

2018

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

Inquiry into ACT Libraries

OPENING STATEMENT

**Mr Chris Steel MLA
Minister for City Services**

Introduction

Good Afternoon Chair and Committee Members.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee's inquiry into the ACT Libraries.

Libraries change lives in the ACT. From educating parents as their child's first literacy teacher, to enabling the joy of reading and books, to providing unemployed people with assistance to seek work; or teaching digital literacy to seniors, our libraries impact on the lives of people of all ages, interests and personal circumstances.

Around 60% of our growing population are library members and while the loans of materials have declined a bit over the past few years in line with national trends, visits are strong and participation in learning programs is high.

The roots of our library service go back to 1948 when the National Library of Australia offered the first lending collection of fiction books. Small libraries were then established in the early 1950's focussed mainly on services and collections for children.

Today we have nine branch public libraries and the amazing ACT Heritage Library. Our public libraries are open almost 412 hours per week to support literacy and lifelong learning in our city. The Library provides about 550,000 physical items for loan. Last year more than 42,500 digital items were downloaded.

Our public libraries hold books, magazines and newspapers in around 18 languages other than English and a review of this is currently underway to

ensure that new and emerging languages in the Canberra community can be considered.

The ACT Heritage Library collects, preserves and makes accessible the social, cultural and environmental history of Canberra as a place and a community. A visit to the Heritage Library introduces you to over 106,500 publications, photographs, diaries, maps and many other items about our lives as Canberrans. There is even the Canberra board game to look at. Historians, students, researchers and the media use this rich collection of items that speak of Canberra and Canberrans. This collection places the ACT in the national record of Australia.

Public libraries are the 'community's living room' and Libraries ACT offers not only its wonderful collections to the community but our libraries are places for the community to meet, share, learn and be engaged. In a time of rapid technological change our libraries offer access to the digital world through internet computers and wifi. There are about 72,000 hours of free internet use accessed by the community each year.

Our libraries have also embraced the digital world in terms of their collections. The use of e-books, e-audio books, e-magazines and digital music recently, for the first time, surpassed the loans made at each individual library branch.

Lifelong learners are people who are able to navigate life in our complex world most effectively. They have a growth mindset and know how to investigate an issue or learn a new skill to help them adapt, change or address a problem. Libraries facilitate lifelong learners and our libraries in Canberra offer a broad range of learning programs to support this.

One of the most important programs that our libraries offer is Giggle and Wiggle for babies from birth to two years and their parents and carers. This might sound like a lot of fun – and it is – but there is a serious side to Giggle and Wiggle. This program reaches almost 36,000 people each year and it teaches parents how to interact with their baby so that their early literacy and language skills are well developed, putting them in the best position for later literacy. Giggle and Wiggle sessions will increase in 2019 and, after feedback from the ACT Government’s Better Suburbs consultations, sessions will be held on weekends to increase the availability of this program to more Canberrans.

Libraries ACT has 11 story times a week for children from 3-5 years of age and the library offers regular bi-lingual story times in Farsi, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Arabic, Indonesian and Thai.

Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is very important to our library service. The Library has an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learning Co-ordinator who works with the local indigenous community to promote using library services, as well as facilitating the celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the broader community. To celebrate International Mother Tongue Day special story times are held in Ngunnawal language, to share the stories and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who served in the Australian Defence Services, the library hosted a photographic exhibition called ‘Serving Country’ earlier this year.

Our library service enjoys a great relationship with the ACT Government’s Child and Family Centres, providing programs and support to the community who access these centres. The library even provides its deleted children’s books to these centres so that they can be given for free to families so that kids can

have more books to read in their homes, no matter what their family's financial circumstances are.

Learning programs are offered for all ages and interests. Our library has a team of staff who investigate community needs in partnership with branch staff and identify presenters who can deliver learning programs to meet those needs. In October and November alone you can learn to 'Live your best life'; raise your child bilingually or design a quilt.

Library staff offer many one on one sessions to help those in the community who are not 'digital natives'. You can learn how your smartphone works, how to use Skype and facetime – so that you can do digital story time with your grandchildren on the other side of the world – as well as discover what social media is all about. The library plays an important role in assisting the community, young and old, to be cyber-safe. Our library is an accredited eSmart Library under the Alanna and Madeline Foundation and Telstra eSmart Libraries program.

Programs for non-English speaking adults include the very popular regular English Conversation classes and the library's partnership with Global Sisters provides online privacy and security training to women from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Sadly there are adults in our community who are English speakers but who have difficulty reading and writing. I am very proud that our library service has stepped in to assist learners in this situation with a Volunteer Literacy program conducted in partnership with a range of local community organisations. Learners are being supported to develop their reading skills in a respectful way that is relevant to the learners' needs.

Libraries ACT has decided to add to the lifelong team with a new Disability Learning Co-ordinator. This position will be advertised soon and, like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and the Multicultural positions, this person will engage with people with disabilities to ensure that they are able to fully access library services.

National research conducted in 2013 found that Libraries ACT offers the best return for investment to the community of any state or territory in Australia. For every dollar that the ACT Government puts into libraries, it receives \$4.10 back in benefit to the community.

The ACT Government recognised that the library's computer system and website needed updating and funds have been provided to update both of these important tools. We expect the new integrated library management system to be operational in early 2019 and the website to be live soon.

Towards the end of this calendar year we are expecting to relocate the ACT Heritage Library from upstairs at the Woden branch library to 255 Canberra Avenue, Fyshwick. This move is necessary as the Heritage collection has outgrown the Woden site. Preparations are being made to the new site so that the collection is secure and held in the right climactic conditions.

In 2019 Libraries ACT will be developing a new strategic plan for its public libraries. Its current plan, "Renewing Libraries: Libraries, Literacy and Learning" concludes in 2019. The Library hopes to collaborate widely with the community to develop its new strategy, as well as looking to best practice in libraries across the world. Of course the findings of this Inquiry will also inform the Library's next strategic plan.

The ACT Heritage Library released its strategic plan, A Capital Identity, recently. This plan sets the course for collecting and preserving materials in both physical and digital formats for the students and researchers of the future.

In summary, I thank the Committee for the opportunity today to discuss the important services being delivered by ACT Libraries. Our libraries really **do** change lives. I remember going to the Woden Library as a child and how access to resources and learning opportunities have shaped me. This is multiplied many times over in the lives of the over 200,000 members of the library and the almost 2 million visitors that go to libraries each year.

Libraries inform, educate, inspire and support our community. They are havens for some; and places of excitement and discovery for others. Our libraries perform well when compared with other states and territories and are much loved by Canberrans, as evidenced by the many notes and comments received when we were recently able to partially reopen the Dickson Library after works to repair water damage.

Our libraries will continue to embrace the digital world while not forgetting the importance of the physical book. Library staff will continue to embrace the collaboration that they are well known for.

The ACT Heritage Library will continue to gather, preserve and make available our unique ACT identity.

In essence our libraries will continue to deliver their vision of “Literacy and Learning for Life”.

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