



AUSTRALIAN  
PUBLIC LIBRARY  
ALLIANCE



Australian Library and  
Information Association

## **Submission in response to the Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee review into telecommunications services in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia**

**5 August 2018**

### **1. About us**

#### **ALIA**

The Australian Library and Information Association is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support.

#### **ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance**

The ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance advises the ALIA Board of Directors about matters relating to public libraries and facilitates collaboration in the public library sector. Members of Alliance are representatives from ALIA, the state-based public library associations, territory libraries and LINC Tasmania.

#### **Australia's public library network**

Australia has more than 1600 central, branch and mobile libraries, with 9.3 million registered members and more than 113 million customer visits each year. Offering books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs, wifi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, they are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource. In 2015-2016, the number of public access internet devices provided by public libraries nationally was 12,806, an increase of 28.4% on the number in 2010-2011.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in the digital space, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind, particularly in terms of the ability to access government information.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla.aust-pub-lib-stats\\_2015-16.pdf](https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla.aust-pub-lib-stats_2015-16.pdf)

Public libraries provide:

- Support for safe online experiences
- High speed broadband internet connection in a safe, friendly community space.
- PC terminals, tablets and other devices (including technology petting zoos)
- Spaces for exploring innovative digital technologies
- Training and informal help for people to develop digital literacy skills
- Relevant and engaging content.

## 2. Introduction

ALIA and APLA welcome this opportunity to respond to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2018.

In 2009, ALIA submitted a paper to the Senate Select Committee on the National Broadband Network. This paper, prepared on behalf of the state-based public library associations and territory libraries (now known as the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance), explained the role and potential of public libraries in delivering the national broadband strategy and advocated for 'the development of an informed society that can partake and participate in skilled decision-making'.

In 2015, we responded to the Regional Telecommunications Review noting that: "If e-government is to be a reality and if there is to be equity of access to essential information and resources, the strengths of the public library network should be recognised and harnessed, and a significantly greater investment made in faster internet access through these community hubs."

While the years have passed, our proposition remains the same. We support equality of access to the benefits arising from our increasingly digital society and view public libraries as having an important role in bridging the gap for those who don't have the skills, knowledge, money, devices or high speed connection to be regular and confident users of the internet.

## 3. Australian Digital Inclusion Index

The first Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) was released in 2016, as a joint venture between Telstra, RMIT University and the Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne, powered by Roy Morgan Research (ALIA has a place on the Research Advisory Committee). The ADII identified the barriers to digital inclusion and the impact on communities.

As described in the ADII 2017<sup>2</sup>, digital inclusion in Australia is growing, but gaps between digitally included and excluded Australians are substantial and widening. "The ADII reveals substantial differences between rural and urban areas. In 2017 digital inclusion is 7.9 points higher in capital cities (58.6) than in country areas (50.7). The overall 'Capital-Country gap' has narrowed slightly since 2015, from 8.5 (2015), to 8.3 (2016), to 7.9

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<sup>2</sup> <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>

(2017). However, this is not reflected in all states and territories. While South Australia, Western Australia, and Queensland narrowed the gap between capital city and country residents, the gap widened in Victoria, New South Wales, and Tasmania."

#### **4. Key areas of interest**

##### **Q1 What are the main barriers to people in regional communities increasing their use of digital technologies and possible solutions for overcoming these barriers.**

The ADII highlights the three main reasons why people are not digitally included: access, affordability and digital ability. Public libraries address all three barriers. We provide nearly 13,000 public access internet devices across the country in metro, regional, rural and remote locations and most libraries offer WiFi for people's own devices. The library service is free at the point of use. We run classes and give one-on-one support to library users to help them develop and build their tech skills.

One issue for libraries is our ability to meet the demand for high speed broadband internet access within our current funding. Often, we have to cap access to devices and WiFi by imposing time and data restrictions because we have to stretch a limited resource across a growing number of users. Another issue is the cost of training staff in regional, rural and remote locations. Training visits are expensive and infrequent and there is a strong need for connectivity that can deliver online training and support services through platforms such as Webex, Zoom and Skype.

As more government services are delivered online, even those who lack confidence with digital technologies are required to interact with government websites. We find libraries are often the place people come to for help navigating complex web pages and online forms. As a partial solution to the difficulty people experience, library patrons could provide a valuable cohort for user testing of these sites.

##### **Q2 How are people in regional communities currently using their broadband service and how might they increase the benefits of using this technology?**

Libraries are used by all ages for formal and informal study. We run homework clubs for school pupils. As more VET and higher education courses are delivered online, we are seeing more people using public libraries for private and group study sessions. We also support lifelong learners – people who are coming into libraries to find out how to use technology to communicate with friends, research family history, access government services, and so on. Again, we are constrained by the limitations on bandwidth.

With more people working remotely and others running small businesses from their homes, the demand for broadband services in libraries has increased. Services such as online business databases and web-conferencing have been incorporated where there is funding available to do so.

*Goldfields Library Corporation in Victoria ran a microbusiness expo in 2017, with 35 small businesses displaying their wares to library visitors. It was a low- cost opportunity for the companies to reach 2,000 people each day and the chance for business*

representatives to give talks to library users to encourage entrepreneurship and build employment skills. One of the topics was how to gain the most from free online training, available free via library subscriptions to Lynda.com and other resources.

**Q5 What can be done to improve access to and uptake of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities?**

Again, it is a question of providing the funding and resources for libraries to introduce tech programs serving remote communities.

*Since 2002, the State Library of Queensland has partnered with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councils to support a network of Indigenous Knowledge Centres (IKCs) in remote communities of Queensland. IKCs provide library and library-related services.*

*There are 24 IKCs operating in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities across Queensland. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities without an IKC are trialling an Ideas Box to assist the community. The Ideas Box is a portable mixed-media centre developed by Libraries without Borders. It provides an introduction to library services for the communities currently without infrastructure to house an IKC.*

*Digital inclusion programs commenced in 2007 through the Taking IT On initiative. The digital inclusion focus continued through the Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access program which ran from 2009 to 2015. Deadly Digital Communities commenced in August 2017 as an initiative of the State Library and Telstra. It is being delivered in partnership with local councils through their IKCs. Deadly Digital professionally develops local technology leaders to continue regular digital literacy training through their IKC.*

**Q6 Are there practical examples of how communications services can improve the well-being of people in remote Indigenous communities?**

Across the public library network, there are many instances of digital programs improving the well-being of people in remote Indigenous communities.

*Over the last seven years the partnership between Northern Territory Library and the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS) has delivered internet connectivity and computer rooms into many remote Australian Aboriginal communities.*

*To date, CAYLUS has supported the development of computer rooms at Mt Alan, Laramba, Mt Liebig, Kintore, Harts Range, Engawala, Lake Nash, Areyonga, Amoonguna, Ikuntji, Docker River, Tjuwanpa, Ntaria, Titjikala and Papunya. They have also developed computer rooms at three town camp learning centres in Alice Springs: Trucking Yards, Hidden Valley and Karnte.*

*These community spaces have enabled skills development, literacy and numeracy, access to internet banking and government services and self-directed learning for all ages – and not least, a fun way for kids to engage with the wider world. As more*

*government and other services transition to online access only, connectivity and access to computers is becoming increasingly essential to those living in remote Aboriginal communities.*

**Q7 What skills do people need to get the most from their digital technologies and where can they learn these skills?**

Libraries provide technical support for people who may never have used a computer before. We run classes and give one-on-one help to seniors, new migrants and others who have not had the opportunity to acquire digital skills. At the same time, we see our role as helping people to navigate the web safely.

Launched in 2012, eSmart Libraries is an \$8 million, multi-year partnership between the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, Telstra Foundation and Australian public libraries. The program has been rolled out across Australia, in more than 1,000 locations, ensuring libraries and library users develop the skills everyone needs for smart, safe and responsible use of technology.

*Esperance is small and isolated town in Western Australia. This limits the options available for the community when it comes to in-person technological assistance. Some customers find the rate of technological change alarming. Just altering the user interface design of a website that they were previously familiar with is a major barrier to their continued use of technology, and one that occurs frequently. Customers sometimes arrive at the library quite distressed because their technology seems to have a mind of its own and they have no idea where to start or what to do. Customers are increasingly relying on the library to access government services online. Some do not have or use computers so they need intensive help to accomplish basic tasks.*

*Tech Help sessions at the Esperance Public Library, offered since 2013, meet this demand for digital support and eSmart accreditation was a natural extension of the service. Esperance became eSmart in April 2017.*

*As an eSmart library, Esperance is recognised as a safe and highly accessible place for people to get help with technology. There is nowhere else in the community that provides this service and the library serves the entire range of socioeconomic and age groups, making libraries ideal for delivery of such important information and assistance. Libraries are trusted information providers and have been for a very long time. Staff members know how to communicate in a way that customers can understand, and the service and information provided is free.*

**Q10 What economic or social indicators could be used to guide investment to further improve mobile coverage?**

We propose that libraries in regional, rural and remote communities which score low on three SEIFA indexes (*Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, Index of Economic Resources and Index of Education and Occupation*) should automatically, and without

reference to cost be connected to either nbn™ Fibre to the Premises or nbn™ Fibre To The Node.

A low score on these three indexes should mean an allocation of funds goes to disadvantaged areas because:

- There are many households with low income, many people with no qualifications, or many people in low skill occupations.
- A lack of wealth probably means little or no access to a technology that nearly 99% of Australians have access to: and
- There is relatively lower education and occupation status of people in the area in general.

In these scenarios, the social imperatives should be paramount in delivering equitable access to all Australians and should outweigh any financial constraints.

## **5. In summary**

Reliable and affordable access to the internet is critical to regional, rural and remote communities for access to services, access to information, access to education and employment opportunities. In remote areas, where home internet access is not available or not affordable, internet access through the public library service is correspondingly more important.

Where available, faster speeds from NBN services have generated a great improvement, however, overall bandwidth is not keeping pace with citizen expectations and is not supporting a good library user experience. In remote areas, bandwidth barely supports basic services such as email and banking.

State, territory and local government funding of public libraries is already over-stretched and cost is a significant barrier to libraries offering adequate high speed internet access and digital programs for their users.

## **6. Recommendation**

Consideration should be given to a new funding stream to support libraries and enable them to provide digital programs and services, particularly in regional, rural and remote locations. Introducing a sustainable funding model would ensure equity of access to the benefits of new technologies for all Australians and help bridge the widening digital divide.

### **ALIA contact:**

Sue McKerracher, CEO, Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA),  
9-11 Napier Close, Deakin ACT 2600  
t 02 6215 8215 [REDACTED]  
w [www.alia.org.au](http://www.alia.org.au) e [sue.mckerracher@alia.org.au](mailto:sue.mckerracher@alia.org.au)