

NSW Public Libraries and eGovernment

Summary report

Library Council of New South Wales
2006



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ISBN 0 7313 7164X

Published by the Library Council of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
Sydney New South Wales 2000
Australia

www.sl.nsw.gov.au
atmitchell.com

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This document is a summary of the original report *NSW Public Libraries and eGovernment 2005* which was commissioned by the Public Library Network Research Committee and prepared by Environmetrics Pty Ltd <www.environmetrics.com.au> for the Library Council of New South Wales. The original report and this summary can be found on the State library of New South Wales website at: www.sl.nsw.gov.au

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Foreword

Public libraries serve the educational, economic and social needs of Australian communities. As well as meeting individual information and research needs, public libraries serve a broader role. They offer community support as a whole and demonstrate their commitment to meeting shifting and growing community needs by providing communication technologies and access to electronic information.

Internet use is an increasingly crucial identifier of how well an individual participates in contemporary economic and social life. Just as the number of services available online increases, so too does the depth of the divide between those that have Internet access and those who do not.

One of the most significant ways in which public libraries provide access to Internet resources is through equitable access to electronic government (eGovernment) information and services. The NSW Public Library Network Research Committee recognised that to maintain and develop these services within a dynamic online environment a better understanding of the impact of eGovernment policies on the community's use of public libraries was required.

This research, *NSW Public Libraries and eGovernment*, reports on how NSW public libraries are bridging that divide. To date, this is the most extensive research conducted on public libraries and eGovernment within Australia and internationally.

Over the past decade, the volume of information available online has increased dramatically. The Internet continues to have a pervasive influence on work, education and day to day living. While most Australian communities are aware of the Internet's wealth of information their local public library may be their only point of access to this extraordinary resource.

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) survey - *Public Libraries Australia 2003-04*¹ cited public libraries as key access points to the Internet for local communities. There are 1,400 public libraries across the nation (363 in NSW), primarily funded by local government, and ABS reports:

- Increased overall usage of public libraries - 100 million visits nationally each year
- 30 million of these visits made to NSW public libraries
- 34% (1,567) of the 4,638 Internet access points in Australian public libraries are in NSW.

Between 1998 and 2005 the number of internet terminals in NSW public libraries increased 6.2 fold and the usage (number of Internet hours reserved) 20.9 fold. It is highly likely that this level of growth will continue. The number of terminals has expanded to 1,963 and the hours reserved to 1,997,533.²

¹ *Public Libraries Australia 2003-04*, Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005. (Catalogue no. 8560.1)

² *Public Library Statistics, 1997/98, 2002/03 & 2004/05*, State Library of New South Wales

Table 1. Internet access - New South Wales public libraries

Year	Terminals	Hours reserved
1998	319	95,767
2003	1,625	1,392,268
2005	1,963	1,997,533

The Public Library Network Research Committee commissioned Environmetrics Pty Ltd to conduct research into the community's use of eGovernment resources. The research report *NSW Public Libraries and eGovernment 2005* was the result and the present publication is a summary of the full report. It gives a wide-ranging view of the support that NSW public libraries are providing to eGovernment initiatives and looks specifically at:

- general uptake of eGovernment information and services
- usage of specific, high demand sites
- amount and type of assistance public librarians provide to clients
- general issues associated with supporting eGovernment

NSW Public Libraries and eGovernment is a picture of the support provided by public libraries at a specific point in time (with a reassessment planned for 2008). As the three spheres of government (federal, state, local) continue to implement eGovernment initiatives and strategies, the role of NSW public libraries in providing effective access to such information, services and programs will, inevitably, increase.

The *NSW Public Libraries and eGovernment* research report was submitted to the July 2005 meeting of the Library Council of New South Wales for consideration. Library Council commended the report and endorsed its recommendations.

Kathleen Bresnahan
Assistant State Librarian, Public Library Services
November 2006

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Executive summary

Australian Federal, state and, to some extent, local governments have embraced the Internet as a means of delivering information and services. However, there is currently a disjuncture between governments' readiness for eGovernment (electronic government) and citizens' capacity to participate in these services.³

Policy makers, aware of this gap, are keen to develop programs that can tackle it. One of the most effective ways to bridge the divide is to engage and support intermediaries who are already helping citizens in their use of government online services. Public libraries are the most established and active of those intermediaries. Public libraries in NSW have demonstrated strong leadership in meeting community need for greater access to eGovernment by providing communication technologies, resources and staff to assist clients to use government information and services.

This support will grow as public libraries are increasingly recognised as accessible, with convenient locations, opening hours and diverse services (the possibility to conduct other business such as borrowing books) while having access to specific government agency sites and information.

The State Library of NSW through NSW.net, a NSW State Government initiative, has provided public libraries with subsidised and improved access to the Internet through faster, more reliable connections, equipment (over 700 PCs), and free access to quality online information resources.

Access to eGovernment

Government agencies have begun to use the Internet as a supplement to traditional forms (mail, phone or personal contact) of communication. Increasingly, however, eGovernment services are designed for the particular functionality of the Internet and some services are available only via the Internet - a trend observed at Federal, state and local government levels. One example, the Federal Job Network system of delivering assistance to job-seekers, is largely Internet based.

Because Internet access is by no means universal, equity of access to government information and services is an important concern in all strategies for Internet based services. Community members who are not computer literate or Internet savvy will need special assistance to access government programs that are Internet based.

Some Internet based services provide access for clients via a specialist network of kiosks (for example, Job Search kiosks in Centrelink offices and the offices of employment service providers). However this is not a practical option for many government services. Public access to the Internet is provided by the private sector via 'Internet cafes', however, these are not distributed throughout the community; instead they tend to be restricted to areas where travellers/backpackers congregate.

³United Nations, *Global eGovernment Readiness report 2005*, <http://www.unpan.org/egovgovernment5.asp> viewed 25 October 2006. (Reports Australia's readiness of 0.8679 [6th in top 10 countries] and Australia's participation of 0.7143 [9th in top 10 countries])

Today, the most extensive network of Internet access for the public is provided by public libraries which offer:

- distribution throughout the state in all metropolitan, regional and rural communities
- convenient opening hours (usually beyond office hours)
- a safe, supervised environment
- staff trained in computers, Internet use and information seeking skills

Research for the report

Aims

This project had the following objectives:

- explore in detail, NSW government e-initiatives and their impact on New South Wales public libraries
- investigate the ability of NSW public libraries to support the delivery of government electronic services with specific reference to infrastructure.

The report presents a picture of the current and likely load placed on public libraries by eGovernment initiatives. The results of the research will assist public libraries:

- in the provision of access to government electronic information and delivery of electronic services
- and other government agencies in their support of government initiatives in general.

The project was designed to be comprehensive in looking at a representative range of government e-initiatives including: various domains (e.g. health, planning and education); initiatives of different scale and impact; initiatives where the Internet supports other media as well as web-only initiatives; libraries in metropolitan, regional and remote areas.

Method

The study involved five stages of research:

- a literature review
- desk research
- field consultation
- a survey of public libraries
- case studies

Details of each research stage including the literature review and survey questionnaire form part of the NSW Public Libraries and eGovernment publications which are available at: www.sl.nsw.gov.au/pln/projects.cfm

Challenges and opportunities

The increased reliance by government agencies on the public accessing information and services via the Internet leads to increased demands on library staff to help clients to find information, or carry out functions. The research has highlighted a number of key challenges for NSW libraries in planning ongoing, effective provision of access to eGovernment information for all NSW clients.

Challenges include a significant increase in demand for services and draw on resources; the lack of ability to manage resources effectively when grant based projects are not sustained, or fully sustained, by recurrent funding; and the impact of poor website design and changes to websites.

In addition, the public library sector appears to have a low profile with senior policy makers, with many unaware of the central role that libraries fill in local communities.

Improvements in the channels of communication and greater cooperation between the library sector and government agencies will benefit clients of government agencies and libraries alike. Existing arrangements can and should be improved and new ones established.

If it is proactive in establishing pilot projects and centres of excellence the public library sector could advocate for more support for libraries as a means of accessing eGovernment. The library network already has proven initiatives, for example the Legal Information Access Centres (LIACs) and the ABS Library Extension Program. These highly successful programs are models of cross sectoral and intergovernmental collaboration.

Recommendations

Following the submission of the research report to the Library Council of New South Wales in 2005 the following recommendations were endorsed for action by the State Library of New South Wales, in conjunction with the NSW public library network:

- liaise with government agencies, especially those with high impact on public libraries, to develop memoranda of understanding that acknowledge and fund the role of public libraries in providing access to, and delivery of, eGovernment information and services;
- support and facilitate training for public library staff in eGovernment issues;
- review information and communication technology (ICT) within the NSW public library network to assess the ability of the network to provide access to online information and services;
- conduct follow-up research within three years (2008) to assess the ongoing impact of eGovernment on NSW public libraries and the ability of the network to respond to the demands created by eGovernment policies.

What the research revealed

Setting the scene

Information and communication technology (ICT) is evolving rapidly and so too are eGovernment initiatives with new benchmarks and expectations for service and functionality being continually introduced. The development of government online services can be described in four stages, as follows:⁴

Table 2. Four stages of government online services

Stage	Nature	Description
1	Information	The information necessary to start the procedure to obtain a public service is available online.
2	One way interaction	The publicly accessible website offers users a possibility to download forms to start the procedure (a 'paper application') to obtain this service.
3	Two way interaction	The publicly accessible website offers the possibility of obtaining a public service via an application online (an electronic intake of information on an official electronic form with a requirement for authentication of the person requesting the service).
4	Full electronic case handling	The publicly accessible website offers the possibility to complete the public service (including decision and delivery) entirely via the website.

In 2004, Australian Government websites ranged across the four levels of functionality.

The NSW Government Chief Information Office, formerly the Office of Information and Communications Technology, is taking the lead in developing and driving whole of government initiatives for the use and management of ICT within government, industry and the community. It is using ICT to improve customer focused services, and processes for the public's access to government services.

The NSW Government has expressed its Internet strategy in *connect.nsw*⁵ - a whole of government strategy that involves:

- **integrated government** - establishing a common infrastructure for delivering services and sharing information within and between agencies across all tiers of government

⁴ From 'Online availability of public services: How is Europe progressing? Web based survey on electronic public services'. Report of the Fifty Measurement October 2004, prepared by CapGemini for the European Commission Directorate General for Information Society and Media, 4 March 2005. Accessed 25 October 2006 http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/eeurope/2005/doc/all_about/online_availability_public_services_5th_measurement_fv4.PDF

⁵ *connect.nsw: an Internet strategy for NSW* published 1997 ISBN 0 7313 0774 7 Accessed 25 October 2006 <http://www.gcio.nsw.gov.au/docs.asp?CAT=849>

- **electronic service delivery** - encouraging NSW government agencies to deliver customer focused services to the NSW community through the use of electronic technologies
- **electronic commerce** - accelerating the take up of electronic commerce to support NSW economic development
- **networked communities** - enhancing the quality of life of NSW residents by networking within and across communities, especially those isolated by distance or social dislocation.

NSW public libraries are involved in a range of regional partnerships with government agencies to jointly deliver information and services. Lithgow Library is an example. By identifying the local community as a 'Learning City' and co-locating the library with the Lithgow Technology Centre and the Lithgow Learning Centre, Council is aiming to revitalise the local community. As demand for eGovernment service expands, so too does the pressure on venues, such as public libraries, to provide public Internet access.

Who are the clients?

A library's client profile is usually broadly reflective of the local population profile which can be very diverse. In NSW, this includes: Port Macquarie - a coastal 'sea change' town with a large number of retired/semi retired clients; Moree - a western inland town with young and Aboriginal clients; and Fairfield - a Sydney suburb with a high immigrant population.

Most Internet users in libraries also used the library for other services, though exceptions occurred in some locations, particularly where there was a higher proportion of travellers/backpackers and young people.

The most common factor for all library Internet users was their lack of access to the Internet at home, work or school/education base, often reflected in the low computing and Internet skills of the user.

Seniors

All libraries identified seniors (over 60 and retired) as prolific users of all library services. In general, a limited experience with the Internet led to a high demand for support, as well as basic services. The highest demand for Internet access came from women (themselves the most prolific users of general library services) and those who had no access at home. Seniors split into three main groups:

1. **No/limited experience with one-off need**, requiring considerable staff time (one-to-one help on an ad hoc basis) and some basic training. Government websites accessed included the Australian Tax Office (ATO), NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages (BDM), Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA), Veterans Affairs, Health and Government travel sites.

In many cases, the client had been advised by the government agency to access the information/resources at their local library.

"A client was told that they could download a form from the Veterans Affairs website at their local library. It took 30 minutes of help from a staff member to complete the process. Because the client is not likely to

use the Internet on a regular basis, any skill transfer probably won't be retained." Library staff

2. **No/limited experience with need to develop skills** resulting in strong demand for basic training (computer and Internet) that is low cost and tailored. Across Australia, computer take-up amongst seniors is higher than for other age groups.

Such clients were looking to learn more about the resources available on the Internet and their local library was a source of expertise in this regard.

3. **Experienced, regular clients.** Many seniors regularly used their local library to pursue an interest - family and local history, travel, health, digital photography, film, current affairs. Government sites accessed includes: BDM, the Australian War Memorial, Health, local councils and the Bureau of Meteorology.

In some libraries computers are dedicated to specific interests (for example, family and local history linking to sites such as BDM).

Young people

Young people were significant users of public libraries and their Internet services - for email, and hobbies and interests (music or sports sites and general education - assignments or research). Most libraries did not allow clients to use computers for games though some regional/branch libraries allowed it for social reasons and to reinforce keyboard skills.

Usage by young people was likely to follow these patterns:

- upper primary children pursued hobbies and interests and school-centred activities
- lower high school children pursued general education (assignments or research) as well as hobbies and interests
- 16-17 year olds were likely to use the RTA site (Driver Knowledge Test)
- 17-20 year olds were likely to follow study topics.

Most were skilled in computing and Internet usage and only needed help when navigating particular sites, or having difficulties logging in or with intermittent connections. Though young people had limited information searching strategies, librarians indicated they spent less time per problem with young people.

"Our young users are usually capable. Sometimes they sit in pairs and help each other." Library staff

Unemployed

The unemployed were high users of library services, especially in localities of social disadvantage. This usage was reduced, however, where there were appropriate resources in a locality, such as employment service providers, migrant resource centres and Community Technology Centres (CTCs).

Unemployed clients were most likely to use the Australian JobSearch website to:

- find out more about prospective employers;
- print job descriptions;
- prepare and update resumes;
- email applications to prospective employers.

This often involved more than merely Internet access to JobSearch (for example, basic word processing). The NSW.net computers, however, are not loaded with such software and this often meant clients had difficulty completing some of these tasks. Unemployed clients who used the Internet in public libraries for job searching were more likely to be female and adult rather than young people.

The majority of unemployed clients were Internet competent and did not place heavy demands on staff time. The exceptions were immigrants whose linguistic and cultural diversity and an overall lack of web literacy created special needs.

"We have a few unemployed single mums who come in most mornings after they have taken the children to school. I think they feel more comfortable here than at Centrelink." Library staff

Mature students

The mature age student client was, typically, doing a TAFE, rather than university course, was economically disadvantaged, unemployed, and pursuing educational/vocational training to improve employment opportunities.

The most noticeable feature of their computer usage was the length of computer time needed (not all their time was used for Internet based activities).

The demand on public libraries by mature-age students was affected by the facilities offered by local TAFEs. Some TAFEs had quite restricted opening hours, others allowed access to computer facilities outside normal hours with the use of a passkey.

"If no one else has booked the computer, they can stay on it." Library staff

Small business owners

Small business owners were not heavy Internet users in public libraries (most had access to a computer). Those without access at work or home sometimes turned to relatives or friends when they had particular needs. Most small business clients had one off or occasional needs - the majority were with eGovernment sites (ATO, NSW Small Business website and local councils' sites) where they were generally researching, buying or downloading and printing forms or information.

Overall, small business owners were not confident computer or Internet users and needed extensive staff help.

Travellers/tourists

Travellers and tourists were heavy users of Internet services in public libraries in some regional (usually coastal) and metropolitan areas. They mainly used email, but also accessed a number of government sites (ATO, Board of Studies,

immigration, Australian JobSearch and local council/tourism). Most were Internet savvy and needed help mainly to locate websites or specific information on sites.

Special client groups

Public libraries are committed to catering for the needs of clients with special needs. Where the particular client type was identified, many libraries had additional resources (multi-lingual staff or language software) to cater for these needs.

“A third of our staff speak community languages” Fairfield Library

Librarians in urban areas receiving the bulk of recent immigrants reported considerable demand to help clients discover which government department to contact to resolve particular issues.

Many libraries in older buildings had modified their premises to provide wheelchair access and had software to aid vision impaired clients installed on their computers.

Current state of play

Role of public libraries

In the past 20 years, public libraries have changed dramatically as technology and cultural expectations have revolutionised information resources at all levels. Public libraries in NSW have a strong common ground of professional standards, resources, networks and legislative framework. Each is administered at the local level.

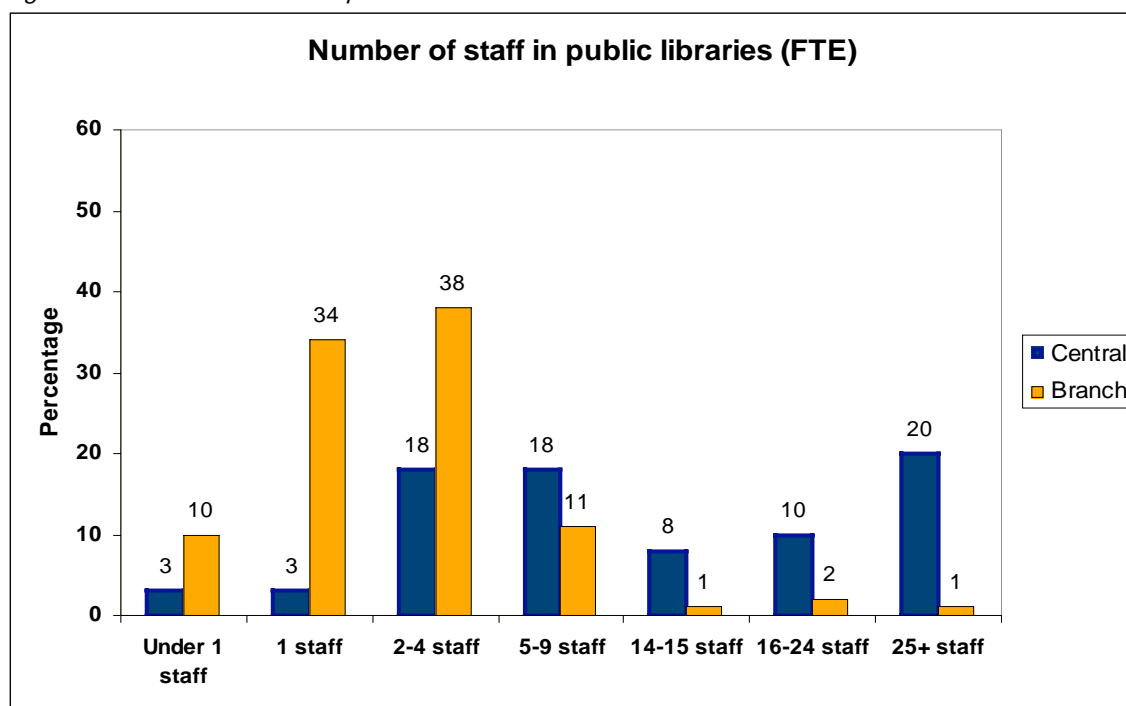
NSW libraries have emerged as vital and dynamic institutions in local communities. In some rural areas the library has become the cornerstone of social renewal and for many city and country libraries the definition and functions are expanding.

Resources in public libraries

Staff

The following graph shows the number of full time equivalent (FTE) staff in the libraries surveyed.

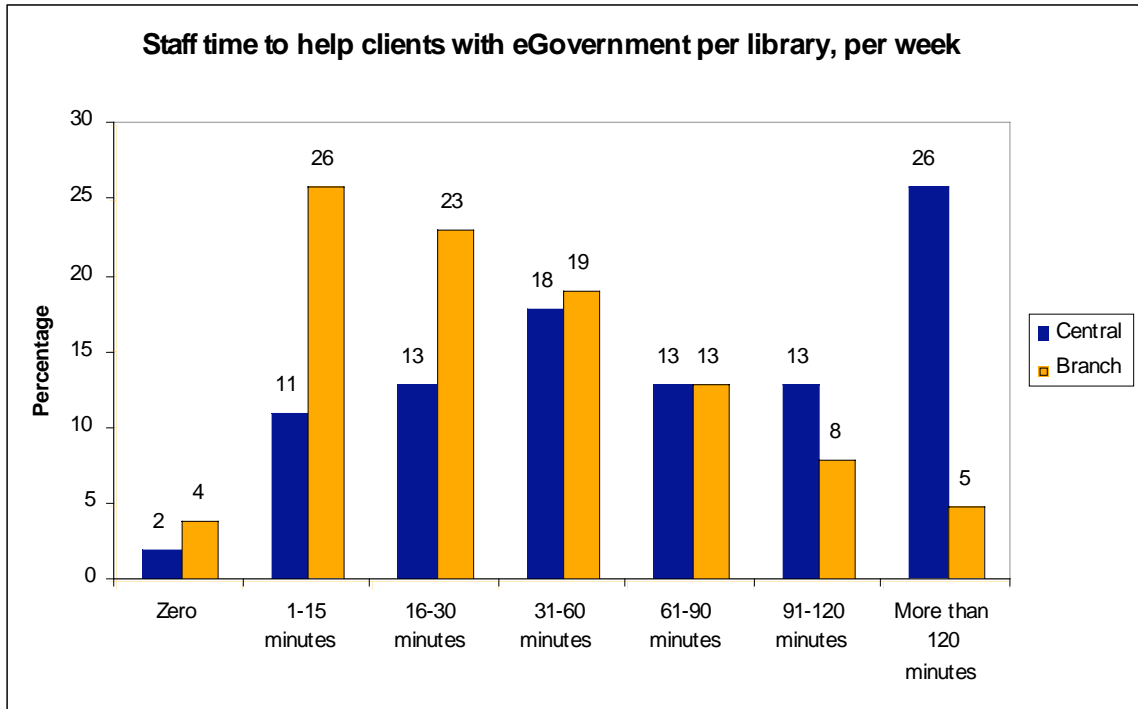
Fig 1. Number of staff in public libraries



Most branch libraries (82%) had four or less staff members. Central libraries ranged in size from those with four staff or less (24%), to those with more than 25 FTE staff (only 20% of all libraries).

An estimate can be made of the staff time spent giving direct assistance to clients accessing government websites. Taking the mean of 50 minutes per week across all libraries, gives an annual demand of more than 15,000 hours. This is greater than the total opening hours of the 363 NSW public libraries each week.

Fig 2. Staff time helping clients with eGovernment, per library, per week

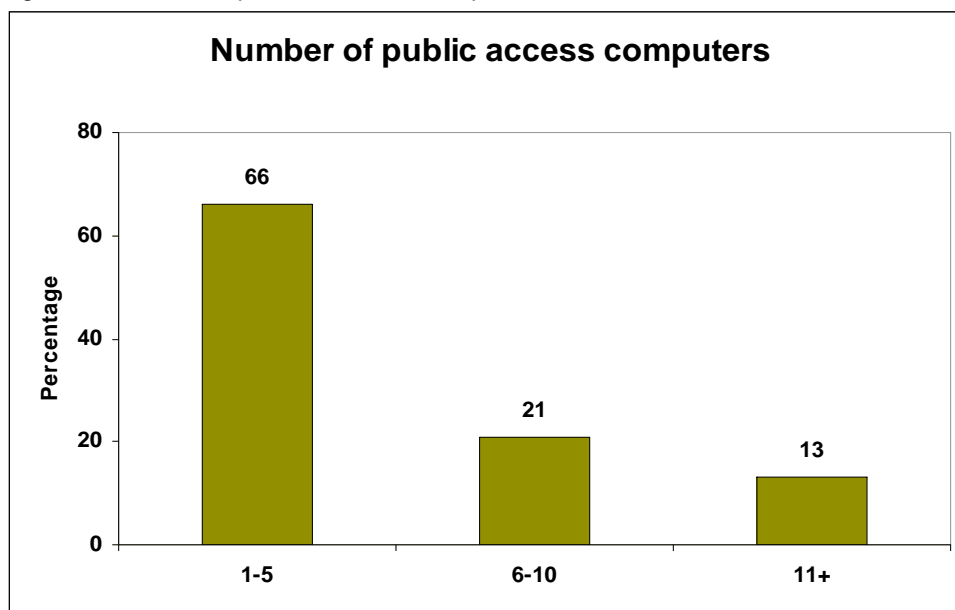


In addition to the staff time spent on direct client assistance, many more hours are dedicated to selecting and maintaining direct links to government websites, staff and client training, preparation of training materials, maintaining associated hardware and software, managing booking systems, collecting print fees and general administration including supervision.

Computers

Most libraries in NSW (66%) have five or less computers available for public Internet access.

Fig 3. Number of public access computers



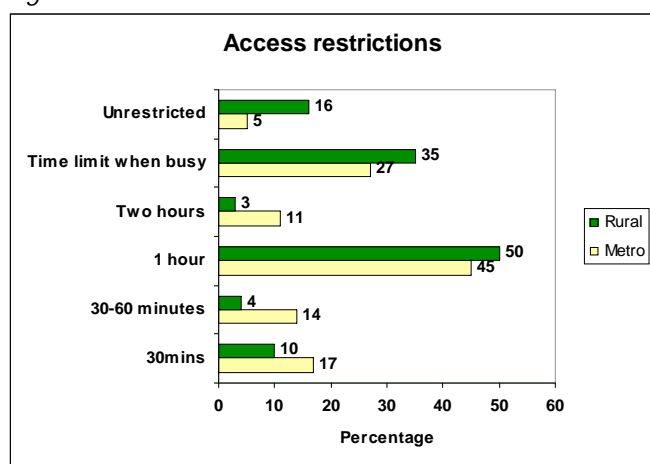
In addition to the Internet access computers, 7% of libraries had a computer that was dedicated to a particular government site (in most cases the RTA website).

“We had a machine dedicated to HSC (Higher School Certificate) papers on CD. We switched it to the RTA Drivers Knowledge Test on CD, in order to free up an Internet computer.” Library staff

Access restrictions

Most libraries impose some restrictions on the Internet access they are able to provide to clients, due to a lack of resources. The majority of libraries managed the existing resources through time-based rationing regimes. Libraries in high demand locations applied these limits at all times, others only at busy times. Control regimes were stricter in metropolitan areas than in rural, with only 5% of metropolitan libraries offering unrestricted time access to the Internet compared with 16% of rural libraries; the following graph shows the extent of the restrictions.

Fig 4. Access restrictions



“Their time is up, others are waiting, but they haven’t finished what they wanted to do. They can get upset, and you have to handle it.” Library staff

Libraries housed in older buildings across NSW struggle to incorporate public Internet PCs well (they often lack the space and/or configuration to permit effective service). For example, one library noted that they could not locate the Internet PCs in an area that had wheelchair access. Others noted the cost or inconvenience of bringing power and network wiring to the place where the computers should be located.

Where do library resources come from?

Funding for public libraries comes mainly from the local council. The State Government assists with subsidies, grants and specific programs such as NSW.net. In addition, local philanthropy provides limited funding in some areas.

Local councils

Local councils are the main funding source for public library networks and equipment (which ranged from flat screens and compact casing to ‘hand me down’ PCs from council offices). Local council funding was applied to maintenance, technical support, software upgrades and licences, Internet connection, furniture and floor space for public access computers (usually loaded with common office software).

NSW.net service

The State Government funded NSW.net service provides subsidised access to high speed Internet connections and free access to quality online information resources for public libraries and their clients. In addition, NSW.net distributed 700 PCs for Internet access in public libraries in 2001/02. At the time of this research, these computers were prominent across the library network and libraries were very positive about having the resource. Some reported that with these computers, they had three times as many public Internet access computers as previously.

Grant based funding

Funds were available from government grant schemes aimed at specific community members (young people, seniors, socially disadvantaged, immigrant and Indigenous people). These were often very useful, but also had some drawbacks - some came with restrictions that limited the total benefit. Writing grant applications and keeping associated paperwork was a drain on staff time and skill and, sometimes, provided only part of a solution (the computer but not the desk to put it on or the space to put them both in).

" There was an offer from the Department of Ageing called Seniors Online - if you dedicate a PC they would give you banners and software. We didn't take it up because it was too limiting." Library staff

Philanthropy

This is not a significant source of resources for NSW public libraries, with only two libraries reporting a donation of an Internet computer (both from the local history society, designated exclusively for genealogy and Births, Deaths and Marriages searches).

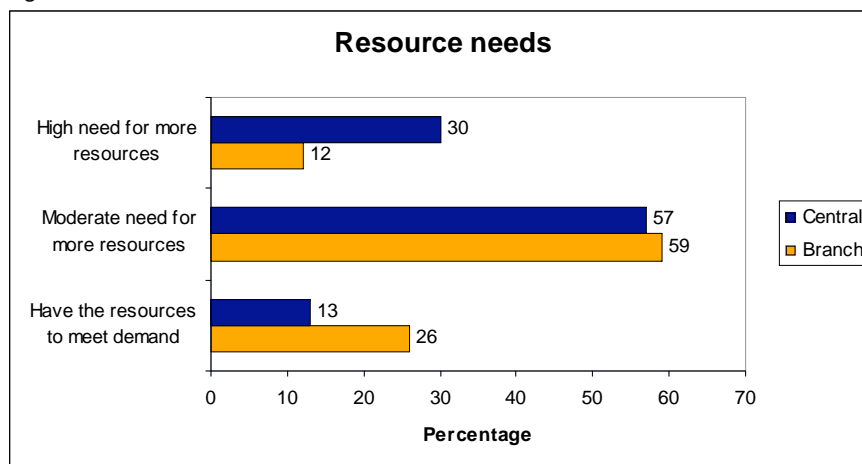
Other resources

Most libraries were able to generate income from charging (small) fees for printing. This was used to maintain and upgrade the printer/s.

Further resource needs

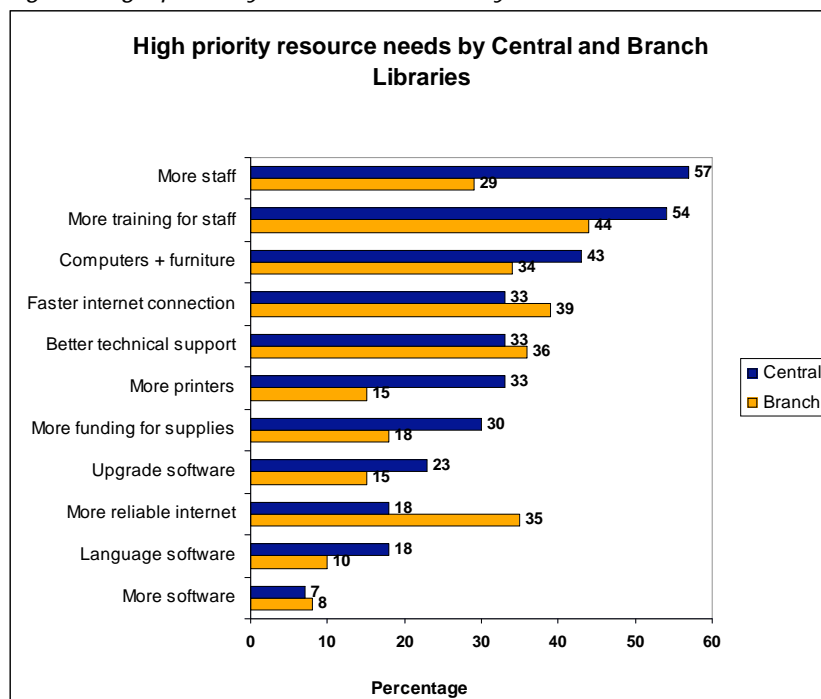
Libraries indicated the need for additional resources to meet client demand for eGovernment. In particular, 30% of central libraries expressed a high need for additional resources, as the following graph indicates. Resources identified ranged from more staff and staff training through to more reliable Internet connections and additional software.

Fig 5. Resource needs



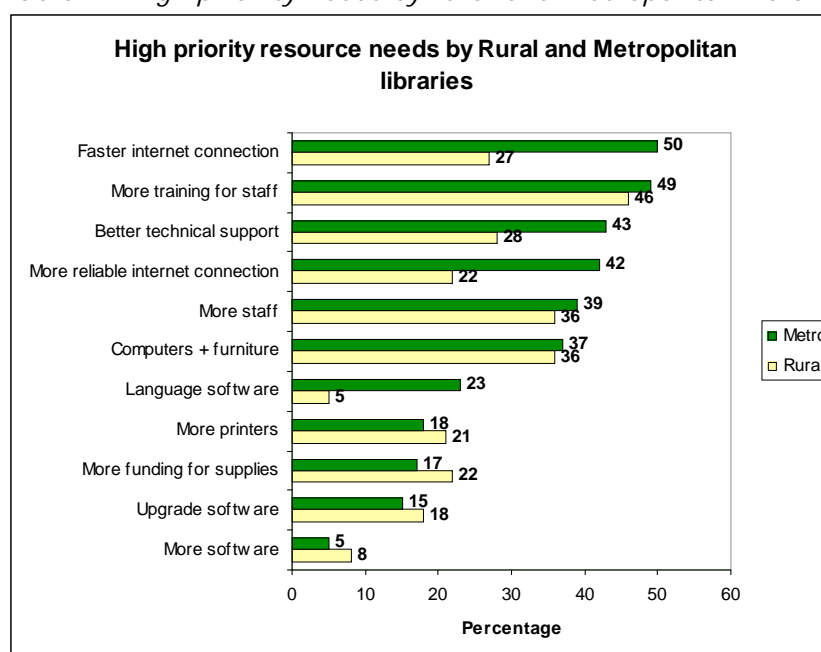
Central libraries are feeling the strongest demand on their current resources and showed the highest need for most items. The wide range of resources needed is a reflection of the many elements necessary to provide public Internet access in libraries and to adequately inform library staff about eGovernment website content. There was some variation in the high priority needs between central and branch libraries as the following graph indicates.

Fig 6. High priority resource needs by central and branch libraries



There are also some variations in the high priority resource needs between metropolitan and rural libraries as the following graph indicates.

Table 7: High priority needs by rural and metropolitan libraries



Metropolitan libraries placed high priority on:

- faster, more reliable Internet connection
- more staff and more staff training
- better technical support
- more equipment (computers and furniture)

Rural libraries placed high priority on:

- more staff and more staff training
- more equipment (computers and furniture).

eGovernment sites used in public libraries

The report details only the staff perceptions of client usage - librarians (obliged to respect clients' privacy) were not always aware of how computers were being used or which sites were being accessed.

"In a small community it is particularly important to respect their privacy. They probably don't want everyone to know if they are looking up details on Parkinson's Disease. Library staff

There is anecdotal evidence, however, of extensive use of government websites in public libraries. Of the 12 government websites surveyed 7 were accessed in 75% of all public libraries. Sites most often accessed were RTA (41% of libraries reported high usage); JobSearch (27%) and Births, Deaths, Marriages (19%). The following graphs show the use of 12 government websites in public libraries and their level of use.

Fig 8. Use of Government websites in public libraries

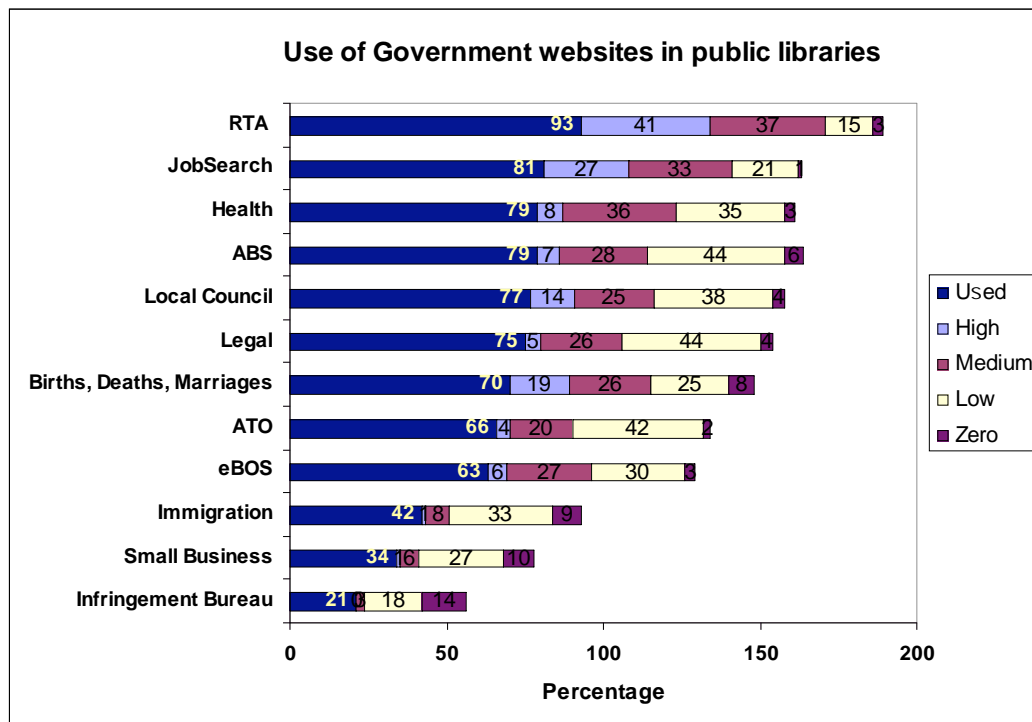
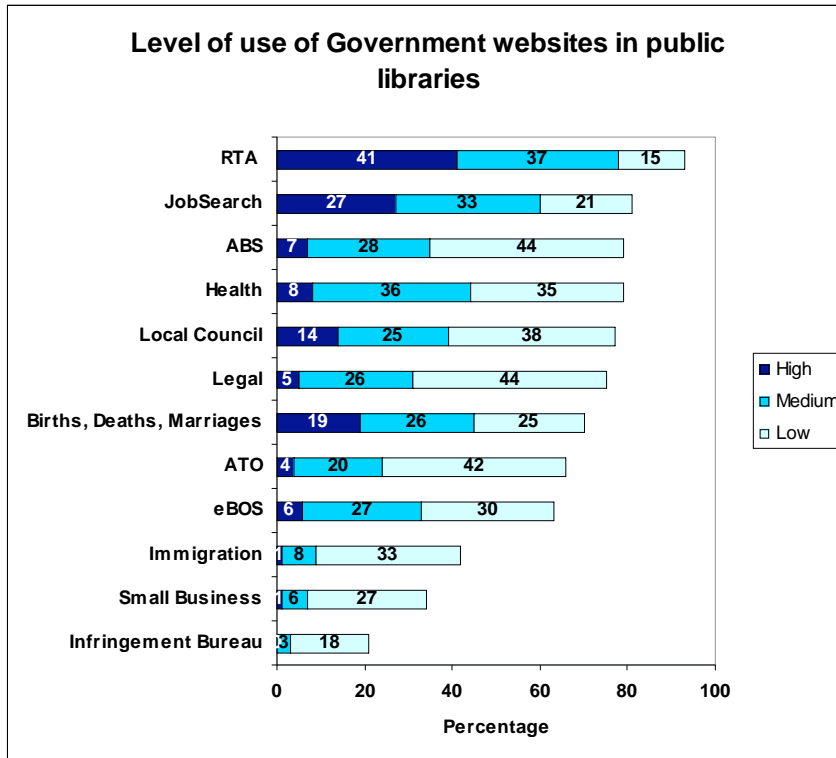


Fig 9. Level of use of Government websites



How does local context affect usage?

Looking at key characteristics of individual communities, the report is able to make comparisons between Internet usages in different areas. The following factors appear to influence the role of the public library as a site for public Internet access.

Size of the suburb/town

Central libraries in larger towns and metropolitan areas offered a substantial range of resources across all media - Internet access was just one element. These libraries sometimes had synergies with other institutions (for example, the University of Wollongong Access Centre at Bega Valley Shire Library links to the University of Wollongong databases and has a collection of course-related books). Larger collections and range of services often resulted in increased demand for Internet access.

"The Fairfield library website is a fabulous resource. They have databases online that schools can't afford. I tell all the kids to join the Fairfield library so they can access the databases. They can access it from here [school] or from home. Of course they go to the library too, and not just the studious ones." School librarian

In contrast, very small branch libraries often had very limited collections and services. As a result, more discerning clients were not drawn to them and demand for Internet access was correspondingly lower.

"The local branch library is very poor. It has terrible book stock and poor technology. I only went once and saw how useless it was." University of the Third Age (U3A) member in rural district

Proximity to larger centres

Branch libraries give ratepayers convenient access to basic services, particularly those in country areas isolated by distance. Branch and mobile libraries help cater for these residents. In city areas, some libraries are located in areas of particular need, for example the library service point in the Community Centre in Newington, Auburn, was setup up to provide services to a new community separated from the main Auburn Local Government Area (LGA) by the M4 motorway and set apart from the general community by a very different demographic profile.

"Council established a collection point with two Internet PCs at Newington to help create a sense of community." Auburn Council

A minimum number of branch libraries were maintained close to main centres on the understanding that most clients could access the central library while in town on other business.

"They use the Internet while they are here doing other things." Willoughby Library, Chatswood

Socio-economic character

Libraries in areas of low socio-economic levels noted high demand from online access. Clients were less likely to have computers at home, have computer skills or be familiar with the Internet. Library staff noted that clients had fewer alternatives to the facilities in the public library. If the library facilities were not available (heavy booking or technical difficulties) clients went without.

Availability of other services

Local libraries experienced stronger demand on their resources wherever government agencies had withdrawn or downgraded service provision - most commonly in rural areas.

In small centres, library services evolved to complement other available services. For example, wherever there were no other facilities for Internet training, the public library offered courses. There was a reduced need for Internet training where there were active Community Technology Centres (CTCs); and in Liverpool, for example, a well-resourced U3A meant a reduced demand on the library.

A number of initiatives have been established in rural communities to provide access to government services: Community Technology Centres (CTCs), Rural Transaction Centres (RTCs) and Government Access Centres (GACs).

Community Technology Centres

An initiative of the New South Wales and Commonwealth Governments, these centres provide access to Internet connected computers as well as printers, video and teleconferencing, business equipment, and e-commerce incubator facilities. The presence of a CTC alleviated some demand on local libraries, for example, CTCs were better equipped than branch libraries to provide training because they had 5-10 computers while small branch libraries had only 1-2; some CTCs had agencies for government business such as Centrelink and ATO.

CTCs depend on income generation, for example, winning contracts to provide services for government agencies, the private sector or community organisations, or charging fees for Internet access. While libraries offered free Internet access to members/ratepayers or NSW library members as required under the *NSW Library*

Act 1939, CTCs charged up to \$3.30 per 30 minutes - a deterrent to low-income community members.

In most locations, the CTC and the local library occupied separate premises, had little contact with each other and, in effect, developed separate client groups. Some examples of co-location are noted below.

Rural Transaction Centres

A Commonwealth Government program, RTCs are intended as a place to establish multi-function service centres - not, in the process, duplicating existing or planned services. Having many services in a single centre was intended to enhance the viability of the centres and make them financially self sustaining. However, the RTCs surveyed duplicate services offered through CTCs and GACs which often resulted in the few available resources spread across two, three or even four service points.

Government Access Centres

A State Government initiative, these serve as one-stop shops for a range of government (NSW and Commonwealth) services. They provide convenient face-to-face, customer focused information and services for rural and remote communities. For example, in Eden, the Motor Registry offers services for Births, Deaths and Marriages; Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care; Housing; Infringement Processing Bureau; Office of Fair Trading and Waterways.

Three different locations were selected to examine the synergies between a variety of access points and the variations in their usage by the community.

Case study 1 Eden

Eden, population 3,300: located at the southern end of the Bega Valley Shire Council area on the south coast of NSW has many centres from which to access the Internet: the Bega Valley Shire Council office, Government Access Centre in the Motor Registry office, the CTC and the branch library.

The Council office, branch library, CTC and Visitor Information Centre are all located in a building on the main road into town; the library and CTC refer clients to each other, where appropriate.

"We send people to the library when our system is down because they have a different ISP." Eden CTC

There is a GAC at the Motor Registry, which offers services for Births, Deaths and Marriages; Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care; Fisheries; Housing; Infringement Processing Bureau; Office of Fair Trading and Waterways. This reduced the demand on the branch library as an access point for government online services.

Eden has three Job Network employment service providers and their front offices have dedicated Internet kiosks for job seekers to access Job Search.

Case study 2 Warialda

Warialda, population 1,300: located in north western NSW has an active CTC which is located in the same building on the main street as the library, each with their own entrance. Internet resources are, therefore, strong outside the library, though library and CTC share resources informally. There are no other public Internet facilities in the town.

The library opened daily (with restricted hours) and also acted as a contact place for the local history museum. The CTC opened daily during business hours, but closed for lunch (1hr) and had become the town's key Internet point and the representative for several government agencies. The CTC also offered computer related training courses.

Seniors who had completed their Internet training at the CTC then practised on the library computer - sharing and using all the facilities: a fine example of synergy.

Case study 3 Lithgow

Lithgow, population 20,300: located on the western slopes of the Blue Mountains provides an even stronger example of service integration - it has a newly opened main street centre incorporating the public library, CTC services and a learning centre. The new centre is the cornerstone of a renewal program based on the concept of a 'Learning City'.

Community Services

While it might be thought that the existence of a good range of support services in metropolitan areas would relieve the load on public libraries, some public libraries still experience a significantly high demand for their support services. In localities such as Fairfield, Liverpool and Auburn the demand for support services is very strong due to the high number of new immigrants, especially refugees, and libraries are called upon to provide extra resources to meet the heavy demand.

"The Whitlam Library is near the station and in a service hub. It is well-recognised for its services. We looked at doing joint computer classes with them." Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre

TAFEs

TAFEs are another resource for community members seeking access to government services online. In most cases, access to the TAFE library was restricted to students, but a wide range of programs means that, in effect, TAFEs can serve many community members. For example, long-term unemployed can access one TAFE course per year, for free.

"They practise the Drivers Knowledge Test. I figure they are improving their keyboard skills." TAFE librarian

TAFE librarians noted that students commonly accessed the following sites: ABS, Job Search, Education sites, ATO, Health, RTA.

TAFEs generally operated via a booking system for access to Internet PCs, however limits were not as stringent as in public libraries. Outside TAFE hours, the local library could feel the pressure of demand from TAFE students.

U3A/Seniors Computer Groups

In some areas these two organisations (U3A and SCGs) were very strongly represented. Computer courses were found to be the most popular of all U3A courses. But, in many cases, the U3As relied on the goodwill of community organisations to provide access to computers. In Merimbula, for example, the employment services provider rooms were used to run a U3A course; Liverpool Council provided U3A with premises and they inherited older computers when the Council upgraded.

Not all seniors who took these courses had Internet facilities or access to a home computer. Some used the library for access and to practice their newly developing skills. Sites commonly accessed were BDM and health information websites.

Internet cafes

Internet cafes were not widely used by local community members to access government online services because of the cost. Clients of the cafes were usually Internet savvy and younger. Information from library clients contacted in this research and from librarians/teachers suggested that Internet cafes were used to find information on employment, immigration and travel, tourism and taxation.

Relationships between libraries and government agencies

Government websites are dynamic, with new services being brought online continually and with functionality expanding. The research included interviews with staff in five local councils and nine Government agencies.⁶ They covered website development, the role of libraries as a public access point, the relationship between libraries and agencies and future opportunities for cooperation.

In most cases, agencies used the Internet alongside traditional methods of doing business (face to face, telephone and mail). Some agencies, however, are only available online.⁷ While agencies and local councils acknowledged a role for government in providing Internet access in order to support equity, they did not see this as the responsibility of their particular agency.

Library role and communication channels

All agencies interviewed acknowledged the role of public libraries in providing Internet access, but had limited awareness of the implications of this role or of the impact agency decisions could have on libraries. Several NSW agencies were also aware of CTCs' role in facilitating public access.

Most agencies had no formal or informal channels for information to or from the public library sector and, while acknowledged as relevant, libraries were not considered in the process of website development, at site launches or when updates were issued.

"When we changed the site 18 months ago librarians were the first to call asking about our URL... When we launched the new site we emailed those on our links - I don't have a central Library email." DoCS

In most cases, government agencies did not have contacts in the library sector and did not know how to communicate with libraries. In the IT area government agency staff were not aware of library sector email lists, or professional structures (Country Public Libraries Association of NSW (CPLA) or Metropolitan Public Libraries Association NSW (MPLA)) or the role of the State Library as a leading agency within the sector.

Partnerships with libraries

The exception, in this study, was the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), which has established formal communication channels or support measures with the library sector. ABS established a Library Extension Program (LEP) covering 520 libraries across Australia in metropolitan and regional areas. It provides regular information (quarterly newsletters), training and updates on changes to the ABS site.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Department of Commerce (NSW), Roads and Traffic Authority (NSW), Department of Health (NSW), Department of Education and Planning (NSW), Births and Deaths Marriages (NSW), Department of Community Services (NSW), Infringement Processing Bureau (NSW), Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (NSW)

⁷ Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (NSW) has a new planning tool, BASIX available only as an online tool. DIPNR consulted with local councils and building industry practitioners when developing this tool and considered the majority of users would be professionals (architects, planners, etc) with Internet access.

While the RTA has been actively involved with public libraries, these services are yet to be maximised. Several NSW agencies discussed options with library representatives, however no formal channels were established. Several agencies were keen to be more involved with libraries in areas including feedback on site-related issues via standard web manager email, or through invited feedback via library sector email lists. It was seen that information about government websites could be disseminated via library sector email lists for significant website launches, revisions and updates.

Library's role in website development

Government websites presented a range of challenges for users and, consequently, for library staff helping clients find information. Library staff are ideally placed to work as consultants to web developers of government sites as they have significant expertise navigating sites, advising or tutoring clients, writing help sheets. They can consult on a range of key elements in website design in the public sector: layout and language, universal accessibility, effective feedback channels, and usability testing.

Challenges and opportunities

The research has highlighted a number of key challenges for NSW libraries in planning ongoing, effective provision of access to eGovernment information for all NSW clients.

For many senior policy makers the public library sector appears to have a low profile with many unaware of the recent evolution of library services, or the central role that libraries fill in local communities. As a result decision makers may overlook the potential for libraries to have a central role in serving public information needs in this new technological era.

In contrast, the increased reliance by government agencies on the public accessing information and services via the Internet, while intended to help the general public, leads to increased demands on library staff.

Other challenges include:

- a significant increase in demand for appropriate, up to date equipment for all clients
- an unquantified draw on resources directly related to eGovernment sites (difficult to establish specific proportions accessed in overall Internet usage)
- inability to manage resources effectively (provide or upgrade equipment and skills) when grant based projects are not able to be sustained, or fully sustained, by recurrent funding
- fragmented and duplicated services through government programs providing separate support for access to new technologies
- the impact of poor website design and changes to websites which result in information being relocated within the site.

Improvements in the channels of communication and greater cooperation between the library sector and government agencies will benefit clients of government agencies and libraries alike. Existing arrangements can and should be improved and new ones established and this can be done through the following networks:

- at senior level between the State Library of NSW and government agencies
- by using key stakeholder organisations such as the Metropolitan Public Libraries Association (MPLA), the Country Public Libraries Association (CPLA) and the Local Government and Shire Associations of New South Wales (LGSA)
- at the professional level through the Government Libraries Information Network in NSW (GLINN) - for librarians in NSW government agencies.

Further achievements are possible through continued lobbying by LGSA for recurrent funding of public access to Internet technologies. The library sector could intensify its connections with programs such as *communitybuilders*. In addition, the State Library has a role in educating policy makers about the emerging functions of 'new' libraries, particularly libraries as information hubs for local communities.

If it is proactive in establishing pilot projects and centres of excellence the public library sector could advocate for more support for libraries as a means of accessing eGovernment. The library network already has many proven initiatives including the ABS Library Extension Program and the NSW Legal Information Access Centres (LIACs). These highly successful programs are models of cross sectoral and intergovernmental collaboration.

The challenge and opportunity for the public library sector is to continue to build and strengthen current initiatives while at the same time establishing new collaborations within the three spheres of government.

Glossary

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ALIA	Australian Library and Information Association
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
BDM	Births, Deaths and Marriages - NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages
CPLA	Country Public Libraries Association of New South Wales (now Public Libraries NSW - Country)
CTCs	Community Technology Centres - a NSW State Government initiative
DIPNR	Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (NSW)
DoCS	Department of Community Services (NSW)
GACs	Government Access Centres - a NSW State Government initiative
GLINN	Government Libraries Information Network in NSW http://glinn.ilanet.net.au/glinnpol.htm
HSC	Higher School Certificate (NSW)
ICT	Information and communication technology/ies
ISP	Internet Service Provider
LGA	Local Government Area
LEP	Library Extension Program, Australian Bureau of Statistics
LGSA	Local Government and Shire Associations of NSW
LIAC	Legal Information Access Centre (at the State Library of NSW and in NSW public libraries)
MPLA	Metropolitan Public Libraries Association NSW (now Public Libraries NSW - Metropolitan)
NSW.net	A network that links councils and public libraries throughout New South Wales to the Internet (managed by the State Library of NSW)
OICT	NSW Office of Information and Communications Technology
PCs	Personal computers
RTA	Roads and Traffic Authority (NSW)
RTCs	Rural Transactions Centre - an Australian Federal Government initiative
SCGs	Seniors Computer Groups
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
U3A	University of the Third Age
URL	Uniform Resource Locator