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Providing community access to a comprehensive range of networked information was the subject of a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Housing and Regional Development Brian Howe, held in his office at Parliament House on 22 September.

President of ALIA Bill Linklater and I were able to emphasise the role of public libraries in providing an existing network of professionally staffed information

centres that are well-equipped to become principal outlets for community access to information.

We gave Mr Howe wish information about the use and funding of public libraries to illustrate that these organisations deserve a greater level of Government support in the delivery of digitised, on-line services — especially to remote and otherwise disadvantaged communities.

Member for Werriwa Mark Latham, whose understanding and

ALIA takes access message to Deputy Prime Minister

support for public libraries has been further demonstrated by the extracts from an article he wrote recently (and which appears in this edition of *inCite*), also attended this meeting. Mark emphatically stated the need for specifically-targeted Federal Government funding for libraries and encouraged the involvement of Ministers for Communication and the Arts Michael Lee, Social Security Peter Baldwin, Chairman of the Regional Development Task Force Bill Kelty and Mr Howe in addressing public policy issues associated with ensuring community access to information.

Mr Howe, who clearly had given these matters thoughtful consideration, was very receptive to both propositions. The development of an outcome-orientated information policy is back under consideration by senior Government players.

During our meeting, we were able to discuss the progress being made with pilot community access projects being conducted in Newcastle, Canberra and Ipswich — all of which are library-based.

Bill Linklater was able to recount his experiences in co-ordinating the Newcastle project and there was general agreement that such exercises are producing models of best practice that will be invaluable in the evolution of widespread on-line community access programs. We will be following up prospects for direct Government assistance with Mr Howe and Mr Latham.

A small ALIA delegation will be making a presentation on these issues on 12 October to the ALP Caucus Committee on Housing and Regional Development, which comprises 22 Members of Parliament. Our aim is to generate the broadest base of support for library-based community access to on-line information programs within the ranks of the Government. ■

Summary of points made during meeting with Mr Howe

- Library and information professionals are key stakeholders in the development of Australia's information infrastructure.
- Co-operative ventures involving all spheres of government, business and the community are required to shape the development of the information infrastructure.
- The current direction of converging technologies carries the risk that many Australians will be denied access to information resources available through networks.
- Public libraries provide an existing network of public access venues which have the professional expertise to provide access to networked information.
- Government financial assistance is required to ensure that public libraries can provide access to information to all Australians.
- Government must ensure that the distribution of funds is provided on an equitable basis, particularly to remote and socially disadvantaged areas.
- Steps must be taken to develop a comprehensive information policy because public policy lags behind the development of the information infrastructure.
- The Federal Government should provide government information through the network with access points at every public library.
- Universities, where networking activities are well advanced, should be encouraged to support local networking activities in their communities.
- The Government should support the growth of 'information literacy' in the community by assisting the existing and future activities of public libraries in this task.
- The Government should encourage the development of community networked information services which permit access to information and the exchange of information between individuals and groups in local, state and international communities.
- The principal aim of Government should be to determine public interest outcomes rather than support particular technologies as a means of delivering those outcomes.
- In developing the concept of community access to networked information through public libraries, the principle of free access must be maintained so that disadvantaged groups, demonstrably high users of public libraries, will not be discriminated against to the benefit of the economically and culturally privileged.