



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into ACT Libraries

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Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services
Inquiry into ACT Public Libraries

Weston Creek Community Council Submission

1. The Role of Libraries in the ACT Community

The Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC) recognises the important role that Libraries ACT plays by providing the ACT community with a range of library services across ten branches. WCCC supports the ongoing vision of Libraries ACT to champion literacy, learning, the pleasure of reading and inspiring and connecting people.

WCCC considers the network of public libraries across the ACT to be an essential service. Public libraries enable community members to participate and contribute to our thriving culture and democracy. They also often provide community members with a space to meet, socialise and access information. Their services contribute to the creation of an educated and informed population, enable community members to participate in society, contribute to social inclusion and enable people to contribute to the economic wellbeing of themselves, their families and the nation.

WCCC notes the importance of continued investment in our public libraries to ensure that Libraries ACT can continue to fulfil its key role in the ACT community.

2. Strategic Planning for Libraries in the ACT

WCCC notes the importance of strategic planning for libraries in the ACT to ensure that our public libraries continue to service the needs of the ACT community.

The WCCC supports *Renewing Libraries: Libraries, Literacy and Learning Strategy 2015-2019* (the Strategic Plan) and its chief aims of developing its customer focus, responding to the shift towards digital services and improving service delivery. WCCC also supports the key focus areas of celebrating reading and literacy, being a catalyst for lifelong learning, taking our place in the national record and fostering digital services.

The Strategic Plan notes that 31 per cent of the adult community in the ACT cannot read or write at a functional level. WCCC is of the view that, going forward, it should continue to be a key priority of the strategy to continue to work towards reducing this number and improving literacy in the community.

3. The Nature and Extent of Current and Future Community Demand for Library Services

General Comments

Access to Libraries ACT, its collection and services is an important piece of the ACT's social and community architecture. Access to libraries and library services should be made as simple as possible. WCCC notes that Libraries ACT *Loans Policy* has not been updated since 2014 and is in need of a refresh to assess whether it is still fit for purpose and adaptable to the future demands of the ACT community.

WCCC supports the continued free membership for persons who live, work and study in the ACT. However, WCCC notes that the membership process can only be undertaken in person and that there is no online mechanism to become a member. WCCC recommends that Libraries ACT invest in an online membership registration process that allows online confirmation of identity and the provision of digital memberships.

WCCC supports the Libraries ACT policy to provide high quality print, video and electronic formats. WCCC supports maintaining a *Collections Policy* that is guided by community needs, analysis of collections, customer and staff suggestions and community engagement activities to determine new and emerging issues and knowledge trends. However, WCCC suggests that Libraries ACT may like to review its *Collections Policy*, which has not been updated since 2013.

WCCC notes that demand for Libraries ACT computer facilities is high, with these facilities being well used by the public throughout the day. WCCC recommends that the ACT Government assess the

level of demand for computer facilities and consider expanding the number of computer terminals at each of its locations.

WCCC notes the importance of the Home Library Service, particularly for Canberra residents who may not be able to access regular library services due to illness or physical incapacity. The Home Library Service is extremely valuable to the ACT Community and WCCC would like to see this service continue and its promotion improved. With an aging population, the residents of Weston Creek will continue find value in this service.

Non-Digital Offerings

Libraries ACT offers a wide selection of non-digital offerings, which are at the heart of the Library's collection. WCCC supports Libraries ACT *Collections Policy* of keeping the collection current, vibrant and attractive to consumers with the aim of 50-60 per cent of the collection being less than five years old. WCCC also supports Libraries ACT policy of ensuring that the collection contains currency and accuracy of information, is kept in good physical condition and stored for easy access by the ACT community. Further, WCCC supports Libraries ACT ensuring that the collection has a wide selection of both fiction and non-fiction books.

Digital Offerings

Libraries ACT offers a wide range of digital offerings for library users. Of particular value to the community are the Overdrive and BorrowBox facilities which allow users to borrow eBooks and audio books – bringing the pleasure of reading to a wider range of people and contributing to improved accessibility to library services. However, these services can be confusing to access and navigate – especially for users with lower digital literacy (who are also likely to be the group of users who would benefit most from access to these services).

WCCC recommends that Libraries ACT consider the creation and provision of simple, online, step-by-step user guides to help Canberra residents access and use the digital offerings. This would improve accessibility to the digital service offering, helping new users engage with digital content.

Education and Training Opportunities

WCCC notes the range of education and training opportunities offered by Libraries ACT including Giggle and Wiggle, Story Time and the English Conversation Groups. In addition, of particular importance are the learning and social groups that operate in the library branches. These groups allow ACT residents an opportunity to meet like-minded community members and pick up new skills. They facilitate social inclusion and cohesion. WCCC supports the continued operation of these initiatives.

Facilities Available for Public Use and Spaces for Leading, Creativity and for Achieving Social Inclusion

Most Libraries ACT branches make available public meeting room spaces for hire to the community. The purpose of the community rooms is to facilitate community learning, improve literacy and economic development, and importantly, facilitate social inclusion.

WCCC recognises that these rooms are an excellent resource for the community, and their use is well supported by the community at large. With less and less space being made available for the provision of community facilities within the suburbs of Canberra, these public community spaces within our public libraries are more important than ever. They allow members of the community to meet and engage with one another, to form bonds and relationships that add value to their lives and value to our society.

WCCC support the ongoing provision of community spaces and rooms for hire in existing Libraries ACT branches, and supports the inclusion of such facilities in any new branches.

Other Government Services Co-Located with Libraries

WCCC supports the co-location of ACT Government Services with Libraries ACT branches where possible and feasible.

Any Other Library Services Sought By the Community

WCCC recommends that the ACT Government reconsider its decision to terminate the operation of the ACT Mobile Library.

4. The Extent to Which ACT Libraries Are Positioned to Respond Flexibly to Meet Current and Future Community Opportunities and Demands

WCCC notes that the Libraries ACT website and online catalogue are old, tired and in need of an overhaul. The online catalogue in particular is quite dated and in need of a visual and functional refresh. Further, it contains many old and obsolete entries for items no longer held by the libraries. WCCC recommends the ACT Government invest in a new website and catalogue.

5. The Extent to Which ACT Libraries Are Accessible to the Community

Opening Hours

All Libraries ACT branches have similar standard opening hours, typically opening at 10AM and closing around 530PM on weekdays and opening around 12PM and closing around 4PM on Sundays. Some major branches, such as Civic and Erindale are closed on Sundays.

Demand for library services in the ACT is strong, with over 2 million people visiting Libraries ACT branches each year. This strong demand illustrates that there is a market for longer opening hours. As a first step, WCCC would like to see the opening times of Libraries ACT branches extended, with an earlier opening time of 830AM and a later closing time of 6PM or 630PM. These more flexible opening and closing times would allow more people to visit the library at a time that suits their needs. Extended hours of operation are particularly important for office workers, who may not have the opportunity to visit the library during the day, but would like to visit the library on their way to or from work.

Weekends are a time for leisure and relaxation and reading plays an important role in the way Canberrans choose to spend their leisure time. Longer opening hours on weekends would be welcomed by the ACT community and WCCC supports consideration of extended opening hours for all Libraries ACT branches. In particular, WCCC would support the addition of Sunday hours of operation for the Civic and Erindale branches.

Locations

With nine locations across the ACT, Canberrans typically have good access to a Libraries ACT branch. The nine branches are spread reasonably evenly across the city. However, as Canberra continues to expand and grow, newer suburbs are further away from a Libraries ACT branch.

Of particular concern to WCCC is the growing area of the Molonglo Valley. The new suburbs of Wright, Coombs, Denman Prospect, and the forthcoming suburb of Whitlam, are home to diverse populations, but particularly home to new families with young children, for whom the library is an important resource for their child's development. The closest branch to the Molonglo Valley is the Woden Branch which is some 8-12 kilometres away. Not only is the Molonglo Valley without easy access to a Libraries ACT branch, it is also sorely lacking in community facilities. Land that was previously zoned for community facilities has been rezoned for public housing, leaving the residents of the Molonglo

without any community meeting spaces. Libraries ACT branches offer access to spaces for public use, learning and community participation. WCCC would like the ACT Government to consider the Molonglo Valley as a priority site for future branches.

In addition to the lack of services for the Molonglo Valley, WCCC would also like the ACT Government to consider the addition of a smaller branch, similar in size and scope to the Kingston branch, for the Weston Creek area. As noted, the closest branch to Weston Creek is the Woden Library. Woden Library is an excellent facility, serviced well by the ACT's public transport system. However, Weston Creek has one of the largest aging populations in the ACT and residents would benefit from the addition of a smaller branch closer to their homes. In the past, the ACT's mobile library service – which was abolished in 2014 - always found an enthusiastic audience in the Weston Creek community, and it was well used during its stops at Cooleman Court.

Disability Access

WCCC supports all Libraries ACT branches having proper disability access. WCCC recommends the ACT Government conduct an audit into the adequacy of current access arrangements at all Libraries ACT branches.

6. The Cost Effectiveness of Existing Branches

WCCC notes that in 2013, the Australian Library and Information Association released a report on the *National Welfare and Economic Contributions of Public Libraries*. The report found that the total recurrent costs of public libraries in the ACT was \$15.6 million, and the total benefits of public library services in the ACT was \$63.9 million. Thus, the benefits of operating Libraries ACT far exceed the costs.

WCCC notes that the report found that the benefits of public libraries are wide ranging and benefit library users both directly and indirectly, including:

- The services and programs made available to users by public libraries;
- The social interaction facilitated in public libraries;
- The sense of place and enhanced local amenity afforded by libraries;
- Environmental savings generated through continued re-use of library collections;
- Public library contributions to language and computer literacy, and
- Public library facilitation of improved education, career development and health outcomes.

7. Comparative Analysis of ACT Libraries with Library Services in Other Jurisdictions and Community Take-Up of These Services

WCCC makes no comment on this term of reference.

8. Any legislative considerations that may be relevant

WCCC makes no comment on this term of reference.