



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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Before making this submission I took the time to read the public submissions already available online for this inquiry and was heartened to see the positive & appreciative comments in the submissions.

I don't use the library service much now I am retired as I no longer face long bus commutes each day, which were great for reading. However, I do pop in to either Erindale or Tuggeranong from time to time to browse the magazines, newspapers and specialist materials. My reasons for not using the library service more is partly because the collection has been weeded to non-existence so I don't tend to find the fiction or non-fiction I might like to read and for non-fiction I have easy access at home to the internet and e-resources anyway.

I have more than a usual interest in the fate of the ACT library service as I worked for the ACT libraries, first as a new librarian in the late 1980's for a couple of years and then many years later as a contractor in the mid 2010's. Between those times, I worked in jobs outside libraries but I kept in touch with former colleagues and kept abreast of the trends in, and challenges of, the delivery of library and community services over the years.

I agree with many of the comments and suggestions made in the published submissions,, especially those concerning the catalogue and webpage although I think the suggestion to re-instate the loan limit back to 100 items is a recipe for disaster (from my experience from working in libraries, overdue book fines are usually due to the customer having too many items out and not having time to read/watch them and/or losing track of them). The allowance at 50 times is overly generous, and could be argued to impact on the equitable access to books & other resources of the library.

The following pages provide my more detailed response to the Terms of Reference.

Regards

Mandy Cox



Response to Terms of Reference

1. The role of libraries within the ACT community

The ACT library service is as relevant today as it has ever been, possibly more so due to its expansion into the provision of free internet access and community support programs.

Some might argue that in the e-age we live in there is no need for a bricks and mortar library service. I don't agree and argue that while offering a range of e-services accessible from home is all very laudable, not everyone has the technology or skills to take advantage of this. The physical presence of a library itself is an important resource as a safe space where not only can you access the libraries in-house services & resources but also those provided by the community using the library space. The library has become a valuable community hub.

The provision of community spaces and programs provides a great social good by fostering and supporting literacy and life-long learning, social connection to those who might otherwise be overlooked, such as the home bound or new citizens learning our language and our funny way (otherwise known as culture and custom).

Libraries ACT's vision statement states that "*Libraries ACT champions literacy, learning and the pleasure of reading, and inspires and connects people, engaging them with their community and the world.*" – I would argue it also does one more thing – it also provides a positive face of local government and offers something for pretty much anyone in the community.

2. Strategic planning for libraries in the ACT including;

a. Current practice &

b. Potential revisions to current practice and the associated benefits

Within the constraints of a tight budget Libraries ACT has successfully adapted to the changes in society and its information/entertainment needs. The e-resources, the programs for ESL and support of community groups such as

knitting/craft groups are much appreciated and valued adjuncts to its core services as a 'library'.

However, I feel that at times the management and the decisions it makes are not always the wisest and/or offering the best use of resources. (Also, it does not appear to treat its staff very well, so it is a miracle that these staff are loyal, cheerful and helpful).

Here are some suggestions for improvement & why:

- Re-instate the mobile library. The decision to cease provision of **mobile library** was a short- sighted and a lost opportunity. It may have saved money in the short term but lost the library a valuable outreach tool. There are communities around Canberra that have no easy access to a public library. If you work in Fyshwick or out near the airport for example, you are not going to take a bus into Civic or Kingston during your lunch hour to get to that library and you may not be free or have suitable transport options to be able a library on weekends. I know a number of interstate library services still have mobile libraries and they seem to be a well- used and loved resources.

If, as this review suggests, there is currently a concern about the sustainability and affordability of maintaining the current number of suburban/city centre branches let alone expanding into new suburban areas then the mobile library offers some way to provide a library service in a more affordable way.

- Recruit qualified library staff, so that each branch at least has one or two library/information services trained and experience staff.
 - There has been a progressive de-professionalism of the team tasked to deliver the libraries ever increasing range of services – I was working as a contractor when the PO2s (senior qualified librarians) were cut in favour of more junior APS managers, which resulted in the loss of professional input into the day to day running of the libraries and a depth of knowledge and professionalism that was incalculable. (It also didn't do much for morale, too when this

happened as around the same time all positions were emptied and staff were required to compete for their own jobs. How can you expect loyalty and high performance from your staff, when you treat them like that?)

I understand that the now the majority of the front of house staff do not have any library qualifications, which at the very basic means they really do not understand the catalogue/classification system used by the library and therefore be able to fully exploit it for patrons. Having a library trained person means the library would also be able to offer a better standard of reference/reader advisory service and also provide support to senior management.

- Limit rotation of staff to a needs basis, rather than as a routine (if the multiple placement system is still the current practice). This encourages ownership of “their library” - why worry about something being broken or collection issues if you were not there the next day???? The staff also get to know the regular patrons and their needs.

Rostering staff across multiple branches sounds like a good idea and I understand the concept behind it was to ensure consistency of delivery and widen staff experience and abilities, but actually when it was implemented proved to be a disrespectful way to treat loyal staff, and a stupid application of the now discredited hot-desk idea. I hope this practice has been reversed or reduced.

- Update the online catalogue – not just the software but the contents in it. It is very frustrating to find records for items that are no longer held. I know that part of this problem is due to staff not being fully trained in how to delete or mask records – the catalogue is a clunky bit of software which makes it easy to omit a step (I will not go into cataloguing errors I see, as I guess that is the price of buying in records from different suppliers)
- Keep the shelved items in good order, so we can find the items we seek. Shelf reading, the practice of restoring order to chaos, seems to be a low priority in some branches due to the need to do so many other things, such

as shelving and filling online requests.

- Providing a *click and collect* service for physical items is a great especially when the book is at a branch the other end of town from where you live. But, it is a labour intensive exercise and I suspect that some of the large number of requests for books to be put on hold are due to the problem of not being able to find them! (This is based on anecdotal evidence)

c. opportunities for community involvement

- Establish a focus group to review proposals for new or changed services and policies. There is a lot of wisdom for free out there – might as well use it!
- Place a suggestion box in each branch & provide opportunity for feedback via the ACT library webpage or Facebook page. This feedback to receive a *timely* response back from the Director or their delegate.
- Mail out a short survey with the rates notices.
- Tap into the Minister's talk back on ABC Canberra radio.
- Continue & expand upon the Directors chat on the ABC local radio by perhaps also moving to speak on local commercial radio & maybe doing a column in the local free newspaper

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

- a. Non-digital offerings**
- b. Digital offerings**
- c. Education and training opportunities**
- d. Facilities available for public use**
- e. Spaces for learning, creativity and for achieving social inclusion**
- f. Other government services co-located with libraries, and**
- g. Any other library services sought by the community**

- The diversity of resources available is wonderful, while I don't use many of the digital resources such as online magazines or mango languages, I am sure many do.
- Please do keep buying in books and magazines in paper format. The format still has a lot to commend it – for one you don't need to remember to charge them up to read them.
- Home Library service is an excellent amenity. I volunteer in an aged care facility, and the residents and activity staff really appreciate this service.
- Provision of free internet is also a wonderful service, and heavily patronised. I understand some libraries also provide training and support in the use of PCs and the internet, which is a valuable service particularly as now days and yet often now you have to have these skills to apply for jobs or manage your relationship with government agencies.
- The provision of public spaces and supporting community programs not only has social benefits, it also brings people who may never otherwise have come into the library and discovered its wonderful resources.
- It's a great idea to offer other ACT government services located within the libraries or co-located to them. I know the Access Canberra drivers licence service in Civic and the ability to apply for a seniors (bus) card at any branch are well used. Similarly, offering to help with online tax lodgement is a valuable social service.

- The JP visits to various branches was a great innovation. It would be great if the number of days there is one available could be increased.

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

They are very well positioned, although I am sure more funding would help! Being asked to do more and more must have a cost impact, and at some point hard decisions will need to be made as to what is core and what is extra, but not necessary e.g. DVDs and CDs are popular, but are short lived and it could be argued to not represent good use of limited funds.

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

a. Opening hours

The current opening hours are reasonable, but the loss of late nights in some libraries know has been keenly felt and I am sure impacted on foot traffic. Opening on Sunday afternoons is very handy, although no doubt you are competing for patrons with weekend sports commitments!

b. Locations and

c. Disability access

The **location** of some branches is not user friendly, and not just for older patrons or parents with young children.

Accessing Kingston, Civic, Woden and Belconnen can be problematic– parking is not close by, it is not free and on a cold wet winter’s day who wants to trudge in the wind from the bus stop/terminal some distance away? Whereas Erindale, Gungahlin, Kippax are much more accessible having parking at the door of each library.

If a public library is to be located in a city centre (hub) it would be better *inside* the main shopping centre of that centre – something I have seen done successfully interstate. In Brisbane, for example there is a public library inside the Garden City complex right next to the (now defunct) Toys R Us –it was a brilliant location because it was highly visible. In rebuttal to the concern that

having a library in a shopping centre may make the public library a de-facto child care centre I would observe that it already happens now at some branches!

The development of joint use libraries was a sensible idea, and the concept could be expanded upon to provide wider access to some of the library services or resources. For example, there could be a library shop front in other government facilities, where you could at least access catalogue, return books and maybe even collect items for example, in the hospitals, the actual shopfronts where we pay bills, etc.

In terms of **Disability access** – some branches are better than others. Kingston branch is a cramped space, and an ergonomic nightmare for the staff (actually it is downright dangerous) and while much loved by its users fails to meet their needs in terms of space and resources. It is not disability friendly.

The distance from parking for some of the branches is also not disability friendly – Civic library for example is quite a hike from the bus station or parking areas.

6. The cost effectiveness of existing branches

It's a pity this needs to be considered, and needs to be weighed with the public good having a library, even a small one, in your area. Having said that, the ACT library service is probably spread too thinly to be able to offer a tip-top service in each branch. If there are lesser used libraries, there may be a reason (hours, accessibility, collection quality, staff quality) –a mobile service could supplement the current branches and also service growing new suburban areas such as Molonglo.

There joint use libraries are a sensible idea, and the concept could be expanded upon. For example, having a library shop front in other government facilities, where you could at least access catalogue, return books and maybe even collect items for example, in the hospitals, the actual shopfronts where we pay bills, etc.

7. Comparative analysis of ACT Libraries with library services in other jurisdictions and community take-up of these services - no comment

8. Any other relevant matter

The limited number or lack of public toilets in branches is annoying. Please can we have nice clean and easy to get too ones in all branches, not just some. For example, the decision to restrict access to the one external public toilet in the Erindale library is hardly user friendly....directing people to the public toilets in the nearby shopping centre only works if they ask.

I am comfortable in asking for a key, as is the case at Woden library, but I wonder if some might find that embarrassing and deter them from using that branch?