

RESPONSE TO:

CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE – DRAFT SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS

Executive summary

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this document. It is an excellent summary of the key issues and the suggested responses from stakeholders to address these issues. We agree with the comments on telecommunications and lack of adequate bandwidth, the need for Government involvement through policy setting and funding, investment in ICT training for teachers, encouragement of information literacy and the concept that computer skills without information skills will not take us very far.

This submission will comment in more detail on the best means of making access to computers available, information literacy training and the provision and organisation of content. We believe that insufficient emphasis is given to the role that libraries, in particular public libraries, can play in these areas. We believe that public libraries provide one of the best means for community access and that they will provide more benefit for less cost. The majority of citizens are familiar and feel comfortable about using public libraries.

The reasons for preferring public libraries as a primary access channel are:

- Best spend for public money because physical and technical infrastructure is already in place
- Access to the internet and information already part of their core business
- Libraries are well used and respected community institutions which people associate with access to information and ideas
- Accountability for spending public money easy to ensure as processes are already in place
- Librarians have the skills to enable others to become information literate
- Libraries are already working more closely with the education sector to meet life long learning needs. Even greater synergies are possible with targeted funding.

In summary, don't spend time, energy and money on recreating a network of centres - use the already existing resource we have in public libraries.



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¹ MetroNet is the society of New Zealand Public Libraries serving populations of 50,000 or more. Eighteen libraries are currently members.

Background

1. Christchurch City Libraries has been a pioneer in the provision of Internet access for the community and in the supply and organisation of content on the web since 1995. We provide well over 100 computers (the number is growing significantly annually) for access to electronic resources both on the web and through subscription databases for Christchurch and the wider community. We also provide courses and one on one help for those wanting to learn how to access information for themselves
2. We see our role, and that of all public libraries, as being one of enabling and supporting life long learning and the creative use of recreation through:
 - Equitable access for all to information
 - Provision of content, both in physical and electronic format
 - Organisation and validation of information, both physical and electronic
 - Skilled and knowledgeable professionals who both find information for people and impart skills so that they can do this for themselves
3. A modern, well-resourced public library works with all segments in the community to meet their information and reading needs. We start with babies, support pre-school and then school based learning, tertiary and life long learning as people retrain and learn new skills. We work with business and with communities. Many libraries are progressing well in endeavouring to meet bicultural commitments and to work with Tangata Whenua to meet Maori information needs. The Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) has taken a lead in working in partnership with its sister organisation Te Roopu Whakahau, the Maori Library Workers Network.
4. Public Libraries are well-used institutions, recognised and supported in their communities. Christchurch City Libraries has over 70% of its population as registered members, issues over 5.5 million items per annum (nearly 17 items per head of population) and had 1.6 million pages downloaded from its web site in the last year. Nearly 3 million visits to its 13 libraries occur annually.

Public Libraries as Community Access Centres

5. This information is provided to illustrate the point that public libraries can and should be a key plank in any Government strategy to close the digital divide. The physical infrastructure is already in place – the buildings and the technology. . Even small public libraries in rural districts now provide Internet access that is well used. However, the provision is not consistent because each local authority operates independently and there has been no legislative requirement for local authorities to provide library service and no standards of service provision that have any legal standing. Although LIANZA has produced standards of service for public libraries a local authority can choose to ignore these.
6. Local Government amalgamation did result in some improvement in the standards of service for small and medium size public libraries, but the Local Government Amendment Act no 3 has undermined many of these gains. The requirement to assess public and private good and then develop funding policies based on this assessment resulted in many public libraries being forced to increase revenue by direct charges. In nearly all cases, the only way a public library has been able to provide access to new services and sources of information through

the Internet has been to charge for it. This quite correctly has been identified in the document as a barrier to access (clause 38).

7. As well as the physical infrastructure, public libraries have the systems, people and the support mechanisms to deliver a product over time. They are institutions grounded in community with community values and can be responsive to community need. The report (Clause 30) implies that “schools or libraries might not suit everyone”. It goes on to give examples of why schools may not be appropriate places but no evidence is supplied that would suggest libraries are not suitable places.
8. The United Kingdom government has recognised the key role that public libraries can play in delivering their objectives for e-literacy through the establishment of the People’s Network.²
9. The Singapore Government has made its public library infrastructure central to its learning nation objectives and has poured \$8 billion into the improvement of its libraries over 8 years. They have built new facilities, extended physical collections, and provided impressive video, electronic and other information systems and technology to achieve these goals.³
10. New Zealand has the opportunity to learn from these countries. It is probably the only country in the Western world where Central Government funding is not available to support public library development. Australia, the USA, the UK, Finland, Canada as well as other European nations provide grants and targeted funds to support public library development. Sometimes this is through State run services; sometimes it is through contestable funds that public libraries can apply for.
11. Whilst the National Library of New Zealand supports educational information needs through its School Services, it moved away from any direct public library support in the early 1990’s. Local taxes are now the only public funds supporting public library services in this country.
12. Clause 7 identifies as an issue “the inability to upgrade (hardware, software etc) as technology advances”. The possibility of doing this in a systematic way is much improved by using organisations such as libraries (backed by Councils) that already recognise this as an issue and have processes in place to do so. This clause also identifies accessibility issues for people with disabilities. Again most public libraries, because they are part of the public sector, have adequate to excellent provision for people with physical and other disabilities. This may not be the case if community access centres are set up in existing shop front buildings, which would require money to be spent on making them accessible.

Schools as Community Access Centres

13. In communities where public libraries are not available (particularly in rural areas) the other important provider can be through schools. Again they have the physical infrastructure and increasingly have some technology. If Government is going to move further into the role of providing computer equipment and software it is our belief that this is better provided in the education sector where multiple use of facilities can be made.
14. In Christchurch we are piloting two projects with schools and the education sector. The first involves two secondary schools that access the Internet via a Christchurch City Libraries’

² New Library: the People’s Network <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/lic/newlibrary/intro.html>

³ National Library Board, Singapore. Mission <http://www.lib.gov.sg/info/nlboverview/index.html>

server and thus have access to the suite of Internet and electronic resources as if they were a branch of the library. The second project will be the building of a learning centre in association with a community library that will provide programmes for schools and the community. The Christchurch City Council will build the facility and a Trust will be formed to run the Centre that will have Library, Education and Community representation. We also have Learning Centres in two other community libraries.

15. Better partnerships between schools and libraries could be fostered through digital divide projects, again gaining multiple use of facilities and equipment.

Other providers of Community Access Centres

16. The “Combined Social Service Model” described by Botha, Small and Crutchely (Clause 36 and 37) does allow for flexibility and community driven approaches. There are some cautions however. Many community initiatives are personality dependent that is the enthusiasm of one person will ensure a Centre gets off the ground, but things can fall apart if that person is removed. Time and money needs to be spent on getting an administrative and financial structure in place. Whilst such a model would allow a physical infrastructure to be put in place, experience shows that the equipment without the skilled tutoring or course structure will not result in any real learning gains for the individual. These comments do not apply to the appropriateness of specific learning centres for Maori, Pacific Islanders and other specific target segments of the population, which we support.

ICT education and training

17. Information literacy, which is the skills required to “find, collate, interpret, manipulate and transform information” (Clause 7), is rightly identified as being key to overcoming “digital disadvantage”. These skills are the very same ones the librarians acquire through their professional education. Academic libraries have moved heavily into the area of teaching information literacy skills and many librarians also have teaching qualifications so can use both sets of knowledge and skills to ensure appropriate methodology. Public Libraries are also moving into this field and our library, for example, has a small team dedicated to training customers in information literacy and computer skills

Relevant content

18. Information literacy by its very definition requires content for evaluating. Libraries are already recognised as content providers both physical and electronic. Associating the Information Literacy training with the information provider and access point is synergistic.
19. The Internet as we know is vast, disorganised, providing access to quality information as well as junk and downright misleading information. Public libraries provide mediated access to the Internet by selecting and organising sites for easy navigation.
20. Much of the best information is still only available by expensive subscriptions to electronic databases. Christchurch City Libraries recently re-launched its Website⁴ with a suite of premium databases available within its libraries, the majority of which are also available at home, work and school for library members. This sort of access to quality content such as full text magazine articles, newspapers, encyclopaedic information across many subjects should be available nationwide. Opportunities exist for the National Library of New Zealand

⁴<http://library.christchurch.org.nz/Search.asp>

to co-ordinate electronic access to such information and distribute via the web with public libraries as community access points.

21. The issue of communities finding content on the Web that is relevant to them has been identified as an issue (Clause 7). Public libraries can and have played a significant role in enabling communities to collect and publish their information⁵ and Christchurch City Libraries is about to extend its community information database (CINCH) to include the possibility for Community Groups to publish their material on the web as part of a Community Trust funded project, *Christchurch on Line*.
22. Government information on-line and freely available is as crucial for initiatives to close the digital divide as it is for the government.nz@your.service, the recently published Vision statement for e-government in New Zealand. We support any initiatives which make this accessible and ensures that information is archived for future generations.

General

23. We endorse the approach taken by LIANZA in its submission on National Information Policy
24. In conclusion we feel that the report is an excellent summary of the issues. We believe it does not take sufficient cognisance of the work already being undertaken by public libraries to bridge the digital divide. Public libraries should be an avenue that is utilised as a first priority. The impact, in small town and rural New Zealand in particular, of funding free internet access and additional computer technology, along with community based ICT training programmes developed in partnership with the community, would be significant in moving to bridge the gap between haves and have nots.

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⁵ The Charlotte and Mecklenburg County Public Library was the instigator of Charlotte's Web