

VICLINK RESPONSE TO ISSUES FOR VICTORIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN 2001

May 2001

1 LEADERSHIP, VISION AND DIRECTION

Aim: *A clearly understood and accepted process that provides the future vision and direction for Victoria's public libraries.*

- Effective process relies on appropriate structure. The current structure which divides state government funding and policy between two departments and largely excludes local government, the primary funder and 'owner' of public library services, leads to confused, confusing and fragmented process.
- The Library Board of Victoria's statutory responsibility covers all library and information services in which the state government has a role. There is currently little evidence of the Board delivering on this responsibility in relation to public libraries. Responses to this inadequacy need to go beyond strengthening the relationships or recognising the leadership role suggested by the current legislation and structure. The very necessity of a role for LBV in relation to public libraries is in question. There are other services provided by local government and partially funded by the state government which should be used as models for a more appropriate structure. In the meantime public libraries are ready, willing and able to assist the Board in understanding public library issues and supporting any initiatives the Board takes in developing its role.
- The State Library of Victoria is a very significant library for the public, but as a city-based, single outlet institution its role and profile are very different to the wider public library sector with its 900 service points throughout metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria. The relationship between SLV and the public library network needs to be developed into a strategic alliance of partners who understand and support each other in delivering on their separate and wonderfully complementary responsibilities. Such a partnership does not depend on a shared governance structure.
- VICNET is extremely highly valued by Victoria's public libraries and should be funded and managed in ways which enhance its capacity to deliver internet-based services to the communities served by public libraries. The matter of whether this benefit is maximised by VICNET's current management arrangement, sitting as it does within a large bureaucracy with high costs in both dollars and efficiency, should be reviewed thoroughly and from an independent perspective.
- There are, as suggested above, other models which will address the issues raised under this aim, including an effective voice for local government (while ensuring that service delivery is improved across the state) and for public libraries in advocating and influencing from a position of strength. A model which establishes a single agency for public libraries within one state government department (resolving which this is to be would be the subject of further debate) and develops appropriate partnership agreements with other stakeholders including the State Library and peak local government bodies is the appropriate way to move forward on the issues arising from the need for *leadership, vision and direction*.

2 ACCESS AND EQUITY

Aim: *To provide free or affordable access to properly funded and resourced public libraries for all Victorians.*

- Statewide standards are not a popular tool for service development in the current climate of ‘best value’, in which local needs and values determine priorities for service provision. The esteem with which public libraries are held by their community may ensure that this approach works to improve standards. However, it is felt by many that there are core values around the public good, social capital and community benefit which require some kind of underpinning via a standards-based approach. And upgrading of those below any agreed standards can only happen when appropriate funding is provided – this is likely to be needed on a recurrent, not short-term, basis and should be provided by those who support those values the standards represent.
- Public libraries have a responsibility to identify local needs and develop ways of responding to them, a key principle of the Best Value framework. These responses will often be in partnership with other service providers. Development of the skills and resources to undertake this research and implement appropriate and effective strategic alliances is a key area for cooperative initiatives in the sector (under current arrangements examples include statewide training, LGB project funding etc.).
- Dimensions of the ‘free vs. user pays’ debate include both a ‘reality check’ and a core values and principles component. There are those who argue that recent experience in New Zealand demonstrates scope for further income-generation by public libraries. This should be balanced by the view which supports values placing public libraries centrally in our social capital, social engagement scenario. If these values are held by the community and its governments to be at the core of the public library function, funding and full access (ie. not based on capacity to pay or to meet some other prerequisite) should be provided by those governments.

As something of an aside, the prescribed ‘core and value-added services’ definition contained in the current Negotiated Service Agreement for state government per capita funding offers a useful example of a ‘standard’ in operation – there is no doubt that this has protected many services from moves to charge for a greater range of public library services, but it is under challenge from the low proportion of funding from the body which imposes the standard, and from some efforts to bypass the ‘standard’ in creative ways.

- Social engagement is undoubtedly **the** key issue of the present and the future for public libraries. Many in the community intuitively understand this about their public libraries and identify it as a role they would like to see built further. There is a crucial need for the public library network to ‘tell the story’ about its role in community development, community well-being and improving social capital to funders and decision-makers. This requires new skills and a strong capacity not currently available. There is a clear role here for VICLINK on behalf of its membership. Building this capacity would be supported by a streamlined governance structure as identified in section 1 above.

3 CHANGING ROLES AND PATTERNS OF USE

Aim: *To understand the needs of different groups in the local community in order to provide library services for the whole community as inclusively as possible.*

- Marketing and promotion are key activities for public libraries, both locally and on a statewide, potentially national, basis. The statewide *librariesvictoria* campaign has led the way in this, and should continue to develop and improve its strategies and deliverables to attract new users to public libraries. A national project evaluating the potential of an 'Australian public library network' is underway, and this may lead to opportunities for federal input into service and network development and promotion. Undoubtedly, one of the outcomes of the CCT regime which lives on in Victoria's public libraries is an improved understanding of the need to determine community needs and develop services in response – the capacity to actually deliver on these remains problematic for many poorly-funded services, and this comes back to many of the other issues raised in the paper about standards, service development and the ongoing issue of available dollars and government / community priorities.
- IT services provided by public libraries have been critical to maintenance of our value to communities since the world became wired in the last decade or so. Issues around maintaining and improving these services are the same as for other public library services, although the costs attached are high, particularly of infrastructure and recurrent components. Further key issues relate to evaluating cost-shifting from more traditional services (eg. non-fiction and reference collections) to electronic resources and the equipment needed to gain access to them – issues which require not only sound understanding of service use patterns, but also of expectations of current and potential service users. This is but one example of the issue of how to expand services within existing resources and be able to make strategic decisions about what to shed and how to manage such a process.
- IT services offer opportunities for appropriate and soundly-based partnerships, as with other services. The potential for consortium purchasing is great, another area where additional capacity around governance and centralised administration is the key. Note that a consortium to purchase and manage electronic databases on behalf of the majority of Victoria's public libraries has recently been established ('Gulliver'), no mean feat given the absence of any structural support for this initiative beyond the significant and effectively volunteer commitment of a number of individuals and library services (not, it should be noted, the case with consortium arrangements established by other library bodies such as the Council of Australian State Libraries, CASL).

While it is difficult to see a statewide library management system etc. being implemented in the near future, this remains a worthy goal both from the point of view of cost saving and of service delivery. For these reasons, any means by which systems and access to them can be integrated to the max and provided seamlessly must be continually monitored and evaluated. This is another area which has more likelihood of underpinning policy, governance and strategy if there is a unified structure supporting public libraries.

- 'Lifelong learning', a key service provided by Victoria's public libraries since their inception in Mechanics Institutes in the nineteenth century. The public library is not a formal educational institution, it is inclusive to all in the community. supporting individuals who wish to pursue education informally and whose learning is self-directed. It is a strength of public libraries that they are not part of the formal

education system and have built service delivery and supportive relationships with natural partners at the 'grassroots level', for example adult education providers.

Another great story to tell – we don't necessarily need to do anything differently to the way it is being done now, we do need to tell the story, sell the message and yes, the federal government could well put its money here if there was appropriate recognition of what we do. See various comments above about the need to build a capacity to communicate more effectively on this as well as many other aspects of public library service provision and roles in the community.

4 FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Aim: *A statewide public library system whose resources adequately satisfy the complex information needs of contemporary society.*

- Funding – referred to throughout, including the need to develop the case and argue it persuasively. Of course VICLINK recommends an increase in government funding, access to federal funding is most important. And, while project funds have and can support many worthwhile initiatives, all too often this results in 'on again, off again' service provision which does not in fact meet community needs and expectations effectively. It must also be recognised that governments currently opt for this approach over long-term funding – a challenge for us all to work with.
- As a sweeping and superficially simple statement, it should be said that any level of government which supports the values and principles by which public library services are offered should contribute funding. In the view of VICLINK, this means all three tiers of government have a role to play and should contribute in areas relevant to their constitutional responsibilities. And where the sustainability of some services is in doubt, in particular library corporations in rural Victoria at present, this is a responsibility to be carried by local and state governments. Solutions are complex, need to be tailored locally but above all must support and enhance the role of public libraries in their communities, not detract from this by addressing only dollar-driven values.

5 RE-CREATING THE PROFESSION

Aim: *To provide the conditions that result in a skilled and adaptable library workforce, and to improve the status and esteem of the library profession in the eyes of the community.*

- The issues in this key area of service provision are well summarised in the paper. As with other human services agencies, well over two-thirds of public library expenditure is spent on staffing, and library staff provide the essential mechanism by which the crucial added value of connecting information and recreational resources with those in the community who seek to use them is delivered. Responses to these issues require resources and strategic development of programs and activities which support training and development. The statewide training program delivered through the Library Network Unit of the State Library with public library funds has been an innovative and very successful response to the needs of libraries throughout the state. It is also up to library managers and VICLINK to advocate on behalf of the network to library education providers, and to develop their internal staffing profiles

and strategies in ways which respond to needs for flexibility and staff satisfaction. Relationships with bodies such as VECCI and peak local government organisations (MAV, VLGA) need to be developed so that industrial relations structures and processes can deliver on these objectives too.

- The profile and image of the profession need marketing and promotion as do the services and resourcing provided by public libraries, and it makes sense for these to be communicated as two aspects of a single 'message'.

6 BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES REDEVELOPMENT

Aim: *To ensure library buildings are adequate to their purpose, and to enhance the value and pride the community places in them.*

- There are some fine examples of library buildings representing the 'messages' of the services they provide and the values they epitomise. Such buildings are not cheap, and they have arisen from strong local commitment and responsiveness to community expectations. We must continue to strive for more such buildings and to communicate the message that the library building is no less relevant in the twenty-first century than it was in the twentieth.
- The primary determining factor in evaluating co-location, re-location and shared service provision models must be whether it will work for public library users and potential users in supporting primary public library roles and values, as discussed elsewhere (social capital, community development, access and equity).

7 AN INTEGRATED LIBRARY SECTOR FOR THE WHOLE OF VICTORIA

Aim: *A statewide public library system whose resources adequately satisfy the complex information needs of contemporary society*

- There are strong concerns among VICLINK members, particularly those in rural and regional Victoria where shared facilities and proposals for same are more common than in metropolitan areas, about the mismatch of service provision in such facilities. The sole driver of such models is most often saving dollars, which is of course not an unworthy and certainly a realistic factor in itself. However, it is essential that the following matters are fully considered in relation to any such service model:
 - What is best for the **public library** and its users?
 - Does any such proposal provide a setting in which public library users will be comfortable?
 - Has the full range of other options been comprehensively canvassed? – cooperation using the potential of electronic service delivery, for example.

Victorian public libraries have an excellent track record of cooperation, which is recognised as a great strength of the network and which delivers myriad benefits to funding bodies and service users. For cooperation to be developed effectively, it must genuinely assist service provision and not have an adverse impact on participants. To this end, VICLINK's position on the matter of joint-use services is that Victoria's public library policy should not endorse or promote such services either directly or implicitly. It is recognised that some joint-use models have the potential to deliver cost-effective library services. However, to do so they must be developed with the full participation of all stakeholders and must be measured

against compatibility of values underpinning service provision and the benefits to public library users and potential users. Support for core values around community engagement, access and equity in services provided will only be translated into effective service delivery if considered and developed from the outset, not imposed either *post facto* or externally. Where these values and needs are disparate, a public library service which is of benefit to its community will not emerge from a solely dollar-driven strategy. Please refer also to comments about public libraries and lifelong learning above.

- The mutuality of service integration and co-operation is crucial, as the paper describes. VICLINK supports such approaches where key values and principles are protected and developed to the good of the community and in recognition of community support for these commitments. A sophisticated model which builds strategic alliances offers a productive profile to support local and national objectives such as Australia as a 'knowledge economy'.

Barbara Horn and VICLINK Executive,
on behalf of VICLINK.