



Australian Library and  
Information Association

**Submission in response to the Australian Government Productivity  
Commission Issues Paper on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning from the  
Australian Library and Information Association Public Libraries Advisory  
Committee**

February 2014

## **1. About us**

The Australian Library and Information Association [ALIA]<sup>1</sup> is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. On behalf of our 5,500 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support.

The ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee [PLAC] advises the ALIA Board of Directors about matters relating to public libraries and facilitates collaboration in the public library sector. Major achievements have been to produce National Standards and Guidelines for public libraries and a National Vision and Framework which guides the work of PLAC.

Members of PLAC are representatives from ALIA, the state-based public library associations, territory libraries, LINC Tasmania and Public Libraries Australia.

## **2. Purpose of our submission**

We are responding to the Early Childhood Learning element of the Productivity Commission Issues Paper, with the aim of:

- (1) securing explicit acknowledgement of the role of Australian public libraries in early childhood development in the final report to Government (31 October 2014), and
- (2) encouraging discussion to identify further opportunities for the national network of 1500 public libraries to be used by federal, state and local government to support early childhood learning provision.

## **3. Evidence**

Evidence to support these aims is provided in the following appendices:

Appendix 1: PLAC Early Literacy Framework and Strategy for Australian Public Libraries

Appendix 2: National Year of Reading 2012 Summary Feature

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.alia.org.au/>

## 4. Comments relating to the Terms of Reference (page iii)

*'The Australian Government is committed to establishing a sustainable future for a more flexible, affordable and accessible child care and early childhood learning market that helps underpin the national economy and supports the community, especially parent's choices to participate in work and learning and children's growth, welfare, learning and development.'*

### **4.1 Flexible, affordable and accessible:**

There are some 1500 public libraries across Australia, serving metro, regional and remote communities. With nearly 10 million registered users, libraries reach out to everyone, encouraging people to read for pleasure as well as providing programs and resources for study and research.

Public libraries provide essential early literacy support for families with very young children. They offer free baby rhyme-time and story-time sessions in the library, and books, music and toys to borrow. This support is not only beneficial for families, preparing children for a smooth transition into formal schooling; higher levels of early literacy have also been shown to provide a significant payback for the nation's economy.

### **4.2 Children's growth, welfare, learning and development:**

The building blocks for literacy are established long before a child reaches school. In international studies<sup>2</sup>, sharing stories, rhymes and songs with babies and toddlers has been shown to have a significant positive impact on their vocabulary, communication, reading and writing skills.

### **4.3 Underpinning the national economy:**

A Productivity Commission working paper published in August 2010<sup>3</sup> explained the clear link between literacy levels and workforce participation. From the concluding remarks (p57):

*'[Functional literacy and numeracy] Skills were also shown to be important for labour market outcomes — people with higher skills are more likely to participate in the labour force, be employed in higher-skilled occupations, and earn more, compared to people with lower skills.'*

### **4.4 Supporting the community:**

Libraries play a special role in helping to create a literate nation, as was evidenced during the National Year of Reading 2012, a highly successful community-based campaign orchestrated by Australian public libraries (see Appendix 2 and evaluation PDF).

---

<sup>2</sup> Example: America's Early Childhood Literacy Gap, Jump, 2009:

[http://love2read2012.wikispaces.com/file/view/America\\_s\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Literacy\\_Gap.pdf/298003220/America\\_s\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Literacy\\_Gap.pdf](http://love2read2012.wikispaces.com/file/view/America_s_Early_Childhood_Literacy_Gap.pdf/298003220/America_s_Early_Childhood_Literacy_Gap.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Shomos, A. 2010, *Links Between Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes*, Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper, Melbourne, August.

[http://www.pc.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/102024/literacy-numeracy-labour-outcomes.pdf](http://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/102024/literacy-numeracy-labour-outcomes.pdf) accessed 7 January 2014.

## **5. General comments**

### **5.1 Connecting early childhood care providers**

Australian public libraries are not early childhood care providers per se, but they have the potential to connect early childhood care agencies and to provide free, flexible, accessible early literacy programs, resources and expertise (see Appendix 1).

*Libraries are more than simply service providers to library users, they are 'active connectors' for families and other agencies. They actively connect:*

- *Organisations operating in the early childhood sector*
- *Parents/caregivers with resources*
- *Parents/caregivers and their children, through the reading experience*
- *Parents/caregivers with other service providers, especially where families are from diverse cultural backgrounds and don't know about the help and support that is available until they discover the information at their library.*

*This role as 'active connectors' is something all public libraries can recognise, value and expand upon.*

### **5.2 The potential of an established national network**

Public libraries are funded by local and/or state/territory governments to provide services to the community. In many local government areas, libraries are already an integral part of cross-council initiatives to raise literacy levels, working closely with family services and maternal and child health. However, libraries' role as 'active connectors' in the early childhood sector has yet to be fully explored by federal government.

### **5.3 Helping parents to be their child's first teacher**

Specialist children's and youth services (CYS) librarians not only deliver programs for young people in public libraries, they also pass on their skills to others, supporting parents in their role as their child's first teacher. Attending rhyme-time and story-time helps parents, even those whose own reading levels are poor, to understand how to use words and pictures to improve the literacy outcomes for their children.

### **5.4 Access for all**

The library network provides services for everyone, free at the point of use. Individual libraries engage with their communities and design their programs and collections around local needs. Libraries in areas of cultural diversity, for example, often run bi-lingual storytimes, and provide books and resources in languages other than English.

## **6. Summary**

We would welcome the opportunity for further involvement in the national discussion about Early Childhood Learning. The role of Australian public libraries in this space has yet to be fully recognised, acknowledged and leveraged by the federal government, and this Productivity Commission Inquiry provides an opportunity to rectify this situation.



## **APPENDIX 1: ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee**

# **Early literacy framework and strategy for Australian public libraries**

## **1 ABOUT LIBRARY SERVICES FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN**

Families have traditionally been heavy users of public library services. These services are free, accessible, local and informal.

Families have borrowed from libraries' collections of books, DVDs and other print/online materials. They have participated in baby, toddler and children's rhyme, song and storytelling sessions, and parents/caregivers have sought advice from library staff about sharing books with their infants.

While other early childhood professionals acknowledge the importance of reading as part of the learning experience, only libraries open up a world of books, a lifetime's supply of free reading materials and other resources. Public libraries are the only government-funded agency available to children from babyhood, providing year-round, free access to resources and services that support reading and literacy.

Libraries provide free literacy resources to parents of 0 to 4-year-olds and they are one of the few agencies, along with maternal and child health services, helping parents to be their children's first teachers.

The most active period of human brain growth and development is from birth to three, and libraries employ specialist children's and youth services staff to help parents/caregivers give their children the best start by sharing books with them.

Although this framework and strategy is designed around Australian public libraries, there is clearly a leadership role for State and Territory Libraries:

- They are best placed to monitor and measure the impact of strategic initiatives on public library services.
- They collate and disseminate information to public libraries through their networks.
- They provide proactive encouragement and support for national projects.
- They create professional development opportunities for public library managers and staff.
- They broker state and national partnerships to build sustainability.
- They advocate for the role of libraries in providing vital support for early literacy.
- They lobby for state and federal funding for early literacy services in public libraries.

## **2 THE PURPOSE OF THIS EARLY LITERACY FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGY**

The purpose of this national early literacy framework and strategy for Australian public libraries is:

- To define the special role of public libraries in early literacy.
- To raise the profile of the important role that public libraries play in pre-school learning both internally (with library staff) and externally, with the public, government and especially funding bodies.
- To gain formal recognition from government and other agencies providing early childhood support and services, resulting in the inclusion of public library representatives in high level state, territory and local government planning for pre-school children.

## **3 THE SPECIAL ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN EARLY LITERACY**

By providing services for families with young children, public libraries are investing in future library users. State and public library participation in early literacy:

- Early literacy advice and encouragement direct to parents – new parents' visits to libraries with the maternal and child health service; visits to crèches, kindergartens, community language centres; parent advice at the desk eg booklists
- Activities for parents and/or children to encourage early literacy – Children's Week events, Children's Book Week activities; Reconciliation Week storytimes
- Early literacy programs for parents and children – community publishing, baby bounce, Auslan baby bounce, toddler time, storytime, bilingual storytime
- Advocacy - promoting the need for early literacy – outreach to community groups, the Reading Hour and National Simultaneous Storytime
- Training for professionals and/or parents – training for library staff and family day care, childcare centre, playgroup staff and maternal and child health nurses; training and support for volunteers
- Resources for professionals and/or parents – collections of board books, picture books, CDs, DVDs, databases eg Tumblebooks, Intrepica; parenting books and magazines; book bags for babies; tips for reading with very young children; resources for playgroups
- Information sharing events and connections – liaison programming with the Council, early literacy working groups in some Councils; hosting and participating in children's forums
- Research into early literacy
- Gaining external funding for early literacy initiatives.

By comparison with other service providers, including Council children's services, playgroups, kindergartens, childcare centres, government and non-government early literacy initiatives, only libraries provide all five of these aspects to their service:

- Physical space that can be shared by other organisations
- Programs – rhymes and stories
- Resources – books, CDs, DVDs, reading lists
- Activities and events, both regular and one-off
- Early literacy focus and expertise.

Libraries are more than simply service providers to library users, they are 'active connectors' for families and other agencies. They actively connect:

- Organisations operating in the early childhood sector
- Parents/caregivers with resources
- Parents/caregivers and their children, through the reading experience
- Parents/caregivers with other service providers, especially where families are from diverse cultural backgrounds and don't know about the help and support that is available until they discover the information at their library.

This role as 'active connectors' is something all public libraries can recognise, value and expand upon.

## **4 FRAMEWORK: LIBRARIES AS EARLY LITERACY 'ACTIVE CONNECTORS'**

### **4.1 Partnerships**

Public libraries have a history of partnerships with other organisations engaged in education, training, leisure activities, social networking, informal learning and technology. Partners include branches of Council and non-governmental agencies.

- Library managers know how to achieve mutual benefit based on combined strengths, expertise and communication networks.
- Libraries don't compete, they collaborate, expanding their capacity by providing facilities and opportunities for other early childhood and parenting service providers.
- Libraries are active participants in partnerships, both hosting and participating.

### **4.2 Programs**

- Library programs and events provide opportunities for parents/caregivers, whatever their literacy level, to connect by sharing books with their children.
- Connection is not only about activities within the library, it is also about outreach, with library staff delivering services to the wider community.

### 4.3 People

- Early literacy is something that involves all the library team, not only the children and youth services specialists. Literacy is transmitted across generations, with parents playing a vital role in developing their children's reading and literacy skills. Many services delivered by public libraries are intergenerational.
- The skills required go beyond a knowledge of children's literature into an understanding of early childhood development.
- It is important to allocate time and resources to developing and delivery services for pre-school age children and for library staff to have access to professional development (PD) relating to this area.
- Libraries can provide PD sessions for people from other agencies and library staff can participate in PD provided by partner organisations.

## 5 STRATEGY: EVERY PUBLIC LIBRARY AN ACTIVE CONNECTOR

This strategic framework builds on what public libraries already do and provides the opportunity to create a stronger focus on early literacy.

### **At a basic level, every public library should:**

- Carry out a local family needs analysis
- Provide resources – picture books, parenting books
- Enable PD access for appropriate staff
- Hold regular storytimes
- Bring community partners together
- Record and report early literacy achievements
- Include responsibility for early learning in at least one member of staff's role statement

### **At the optimum level:**

- Early literacy features in every library plan
- PD offered to other agencies
- Library invited to other agencies' PD sessions
- Promoting resources and making them widely available eg bulk loans for kinder
- Outreach for vulnerable, hard-to-reach, non-library users
- Actively creating programs
- Baby bounce/rhyme time as well as storytime activities
- Parenting support and being active in the space eg programs for teenage mums
- Participating in academic and other research
- Collaborating (real/online) with other libraries locally/nationally about the development of resources and programs
- Actively involved in the reading and literacy debate
- Participating in the provision of early literacy incentives (free DVDs, books, other materials) as a public library membership 'bonus'

## **6 IMPLEMENTATION**

This framework and strategy has been developed by the ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee (PLAC). PLAC is made up of representatives from the state-based public library associations, territory libraries, LINC Tasmania and Public Libraries Australia.

Communication and implementation will be carried out through PLAC members' own networks, which cover all 1500 public library locations across Australia.

## **7 MEASURING THE IMPACT**

If this framework and strategy is adopted by Australian public libraries, there is the potential to monitor and measure its impact in a number of ways.

- Public libraries can benchmark their performance against others serving communities with similar profiles.
- We can identify how many public libraries include early literacy in their strategic plans and monitor the increase over time.
- With funding for academic research, we could look at the impact on school readiness by focusing on a few communities.
- ALIA can continue to profile libraries achieving success in this area through its various programs and communication channels.

This document is an updated and summarised version of the ALIA PLAC Early Literacy Framework and Strategy 2011, which is also available on the ALIA website <http://www.alia.org.au/node/184/public-libraries>.



## National Year of Reading 2012

### APPENDIX 2: National Year of Reading summary

Australian libraries and library associations<sup>4</sup> were the driving force behind a campaign to turn 2012 into the National Year of Reading, linking together all the great things that were already happening around books, reading and literacy, and giving them an extra boost, with inspirational programs and events taking place across the country.

Libraries partnered with government, the media, writers, schools, publishers, booksellers, employers, child care providers, health professionals and a whole host of other organisations that shared our passion for reading.

Our vision was of “Australia, a nation of readers” and our three goals were:

- For all Australians to understand the benefits of reading as a life skill and catalyst for wellbeing
- To promote a reading culture in every home
- To establish an aspirational goal of sharing a book with your child every day

We purposefully described this as a National Year of Reading, not a National Year of Literacy, but pockets of low literacy around Australia provided our rationale for raising awareness of the importance and benefits of reading. Our killer statistic was the 46% figure we took from the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, 2006.

*“If your parents read to you when you were very young; if you learnt to read at an early age; if you went to a good school, where reading for pleasure was encouraged, and if you were inspired by the people around you to keep reading as a young adult, then the word on the page (or the screen) will be part of your DNA.*

*“But that’s not the case for 46% of the population.*

---

<sup>4</sup> National Year of Reading 2012 founder partners were the Australian Library and Information Association; the state-based public library associations of New South Wales (Metro and Country), Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia; the State Libraries of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia; the Northern Territory Library; LINC Tasmania, and Libraries ACT; auspiced by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA).

*“Nearly half the population struggles without the literacy skills to meet the most basic demands of everyday life and work. There are 46% of Australians who can’t read newspapers; follow a recipe; make sense of timetables, or understand the instructions on a medicine bottle.*

*“2012 will see a whole heap of amazing, fun, reading activities taking place around Australia and online, so people of all ages, from different backgrounds, can discover and rediscover the joy of reading.”*

Our target audiences varied for different programs within the overall campaign. For *One Country Reading* we targeted under 12s, teen and adult readers; for the *National Year of Reading in the Workplace* and *Adult Learners’ Week* we targeted adults with low literacy; for *Dads Read*, we targeted parents from low socio-economic groups; for *The Reading Hour* we especially targeted parents of very young children (0-5); for our Indigenous literacy programs, we targeted people with low literacy in remote communities.

Family literacy was a key target for the National Year of Reading. By giving parents and caregivers the confidence and skills to share books with their children – whether or not they themselves are readers – we knew we could help to break the cycle of disadvantage.

The National Year of Reading 2012 was about children learning to read and keen readers finding new sources of inspiration. It was about supporting reading initiatives while respecting the oral tradition of storytelling. It was about helping people discover and rediscover the magic of books. And most of all, it was about Australians becoming a nation of readers.

The whole campaign was based on a highly consultative, evidence-based approach involving the National Year of Reading founder partners in setting the goals and objectives of the campaign.

While much of the activity happened through partners and at a local level, we ran four national campaigns within the National Year of Reading to create a framework that others could add to.

#### Campaign 1: The Reading Hour

The Reading Hour (like Earth Hour, but with the lights on!) was both a family commitment and a national event. Sharing a book with your child for 10 minutes a day, an hour a week was our aim for Australia’s first Reading Hour on the 25 August 2012. It was nominally from 6pm to 7pm Australian Eastern Standard Time, but with flexibility to allow schools and workplaces to run activities on a weekday (the previous week was the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s Book Week and the following week was the Australian Government’s Literacy and Numeracy Week) and different time zones to run events all through the day.

Having said that, The Reading Hour was for everyone and there were events and activities for all age groups. Our key partners were Scholastic, Dymocks bookshops, The Walt Disney Company, Madman Entertainment, Good Reading Magazine, The Big Issue, ABC Local Radio, Melbourne Writers Festival and Dymocks Children’s Charities.

## Campaign 2: Public library membership drive

We ran a nationwide membership campaign between May and August, using the National Year of Reading to attract people into libraries and to support family literacy initiatives. Different libraries interpreted the campaign in different ways, and, indeed, the whole National Year of Reading was a giant promotion for all Australian libraries.

## Campaign 3: One Country Reading

Several cities have adopted the One Book One City approach – Edinburgh with *Kidnapped* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; Chicago with *To Kill a Mocking Bird*; Dublin, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Brisbane, *The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies*.

We based our multi-tiered version of the program around a much-loved Australian children's book, Alison Lester's *Are We There Yet?* We developed this theme of travel and places for a junior, young adult and adult audience, using a variety of different media and we based our National Year of Reading touring exhibition around Alison's original artwork.

## Campaign 4: Workplace literacy

We worked with major employers to create writer-in-residence programs, with published outputs. There were writing workshops for employees who wanted to develop their creative skills, and for those who struggled with reading and writing but welcomed the opportunity to tell their story with the help of an author or illustrator.

In addition, we ran an Indigenous Festival of Reading, Writing and Storytelling, in Alice Springs, in September; a short story writing competition on the theme *It's Never Too Late ... To Learn to Read*, for Adult Learners' Week, also in September 2012.

Although the National Year of Reading needed to reach readers and non-readers, to have critical mass and be part of the mainstream rather than sidelined as a program for marginalised Australians, the underlying intention of the campaign was to reach people experiencing disadvantage and low literacy. For the public library membership drive, for example, we targeted:

- Those who can't afford to buy all the books they want to read
- Migrants looking for a point of connection with their new surroundings
- Parents who might not have thought of reading as a family activity
- Elderly residents (promoting a healthy mind as well as a healthy body)
- Young adults who may have got out of the habit of reading for pleasure
- Non-readers seeking help to improve their literacy skills
- People who don't have their own computer at home

The cost of the campaign at a national level was \$1.7 million. In addition, we estimate there was \$5.6 million-worth of in-kind support. Partners contributed what they felt the project needed or

deserved (Disney Junior, for example, produced a high quality TV advertisement for The Reading Hour and ran it free on the Disney Channel in the run up to The Reading Hour). For most recipients, the cost of participation was free.

The promotional tools were primarily shared branding (available to all free of charge); print collateral including posters, bookmarks, wallcharts, available free to libraries; free downloadable versions of the print material for other partners; our highly active website [www.love2read.org.au](http://www.love2read.org.au), updated at least twice a week, and our even more active social media sites – 12,000 online followers for Love2Read Facebook, Twitter and our e-newsletter (links and back issues available on the website). PR was incredibly important, as we had no budget for advertising. In terms of editorial coverage and free advertising alone, we gained \$26 million-worth of media coverage.

We know that more than 2,000 libraries across Australia participated, running more than 4,000 events across the year, involving more than 200,000 active participants.

Our original budget for carrying out the campaign was \$7 million and, thanks to a highly active program of partnerships, we managed to pull off nearly all the activities we wanted to do at a national level on the much reduced figure of \$1.7 million. We are currently working on the allocation of costs against project management, program delivery, marketing and communications and evaluation, but as the project only ended two weeks ago (at time of writing), these figures are not yet available.

However, we can see clearly that there has been an incredibly high level of return on investment (ROI).

- If we just look at the \$1.7 million invested against the value of the media coverage generated and the in-kind support provided, this gives us an ROI of \$18.59 for every \$1 invested.
- If we look at the \$1.7 million against the 200,000 direct participants alone (ignoring the wider community awareness raising), it has cost just \$8.50 per person for a potentially life-changing experience.

Edith Cowan University is carrying out an evaluation of the National Year of Reading and we anticipate more findings about the value and contribution of the campaign to individuals and communities across Australia. The report will be finalised at the end of February 2013.