

The introduction of CCT

The impact on public library service in Victoria — staff concerns

Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) as enacted by recent legislation in Victoria legally requires all local councils to expose a minimum of 50 per cent of total expenditures to open market forces by July 1997. The process has already begun and public libraries are among the services which will be required to subject their operations to CCT.

There is concern that CCT is being used as an excuse to cut costs without consideration for the broader consequences. While libraries fully accept the need to be both cost-efficient and accountable, the implications of exposing such complex and vital services to the market place have not been fully addressed.

Free public libraries have been a cornerstone of democracy in this country, and ALIA has campaigned in the past on issues of equity and accessibility to defeat recurrent user-pays arguments. The ramifications of CCT for free public library services need further exploration. Here are some of the issues:

Library co-operation and networking

It is difficult to determine how co-operation between libraries can be adequately maintained in a competitive environment. This co-operation has resulted in the development of a complex web of networks which benefit users of all libraries and in turn impact upon the quality of life of all Australians. At risk may be such things as inter-library loans, reciprocal membership and the goodwill which

facilitates information sharing between professionals.

Reduced diversity of collections

In order to provide the essential depth and breadth in collections a wide variety of suppliers and booksellers is required. If the library's collection is to maintain its integrity and respond to client need it must include more than mainstream titles. There is a possibility that true competition between book suppliers may actually be reduced by the introduction of CCT. If large suppliers squeeze smaller suppliers out of the market monopolies may arise further limiting choice.

Cost of provision of library services

In real terms library funding has declined in recent years at the same time as demand for library services has grown. There is a danger that CCT will be used by some councils as a means of further cutting services in the guise of achieving the required budget reductions. There is evidence already of such occurrences in the areas of child care, meals on wheels, and home help. After rubbish collection, libraries are the most highly used council service! The substantial resources required to run such a highly used service make it a prime target for cost cutting in the guise of CCT.

Complexity of library service

The quality and breadth of complex operations such as public library service are very difficult to

measure and evaluate. There is a real danger that the more easily measured quantitative factors may be the sole consideration of any specification. This needs to be taken into account when preparing for CCT. There are concerns that some commissioners and council officers demonstrate a lack of understanding of the vital 'quality' question. There needs to be involvement of public librarians in the writing of any specifications for provision of public library services. It is crucial that any specification for public library service is based upon accepted minimum requirements for the achievement of specified outcomes, for example, the appropriate staff required to guarantee delivery of quality information services. We need to clearly demonstrate our commitment to the ongoing delivery of quality public library services in Victoria by a publicity campaign conducted at State and national level and by lobbying the relevant ministers about these concerns.

Deprofessionalisation of public libraries

It is obvious that one of the side-effects of CCT used solely as a cost cutting exercise will be the loss of specialist expertise from the public library sector. We should be concerned at the potential loss of our professional colleagues. The profession will only survive if there is solidarity between all librarians whatever their area of specialisation.

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