

Submission in response to the National Indigenous Australians Agency Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan discussion paper

October 2021

1. About us

ALIA

The Australian Library and Information Association is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. We represent school, TAFE, university, health, law, government and other special libraries. Through our Australian Public Library Alliance, we connect public libraries across all states and territories.

Australia has more than 1600 central, branch and mobile public libraries, with 9.3 million registered members and, in a non-COVID year, more than 110 million physical customer visits. 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. The number of public access internet devices provided by public libraries nationally exceeds 14,200.¹

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. Public libraries provide:

- Support for safe online experiences
- High speed broadband internet connection in a safe, friendly community space.
- PCs, tablets, devices and the opportunity to explore innovative digital technologies
- Training and informal help for people to develop digital literacy skills, including media literacy awareness to counter fake news, mis- and disinformation
- Relevant and engaging content.

Libraries across Australia are committed to improving services for people identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, whether they live in cities, towns or remote communities.²

National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA)

National and State Libraries Australasia is the representative body for the national, state and territory libraries of Australia and New Zealand. We share ideas and expertise, delivering projects that are considered to be of national value, and that can best be accomplished by

¹ <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-publibstats-2019-20.pdf>

² <https://read.alia.org.au/improving-library-services-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples;>
<https://read.alia.org.au/2019-year-libraries>

collaboration. Our priorities are in shared digital systems, strengthening community identity, and building cultural and intellectual capital.

During 2020-2021, our nine Australian libraries supported nearly 5 million visits to library buildings (despite the effects of pandemic-related closures) and an additional 62.8 million visits to our websites. We answered more than 407,000 research enquiries.

NSLA libraries have collaborated closely for the past decade on the subject of Indigenous collections and services. This work led to a substantial investment in 2018 in the NSLA Culturally Safe Libraries Program – a three-year program including Indigenous cultural competency training for 2,000 staff, Indigenous collections workshops, and the creation of a suite of online resources for the GLAM sector to assist in working with Indigenous collections. These received over 15,000 page views in their first year. In addition to our commitment to developing the cultural awareness capabilities of our workforce, NSLA libraries are working individually and in partnership to ensure that Indigenous communities feel welcomed, supported and culturally safe in our buildings and in our digital spaces.

2. Background

The latest Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), released on 15 October 2021,³ revealed that COVID-19 has exacerbated the digital divide, increasing the gap between those with the highest level of digital inclusion and those with the lowest. Indigenous Australians living in remote Australia generally fall into this latter grouping, although sample sizes are too small to be wholly reliable.

National, state, territory and public libraries use these findings to shape services that meet the needs of communities. These services assist in the development of an informed society that can participate in decision-making, and help to make e-government a reality by providing equity of access to essential information and resources. In order to fully realise these benefits, the strengths of the public library network must be recognised and harnessed, with a significantly greater investment in faster internet access through these community hubs.

In 2018, we asked the federal government to give consideration to a new funding stream to support libraries and enable them to provide digital programs and services, particularly in regional, rural and remote locations. We explained that 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.

Our position remains the same in 2021. As public libraries' operational funding is provided at the state, territory and local level, they can be a blind spot for federal government and yet the network is an immensely valuable asset for progressing digital transformation and bridging the digital divide – and during COVID we have seen an exponential growth in demand for online resources and support.

Federal government-funded programs delivered specifically through the public library network have the proven ability to make a significant difference to the digital capability and connectivity of Australians of all ages, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in metro, regional and remote Australia.

³ Thomas, J., Barraket, J., Parkinson, S., Wilson, C., Holcombe-James, I., Kennedy, J., Mannell, K., Brydon, A. (2021) *Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021*. Melbourne: RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology and Telstra.

3. Introduction: why libraries?

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 critical.

As established and trusted places for digital access, skills development and resources, public libraries have always been well placed to support individuals, families and communities. Over the last 18 months, ALIA has been working with the Australian Digital Health Agency to train library staff in the use of My Health Record, so that they can assist community members to use this tool. Libraries have been delivery partners across metro, regional and remote areas for the Australian Government's *Be Connected* program for senior Australians. During city- and state-wide lockdowns, libraries continued to provide online services 24/7.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, however, public libraries faced extraordinary demand on their resources to support people accessing government services, such as Service Australia. With the emergence of the pandemic, public libraries have seen an exponential rise in people seeking assistance with complex government requirements and frequently changing information online. The additional burden has been felt disproportionately in regional and remote area libraries where staffing and PCs are limited. A recent study by Charles Sturt University⁴ identified specific challenges for the regions, noting that 'outer regional and remote libraries were less able to adapt their services and programs to meet user needs during lockdowns than were major city and inner regional libraries.'

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. Often, public libraries 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 uses and users. Similarly, there are cost barriers for small regional and remote councils maintaining IT equipment, with services contracted out to providers that may only visit once a year. Consequently, some small libraries are operating with outdated hardware and/or software (at the front and back of house areas) which limits functionality.

While public libraries are well positioned to support a place-based approach to access and digital inclusion, this can only be achieved with new partnerships and initiatives, including with the telecommunications industry, and with recognition and funding at the federal government level.

4. Response to the discussion paper: issues affecting Indigenous Australians living in remote communities

The whole-of-population issues we have described above are most keenly felt in remote Australia and have the greatest impact on the wellbeing and rights of Indigenous Australians.

Documented experiences of libraries in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland illustrate particularly well the needs of these remote communities, and the opportunities that Australia's public library networks provide.

⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24750158.2021.1901329>

Access

Libraries already operate as digital technology hubs within communities. However, connectivity, bandwidth issues and high costs are barriers to realising the full potential of libraries as digital centres. In addition, ADSL services are being discontinued in remote areas and replaced with, for example, similarly priced Skymuster Plus services. These services have latency issues and are unable to support existing services such as Smart TVs and gaming consoles, resulting in reduced services.

An example of the potential for libraries to reduce access barriers in remote communities comes from Library & Archives NT (LANT), and its partnership with regional councils through the Public Library Funding Agreement. Many remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory do not have their own library service. To address this issue, LANT provides free community Wi-Fi services in 48 remote communities. In 2020-21 these community internet services were used 275,213 times, representing an increase in usage in the last four years of over 1,000 percent from 23,326 sessions in 2016-17. In addition to the large increase in usage, regional councils in the NT are increasingly leveraging this connectivity to build digital skills programs. For example, MacDonnell Regional Council, which does not operate any physical libraries, uses the Wi-Fi access points provided by LANT to develop its MacConnect⁵ programs to support digital literacy and cybersafety across its 13 communities.

Affordability

Access and affordability are linked. Where available, faster speeds from NBN services have seen a great improvement in the capacity of libraries to cater for individuals and families who cannot afford internet access. Without this kind of connectivity, overall bandwidth cannot keep pace with citizen expectations and does not support a good user experience for those relying on library services. In remote areas, bandwidth barely supports basic services such as email and banking.

As established providers of digital infrastructure (internet, PCs and mobile devices), alongside digital literacy training and technical support, public libraries across Australia can become hotspots for local digital initiatives and should be considered through their local councils as potential lead bodies in funding applications for Indigenous digital inclusion projects.

Digital ability

While digital technology has continued to evolve, there has been one single consistent driver of technology uptake and digital skills development: the availability of relevant content. This holds true irrespective of demographic factors or location. The experience of libraries has demonstrated that digital projects and initiatives related to people's needs and interests (e.g. language, culture, family history) achieve the best results. Our role as memory institutions that preserve and share historical and contemporary collections, combined with our capacity to deliver programs to a wide range of community audiences, means that libraries have a unique role to play in supporting Indigenous digital inclusion.

Public libraries run a host of programs to assist regional and remote communities in building digital skills. In Western Australia, for example, the State Library is a network partner of the *Be Connected* initiative, working to increase the digital confidence, skills and online safety of older Australians. Training sessions for Indigenous digital mentors have been held in

⁵ <https://www.macdonnell.nt.gov.au/services/library>

Geraldton, Carnarvon, Kalgoorlie, Karratha, Roebourne and Manjimup for the *Be Connected* capacity building project.

Acknowledging the importance of relatable content as a driver for the uptake and application of digital skills, the State Library of Western Australia has run *Be Connected* in concert with its own *Storylines*⁶ program. The *Storylines* team works with Indigenous communities, organisations and families to discover and describe digital photographs and records relating to their ancestors within State Library collections, thereby building information literacy and sharing language and knowledge. The success of this program can be attributed to a partnership model based on trust and authenticity.

In Queensland, the well-established Deadly Digital Communities initiative runs as a partnership between State Library of Queensland, Telstra and local government, to develop digital literacy skills in remote and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and to assist community members in accessing health, social and financial services. State Library of Queensland's Palm Island Centenary exhibition⁷ is another example of a project that leveraged content that resonated with the needs and interests of a community to support the uptake and development of digital skills and inclusion.

Despite their ongoing commitment to support digital inclusion, one major issue for libraries in providing contemporary information and advice, particularly in regional and remote areas, is the cost of training and keeping staff upskilled. Training visits are expensive and infrequent and there is a strong need for connectivity that can deliver online training and support services through platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

Data

While libraries are actively engaged in acquiring data to support evidence-based decisions, we do not have the capacity to measure Indigenous digital inclusion. We welcome the work done by data researchers, including the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society at RMIT University's longitudinal study over 2021-2024.

We would welcome changes to the next Australian Digital Inclusion Index that could shed more light on the experiences of Indigenous Australians in this area.

5. Summary

We support equality of access to the benefits arising from our increasingly digital society, and view 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.

Much more could be achieved by federal government working with the national public library network and providing targeted investment in connectivity, a new funding stream for digital programs and services and skills training for staff working in remote library locations.

Libraries already provide digital technology hubs in communities – it's part of our core business. However, connectivity and bandwidth issues and the need for ongoing training for

⁶ <https://slwa.wa.gov.au/collections/aboriginal-collections/storylines>

⁷ <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/discover/exhibitions/palm-island-our-people>

staff are barriers to realising the full potential of libraries as digital centres in regional and remote Australia.

Public libraries' success with the *Be Connected* program and the Australian Digital Health Agency partnership demonstrates how much can be achieved by activating the library network. However, this is the extent of libraries' involvement in the federal government Digital Economy Strategy to date.

We ask the NIAA to reference the role and value of the public library network in its report and to encourage federal government, telecommunications industry actors and other stakeholders to approach libraries, through councils, as key delivery partners in new initiatives in this space – particularly in regional and remote locations where there remains a significant digital divide putting Indigenous Australians at a significant disadvantage.

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