



## **Submission in response to the Australian Public Service review, first round consultation**

**31 July 2018**

### **1. About us**

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector.

On behalf of our 5,000 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. We represent school, public, academic, research, corporate, law, health, government, national, state and territory libraries and the professionals who work in them.

There are library and information professionals working for the National Library of Australia; the Parliamentary Library; health and law libraries; government department, agency and research libraries, all part of the Australian Public Service. But our submission relates primarily to library and information professionals working in government department libraries.

### **2. Introduction**

This review is looking at the capability, culture and operating model of the APS, and these are three areas that have undergone radical change in libraries around the world. We would say that the library and information sector is an outstanding example of an industry that has successfully transformed itself to meet the challenges of the digital age and is supporting its users to do the same.

Over the last 20 years, we have held fast to our mission of providing access to information for all Australians, but we have reinvented the way in which we deliver our services.

- Capability: We have redefined the skills and competencies of our workforce.
- Culture: We have developed a strong user focus.
- Operating model: We have taken advantage of emerging technologies to improve operational efficiency and introduce new services where digital delivery has opened up exciting possibilities.

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the Australian Public Service Review on behalf of our government library Members.

### 3. The case against library staffing and service reductions

Access to quality information is essential for all the outcomes described in the scope of this review and the APS needs qualified library and information professionals in order to deliver these goals. However, the employment of library and information professionals has declined in recent years, with government library closures and reductions in staff brought about by cost cutting measures.

This has been to the detriment of the Service, and the full extent of the damage will emerge as we see the long term effects of policies based on half-understood ideas rather than properly sourced research. The Australian Library and Information Association has advocated for the vital role of our Members in combating the proliferation of 'fake news' and unsubstantiated information.

#### Facts not fiction

*"Closing government libraries will save money."*

**WRONG:** Library and information services provide a significant return on investment in terms of output and resource sharing. Departments will still need information, but instead of it being purchased and managed in one area, there will be duplication, as different teams build up their own information resources.

*"Employing fewer information professionals will save money."*

**WRONG:** Library and information professionals can source facts in a few minutes, which would take untrained government staff hours to find. This not only saves time, but also costs significantly less per hour when pay levels are compared.

*"People can carry out their own searches."*

**WRONG:** Closing libraries exposes government departments to a higher risk of ill-informed decision-making. Most people Google for quick answers to everyday questions and few ever get past the first page. Ask people to find something online and you will find that many search for under a minute, only look at the first page of results and never use advanced search features. Library and information professionals use Google, other internet search engines and specialist databases to find authentic, comprehensive information. They don't rely on Wikipedia and other unauthenticated sources.

*"Librarians are not needed in today's government departments."*

**WRONG:** In terms of open data and e-government, library and information professionals have the skills and knowledge to manage and organise data for public accessibility.

*"Everything is online."*

**WRONG:** Much of the current information used by various government departments is still only available in hard copy format and the digitisation of unique collections is still in its infancy. Historic records, dating back to the late-1800s, are likely to be paper-based. If a library is closed and the collection dispersed, these items will be lost forever.

*"People can find the same information in other libraries."*

**WRONG:** Government libraries have specialised, unique and irreplaceable collections. They have current collections of specialist journals (electronic and print) and databases to inform

operational, corporate, administrative and training practices. These complete, comprehensive and tailored collections do not exist elsewhere – not in state and territory libraries, not in university libraries, not in public libraries.

*“Government officers can keep up-to-date by watching the news.”*

**WRONG:** Much valuable information is published informally. Information professionals regularly scan worldwide resources for best practice and bring it to the attention of government clients in a timely and concise manner.

*“There is no risk.”*

**WRONG:** The consequence of ill-informed decision-making is to expose government departments to public censure, media condemnation and claims for compensation.

#### **4. The case for staff retention**

Our government library Members provide timely access to knowledge that will enable Ministers and their advisors to create better policy, because their decisions will be based on relevant, current, quality information.

There is more information available today than there has been at any time in the past, but much of it (especially online) is out-of-date, commercially-driven, irrelevant and sometimes downright wrong.

Against this backdrop, the role of libraries and information professionals has never been so important. Library and information professionals go through e-databases, online journals, academic and industry papers to find accurate, up-to-the-minute results. Our searches are robust and comprehensive; our searches are quicker, smarter and give better quality results.

If government scientists, researchers, politicians and bureaucrats are to have access to vital information that enables them to do their jobs well; if they are to make informed, well-balanced decisions; we need to retain well-resourced government libraries run by qualified professionals. A robust library and information service is a small price to pay to know that the information on which government bases its decisions comes from the very best, authenticated services, and that due diligence underpins policy making.

#### **5. The case for reinvention**

The library sector is dynamic, fast moving and evolving to meet the demands of the digital age. We recognise the need for new ways of thinking about organisational structures and service delivery, to fit with this new paradigm.

In the Commonwealth Government, libraries exist in a departmental silo. Decisions about library services, collections, staff, are taken without reference to the broader information environment. At State and Territory Government level and internationally, new models of delivery have been trialed, gaining economies of scale by bringing together back office functions, including procurement, while retaining the specialist knowledge of librarians assigned to specific departments.

Instead of reducing the library head count, we believe there would be significant benefit from a whole of government approach, providing library staff with the higher-level skills which will result in decision-ready information for policy analysts.

To quote a government librarian, *"As the public service grows smaller and policy analysts have less time and resources to be involved with research and sourcing evidence, both national and international, information specialists are a strong, rich, resource of skills to save a great deal of time and cost to government."*

## **6. Other comments**

There are very few library and information professionals identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This is of particular concern where government departments are dealing with information relating to Indigenous matters, when it is vitally important to have people with the appropriate knowledge, skills and understanding.

The APS grading structure takes precedence over specialist skills. Employees at a particular APS level are assumed capable of operating at that level within any department or agency, irrespective of the need for specialist qualifications, skills and training. This has led to non-library professionals being put in charge of libraries, without the knowledge and experience to take the team through the changes needed in order to continue to provide a modern library and information service.

## **7. Recommendations**

We ask the APS Review to consider the following five recommendations:

1. That the review recognise the importance of knowledge and information to the efficient and effective operation of the APS.
2. That the review endorse the ongoing need for qualified library and information professionals serving the Commonwealth Government.
3. That the review propose exploration of new service models for library and information services, with advice from ALIA and other relevant organisations.
4. That the review note the opportunity for the recruitment and employment of Indigenous professionals in the library stream.
5. That the APS recognise the need for specialist skills in the management of library and information services.

### **For more information:**

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