

Open Government National Action Plan

November 2016

National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Open Government National Action Plan. We support the content and direction of the plan, and the commitment for government to become “even more open, transparent and accountable” and to improve public engagement.

National and State Libraries Australasia represents the ten national, state and territory libraries of Australia and New Zealand. The nine Australian members, which includes the National Library of Australia, are major developers, content contributors and collaborators in the national information environment. These major institutions work closely with their diverse communities and with the public library sector in each jurisdiction.

Of the five important areas identified in the action plan – libraries have an integral role in providing:

- open data and digital transformation
- access to government information
- public participation and engagement

Theme 2 of the action plan is a focus on “open data and digital transformation” with the objective continuing “to make more public data openly available and support its use to launch commercial and non-profit ventures, conduct research, make data-driven decisions, and solve complex problems”.

NSLA libraries have been active with the release of open data sets in both the Australian and State open data portals. Libraries have also participated in GovHack for a number of years – by releasing content, coordinating challenges and hosting events. Libraries can be a key component of the action regarding developing an ‘engagement process to demonstrate public-value examples and enable an ongoing dialogue with the community’.

Libraries have a long history of managing resources to ensure that the content is easily accessible for current and future users. The addition of a library representative in the expert panel to be established would enable contribution of these existing practices.

NSLA believes to build and maintain public trust in this open data environment there needs to be a clear commitment shared with data users regarding the long term access to data. Publication of open data sets is enhancing and sometimes replacing traditional government and non-government publications. Assurances that this content will be managed for long term access by future users are an important component of building public trust.

Australian libraries provide local and global digital content through services such as Trove (trove.nla.gov.au) where anyone can find and get over 468 million Australian and international online books, images, historic newspapers, maps, music, archives and more. Trove brings together the collections of more than 1400 Australian collecting institutions. Trove also includes the Australian Newspapers service that has more than 22 million searchable pages from local and newspapers. The newspapers are sourced from digital collections held in the national, state and territory libraries and from local collections across the country. Newspapers are a rich and valuable repository of local stories and photographs: they connect and illuminate local history collections, local museums, and local heritage sites; inform local planning decisions; support local identity and culture; and record the issues and perspectives of the local area. Trove collaboration showcases a shared commitment across Australia to deliver digital transformation.

Access to government information, the third theme, commits to improving and modernising the way in which the public accesses government information. There is a specific commitment to improve the discoverability and accessibility of government data and information including making it easier for the public to find and use government data and information through central portals and digital platforms.

The community engagement with the Trove platform with over 20 million views per year highlights libraries' response to this commitment. The Australian community have responded to the portal with strong use and engagement of this centralised resource. In February 2016 the National Library introduced an edeposit service that enables publishers to deposit digital publications with the Library to be preserved for the community and future generations. Government publications are a key component of this service.

Libraries can play a vital role in meeting the ambition of the fifth theme that aims "to identify, develop and implement ambitious open government commitments through ongoing partnership with civil society".

This commitment to public participation and engagement in Australia will be dependent on strong and affordable connectivity and digital literacy skills. Libraries play a key role in developing digital capability in the community; the critical link that libraries provide to enable people to interact with digital government; and the importance of access to the expanding world of digitised and born-digital information that is collected and made available by libraries. Good literacy, which is increasingly in a digital context, improves quality of life. A person is more likely to have a job, to earn an income, to be in good health, and to be involved with the community if they have functional literacy skills. Businesses of all sizes are more productive with a more literate workforce and greater digital capability. Digital literacy is vital to using e-government services. Libraries provide practical and flexible literacy services to allow the whole community to access services and improve their skills.

Fast, effective and consistent connection to the Internet is a basic need for digital inclusion and engagement. Libraries in rural and remote parts of Australia do not have reliable services and this impacts on their ability to support their community's digital access. The libraries are hubs for community Internet access and serve populations that often have less home connectivity, less alternative access options and high needs.

Together NSLA libraries are deeply engaged in establishing the infrastructure, skills and processes to support collection, access, engagement and long-term preservation of the digital record of Australia.

The role of libraries should be recognised as an essential service underpinning the ability of communities to successfully use and interact with open government.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Open Government National Action Plan.

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