



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

Inquiry into ACT Libraries

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Inquiry into ACT Libraries

Australia's first public library was opened in 1856 in Melbourne. It was followed by libraries all around the nation, in capital cities, in union headquarters, in schools and other places – all dedicated to the enrichment of the public or members of the libraries through access to books and periodicals.

The goal of libraries has always been to provide access and equity, with the belief that nobody should be denied access to any information because he or she cannot afford the cost of a book or a periodical, nor access to the internet or any other form of information.

This is a noble and democratic ideal in an age when such ideals too often take a back seat to ideologies of market-forces and user pays – often equating to access only for those that can afford it.

If the idea of free public libraries were first proposed today, it is unlikely they would ever be created.

But we have them and the question now is how to best utilise them.

As an author I travel around Australia a lot and visit libraries in many cities and towns, discussing books and reading and the changing nature of libraries.

I have seen those that have diminished their collections of books in favour of CDs and DVDs to maintain relevance to community members and now find that they have lost that in the face of digital downloads. I have seen libraries that have re-invented themselves as information centres, attempting to manage decreased budgets by turning towards digital assets – which suit some users but not all.

I have also seen libraries in indigenous communities that provide books and magazines and computers and bean bags and places to hang out in safety.

I have seen libraries where homeless people commonly come in during the cold months to sit quietly and read newspapers and maybe have a sleep.

And I have seen libraries that only open for a few hours once a week in remote locations and have a line of people waiting outside them to exchange their books, or CDs or DVDs.

The point is, of course, that there is no one perfect plan for what makes a library in the modern world and the role of libraries is evolving as much as the needs of libraries are evolving.

The most popular libraries, I have found, are not necessarily measured by resources, but by how well they work with the members of the local community to better understand their needs and adapt to those needs.

For libraries are a community resource and the community should be considered stakeholders at the very least (not customers) or co-owners at the best.

And the points in the terms-of-reference of this Inquiry should be best addressed by input from those members of the community who are the stakeholders. This may entail different models of public engagement than calling for submissions to an Inquiry, but would be an invaluable way of understanding the needs of users.

In an era of significant social isolation, diminished trust in institutions, and challenges with fake news and contested truths, libraries remain one small bright light where people can talk to a librarian, find resources beyond what Google might favour for them, and engage with information, entertainment and people.

I live in a suburb in Canberra that has a library at the local shops and I consider it one of the key assets of the community hub there and any trip the shops usually involves a drop in to the library.

I know I am richer for it and our community is richer for it.

The role of the library may have changed since the initial vision of providing books to all those who could not otherwise afford them, but the principal of providing equity of access has not. If anything the role of the library has grown to encompass so many more things, and Canberra's libraries – whether that be children's story time, free internet access, newspapers and magazines, community meeting rooms, Justices of the Peace, courses or even borrowing books - are an important part of the city's soul.

I strongly recommend that the Inquiry support some forms of public engagement to get more input from the breadth of library users – or potential users – to broaden the quantitative and qualitative input to this Inquiry and ensure it best reflect the needs of general library users.

Craig Cormick

Former Chair, ACT Writers Centre

Former winner ACT Book of the Year.