



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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Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into ACT Libraries

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

I am an information professional with almost 15 years' experience working at the National Library of Australia. However, I write as a private citizen to make a number of observations and suggestions under several of the terms of reference.

The role of libraries within the ACT community

I have known the enormous value of public libraries from a very early age. I grew up on a farm outside the small rural town of Coleambally, New South Wales. The population is small, resources are few, and distances are large. The nearest public library is located in Griffith (NSW), almost an hour's drive away. However, each Wednesday, a book van visits Coleambally and does a circuit of the local schools, aged care accommodation, and shopping centre. The 'mobile library', as it is called, was and remains a lifeline for people of all ages, and for many, a highlight of their week. The librarian of my childhood often went out of her way to choose and bring materials based on individual readers' interests. I was able to access a wealth of literature that was otherwise inaccessible. There is little chance that those without means of transport would otherwise be able to access the information and entertainment that the library provides.

I have now lived in Canberra for nearly 20 years and my appreciation for the role of public libraries is undiminished. ACT Libraries provide a welcoming and safe space for people of all ages and backgrounds. I am glad to know that there is a place for people to just 'be', without any expectation that they will have to buy anything or give an account for being there. When I broke my arm a few years ago, I appreciated having a daily supply of DVDs and audio books available at no cost to keep me entertained during several weeks off work. I can access a range of Australian and overseas magazines and all kinds of materials that would otherwise deplete my budget. When I was commuting weekly to Sydney for study for a few years, I could access new audio books for the trip every week. I can suggest new books to add to the collection, and very often those suggestions will be taken up.

Opening hours

I work full time and it is often difficult to visit any of the branches during the day. I would be very likely to visit and borrow materials from the library more if the opening hours of my nearest branch (Kingston) were extended on at least some days. Any chance of closing at, say, 7pm instead of 5:30pm?

Whilst I am pleased to see that all branches are open on Saturdays, and thus enable working people at least one day in which they can get to the library, I would like to see Sunday opening hours extended to more branches, enabling more opportunities for people to visit.

Locations

I am glad that Kingston Library is my local library. It is easy to park nearby, it is located close to my route home from work, and I can access almost anything from another branch simply by making an advance request. Whilst there may not be space for a large number of people to study or read at any given time, having easy physical access to collection materials is an important factor for me as I tend to read at home rather than on site.

Might I suggest that the committee consider opening further 'shopfront'-style branches in smaller suburban centres, as a means of promoting wider and more equitable access for more Canberrans?

Visiting one of the larger branches often entails the hassle of finding and paying for parking, which puts me off visiting unless it is the weekend. I am much more likely to visit the library if it is in a place near where I'm already going for other things, or if I can walk to it easily from work or home. I can only imagine how much easier it might be for people with mobility issues, or with children, or without a car, if they could access a branch closer to their home.

I don't know whether there is a mobile library in the ACT, but I wonder whether it may be an idea worth exploring in addition to or instead of opening more branches—what about a service to hospitals, nursing homes and other community hubs?

Cost effectiveness of existing branches

Public libraries provide benefits to the community in many ways that cannot be measured. They provide safe and warm spaces for everyone, especially those who have nowhere else to be. They enable everyone to access information, especially those who have few other means of connecting with essential services and information that might lift them out of precarious life circumstances. They contribute to the whole community's literacy levels and raise understanding of other people and the world.

I encourage the committee to consider the intangible as well as the measurable ways that each library provides value for taxpayers' money. At the very least, surely funding for libraries is at least a partial safeguard against costs down the track for police, courts, prisons and hospitals.

I wish the committee well in its deliberations and trust that it will produce findings that will ensure that the many benefits of ACT Libraries and their services will be sustained well into the future. I would be pleased to speak further to my submission should it be useful.

Kind regards,

Matthew Stuckings