Submission in response to the ATO Digital by Default Consultation Paper, January 2016

15 January 2016

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1. About us

ALIA

The Australian Library and Information Association 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.

ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance

The ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance advises the ALIA Board of Directors about matters relating to public libraries and facilitates collaboration in the public library sector. Members of Alliance are representatives from ALIA, the state-based public library associations, territory libraries and LINC Tasmania.

National and State Libraries Australasia

National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) is the active collaboration between the ten National, State and Territory libraries across Australia and New Zealand. We achieve more by working together; developing shared solutions and delivering greater value to our jurisdictions through collaboration.

2. Australian public libraries

There are 1530 public library service points across Australia, 112.6 million customer visits each year and more than 8.5 million registered library members – 37% of the total population.

Customer visits have risen, from 9.3 million per month in 2010-2011 to 9.4 million per month in 2013-2014. In the same period, the number of public access internet terminals has increased from 10,000 to 11,500.

The statistics support what we know is happening in public libraries. We still have a solid core of book borrowers, but increasingly libraries are providing programs and services – particularly online services – to support families with young children; seniors trying to keep pace with new technologies; job seekers without internet access at home; students seeking quiet study space; new migrants looking for safe places with trusted staff who can help them understand the Australian way of life, and citizens wishing to engage with egovernment.

3. Libraries support digital inclusion

One in five Australians are not online; four in 10 of the lowest income households in Australia are not connected to the internet; of people aged 65 or more, only 46% are internet users and 75% feel confused about using technology – these facts from the Telstra Digital Inclusion Index Discussion Paper[1] aren't news to us, they are the daily realities for staff in public libraries.

Over the last 20 years, public libraries have increased their role in supporting digital citizenship, enhancing people's online experiences, helping people connect to this new virtual world, and providing a safety net for those who are in danger of being left behind.

For us, digital inclusion means public libraries providing:

- Support for cybersafe online experiences
- High speed broadband internet connection in a safe, friendly community space.
- PC terminals, tablets and other devices (including technology petting zoos)
- Spaces for exploring innovative digital technologies
- Training and informal help for people to develop digital literacy skills
- Relevant and engaging content.

4. Libraries provide assistance with egovernment

Library staff already handle in excess of 8.3 million requests for information every year, many of them relating to government form-filling. We expect the federal government's commitment to Digital Transformation to increase the number of requests for one-on-one assistance still further.

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[1] http://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ADII_DiscussionPaper_Final_Web8.pdf

A strong customer service ethos and desire to help people from disadvantaged communities, those who are without technology skills, or those for whom English is a second language, is ingrained in library staff. Public libraries do not turn people away, but it will be more and more difficult to provide the level of assistance that will be needed as federal, state and territory governments gear their services for technology-enabled households.

5. Libraries and the ATO

Libraries have long been required to support customers who would like to fill in their tax forms online but don't have the skills, internet connection or device to do this from home.

In 2010, ALIA wrote to the ATO Commissioner about a particular issue that had arisen:

"The Australian Tax Office (ATO) will not currently accept eTax files that are transmitted via a proxy server rather than through a direct internet connection. As most public library PCs connect through a proxy server, many thousands of Australians are denied the opportunity to lodge their tax returns electronically through their local branch. Instead, they have to pay extra to use a tax filing service or rely on the goodwill of better-placed friends and family who have internet access. As one senior library manager told us, 'I suspect for many people it will all just be too hard, and they may not file at all.' A further disincentive to file electronically is that Mac users have to purchase special software in order to use the eTax software, which is designed to run on the Windows platform.

"We have been asked by our members to request that the ATO review its policies and software requirements so that public libraries are able to provide every Australian taxpayer with a simple way of filing their tax return online."

We did not receive a satisfactory response to this request and this remains a factor for some people wishing to file their tax forms online via a library computer. With a greater emphasis in online transactions, we foresee further issues arising, unless there is early stage consultation between ATO, the Digital Transformation Office and the Australian Public Library Alliance.

6. Examples of good practice

These are two examples of how libraries have become engaged in state, territory and federal government initiatives:

- A Department of Education decided to make applications for early years places online-only. This would have put families without internet access at home and parents with limited computing skills at a disadvantage compared with others who were tech-savvy. However, libraries in the jurisdiction geared up to offer support to these families in time for the next enrolment, specially training staff and dedicating PCs for this use when applications for places opened.

- Libraries ACT is working with the Office for the Children's eSafety Commissioner to run a pilot scheme enabling families to report cybercrime through local libraries and gain support from specially trained members of the library staff.

In both these examples, the relevant Department has involved libraries at an early stage and has collaborated on staff training and resources.

7. Our preferred way of working with the ATO

The Australian Government is making a major commitment to delivering government information and services online.

While government departments and agencies can drive their own delivery of egovernment, take up by the public is something which has to be encouraged and assisted. Public libraries are well positioned to assist with this transition, given the additional resources needed to do so (primarily staff time and skills).

We would welcome a joint approach to ensure that public library involvement (capacity and funding) is factored into the ATO's digital transformation plans at the earliest stage.

Given planning time and support, public libraries can be a major asset to the ATO and to other government departments adopting a stronger digital presence.