



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES
Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Chair), Miss Candice Burch MLA (Deputy Chair), Mr James Milligan

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into ACT Libraries

Submission Number: 079

Date Authorised for Publication: 17 October 2018

**To the Standing Committee on the Environment and
Transport and City Services inquiry the current and future
need for library sites and the best, most cost effective model
of library service points ...**

ACT Libraries

Submission by Helen Pryor Roberts

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To the Standing Committee on the Environment, and Transport and City Services

I wish to make the following submission to the Committee's Inquiry into the current and future need for library sites and the most cost-effective services points.

My qualifications are: Bachelor of Laws (Hons 1) ANU
 Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice (Merit) ANU
 Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Sydney
 Graduate Diploma in Librarianship UNSW
 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment CIT and AALIA.

My experience in relation to this inquiry is over forty years working in libraries and peak library organizations. These include:

- Law Librarian at ANU Law Library for fifteen years and ex officio member of the ANU Law Faculty
- Secondment as acting University Copyright Officer in the ANU Legal Office
- Circulation Librarian in Chifley and Menzies Libraries at Australian National University (ANU)
- Librarian in the ANU Bibliographic Control Unit
- The Law, Engineering, Aeronautical Engineering and Rare Book Libraries at Sydney University
- The Law Library and Law Staff Library at Macquarie University
- Copyright and Administrative Officer at AGLIN (Australian Government Library and Information Network)
- Teaching copyright at CIT (The Canberra Institute of Technology).
- I have been a professional member of ALIA, a volunteer and committee member (as convener, secretary and treasurer) throughout my career, and was awarded a 'silver pin' in 2016 for 40 years of membership.

I have a long-term interest in electronic resources and the Internet. For example:

- Helen Roberts, 'Winning Value when Dealing with Vendors of Electronic Products', *Australian Law Librarian*, 9 (4) 2001, p 296.
- My Law Hons thesis was "Cyberspace and the Law, with particular reference to the application of defamation law to the Internet.
- Helen Roberts, *Can the Internet be regulated?*, Research Paper no. 35 1995-96, Parliamentary Research Service, Department of the Parliamentary Library.

I was a member of the Better Suburbs Forum. Its report was tabled in the ACT Assembly on 18 September 2018. One of the areas reported on was the Library.

The assessment was very positive:

"ACT Libraries have demonstrated the ability to provide innovative services with existing funding. Libraries provide an important community service to connect people with each other and ideas. Maintaining this funding will ensure continued access to the range of services provided by ACT Libraries to all Canberrans, regardless of circumstances.

All Canberrans, particularly those in vulnerable and minority communities, will continue to enjoy the opportunities for lifelong learning, socialisation, skills improvement and language learning that the library environment offers.”

My response to the Terms of Reference

1. The role of libraries within the ACT community

In a society driven by fake news and the 24-hour media cycle, users can rely on libraries for quality information. Librarianship is one of the most trusted professions in Australia. People working in libraries promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interests of all Australians. Source <https://fair.alia.org.au/tik-launch>

2. Strategic planning for libraries in the ACT including

a. Current practice

I agree with the Better Suburbs Forum report which praised ACT Libraries and recommended maintaining the current level of funding. “ACT Libraries have demonstrated the ability to provide innovative services with existing funding. Libraries provide an important community service to connect people with each other and ideas. Maintaining this funding will ensure continued access to the range of services provided by ACT Libraries to all Canberrans, regardless of circumstances. All Canberrans, particularly those in vulnerable and minority communities, will continue to enjoy the opportunities for lifelong learning, socialisation, skills improvement and language learning that the library environment offers.”

b. Potential revisions to current practice and the associated benefits

The Better Suburbs Forum report provides some ideas for changes to the current approach:

“We should see libraries continuing to evolve their services and, programs and facilities in line with their current commitment to innovation. To provide ongoing access to these, TCCS (Transport Canberra and City Services) should consider whether libraries are best located to service the local community. TCCS should consider rationalisation/consolidation of libraries in more accessible locations. It would help community groups which could access meeting rooms at libraries into the evening.

In my observation, Libraries ACT is run very efficiently. Recent changes to promote efficiency include:

1. Users previously had to unlock DVD covers in a special machine after borrowing them and then the staff had to relock them on return. It was all too easy to forget to unlock them and take them home locked. This extra step and the extra machine have now been removed.

2. Individual CDs in an audio book used to be marked with detailed identifying information; this is now no longer done.

c. Opportunities for community involvement

The recent Better Suburbs report responded to this aspect.

“Libraries will continue to foster a sense of involvement in the wider community through the provision of low cost and accessible meeting spaces. The community should actively provide feedback to libraries on the demand for and quality of library services and promote the range of services and facilities available to their friends and family. The community can assist the elderly, less advantaged and non-native speakers of English by volunteering through their local library, noting that core library services must always be provided by permanent staff and professional librarians. Many Canberrans are unaware of the range of digital and non-traditional resources that libraries make available to the community. TCCS should make efforts to increase community awareness of these resources.

There is a demand in the community to assist libraries directly. TCCS should explore the establishment of a Library Foundation through the Greater Good Program framework.”

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

a. Non-digital offerings

Books are still in demand ranging from early reading books to large print books. Displays of suggested reads by library staff are very effective. I brought a grandchild aged 7 to Kippax Library and a very helpful librarian quizzed Ashley about what she liked reading and guided her to 4 books, which she borrowed and enjoyed.

b. Digital offerings

Ms Little also said that the pattern of library use had changed so that, rather than coming to a library to browse, people tend to reserve what they want to use online and come to the library when they were notified the items have come in. With this change in use, a most effective service is the New Materials list that is put up monthly on the Library website. I use it to book materials I want to use and borrow them when notified they have come to my nominated library.

c. Education and training opportunities

Excellent educational and training opportunities are provided. Particularly useful are classes and then individual sessions on how to use new technology. However art classes tend to be full as they are so popular.

d. Facilities available for public use

Computers connected to the Internet and printing facilities.

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

Examples are many including Art classes, Mahjong and Mandarin preschool groups

f. Other government services co-located with libraries

It would be ideal location as services such as Legal Aid and Justices of the Peace serve there part time already

g. Any other library services sought by the community

The Canberra population is aging and many older people are isolated and lack transport. The proportion of the population with disabilities is now 21% according to information provided at the Better Suburbs Forum. Rather than just delivering books and other items to them it would be good for these users to be brought to libraries. In Lindfield in Sydney my father (a retired professor) in his eighties was picked up and taken to Gordon Library in Ku-ring-gai once a week. It was the social and intellectual highlight of his week. All the people on the bus got to know each other.

The New Materials list put online each month has a number of useful sections such as local authors as well as sections for children and young people. However, considering the ageing of the Canberra population, I consider a section for new materials for older people or those without good sight would be useful. This would include large print books, CD Roms and MP3s.

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

I have spoken to a number of non-users of the library and find invariably they have no idea of any library services beyond books. Yet the Director of Libraries ACT, Vanessa Little, indicated at the Better Suburbs Forum visit to the Belconnen Library that there now were more electronic than hard copy loans. She also displayed a large poster at the Better Suburbs Forum showing the varied types of material available online. One item was Magda Szubanski's autobiography, *Reckoning: A Memoir*, which Ms Little said, was the most popular item with library users.

For example, the Library has a prominent Large Print Books display for library visitors but they are not aggregated as a section in New Materials. Similarly CD-ROM or MP3 audio books are excellent for the same group. It would be helpful to inform them that they can increase the print size of new online materials so they can be read more easily.

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

a. Opening hours

Would it be possible to open libraries on Sunday and close on Monday rather than just have a few main libraries open on Sunday? I know longer hours on a

rotated basis through the week were tried a few years ago but perhaps that was=as too complicated

b. Library locations

We need not more libraries but better libraries that are better located at transport hubs. For example:

“Surry Hills Library in Sydney is more like the town common, in the old sense of the word. ... It is in Crown Street which has good coffee, wicked ice cream and wine bars ... it is open seven days a week... Libraries are sanctuaries from a busy life, communal in a way a shopping centre cannot be and helpful in ways government helplines simply are not.” Source Caroline Overington, 'Bigger, better libraries get by on precious little', *The Weekend Australian*, 18-19 August 2018, p 21.

Some examples of issues

Kingston

Library services were moved from Griffith to the much bigger shopping centre of Kingston to give users better access to shops and cafes. But the site was always too small to fulfill many other library uses apart from borrowing and return. Since being located there, further development around the Kingston shopping centre has reduced the number of car park spaces which has now made access to the library really difficult. It is the sort of shopping centre where you drive round and round, hoping you will find someone leaving. My hairdresser moved from Kingston for this reason. Though my daughter lives in Narrabundah and Kingston is the closest library, none of her family uses it because access is too difficult. However it can be useful for afters hours return into the chute for books borrowed from elsewhere.

Belconnen

I consider Belconnen the worst located of the ACT libraries, which is reflected in the downturn in borrowings from that library in spite of the large increase in population in the area. It is not well located as it is a couple of blocks from Westfield shopping centre. It also has almost no parking on the road outside the front and a difficult entrance down steep steps or a very steep slope. It is very hard for old or handicapped users to climb up them to get to the road again.

There is no dedicated library parking, access to the front door is difficult and it is a significant distance (a couple of large blocks) and across a divided major road from Westfield Shopping Centre. The Senior Citizens Centre next door, which is much less used than the library, has several parking spaces specifically allocated to Senior Citizens club members only. In the past I used that library a lot but now drive many more kilometers to Kippax where there is flat access, a transport hub and free short-term parking near the library. I have noticed a large number of students and disadvantaged people using the library computers in Belconnen on the weekend and that use should be accommodated within the library system.

It would be hard to relocate the library to the outside of Westfield as that centre is turned inwards. This means you have to drive right into the parking station and then walk to wherever you want to go. This layout discourages a quick visit to buy a few things and to pop into a library as well.

The only feasible improvement I can see would be to move the Library main entrance doors to the back. That is to have them open where the emergency exit doors are at the back so that there is flat access from the commuter car park in Cohen Street. If this were done, the after hours return chutes should also be put there. Those chutes at present are deep in the hollow at the front of the library and are out of sight of the road and many women are reluctant to use them after hours for safety reasons. However I think the library would be better relocated to a more suitable site.

Civic

Civic Library is not well located and many Canberrans are not aware that it is there. It is across a major road, and some distance from the bus interchange; parking is difficult and no longer located in the city centre. Its previous location was much more central and suitable for a hub. I could pop in there before my bus came or at lunchtime. I have never used the library in the new location.

c. Disability Access

Disability access must be considered at the design stage and existing buildings should be checked to ensure they continue to conform to current standards. See also my suggestion of a library bus in section 3.

6. The cost effectiveness of existing branches

I would query Belconnen's cost effectiveness as loans have declined. Also as it is 50 years old it has expensive repair issues such as the lift.

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

Ms Little told the Better Suburbs Forum that the proportion of ACT population who are registered library users is about 67%. This is well above the proportion in any other jurisdiction in Australia.

8. Any legislative considerations that may be relevant

No comment

9. Any other relevant matter.

What efforts have been made to get the information about the library review out to non-users? They are actually the people most in need of library services but generally do not realize the extent of the materials and services offered by the library. The Better Suburbs Forum report raised the general lack of awareness of the services TCCS provide to the community and how to access them.