



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

Submission Number: 063

Date Authorised for Publication: 26 September 2018

**Submission to the
Inquiry into ACT Libraries (2018)
by the
Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services
ACT Legislative Assembly**

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1. In general, the ACT public library system¹ provides a good service under the difficult financial circumstances faced by all Governments, especially the ACT Government which has to manage the often conflicting demands of "state" government and municipal services.
2. The following are my personal observations as a frequent user of the library system, and do not necessarily align with the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

Opening Hours and Branch Locations

3. My local Branch is Tuggeranong. It is astonishing that this Branch (in a town centre) does not open after 5:30pm. In fact on only three nights a week does any Branch in the system open after 5:30pm.
4. I'm sure careful consideration was made of how to use limited resources, but it still sends an odd message when you discover that your local Branch will be not be open late at least one night a week. I have to make all my visits to my local Branch on the weekends, since I rarely leave work before 5:30pm. Using a Branch located closer to my workplace (say Civic or Kingston) is impractical using public transport. Neither of these open after 5:30pm anyhow, making the point moot.
5. There has obviously been a trade-off by having extended Saturday and Sunday opening hours across the system, and this is appreciated, but it would be good to see an extension to weekday evening opening hours.
6. Canberra is a rapidly expanding city and one would have expected more Branches to have opened by now. I think only Gungahlin and Kingston have opened in the last 20 years, and the latter was a substitute for the previous Griffith Branch. Where are the Branches serving Lanyon and Molonglo, for example?

Role Confusion and "Dumbing Down"

7. There has been a distinct lowering in the intellectual atmosphere of most public libraries in my lifetime. No doubt there is an element of nostalgic misremembering on my part, but in the "olden days" libraries had a studious but quietly joyful atmosphere. One felt one was entering a place devoted not just to recreation and entertainment but to the serious pursuit of learning. There was always a solid reference collection separated from the general borrowing collection, staffed by sober but always helpful librarians.
8. Nowadays, perhaps in a reaction to a perceived "relevance crisis", many libraries seem to be determined to turn themselves into "community centres", attempting to appeal to as wide a segment of the populace as possible. Marketing seems to be regarded as an essential aspect of library management, with colourful and twee displays that speak more of the staff's perceptions of their "customers" than the products and services the library can provide.
9. Of course we want libraries to be heavily patronised, and libraries have been responding to the shift in the ways people obtain their information for decades now, but there comes a point when the product becomes blurred and blends in with the surrounding assault on

¹ For ease of reference I will refer to the overall system as the Library.

the senses. Is it a café, is it a driver's licence office, is it a drop-in centre for the homeless?

10. ACT public libraries are invariably noisier than they should be. Patrons use mobile phones, staff chatter amongst themselves, even in customer service areas. There is noise from lifts, and automatic doors constantly opening and closing. Supposedly quiet upstairs 'study areas' at Tuggeranong and Woden are far from quiet (because sound rises from the ground floor). Where are the glass enclosed group study rooms for College students? The noise from the co-located café at Woden is also very distracting.
11. While I'm sure that most Library staff are trained, I often get the impression that they have no real interest in the collection. Many act like customer service staff, not librarians. They have to go online to know where to find items on the shelves, as if they don't know their Dewey at all. Recently I overheard a patron ask the loans desk staffer at Woden what had happened to the motor manuals collection previously held there. She did not know, and assured him he was not the first to ask, but if that was the case why had she not bothered to find out?
12. Last time I was in the Heritage Library, teenagers with food and drink were using the tables. A patron had some archive boxes nearby examining the contents but twice left them unattended and wandered off for several minutes at a time. I would have expected that the reading room for a special collection like this would be better secured and monitored. Just another example of role confusion and the Library not being treated as a different space, one where serious work can be undertaken and resources preserved.

Collection Development Issues – Acquisitions, Accessioning, Weeding

13. Without knowing the details of their acquisitions budget, I think that the Library has done a reasonable job of maintaining their general hardcopy monograph collection, but I find the collection deficient in printed periodicals and more specialised material.

Periodicals

14. The reduction in the number of periodical subscriptions is unfortunate. I understand why the Library has chosen to go down that path – there would be financial reasons and the availability of online platforms helps justify subscription cancellations. The collapse in acquisition of printed journals is universal – witness the slash and burn approach the National Library took in the mid-1990s. I am not against electronic library resources – I have been accessing online material in one form or another since the late 1980s.
15. There is, however, nothing quite like a printed magazine – it's easily portable for example (not everyone has a tablet, and most tablets cannot display a whole page in one glance), and many online platforms are text-based, so you lose the overall impression of the page layout, the colour, and "unimportant" content such as advertisements. These are well-known complaints, and are slowly being addressed by better platforms such as RB Digital/Zinio and Overdrive, for both periodicals and monographs. Of course, online platforms have their advantages – archival material can be more easily searched, and the Library can avoid physical storage overheads. So I don't know what the solution is, except to argue for a broader collection.

16. Of course, we all want to see the periodicals that interest us personally, and the Library is caught between a rock and a hard place in choosing titles, trying to cater for broad lifestyle/hobby interests versus narrower specialities. Because the Library uses subscription agents rather than direct subscriptions, it is not easily able to respond to requests for new periodicals, having to warehouse them and consider them for acquisition in the next cycle. One suggestion might be to put out a public survey 3–4 times a year, asking patrons to rank all current titles along the lines of "Keep / Cancel / Don't Care" and also asking for new title suggestions. New titles which are accepted could then be ordered directly and later rolled into a subscription service.
17. Which brings me to the question of whether the subscription service(s) the Library uses are worth the money. Periodicals often turn up late, or not at all (and this is always going to be a problem for Australian libraries because of the realities of geography and poor mail service) but when I chase up missing issues, I am often told "Oh, thanks for pointing this out, we'll ask our agent what has happened". There appears to be no real effort put into claiming the missing issues, or even taking the simple solution of going out to the newsagent and buying the missing issue (if it's still on the shelves). Last year I was even asked by the serials team to let them know if I noticed any issues missing! While I'm happy to do so, surely the accessions staff should know when issues aren't arriving and take remedial action without being prompted by patrons, by which time it is often too late. I would assume that a modern ILMS would alert staff if there was a delay in receipt.

Scope

18. As noted above, the Library does a pretty good job with its general non-fiction collection, and I have no complaints in respect of fiction, CDs and DVDs.
19. The Library has a Collection Policy. It is, by necessity, generic and cannot be faulted for its principles. However, I still get the impression from browsing the shelves that the Library is not maintaining a core collection which reflects Australia's cultural and intellectual heritage. We enter dangerous territory here of course, having to be careful of using terms like "canon" and "Western intellectual heritage", but that is where we have come from and we should maintain an intellectual resource as a foundation, i.e. the Library needs a Core Collection which is not weeded without careful consideration.
20. I am an historian by education and inclination and am often disappointed that the Library has gaps. In my opinion, there should be books in the collection which deal with every country's history. There might only be a handful of items, and they don't need to be specialised, but a patron should be able to find out something about every nation, culture or region throughout recorded history.
21. There also seems to be a neglect of religion in the collection. I have watched with dismay as the number of items in the "200s" has shrunk at Tuggeranong to just a handful of shelves. Australia is of course a highly secular country, but again, no part of our contemporary culture or our intellectual heritage should be neglected. I suspect that this neglect is not a result of hostility to religion, but more a reflection of poor cultural literacy on the part of those developing (and especially weeding) the collection. A particular irritation is the absence of religious magazines on the shelves.
22. In the past, organisations such as the American Library Association used to publish lists along the lines of "50 000 essential books for a basic library collection". I don't know if

these are still produced, but it would be good if the Library did have such a core collection, suitable for our contemporary society. Of course, to build up a core collection, the Library might have to abandon its policy of not acquiring second-hand material, as many core collection items may now be out of print.

23. Acquisition of foreign-language materials seems to be "too hard" – last time I enquired I was told that it was outsourced to migrant groups. This is a good idea for languages which are not commonly used, but I would argue that educated librarians should have basic literacy in at least French, German, Spanish and Italian, with backup from specialised acquisitions staff with knowledge of Russian, Mandarin, Arabic etc. Difficult, I realise, in a city the size of Canberra, but not impossible.

Accessioning

24. While certainly not confined to the ACT Library, I would urge that care be taken in basic accessioning tasks – like not putting RFID/barcode labels on endpaper maps/charts. It's not always possible to avoid, but careless placement ruins the user's enjoyment. I must admit that the serials accessioning people have been getting better at this, choosing to put them on ads, rather than obscuring text.

Issues with the Catalogue and Circulation System

25. Generally, the online catalogue and the circulation system work well, and the system "uptime" has improved dramatically in recent years. I still get the impression though that the Library is dependent on general ACT Government IT support staff, with little or no in house expertise, so that when the OPAC goes down after hours or on the weekend, it can take several hours to come back online.
26. I make the following observations about my experiences using the catalogue and the circulation system. I'm sure that many of these issues are known to Library staff, but seem to be intractable.
27. Understandably, the Library does not allow the latest issue of a periodical to be borrowed. I don't have a problem with this, as it gives everyone a chance to come into a Branch and read the latest issue. When the next issue is accessioned, the previous one become available for loan. The problem arises when that next issue never turns up or is delayed, thus blocking the release. This can happen because of subscription issues, or because a periodical is published infrequently (2–3 times a year) or seasonal (for example, Rugby League Week suspended publication during the off-season, so you could never borrow the last issue of the season). I have previously suggested that the system be configured to allow the latest issue to be borrowed after a certain number of days on display, or when the next issue was accessioned, whichever came first.
28. Patrons can reserve items for loan, coming into their Branch and collecting them from special reserves shelves. This is a great system and the Library is to be commended for introducing it several years ago. However, I have noticed that an "on the spot" borrower can sometimes trump these reserves by going to the counter with the item. I would like to see reserves enforced, with no queue-jumping.
29. Another problem is what I call "in transit limbo". Let's say I find an item in the catalogue I'd like to borrow and notice that it is marked either "In Transit" or "Transit Request". I

make my request, happy to get in the queue behind others. Weeks later, the item is still marked as being in transit and my number in the queue hasn't changed. Little interest is shown by staff when this is raised – they seem to assume that this is just a normal transit delay. After some educated guesswork on my part, all too often I find the item sitting on the shelves, not having been checked into the system properly after the previous loan or inter-branch transfer. Surely staff could run regular exception reports to identify items which have been stuck in "transit"?

30. Incorrect alphabetising of foreign language titles, e.g. a search for German-language items starting with the definite article "Die" are treated as if this is the English word "die". Thus results will appear out of sequence.
31. There are many "phantom" items in the catalogue which the Library does not hold, or which are held but without holdings statements. Again, surely exception reports could be run and the entries cleared up. Great holiday job for a Library Science student.
32. Series hyperlinks in the catalogue don't work as expected. Let's say I search for the book "A Game of Thrones". I find it in the catalogue, and then notice a hyperlink under the Series note. I assume that if I click on it I will be presented with a list of all the books in the "A Song of Ice and Fire" series, of which "A game of Thrones" is Book One. Unfortunately not, since the hyperlink is coded to show all other instances of "A Game of Thrones" instead.
33. Item type (book, CD etc.) in search results is not always obvious. Again, let me conduct an "All Title Browse" search for "A Game of Thrones". I get a list of several results, but how do I know which are books, and which are audio books? DVDs of TV series are usually easily identifiable because you can see subtitles like "Season 1", but movie titles are sometimes the same as a book title and you can't tell which is which until you click on the entry. Use of an appropriate icon or even an additional column displaying the format would be useful.
34. I have also noticed lazy copy-cataloguing practices on occasion, with French-language subject headings appearing on English-language catalogue entries. I suspect the Library is picking up bilingual Canadian MARC records from a Libraries Australia database without proper quality assurance procedures in place. Copy-cataloguing can be a cost-efficient practice (why reinvent the wheel?) but can lead to some spectacular errors. Staff need to understand the material they are cataloguing, and their work needs to be checked.
35. The automated return chutes at Woden and Gungahlin may be great for library staff, but are annoyingly slow for patrons. We are a family of six, and sometimes may have a hundred items to return!
36. Why are Inter-Library Loans so expensive (\$16.50)? Can they not be subsidised as they are in NSW (\$3.60)?
37. DVDs/CDs are not protected and are inevitably scratched – why not keep them behind the counter like in a record shop? Alternatively, a master copy could be kept and several loan copies made (subject to the DRM / fair use regime of the publisher).
38. Why are new periodical titles not listed in the New Titles list?

Time for a New Territory Library

39. In summary, my submission boils down to two main themes:

- a. several "technical" issues in the Library's acquisition, description, circulation and disposal processes which should be capable of resolution; and
- b. a certain dissonance, lack of gravitas or role confusion caused by the Library being neither fish nor fowl.

40. To address the latter issue, I would recommend that the ACT Government establish a new "Central" Library Branch in a purpose built facility. This new Branch would act as a sort of "State Library" for the ACT, incorporating the existing Heritage Library, the ACT Archives and all technical services for the other Branches. It should open seven days a week, and remain open until at least 8pm on at least four nights.

41. The building would need to house a solid open-access central reference collection, so that patrons looking for material not available at their local Branch would know that they could still conduct their research without having to visit other libraries. The open-access reference collection should also be backed up with a much larger core collection of less frequently used material, including older items weeded from the suburban Branches.

42. There should be scope for specialised reading rooms – one, obviously for the ACT Heritage collection, but perhaps others reflecting the strength of the collection as it develops. Exhibition spaces would be useful, and scope for events such as book launches and private functions. A publication program, arising from research in the collection, would help demonstrate the value and uniqueness of the holdings

43. Some may object that this proposal is like a mini National Library? Yes, and no – I see it more like a "Territory" Library. There is no way that such a library would be able to compete with the National Library in the depth of its collections, but it could certainly be a first port of call for serious research by Canberrans. Perhaps the New York Public Library would be a better example. It has dozens of suburban branches, but has several research divisions with dedicated reading rooms.

44. This proposal would allow local suburban Branches to focus on lending recreational resources, providing basic reference material, running educational programs and having the freedom to engage with the local community, schools etc.

From: [REDACTED]
To: [LA Committee - ETCS](#)
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: Submission to the Inquiry into ACT Libraries - supplementary information [SEC=UNOFFICIAL]
Date: Friday, 12 October 2018 2:02:10 PM

UNOFFICIAL

Good afternoon,

I refer to my submission (No. 63) to the current Inquiry and would like to pass on some supplementary information which I have just received.

In paragraph 17 of my submission, I refer to the struggle that the ACT Library serials team seem to have dealing with magazine subscription vendors.

I recently enquired what was happening with the Library's subscription to "Hello!" magazine, noting that no new copies had been received since April. This is the response I received:

From:
"TCCS_LA LibraryCustomerInfo" <Library.CustomerInfo@act.gov.au>

To:
"stewart.unwin@optusnet.com.au" <stewart.unwin@optusnet.com.au>

Sent:
Thu, 11 Oct 2018 23:01:11 +0000

Subject:
RE: Subscription to Hello magazine [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]
Dear Stewart,

Thank you for contacting Libraries ACT.

I have spoken to the serials officer and she has informed me that **we were told** by our vendor that this magazine must be ordered directly from the publisher.

Unfortunately **we are unable to order with individual publishers** as we have almost three hundred magazines.

We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause.

If you have any other queries, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Kind regards,

<name of Customer Information Officer omitted by me for privacy reasons>

The implication is that the serials team is not resourced well enough to handle individual subscriptions which can not be sourced from a serials acquisitions service. I would urge the Library to decide which magazine titles to acquire (in consultation with borrowers) and then work out a way to acquire those titles, rather than locking themselves into a (presumably) expensive contract with one or more vendors. Relying solely on a third party reduces the autonomy and flexibility of professional librarians. A mix of methods could be used – use of a vendor, direct subscriptions with publishers, and even the occasional use of a local newsagent to fill unexpected gaps. The ideal response to the inevitable problems which arise with magazine subscriptions is to be responsive and agile, but of course this requires staff and money.

Regards,

Stewart Unwin