Commonwealth government libraries

Roxanne Missingham, Federal Libraries Information Network

Commonwealth Departments and Agencies are served by libraries providing a range of information services. They range from large library networks, such as CSIRO (of fifty-five libraries) and the Defence Library Network (of sixty-five libraries) to small agency libraries staffed on a part-time basis. There are approximately 320 commonwealth government libraries most of whom have less than three staff.

Only about a third of the government libraries are in the ACT serving policy makers. Libraries in the states generally are smaller than those in Canberra and serve a smaller client group. We are a diverse group — ranging geographically from far North Queensland to Tasmania, from Darwin to Perth. Some commonwealth libraries far away from Canberra include:

- Tropical Ecosystems Research Centre, in Atherton where a part-time librarian meets the information needs of scientists

- Suzie Davis at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority who provides a wealth of information including the REEF database

- Evlyn Barrett in Tasmania who provides the library service to the Australian Antarctic Division Library in Kingston, Tasmania

- June Caunt at Australian Government Analytical Laboratories in Cottesloe who runs a library service for Government scientists.

What do we do?

Well, we provide traditional library services — searching databases, answering reference enquires, cataloguing, purchasing and looking after collections. A number of libraries have moved to a wider information role as Centres of Information Excellence. Some libraries manage the records management services, both print and electronic. Some produce databases, bibliographic and full-text, such as *Family* produced by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and *HERA* produced by the Australian Heritage Commission Library. Corporate acquisition and delivery of datasets, containing external and/or internal information, has been a developing area of service. In CSIRO librarians have championed the use of SIM through the Information Access Group to delivery full text and bibliographic databases.

Federal Libraries Information Network

In May 1993 the Federal Libraries Information Network (FLIN) was formally established following recommendations of the Block report which identified the need for a body to co-ordinate the potential co-operative arrangements of commonwealth government libraries. FLIN is affiliated with the Australian Council of Library and Information Services.

FLIN has provided a co-operative form to represent libraries in wider Government arenas and on major issues; foster cooperative schemes and resource sharing initiatives; promote library and information services; provide support, guidelines, performance measurement, training and develop cost effective services such as purchasing; and encourage the effective dissemination of government information.

FLIN has over the past year:

- made representations to the Office of Government Information Technology on the important role of libraries in information management;

- made a submission to the Copyright Law Review Committee and maintenance of an active interest in copyright;

- produced and updated the Union list of CD-ROM's;

- developed a co-operative management and marketing abstracts service;

- liaised with AGPS and the adoption of our suggestions in invoicing and information access;

- forged a strong relationship with Purchasing Australia and successful work on the serials contract;

- provided ongoing advice to the Department of Finance on accrual accounting;

- made a presentation before the Senate Economics Reference Committee with ACLIS and ALIA on the role of librarians in communications developments; and

- continued to develop the Web site and communication through FLIN-L.

Whole of Government approach

Information technology is changing dramatically in the commonwealth government. The Office of Government Information Technology (OGIT) reviewed all Commonwealth Government information technology. A draft *Framework* was issued in January and FLIN argued for better support and management of library systems, establishment of single shopfronts for Government information and Internet access for all libraries. WORLD 1 will only be accessible through the Internet.

Libraries have moved beyond print and database services in the Commonwealth and other sectors.

It is a key business system for all libraries and Internet access is critcal for our library operations. Current discussions on the possible outsourcing of PC support and market testing are being watched with interest. OGIT has issued a Registration of Interest for the *Provision of internet access services for government agencies* which should enable libraries to use Internet services more effectively.

More questions than answers abound on what the 'Whole of government' approach will mean for information management and libraries. FLIN is contributing to discussions on systems, skills development, library co-operative projects and resource sharing. Eric Wainwright convenes the Information Management Steering Committee from whom a report is expected shortly.

Role of libraries and information management

Libraries have moved beyond print and database services in the Commonwealth and other sectors. This has been a challenge both to librarians and other information managers. The contribution of librarians to the management of organisational information, including record management and full-text services, such as Web services, has continued to increase. This is changing our expectations as well as those of senior managers.

1996 saw the development of two new and exciting co-operative projects sponsored by FLIN:

- a Management and Marketing Abstract service with contributions from six libraries, sharing document delivery and also the creation of the information service. This service demonstrates resource sharing building on the special collections of the following libraries: Department of Administrative Services, Department of the Treasury, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Australian Taxation Office, Australian Agency for International Development and the Public Service and Merit Protection Commission; and

- a Union list of CD-ROM's. This list has demonstrated how little duplication occurs between commonwealth government libraries, and it's avail-

ability of the world wide web also promotes resource sharing of these expensive collections.

Communicating the value of libraries

How do our organisations or managers know the value of our library services? This is a questions libraries have asked since we began. While we are a 'public good' or 'organisational good' our services need to meet the expectations of our managers and clients and we need to promote the value of our services. There are no easy answers to this, especially for libraries which are downsizing. Work on quality service (see below) will build on the work done by individual libraries.

Quality service and benchmarking

Quality service is a major issue for the Commonwealth public service. Departments and agencies aim to recognise the needs of their clients and to provide and monitor or assess quality service. Libraries have keenly implemented various performance indicators and client services over many years. FLIN is working with experts in service delivery and performance management to follow up on the enthusiasm shown at FLIN Quality Service seminars held in Canberra earlier this year. We are actively following up the work being done by ACLIS, Matarazzo and Prusack and New Zealand initiatives.

Purchasing

Commonwealth libraries aim to obtain the best products for the best price. A number of contracts have been established with Purchasing Australia for library products and services including serials, monographs, cataloguing and indexing and library furniture. FLIN works with Purchasing Australia to review the contracts regularly. This year saw the review and successful negotiation of the Serials supply contract.

Finding out more

For more information on FLIN's activities take a look at our world wide web site at http://www.nla.gov.au/flin.

We also have an open e-mail listserv. To subscribe to FLIN-L, send the message: subscribe flin-l <yourfirstname> <yoursecond name> to: listproc@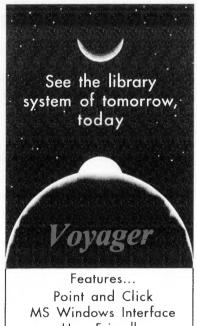nla.gov.au. ∎