



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES
Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Chair), Miss Candice Burch MLA, Mr James Milligan MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into ACT Libraries

Submission Number: 023

Date Authorised for Publication: 26 September 2018

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
30 August 2018

Ms Brianna McGill
Committee Secretary
Inquiry into ACT Libraries
Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Ms McGill,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into ACT Libraries.

I and my family are all members of Libraries ACT. We use the library service regularly and deeply appreciate the access it provides to books, magazines, audio books, DVDs and eResources, all of which are used by members of our family. We have also enjoyed a number of events offered by Libraries ACT over the years, introducing us to new technologies. My whole family deeply values the wonderful services offered by Libraries ACT.

I am a librarian by profession who has worked in that capacity in the Commonwealth public sector and now as a librarian in the private sector.

I would like to comment particularly on three terms of reference, these being:

(5) The extent to which ACT Libraries are accessible to the community, including:

- (a) opening hours
- (b) locations and
- (c) disability access

(6) The cost effectiveness of existing branches and

(9) Any other relevant matter.

(5) The extent to which ACT Libraries are accessible to the community, including:

- (a) opening hours**
- (b) locations and**
- (c) disability access**

I would particularly like to focus on the current locations of ACT Libraries.

ACT Libraries are currently located widely across the ACT but the distribution of the current library branches is inequitable. Some districts of Canberra are very well resourced with libraries, while other districts have no library within their district or in the neighbouring district.

I am particularly concerned by the lack of a library branch in the Weston Creek and Molonglo districts. I acknowledge that the area of Lanyon Valley, not separately recognised as a district for ACT Population projection purposes, also has no library branch.

The current branches are located at:

- Tuggeranong
- Erindale
- Woden
- Kingston
- City
- Dickson
- Belconnen
- Kippax and
- Gungahlin.

The following table divides Canberra up into districts as defined by ACT Treasury in its publication:

ACT Treasury *ACT Population Projections 2017 – 2041* (13/3/2017)

<https://apps.treasury.act.gov.au/demography/projections/act>

It shows the uneven distribution of libraries compared with the population of the districts they serve, using population projections for 2020 for each district:

| District | Projected population 2020 | No. of libraries in the district | Population per library branch |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Weston Creek | 20611 | 0 | No library for 20611 people. |
| Cotter Namadgi (Molonglo) | 13025 | 0 | No library for 13025 people |
| Weston Creek/Molonglo combined | 33636 | 0 | No library branch for 33636 people |
| Gungahlin | 83167 | 1 (Gungahlin) | 1 library per 83167 people |
| Belconnen | 100040 | 2 (Belconnen, Kippax) | 1 library per 50020 people |
| North Canberra | 58702 | 2 (City, Dickson) | 1 library per 29351 people |
| South Canberra | 27618 | 1 (Kingston) | 1 library per 27618 people |
| Woden | 34551 | 1 (Woden) | 1 library per 34551 people |
| Tuggeranong | 82649 | 2 (Tuggeranong, Erindale) | 1 library per 44824 people |

Furthermore, the geographical distribution of these libraries is irregular, with two libraries often located within a very short distance of one another, yet large areas of Canberra with no library branches nearby.

For example, from our home in Duffy to our nearest library in Woden is a distance of 6.2km by road.

The following branches therefore closer to one another than it is for my family to travel directly to our nearest library:

| Library branches | Distance between these branches |
|--------------------------|--|
| Tuggeranong and Erindale | 3.8km |
| City and Dickson | 4.5km |
| Belconnen and Kippax | 6.1km |

From this analysis, the distribution of ACT Library branches seem inequitable in terms of the size of the population they serve and in their geographical proximity to one another.

I would be loath to see the closure of branches in areas which are serving a lower population or which are in close proximity to one another.

I note with approval the new model of library branch at the Kingston Library, which is an innovative shopfront space. This relatively small space with fewer staff than a traditional branch is nonetheless a fully functioning branch library. It provides clients with the ability to browse a variety of library materials, borrow and return items, capacity for collection of library reservations and even activities such as Storytime.

I would suggest that consideration be given to converting some existing suburban libraries, such as Dickson and Kippax, to the shopfront model as successfully used at Kingston, thereby reducing staffing at these branches while retaining amenity. This would enable the opening of a library branch somewhere in the two districts of Weston Creek and Molonglo without an overall increase in library staff.

(6) Cost effectiveness of existing branches:

While I am no expert in the field of measuring the effectiveness of public libraries, I strongly believe that “cost effectiveness” is a poor measure of the impact that libraries, especially public libraries, have on their communities. This is not a widely used measure for the effectiveness of public libraries, because it does not consider the full impact that a library has on its community.

I would rather see consideration of the social impact of libraries as a measure of the effectiveness of library branches. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has created “The Impact Survey” which is an online tool to measure how people make use of a public library’s technology resources and services.¹ More nuanced tools and measurements would provide a clearer understanding of the effectiveness of our public libraries than a blunt cost effectiveness measure.

¹ International Federation of Library Associations *Know your community, improve your technology services* (18/7/2014) <https://blogs.ifla.org/public-libraries/2014/07/18/know-your-community-improve-your-technology-services/>

(9) Any other relevant matter

1. Library fines

Libraries across the world are increasingly recognising that library fines are a serious barrier to accessing their services.

I refer the committee to this article, written by the CEO of the New York Public Library for a detailed analysis on why library fines discourage the public from library use and may be ineffective:

Marx, Anthony W. "The case against library fines – according to the head of the New York Public Library" *Quartz* (18/12/2017) <https://qz.com/1158839/the-case-against-library-fines-according-to-the-head-of-the-new-york-public-library/>

Our family accepts library fines as part of using the library service and we usually keep them under control. However, I know personally of some families who no longer use ACT Library services, due to fines that can accrue. On limited budgets, they are not able to risk accruing such fines.

The fines can be sizable. My family recently experienced a family tragedy and over the course of one week, checking library records was not a high priority. In that one week, my family of four accrued fines of over \$75 between us.

Through this experience, we discovered that once fines reach a certain level on a card, no material can be renewed, resulting in greater fines.

Due to the lack of a nearby library branch, we also had to wait an extra day for one of the adults to specifically travel by car to return the many books to a branch in another district of Canberra.

As a one off, we could afford this fine but I now completely understand why many families cannot risk fines reaching this level.

I would recommend that consideration be given to blocking people's ability to borrow further items once any item reaches a certain number of days overdue, rather than fining them.

If fines do continue, I recommend that no one should be blocked from renewing materials already borrowed due merely to the level of the fine on the card. This rapidly "snowballs" the fine and quickly makes it a very large fine.

Finally, one other cause of escalating fines with ACT Libraries is that if an item is more than a few days' overdue, it cannot be renewed, even if it is not reserved by another patron. I would recommend that any item which is not reserved by another patron and which has not been renewed the maximum number of times ought to be able to be renewed, no matter how overdue it is.

2. Libraries as a unique public space

A public library has one vital role for its community which is not met through any other public indoors space; they are a "third space" in that:

- They are public, not the workplace nor home;
- They are not a retail space, which is available to anyone but trying to sell people something; and
- They are not a place restricted to a particular community, such as a school, youth centre, church or community centre, which people attend for a specific purpose; but rather

- Uniquely, libraries are a space where people can just “be” and be tolerated for that. They could be browsing the books, using the technology or doing homework but they don’t have to be doing anything. A library is the one indoor community facility where that is possible.
- The full potential of the library as a neutral space is set out in a range of studies, one of many examples being:
Civica The Intrinsic value of libraries as public spaces : Technology and digital services reflect the changing role of libraries(2016)
<https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Civica+Intrinsic+value+of+libraries+report.pdf>

I have been thinking about the importance of a library as a third space when making submissions to Transport ACT’s proposals for a new bus network. This proposes effectively converting Coolaman Court into a bus interchange. Unlike every other bus interchange in Canberra, Coolaman Court lacks a library, where anyone would be welcomed into while waiting for a while for a bus.

As it stands, young people in particular waiting for a bus would not be equally tolerated in retail spaces or in the local community centre, which can only be entered with a particular purpose such as participation in a class.

The availability of a library for the neutral, judgment free space it provides to all citizens would be most welcome in Weston Creek/Molonglo, particularly if a bus interchange at Coolaman Court becomes a reality.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry. I would be happy to discuss my submission further with members of the committee.

Yours sincerely.

Alison Jones

Associate Member, Australian Library and Information Association (Distinguished Certified Professional)