



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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ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into ACT Libraries

The Health Care Consumers' Association (HCCA) was incorporated in 1978 and is both a health promotion charity and the peak consumer advocacy organisation in the Canberra region. HCCA provides a voice for consumers on health issues and provides opportunities for health care consumers to participate in all levels of health service planning, policy development and decision making.

HCCA involves consumers through:

- consumer representation, and consumer and community consultations,
- training in health rights and navigating the health system,
- community forums and information sessions about health services, and
- research into consumer experience of human services.

HCCA is a member-based organisation and for this submission we consulted broadly. This included input from our members, our ACT Health of Older People Consumer Reference Group, our Health Policy Advisory Committee and with COTA (Council on the Ageing ACT).

We believe that libraries are an essential community resource in the ACT. Libraries have an important roles in delivering services, providing a social hub for building connectedness within our communities, and for improving health literacy.

We know that the health literacy level of many Australians does not permit them to easily access, interpret, communicate and use health information. This can affect their access to effective health care and health improvement activities.

As a health promotion charity, HCCA

- supports the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (ACSQHC) definition of health literacy¹,
- acknowledges that some health consumers may need support while they gain the skills and confidence to improve their health literacy, and
- undertakes to become a health literate organisation².

HCCA recognises the importance of health literacy and has developed a position statement on the topic, which can be found here: <http://www.hcca.org.au/about-hcca/position-statements.html>

Contributing to this Inquiry is one of the ways in which HCCA demonstrates its commitment to the ACT community and to *improving health literacy*. Thank you for the opportunity to advocate for consumers and express consumer views about ACT Libraries.

Yours sincerely



Dr Kathryn Dwan
Manager, Policy and Research, HCCA

¹ Australian Commission of Quality and Safety in Health Care, ‘Health Literacy National Statement | Safety and Quality’, <https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/publications/health-literacy-nationalstatement/>, [Accessed 22 July 2018].

² Cindy Brach Benard Dreyer, Paul Schyve, Lyla M. Hernandez, Cynthia Baur, Andrew J. Lemere, and Ruth Parker, ‘Attributes of a Health Literate Organization. Discussion Paper’, Institute of Medicine Roundtable on Health Literacy, National Academy of Sciences, 2012.



**HCCA Submission to the
ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry in ACT Libraries**

Submitted 21 September 2018

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Executive Summary

Libraries are the heartbeat of any town or city

HCCA supports the important role of libraries within the ACT community. Libraries, especially physical branches, help to improve social connectedness, are a part of creating age-friendly cities and maintaining overall good health in our communities. As one consumer so beautifully commented, ‘libraries are the heartbeat of any town or city’. Our consultation with consumers demonstrated a great love for libraries and the good range of library services offered in the ACT.

Our consultation with consumers highlighted concerns that underlying this Inquiry is a view to push future library services online and shut down more of the physical library branches. HCCA and its members do not support such a move.

As a health promotion charity and peak ACT consumer advocacy organisation supporting health literacy, we believe that libraries support health across all age groups in our community by:

- having an important role in health literacy
- providing a social hub in the community
- delivering a range of fundamental services meeting diverse needs

HCCA works with the ACT Libraries events program to help promote and encourage health literacy within the community, for example, by running health literacy events open to the public in ACT library locations. HCCA uses the following definitions of health literacy¹:

Health literacy is the combined knowledge, skills, confidence and motivation used to make sound decisions about your health in the context of everyday life.

Individual health literacy describes how easy it is for people to

- get access to the information they need,
- understand the information they receive, and
- judge if the information is right for them.

Environmental health literacy describes the setting in which people seek health information and use health care services.

We believe that ACT libraries provide an important role in both individual and environmental health literacy. Part of the role of libraries is to help guide, assist or teach people to find, evaluate and use information for their benefit. This is

particularly important when searching for health information amongst the sometimes overwhelming sources of evidence, statistics and knowledge available todayⁱⁱⁱ.

Please note that we have chosen to cover the following terms of reference for this inquiry: (1), (3), (4), (5) and (7).

Key Comments

HCCA makes the following recommendations to protect the interests of healthcare consumers with regard to ACT Libraries:

1. ACT Libraries **have a role in supporting health literacy**

ACT Libraries should continue to support health literacy in the ACT community. As part of this, building upon links established with HCCA can help improve access to and understanding of health information. This would support the ongoing improvement of health literacy in the ACT. This might include workshops aimed at improving health literacy in a range of key areas, or making available other trusted health information through library services.

2. ACT Libraries **provide a social hub**

The physical spaces of libraries provide opportunities for enhancing social connectedness. This emphasises the importance of library locations and easy access, including transport options and opening hours. Opportunities for people to engage with others, both formally and informally, forms a part of libraries as a social hubs in communities.

3. ACT Libraries **offer a range of services that meet diverse community needs**

The needs for library services in the ACT community are diverse. For example, community library service needs include:

- access to both digital and non-digital resources, in physical branches of the ACT Library Service as well as virtually/online.
- providing a program of events that continues to cater for a variety of age groups, interests and learning styles.
- continuing to make available resources in other languages, for those who want or need them, as well as supporting those for whom English is a second language.
- access to the home library service and its network of volunteers, who assist those for whom accessing physical and even digital resources can be more difficult
- other mobile library services in some form as part of supporting an ageing population

ⁱⁱⁱ Information literacy is an ongoing need for communities and training continues to be offered as professional development for librarians, for example: <https://membership.alia.org.au/events/event/calling-bullshit>

ACT Libraries – addressing the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference

(1) The role of libraries within the ACT community

HCCA supports the important role of libraries within the ACT community. Libraries are a part of creating age-friendly cities, improving connectedness and relate to the good health of our communities.

As a health promotion charity and peak ACT consumer advocacy organisation supporting health literacy, we believe that libraries can help support the overall health of people across all age groups through:

- having an important role in health literacy
- providing a social hub in the community
- delivering a range of fundamental services meeting diverse needs

Our consultation with consumers demonstrated a great love for library services in the ACT. Consumers considered the role of the library to be broad and appreciated the wide variety of services offered. Library services, and especially the physical spaces, can be particularly important as a refuge and social hub for those more vulnerable in our community.

A selection of comments from consumers:

All consumers have an emotional connection to libraries, even when they may use them rarely.

It is important to note that libraries are universally accepting, everyone is welcome. Vulnerable members of our community are especially made to feel welcome, I am aware that homeless people often wander into the local library to read the paper, browse the internet, or to just sit and rest in a comfy chair and to be warm and have a conversation or a snooze!

Libraries provide community connectedness to the whole population, through a range of activities including borrowing, skills development, IT support and recreational activities.

I believe libraries serve a vital function in making citizens more health literate, amongst other educational functions.

Libraries are important especially for the older community, not so much as getting books but for the friendship of meeting and talking to other people... also older people use the library just to keep warm/cool.

I met a homeless lady the other day [at the library] and trying to help her... she is going to apply for some housing – but guess what – she has to apply online!... so she said ‘that’s ok, I can go to the library’.

HCCA works with the ACT Libraries events program to run health literacy workshops for consumers in libraries across Canberra. This is a valuable and important partnership.

(3) The nature and extent of current and future community demand for different library services including:

Consumers gave examples of the library services they felt there is community demand for, and services they enjoy using or seeing others using such as:

a) Non-digital offerings

- books
- audio books
- newspapers
- music
- magazines
- DVDs including resources in other languages
- home library services

b) Digital offerings

- e-books and other resources in digital format (similar to above), and these can be accessed online or virtually
- language app for help with learning English as a second language
- accessing library accounts online
- capacity to order books/other resources to collect conveniently at a local library close to home or work

c) Education and training opportunities

- opportunities to get assistance with digital technology
- help from librarians in finding books, other resources and searching for information
- training courses and educational opportunities on a wide range of different topics catering to a variety of interests and age groups^{iv}.

d) Facilities available for public use

- meeting spaces
- computers
- printing/photocopying
- internet access

e) Spaces for learning, creativity and for achieving social inclusion

- warm (or air-conditioned) and comfortable spaces available inside libraries

^{iv} HCCA has run a number of workshops relating to health literacy at libraries around Canberra through the ACT libraries program of events.

- co-located with bathrooms
- fun spaces for kids including tables and chairs for craft and drawing
- kids programs such as storytime, giggle and wiggle (music and stories for little kids), and other programs offered for kids such as those in the school holidays
- shared spaces providing opportunities to meet friends and make new ones
- space for community groups to meet publically, such as the knitting group that meets weekly at Erindale library, or the needlework group at Dickson library

f) Other government services co-located with libraries

- Civic library provides an access point for government services for renewing your license, registering vehicles etc.

g) Any other library services sought by the community

- Dickson library – you can currently get help with doing your tax return (free) and a Justice of the Peace is there every Friday^v
- Other nearby services are also important to people – for example, a number of people mentioned the café next to Woden library as a great place to refuel, meet friends, or run into people you know

(4) The extent to which ACT Libraries are positioned to respond flexibly to meet current and future community opportunities and demands

ACT Libraries currently provides a wide range of services to our communities. For example, a consumer told us:

As well as the better known services such as books/music/movies borrowing and access to literature via technology, libraries provide services that impact positively on the health and well-being of our community through specific targeted services such as the learn giggle and grow for small children (and their parents/carers), spaces for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities to participate in English language classes, support with internet searches and job applications, book clubs and much more.

Library access, such as extended opening hours, could be expanded to allow community health and well-being organisations coordinating education and discussion groups to meet at night. We support the recommendation made in the Better Suburbs Statement 2030 “It would help [if] community groups could access meeting rooms at libraries into the evening”. Consumers commented:

People love their libraries! While this [use of libraries by health and well-being organisations] does happen to some extent, it could be expanded. Especially where libraries are in close proximity to community health centres. There could be consideration of an MOU between the ACT Health Directorate and TCSS [Transport Canberra and City Services] to plan and implement some

^v This service is also offered at other libraries.

programs over coming years. Groups such as a range of Chronic Disease, Healthy Lifestyle, even Pain Management could be considered.

The community is asking for spaces [for example] to say exhibit their art. [Libraries] are a great community asset.

I believe mobile libraries would [again] be useful as the population ages.

While HCCA has established links with the ACT Libraries program of events through running some health literacy sessions, some other suggestions for further building on these links include:

- Links through the ACT Library website to trusted health information. An example is the 'Words for Wellbeing' library project in QLD^{vi}, where useful, evidence-based library resources are made available for improving mental and physical health and wellbeing. These resources have been recommended by health professionals and organisations directly involved in healthcare.
- Library exhibits on health-based issues eg. diabetes or cardiovascular disease.
- Links through the library website or through physical library branches to particular health issues highlighted at different points in the year (eg. October is Mental Health Month, November is 'Mo-vember' highlighting men's health).

Our consultation with consumers highlighted concerns that underlying this Inquiry is a view to push future library services online and shut down more of the physical library branches. Libraries play an important role in supporting social inclusion and connectedness in our community. Consumers highlighted the many social, educational and physical needs met by physical library branches servicing communities around Canberra.

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

- (a) Opening hours**
- (b) Locations and**
- (c) Disability access**

These three aspects of accessibility to ACT libraries are important to consumers. Opening hours in general have decreased for many library branches over the years. This may have limited access for some consumers. The Better Suburbs Statement 2030² suggests that there are opportunities for increasing use of community meeting spaces in libraries into the evenings.

Locations and access are important to consumers and can affect utilisation of library services. For example, consumers mentioned that they felt that Dickson library and

^{vi} See <https://www.westmoreton.health.qld.gov.au/community/words-for-wellbeing/>

Woden library tended to be more accessible in terms of public transport and proximity to the shopping centres in these areas.

Dickson Library, at the moment, is doing renovations and so quite a few of the activities (knitting club, they are meeting at the [Dickson] Tradies now), book club, needle work, reading their free newspaper... Dickson Library is close to public transport and the shops.

The Woden library is very accessible – inside and out, however it is old and tired and could do with a facelift.

I use Woden library at least once a week... [but] it is getting increasingly difficult to access due to lack of parking. The light rail will not help as it only connects the city to Woden and does not get the feeds from the surrounding suburbs.

In contrast, a few consumers noted that Belconnen and Civic libraries were less accessible and may be under-utilised as a result.

Some of the issues with ACT libraries currently is that while the services offered within the facilities are readily accessible to all, access to some library buildings is problematic. For example, Belconnen Library is some way from the Belconnen Mall, parking is not easy to find, and people with limited mobility would have difficulty accessing the building, especially if they are on foot.

Civic Library is a little bit out of the way but they do have (after going down steps to the reading room... set up in a poky little space, [a] motor registry where you can renew licenses etc.

While library funding and services should be supported to continue in the current form or with some increase in funds, it could be worth considering consolidating existing services. For example, consumers have noted that the Civic Library is currently underutilised. The building is hard to find, there is little or no parking, and limited access for people with disabilities. The location is not intuitive, or even visible. Consumers were of the opinion that users who do go there were more likely to be seeking a service from Access Canberra, rather than a library service. This service could be closed and the funding dispersed between other libraries that have greater activity... In all libraries, there are some issues with opening hours which have reduced considerably over the years, consumers have suggested that it would be useful to have increased access to libraries on weekends and in the evenings, particular for meetings. The cost for this could be covered if Civic was closed.

One consumer commented on the Gungahlin library:

While a beautiful, welcoming and responsive space, Gungahlin Library has limited parking nearby and again, would be a challenge for the physically challenged.

(7) Comparative analysis of ACT Libraries with library services in other jurisdictions and community take-up of these services

Other organisations may be better placed to comment in detail on the comparative statistics about library use and funding across all Australian jurisdictions. However, HCCA believes that, in terms of the most important measures (such as circulation, use, number of visitors, relative cost) outlined in the Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report 2015-2016³, ACT Libraries are generally doing well when compared to other states and territories.

Concluding remarks

HCCA looks forward to seeing how our feedback and comments shape the ongoing services provided by ACT Libraries. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you wish to discuss our submission further. HCCA would be happy to clarify any aspect of our response.

¹ HCCA recognises the importance of health literacy and has developed a position statement on the topic, which can be found here: <http://www.hcca.org.au/about-hcca/position-statements.html>

² Better Suburbs Statement 2030 https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/hdp.au.prod.app.act-yoursay.files/4215/3722/6646/Better_Suburbs_Statement_accessible_SEPTEMBER_2018.pdf [accessed 19/09/2018]

³ Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report 2015-2016 (2017), compiled by Regional Access and Public Libraries, State Library of Queensland