

No-one left behind – the role of libraries as we transition towards a digital world

“The idea that some information and communication technologies are vital to quality civic life is not new. Some suggest that the Internet and other ICTs are somehow transforming society, improving our mutual understanding, eliminating power differentials, realizing a truly free and democratic world society, and other benefits”.¹

While this quote is perhaps overly optimistic, public libraries have been at the forefront of articulating the value of freely available information and ensuring that people have the skills to access and utilize this information. Public libraries are clear about their longstanding mandate regarding literacy and inclusion, and for some time have been extending that mandate from the physical to the digital realm. Libraries are providing the infrastructure, connectivity and skills development which communities require to minimize the personal and community risks which the long discussed digital divide² is creating.

This paper looks at the experience of the public library network in South Australia as the network attempts to address the digital divide. The South Australian experience is by no means an exemplar; rather this paper is designed to document the experience of a collaborative network’s endeavours.

The South Australian State Government released its IT Strategic Plan³ which declares that access to services will be *Digital by Default*. In recognition that communities are in transition towards full digital connectivity and digital literacy it also said that “no-one will be left behind”. However there is no integrated strategy to ensure that all members of the community will be digitally literate and have access to suitable connectivity.

The network of South Australian public libraries has embraced the challenge of minimizing the digital divide and attempting to ensure that no-one is left behind. Individually many of the libraries in the network have developed and are operating well-planned, integrated literacy and digital literacy programs including the operation of Federal (national) Government funded Digital Hubs⁴. However it is probably at the State-wide level that some unique programs have been developed and implemented. This paper documents a range of these State-wide programs.

By way of background, South Australia is a sparsely populated state, with a population of just over 1.6M and an area of almost 1M Km². Its capital city has a population of just over 1.2M, meaning that the majority of the State is very sparsely populated. The population is served by 135 public libraries, some serving populations as low as less than 1,000 people. Active library membership is 54% of the population – (10% above the national average) and lending rates continue to be over 20% above the national average.

¹ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/links10.htm>

² Norris, Pippa Digital Divide; Civic engagement, information poverty and the Internet worldwide

³ <http://dpc.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/pubimages/documents/ocio/SA%20Connected%20ICT%20Strategy.pdf>

⁴ http://www.communications.gov.au/digital_economy/programs_and_initiatives/digital_hubs_programme

This network of libraries is in general run by and primarily funded by the State's 68 local councils. The State Government contributes approximately 20% of the total library funding, with these funds being administered through a Libraries Board (the Board). The Board is responsible for administering and delivering the outcomes of the Libraries Act (1982).⁵ The Board has a business unit of approximately 20 staff who provide support to the Board and work collaboratively with libraries to implement the Board's policies and strategies for the public library network.

One of the advantages of having a Board which has a "whole of State" mandate and staff to provide coordination and leadership is that the Board can take advantage of opportunities for all libraries rather than libraries working independently leading to any benefits being localized rather than available to all. Also the economies of scale mean that training, funding, partnering and other opportunities can be created which no single library service would be able to achieve on its own

The Board has taken a long-term strategic view of how best to provide for the library and information needs of all residents of the State. It took an early decision that all public libraries in the State should provide free public Internet access. The Board undertook to fund the implementation and ongoing costs of providing this service. This happened at a time when there was considerable debate about whether libraries should even be providing Internet access, and there was considerable pressure for libraries to charge for access. The Board took a view that the Internet is an information source just as books are, and that just as library membership and borrowing was free, so Internet access should also be made available at no cost.

Through a tender process the Board selected a provider who was responsible for the delivery and management of this Statewide telecommunications network. This tender process meant that all libraries received the service, regardless of their remoteness or the cost of service provision.

The Board also set up a mail server, so that key library staff could have an email address and utilize this technology. It seems strange today to mention this as being an act of leadership, but at the time, in many small rural councils the library manager was the first council employee with email access. And there are stories of council CEOs visiting the library and using the librarian's email account to send their first emails.

At the same time as Internet was being rolled out to libraries a Federal Government program offered subsidized computers to country libraries. These computers were provided at significantly reduced cost if the libraries bore the cost of Internet connections etc. As all libraries already had Internet access applying for the computers and paying the relatively small amount for them meant that the State's small remote libraries gained an additional 2- 4 Computers long before they would otherwise have bought them. Once again the Board coordinated the Statewide bid for computers – which meant that all eligible libraries received new computers.

Putting the computers into libraries created community demand, so when the computers had reached end of life there was an expectation that libraries would replace them rather than withdraw the service. So the Board accessing the capital grant both sped up the uptake of computers and Internet, but also left an ongoing legacy of

⁵ <http://www.legislation.sa.gov.au/LZ/C/A/LIBRARIES%20ACT%201982/CURRENT/1982.70.UN.PDF>

significant numbers of computers in libraries. It is interesting to note that almost 20 years after this program South Australia continues to have the highest ratio of computers to community members on mainland Australia – being almost 30% above the national average⁶.

The Board continued to play a leadership role in the implementation of technology for community use. In 2004 the Board agreed to use some of its own investments to fund the roll out of free public WiFi to all libraries. In keeping with legal advice all users of the WiFi network needed to login and be identifiable on the network. So to allow travellers to seamlessly access WiFi in any library a central authentication process was developed. So a customer joining at any library could then use their login at any library in the State. This was the first time that a State-wide “seamless access” approach was implemented. And its success provided a useful indicator which would inform the single Statewide Library Management System project.

Along with providing technology infrastructure the Board has also funded State-wide access to a number of online databases and digital content such as eBooks and digital audio books. By funding these products on a Statewide basis all library users, regardless of the size or budget of their local libraries have access to this online content.

This approach by the Board saw its most ambitious project kick off in 2010 when it funded a feasibility study to investigate whether the creation of a shared single Library Management System (LMS) consortium of all or some of the State’s libraries was technically and financially feasible. Because such a project would require the voluntary agreement and part funding from 68 local councils the business case had to be compelling if it was to succeed.

The business case identified that if councils which represented as little as 40% of the State’s population (640,000 people) then there would be sufficient financial benefits for a consortium to be created. Modeling indicated that all library users would receive significant service benefits, and the increased cost (above “business as usual”) would be in the vicinity of \$2.8M. This increase in costs included all implementation and project management costs.

Given the projected potential increase in costs the Board agreed that it would fund all of these additional costs as well as part providing additional funds, thereby meaning that collectively councils would actually save money over the life of the business case (seven years).

On this basis the Board devised a model of the potential cost to each council and invited councils to indicate a non-binding interest in participation. Councils representing over 90% of the State’s population indicated a keen (non-binding) interest.

This level of interest triggered a tender and selection process which included almost 100 library staff participating in various subject matter expert groups assessing the 3 LMS products which were shortlisted for consideration.

The Board was clear that whichever LMS was chosen, it needed to have a proven track record in delivering a service to over 100 libraries, many of which are very remote (up

⁶ http://www.nsla.org.au/sites/www.nsla.org.au/files/publications/NSLA.public_library_stats_2011-12_0.pdf

to 850 Kms from the capital city) and very small – serving communities as small as less than 1,000 people. However the chosen system would also need to have the full suite of features required by large complex library services including the ability to deliver e-content.

The keys to large numbers of customers using e-content is that it must be seamlessly discoverable within a library's LMS and accessing the content must be simple. The LMS now used across the SA consortium has the capacity to ingest all metadata for licensed digital content, manage all aspects of the digital rights management and allow customers to download the e-content without leaving the LMS. On the basis of this technology being available the Libraries Board has taken the decision to increase the funds it allocates to e-content. The 7% of total funds for e-content is relatively low at this stage. However the Board has a commitment to continue to monitor usage with the intent to increase expenditure should usage warrant this change.

Along with e-content access the outcomes of the development of this LMS consortium is that all South Australians have seamless and free access to almost 4M items, which they can reserve and have delivered to their local library at no cost. They can also borrow from any library and return their library items anywhere.

While the technology of Internet access, WiFi and a single State-wide LMS are all very visible projects, the Board and the public library network has also been actively working on other projects to advance the community's digital literacy.

In 2004 the Libraries Board and the Local Government Association accessed Federal and State Government funds to employ a group of young trainees in libraries. The parties also contributed funds to establish 22 places for Information Technology trainees in rural and regional libraries. This two-year program saw young local people recruited to work in the libraries while also completing a post-secondary school certificated course in ICT skills. As the trainees learned new ICT skills they were then expected to use these skills in both supporting library operations and in providing training for staff and the public.

The trainees all created web sites for their host libraries and trained permanent staff in the maintenance of the sites. They also provided training for the public in a range of digital skills ranging from web site creation to simple introductory courses in using the Internet and using email. Some trainees also provided support for the use of digital cameras.

At the end of the program over 2,500 hours of public IT training had been provided, and all trainees went on to either further education or permanent employment. And the libraries reported that during the program a significant number of their customers started out using the free computers in the library, but then stopped using the computers as they had purchased their own computers and arranged home Internet access. While this is only anecdotal information it does provide evidence that the program accelerated take up of Internet access in these rural communities.

In 2011 the Board worked with TAFE SA (a vocational skills training institute) to undertake a workforce skills needs survey of all public libraries in the network. The survey identified digital literacy as a key requirement for public library staff, with the greatest need being in some of the smallest and most remote libraries.

The Board and TAFE SA therefore developed a certificated course in Information, Digital Media and Technology. This 2012 course was seen as a pilot project which would be used to refine the course content before offering it across the State's public library network. Funds were obtained from the State Government to fund the participants' travel, accommodation and some staff replacement.

Given the remoteness of these libraries it was unlikely that without the Board's brokering of the course and the provision of funding for participants' attendance they would have been able to participate in such a course. Some of the course was delivered in face to face workshops while other parts were structured to be online learning experiences for the participants. The course was deliberately constructed in this way because the libraries were often used by customers seeking support with their own online learning. Staff had reported that they were not confident in supporting these customers, so participating in online learning ensured that the students would develop confidence in this area.

Students digital literacy skills were evaluated prior to undertaking the course, and then at its completion. Across a range of measures the students entered the course with up to 75% of them having no or low skills in particular areas. At the conclusion of the course, depending on the areas being assessed 83 – 95% of students had adequate to moderately developed digital literacy skills. And the students' self assessment was that their confidence to use their skills in teaching others was moderate to somewhat high. And students indicated that they knew that they would have to continue to update their skills to utilize emerging technologies. However they indicated that having had some formal training they were now more confident to undertake this ongoing learning.

80% of the participants indicated that they would not have been able to participate in the course if the external funding had not been available.

Given the success of this pilot the course has now been run on a further two occasions, with one of the courses again focusing on rural library staff, and one being offered to metropolitan library staff. As further grant funds become available the course will continue to be offered. It is anticipated that within the next few years staff from every library in the State will have had an opportunity to participate in this or other similar digital literacy in the workplace courses.

Returning to infrastructure; the Board also coordinated an application for libraries to participate in the Federal Government's *Broadband for Seniors*⁷ project. This program was developed in recognition that many older Australians had worked in careers which had not exposed them to computers, and they were now at risk of not being able to participate in the digital and online aspects of society without some assistance.

By having one central point of contact and coordination the Board was able to get more than 30 regional public libraries included in the program. This program provides libraries with several computers as well as Internet connectivity and significant online learning materials. To participate in the program the libraries had to commit to providing ad hoc and scheduled training sessions for community members. When the

⁷ <http://www.necseniors.net.au>

computers are not being used by senior members of the community they can be used by the general public.

As many of the libraries in this program had previously hosted IT trainees or had staff who had participated in the Information, Digital Media and Technology course they were well placed to take up this offer from the Government to act as Broadband for Seniors hosts.

The Board is also currently involved in supporting libraries becoming involved in the e-Smart Libraries project – one of the Alannah and Madeline Foundation's⁸ projects to keep children safe online. Quoting from the Foundation's website,

eSmart Libraries is a free purpose-built system designed to equip libraries with and connect library users to the skills they need for smart, safe and responsible use of technology.

Following a recent training session in the Board's offices over one third of the State's libraries are now participating in the program.

The rate of change in the deployment of new digital technologies and their use in everyday life means that there will be an ongoing role for libraries in engaging with their communities, providing access to new technologies and in supporting community members. South Australian public libraries are already moving into trialing "maker spaces", "media labs and "innovation labs"⁹, utilizing skilled volunteers to provide ongoing digital skills training for seniors¹⁰ and ongoing public programs¹¹ to engage the community in ensuring that they are enabled to meet the digital future we all face.

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⁸ <http://www.amf.org.au>

⁹ <http://www.adelaidecitycouncil.com/your-community/library-services/home-library-service2/>

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaXridl7_5w

¹¹ <http://adelaidetweet.com/blog/digital-literacy-forum-a-great-success/>