

SUBMISSION
to the Advisory Group on
Reform of Australian Government Administration
from the
Australian Library and Information Association

Background

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the peak body representing the library and information services sector. It represents 6000 members, the library and information profession, Australian library and information services, and the interests of over 12 million library users.

ALIA's first two objectives are:

1. To promote the free flow of information and ideas in the interest of all Australians and a thriving culture, economy and democracy". Freedom can be protected in a democratic society only if its citizens have unrestricted access to information and ideas.
2. To promote and improve the services provided by all kinds of library and information agencies.

Libraries and information services are fundamental to effective modern public sector organisations. It is also vital that the public sector provides access to information contained in the published and documentary record in order to ensure enduring access.

ALIA's policy on access to government information notes:

Government information helps to educate people, stimulate progress and solve complex economic, scientific and social problems. With many new technologies, however, government information has expanded so quickly that basic principles regarding its creation, use and dissemination are in danger of being neglected and even forgotten.

This submission highlights three major issues—the importance of libraries and information centres in assisting high quality policy advice and service delivery, the need for whole of government approaches to information for an efficient and effective public service and the need to make government information widely available with web 2.0 technology to enable a high level of citizen participation in policy development a service delivery.

Role of libraries in policy development and service delivery

Policy development is best when it is based on high quality information and analysis. Libraries have traditionally provided extensive support to policy areas in providing access to print and electronic resources to enable officers to use international best practice and research from around the world.

In 2009 it is not true to assume that all quality information resources are freely available on the Internet, nor that anyone can locate and keep abreast of all relevant information. Libraries have, both through their collection and their searching skills, made an important contribution to the work of policy officers. In addition, many have provided training to policy staff to enable them to effectively use the databases and online resources, including searching the Internet, to enable them to undertake policy work effectively.

Whole of government approaches to information

It is true to say that the current approach to information in the public sector means that library services are fragmented across the sector, depending on the priorities of each agency. Does this make for an effective or efficient public sector? This is quite a critical question.

Commonwealth libraries and their agencies have developed a very efficient approach to purchasing library materials and contract staff through a panel contract. The panel approach was first implemented in the 1970s and has been very beneficial in terms of providing efficiencies in purchasing.

If all the collections of government agencies, print and electronic, were accessible through a single interface there could be greater sharing and less duplication, with more consistent service. Economies of scale could be achieved through purchasing through using both national consortia (such as Electronic Research Australia) and a set of common resources made available to the entire APS. In addition, more staff time could be devoted to service delivery if administrative tasks such as tendering and licence negotiation were reduced. There are inefficiencies and inadequacies in the current 'silo' arrangements.

One of the difficulties of the current system of distributed responsibility is that innovation is difficult because of the small size of many libraries. While the Australian Government Libraries Information Network has done a sterling job of contributing to skill development, innovative projects to delivery information to policy and service delivery officers have been hampered by the framework.

Government 2.0

ALIA believes that providing access to government information through web2.0 technology is vital for an effective government and citizenship in the twenty first century. We note with concern that in some areas information that was previously available online is no longer available, for example:

- i. Funding of particular roads and railways on a year-by-year basis is now only available at the level of total funding for a given road for the period 2008-09 to 2013-14 through the Department of Infrastructure web site. The Minister's Budget media press releases contain only aggregate figures.
- ii. Statistics on income support payment recipients have not been published annually since the annual statistical overview for 2005;

- iii. The former Government released a range of health data by federal electorate (eg bulk billing, Medicare safety net figures, private health insurance membership). The most recent information available on the web site <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/electoratereport-index> is for 2006.

Many government agencies, such as the National Health and Medical Research Service and Medical Research Council, commission high quality research. Much of the research funded through these schemes is tied up in scholarly journals rather than being available freely through the web. Other countries have delivered schemes which ensure that publicly funded research is available to those than funded it – the public. The US National Institute of Health, for example, has mandated free community access to publicly funded research in 2008. Making this research available produces significant public good: it enables quick and effective access to publicly funded research, while reducing duplication and creating a platform for collaboration.

ALIA encourages the publication of government information, particularly relating to government expenditure and government funded research. Wherever possible information should be published in a geocoded/mapping system accessible manner.

We encourage digitisation of information currently available only in paper form, particularly information that has, and will continue to have, historic value, particularly parliamentary and legislative materials.

Permanent access to government information is vital. If engaging the wider community with government is a key goal of the taskforce, the need for government information on former and ongoing policies to remain available online as a tool from which to develop better government policies and services is critical.

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