the Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion, Senator Ursula Stephens, at the ALIA Public Libraries Summit in 2009.

- **Valued by people**

In order to be valued, public libraries must be delivering products and services appropriate to the communities they serve in a way that appeals to library users and is admired by non-users.

- **Valued by governments**

Some politicians appreciate the opportunities within the public library service to further government agenda in many different ways, but most politicians have still to discover the potential for libraries in terms of social inclusion, e-government, literacy, health and so on. It is also important for them to realise that libraries not only contribute to their priorities, but also do so efficiently and effectively.

- **Universal free access**

This refers to the essential investment required not only in physical collections, but also in online databases and high speed broadband access to the internet.

- **Future generations**

We need to manage change so that public libraries remain relevant and we continue to build a sustainable public library network, in terms of the infrastructure, funding, buildings, collections, equipment, staff and future leaders.

QUESTIONS

- Does this draft statement describe your vision for public libraries in Australia?
- If not, what would you omit or what else would you include?
- It is a lengthy statement. Is there an opportunity to shorten it?

National framework

1. Forum to enable the collaborative development of a national framework

ALIA is in the unique position of representing public library professionals in all states and territories and having a proven track record of developing and implementing activities across the entire public library network eg National Simultaneous Storytime. But this is not a task for one organisation operating alone. The development of a national framework needs to encompass the views and comments of all the associations involved with Australian public libraries.

QUESTIONS

- What form might this forum take?
- Who would be involved?
- How do you see it being created and managed?

2. Consensus on the priority areas for public libraries in relation to the political agenda

This process began with the call for submissions for the ALIA Public Library Summit. The subjects and content highlighted the areas to which public library organisations felt it was important to draw governments' attention.

The topics were:

- Social inclusion and community engagement
- Children, early learning and a literate Australia
- Encouraging the digital economy and digital citizenship
- Health and ageing.

Presentations at the Summit focused on these topics and the afternoon workshops enabled delegates to debate what should be included under each heading.

Social inclusion and community engagement	'Libraries could be a mechanism to provide the advantage to address the disadvantage in our society'
Children, early learning and a literate Australia	National Year of Reading based around a national, federally-funded books from birth program
Encouraging the digital economy and digital citizenship	Create a baseline understanding of what it means to be a digital citizen and use this to define a national public library standard
Health and ageing	Public libraries as channels for awareness campaigns; federal-funding for health databases; creating library spaces in which older people feel comfortable

Public libraries' contributions in these areas will be researched and documented, supporting the business case for federal funding of national programs.

In addition, the Summit delegates suggested research into how the demands on public libraries have changed as a result of other government departments sending clients their way; an audit of the current federal spending on federal projects delivered through public libraries; and, the need for collaboration in order that public libraries can provide an adequate range of materials for users from CALD backgrounds.

QUESTIONS

- In identifying our top four or five priorities, have we chosen the right focus areas?
- What would you add/delete?

3. Agreement to an underlying set of guidelines and National Standards for public libraries

ALIA has already engaged Libraries Alive! to build on the work it has carried out for public libraries in NSW, to create standards and guidelines for public libraries across Australia.

A steering committee will be formed to guide this project.

4. Action plan supporting the delivery of national programs

This is our business case with which to go to the federal government to ask for funding to enable us to develop national programs, benefiting communities across Australia and providing a fairer and more equitable public library service for all this nation's citizens.

These may be public programs eg early literacy, or infrastructure programs eg a national investment in management training for future library leaders.

Consultation

We would like to hear your views about this approach to creating a shared vision and national framework for Australian public libraries. Please feel free to circulate this document to your members and to anyone outside your own organisation whose opinions would be valuable.

The consultation process will take place over the three months October to December 2009. We would appreciate receiving your response on or before

Friday 11 December 2009. This could be as simple as a set of answers to the questions we have posed, or it might take the form of a short paper.

Please send your response to:

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Jan Richards, ALIA President, is driving the project and she can be contacted by email jan.richards@alia.org.au or by telephone on 02 6393 8126.