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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.

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. Cybersafety

We read with interest the Review of the Australian Communications and Media Authority Draft Report and the recommendations it contains. On behalf of Australian public libraries, we would like to commend the achievements of the Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner. In the space of less than 12 months, the Office has acted as a valuable aggregator of government cybersafety information, actively engaged with the library and information sector, and become an important participant in, and driver of, new initiatives to support safer online experiences for children, young people and families.

The introduction of the Office has provided a useful link between cybersafety programs in different pockets of government, including the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments' Australian Cybercrime Online Reporting Network and the Department of Communications' Stay Smart Online program.

We would encourage further moves to connect cybersafety public education activities, particularly in light of the announcement earlier this year that a new $10 million cyber security awareness campaign will emerge from the Attorney-General's Department to replace the Stay Smart Online program.

With more than 112 million visits every year, public libraries are used by approximately half the population of Australia, and often our patrons are those who are described by other agencies as "hard-to-reach". While libraries aim to support government programs that are relevant, topical, and have the potential to improve lives, an early and co-ordinated approach enables us to do so to a greater degree than receiving short notice, unco-ordinated and even conflicting requests from several agencies acting independently of each other.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner and with other agencies active in this space to help maintain a trusted online environment.

4. Access and participation

We also noted the principle of "Access to services/participation in society" in Part 5 of the report, The case for further regulatory reform. We agree that "Citizens should enjoy reasonable and equitable access to communications infrastructure, services and the content necessary to enable their effective participation in society and the economy."

We would like to flag that public libraries play a crucial role in ensuring equitable access to technology, providing public access terminals for the nearly one in five Australians who don't have access to the internet at home, together with high speed broadband connectivity and

wifi for library users. The Australian Government's Digital Transformation agenda means that more and more people are using public libraries to access websites and electronic resources, and to seek advice about how to provide information to government 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).

5. Summary

Given planning time and support, public libraries can be a major asset to government departments promoting cybersafety initiatives and adopting a stronger digital presence.

We would welcome formal acknowledgement of this role and involvement in new initiatives from the earliest planning stages.