

Broadband Connect and Clever Networks Programs

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Broadband Connect and Clever Networks Discussion Paper. ALIA and the library and information sector are committed to working with DCITA to achieve the goals of the National Broadband Strategy and these specific initiatives. Our interests aim to increase opportunities for more Australians to benefit from broadband access and the burgeoning amount of internet content requiring access through broadband.

ALIA is the national professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector and represents 5000 individual members, 1000 institutional members and the interests of over 10.7 million library users.

The Australian library and information services sector operates in the local, state, territory and federal government, school, TAFE, tertiary, research, health and business sectors. As a major player in Australia in delivering access to electronic information to the community, the sector is strategically placed to ensure that “all Australians have fair and reasonable access to broadband and its benefits, particularly with regards to price and location barriers”. Library and information professionals have a great depth of expertise in providing access to electronic resources and services, building electronic resources content, and developing users skills.

We believe that with its high usage of electronic information services and public access points the library and information services sector is a major stakeholder in the National Broadband Strategy. The library and information services network within Australia provides an established infrastructure to facilitate extensive holistic community benefit as part of the Broadband Connect and Clever Networks programs.

Recommendations :

1. incorporate libraries and particularly the public library network as targeted access points for increasing broadband connectivity; and include library access in research into and statistical collection on broadband use in Australia;
2. as part of the Broadband Connect and Clever Networks funding initiatives, increasing broadband speed (10Mbps plus) and investigate new models for minimising broadband data transmission costs for public information accessed through public institutions such as libraries and for non-commercial purposes;
3. improve access to e-government services and publications;
4. establish a consultative and advisory committee comprising representatives from public, state, federal government, education, health library and information services, local government, the Monash Centre for Community Network Research and ALIA to work with DCITA and its secretariat to position the library and information services sector within the initiatives as a stakeholder.

We ask that these be considered by DCITA. A success measure for us would be that Broadband Connect and Clever Networks programs deliver significant improvement to broadband services and infrastructure to libraries.

Background

In May 2004 a Forum with sector, government and Telstra representatives was hosted by ALIA to discuss developing a collaborative framework to advance electronic networking initiatives and ideas for sharing resources, improving efficiencies, increasing access to public information and enhancing services provided by the library and information sector.

ALIA recommended that the funding proposals of future programs such as Broadband Connect and Clever Networks aim to resolve telecommunications connectivity issues and provide broadband access to public libraries. Further, ALIA would support the Australian government securing a discount rate for broadband access to public libraries subject to the terms being beneficial to public libraries. It would strongly oppose the imposition of any conditions or limitations on equitable access and freedom of access to information through schemes in public or educational libraries, such as the requirement for the use of filtering systems.

In February 2005 ALIA presented to the National Broadband Strategy Implementation Group further issues and recommendations from the library and information sector.

Recommendations that apply to Broadband Connect and Clever Networks

1. The library network : an area of demonstrated demand

Recommendation: that DCITA incorporate libraries and particularly the public library network into its allocation of funding as a major access point for broadband connectivity; and include library access in research into and statistical collection on broadband use in Australia.

User broadband access through public libraries has been a gap in the overall Broadband Strategy to date. Libraries have the potential to significantly increase reach and user access.

- There are over 1500 public libraries across Australia with over half the population as registered users.
- Libraries are attended more frequently and by more people than other cultural and sporting venues [ABS 4172.0 2004]. In 2002 6.1 million people attended a public, state or National library.
- The introduction of Internet access services in public libraries has seen an increase in attendance and library use.
- Libraries have ongoing revenue streams, unlike many access centres and commercial providers set up under specific government programs.
- Qualified and experienced staff delivers training and assistance to users in accessing electronic information.

In 2005 the comprehensive research report *Libraries Building Communities* prepared for the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian Public Library Network found that internet access and other computer facilities is one of three variables as significant predictors of overall satisfaction of services. The demand for IT resources in most locations still exceeds supply. The potential of the public library network as a major access point for broadband connectivity is yet to be fully realised.

Programs such as Networking the Nation have benefited public libraries in rural and regional areas. However, the 2005 report by the Australian Local Government Association, DCITA, and the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation highlighted the need for continued Government assistance to avoid a digital divide disadvantaging councils, businesses and individuals in regional areas. Some metropolitan areas also continue to suffer from poor broadband access.

ALIA supports the submission by the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) to the Broadband Connect and Clever Networks discussion and will continue to work closely on issues for public libraries.

2. Broadband specifications

Recommendation: that as part of the Clever Networks initiative that implementation plans be developed to increase broadband speed (10Mbps plus); and investigate new models for minimising broadband data transmission costs for public information accessed through public institutions such as libraries and for non-commercial purposes.

Even with the increased take up of broadband across Australia, public libraries continue to need faster internet connections and ever greater amounts of data in order to meet community needs. Public libraries play an important role in ensuring equity of access in the delivery of online resources to all Australians. As online content becomes richer and more dynamic, the ability of local library caches to reduce data downloads is becoming more limited. As a result public libraries are increasingly imposing limits on data usage in order to stay in budget (as are the universities). This includes blocking data streaming. ALIA continues to strongly oppose the imposition of any conditions or limitations on equitable access and freedom of access to information through schemes in public or educational libraries such as the requirement for the use of filtering systems.

As stated in the National Broadband Strategy documentation government “has an important role in promoting market driven broadband outcomes and in taking action in areas where the market will not provide services at fair and reasonable prices within an acceptable timeframe. Government, in implementing the Strategy, will work closely with the commercial and private sector to enhance outcomes for users.”

One possible model for investigation as part of the Clever Networks Initiative to contain costs and increase access is for public and school libraries to engage with government agencies through national peering arrangements where e-Government content can be delivered to all Australians without the need to increase budget allocations thereby ensuring equity of access especially in remote regions. Currently

public funds are utilised multiple times for the delivery of public content to government funded public access terminals. Un-coupling data and circuit costs ensures the commercial vendors receive fair and equitable returns. Non government sourced information would of course need to be charged.

3. Improving access to government services and publications

Recommendation: that significant improvement is required in connectivity and content for acceptable access to government services and publications.

Opportunities for the library sector to work with DCITA to improve access to government services and publications include:

- Developing the capacity of public libraries as an intermediary in the delivery of e-government services. This will require improved broadband capacity.
- Resolving the existing barriers to good access to electronic government publications.

In 2000 the Government introduced its *Government Online Strategy* which requires agencies to make available online all publications and information created for public use. Most agencies now produce limited numbers of printed publications and use their web site as the primary means of providing access to their publications and services.

While online publications have the potential to reach wide audiences and are faster, cheaper and easier to produce than printed publications, Government agencies have not developed effective policies and procedures to ensure that the Australian public has access to their online publications. Since the change to online publishing, libraries have experienced significant difficulty finding out what is being published by Government agencies. Many of these online publications are difficult to locate on agency sites, and may disappear from agency web sites after a short period. Broadband capacity can limit access and downloading of larger publications. Any Government agency that publishes information has a responsibility to ensure that it remains accessible to the Australian public for the long term. Current information must be accessible so that the public can use government services and participate in public debate. Historical or non-current information is equally important particularly for research purposes and must be made available for legal, cultural and historical reasons.

4. Establishing a library sector consultative and advisory committee

Recommendation: that through ALIA a consultative and advisory committee be established comprising representatives from public, state, federal government, education, health library and information services, local government, the Monash Centre for Community Network Research to work with DCITA and its secretariat to position the library and information services sector within the Broadband Connect and Clever Networks programs as a stakeholder. Such a committee would provide an overarching support mechanism for DCITA to meet the program's aims of increasing access to, and the effective use of broadband networks across Australia.

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