

Government publications



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Our Expert Group on Government Publications has responded to Senator Richard Alston to follow up on the announcement in the 2003 Federal Budget that a new business model for the distribution of Commonwealth publications will be introduced that will provide improvements for customers in accessing government publications and will build on existing distribution methods used by individual agencies. An edited version of ALIA's letter to Senator Alston follows, the full letter is available on our submissions website. We are also liaising with NOIE on the matters raised.

[Senator Alston]

Welcome initiatives are the establishment through the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) of a panel of contractors for the printing and distribution of agency publications; the development of a central, searchable register that identifies how to access each government publication; and NOIE to continue to provide guidelines to agencies on their electronic publishing obligations and to support the Library Deposit and Free Issues Schemes.

Online delivery

Your media release acknowledges that tracking down a particular current government publication can be difficult without some understanding of government structures. Even for those who have access to the internet, finding government publications within agency websites can be a hit or miss affair. The development of the electronic register of government publications by NOIE as a response to this problem is welcome.

This new strategy clearly heralds the Commonwealth Government's low priority for hard copy publications with its focus on online delivery mechanisms. PDF is a usable format but it shifts inappropriate and excessive printing costs to readers. Who would want the inconvenience of printing all the Budget Papers, the Customs Act or the Final Report of the Royal Commission into the Building and Construction Industry (22 volumes)! The option to purchase hard copy publications at reasonable costs to the purchaser should be retained. NOIE may well be evaluating how new printing and delivery methods such as those explored through the C-2-C project could be applied to government publications and the Association would encourage this so that print copies remain a viable option.

Public librarians in particular work with many library users who do not have ready access to information in electronic form, or an understanding of how to access government publications without their professional assistance. It should not be assumed in this new business model that electronic paths to government information are widely available within the community or that those seeking this information are sufficiently information and computer literate to utilise these electronic paths.

Library deposit

ALIA welcome's the advice that NOIE will continue to support the Library Deposit and Free Issues Schemes. This distribution of government information through selected

libraries contributes to making government information accessible. However as the Library Deposit and Free Issues Schemes do not extend to public or community libraries some citizens will still have difficulty in accessing government information if the government bookshops are closed and so the business model needs to address public interest concerns in its delivery and distribution methods.

The provision of guidelines and support of the Library Deposit and Free Issues Schemes through NOIE provides an opportunity for the government to clearly state to deposit libraries the principles of the Commonwealth Library Deposit Scheme. An opportunity is also provided for a deposit library representative to participate in the process of preparing a Ministerial directive to Commonwealth agencies which identifies the agencies that will deposit publications, clarifies what is to be deposited with which libraries and sets out the role of Commonwealth agencies in archiving electronic publications. There is also an opportunity for deposit library representation on any advisory body to inform the process for using independent contractors for publishing and distribution.

Government bookshops

Your media release advises that the government bookshop network will close in October 2003 because of declining sales due to preferred means of distribution and increased internet access to government publications. Hard copy agency publications now available from government bookshops will be made available in the future through other delivery mechanisms that is, online, mail order, telephone sales or through other retail/specialist bookshops.

Government bookshops have provided a useful, timely and efficient service to libraries, businesses and the general public for the supply of hard copy government publications and for locating government publications. They provide opportunities for browsing and current awareness about new government publications. To compensate for the loss of this opportunity for customers the Association suggests that the electronic register of government publications to be developed by NOIE include a current listing for example, weekly or monthly, of new items added to the database. This current listing should be distributed on a regular basis to subscribers and available through government information and service points.

Conclusion

Our aim is to ensure the best possible access to government publications by all and maximise the role the library and information services sector can play in assisting the government to achieve this. [A summary of the suggestions was included in the letter] ■

Feedback to your Board of Directors

Do you have an idea, compliment or concern about your Association? Contact any director below on personal issues and ideas will be reviewed at each meeting of the Board.

E-mail to feedback@alia.org.au will be automatically forwarded to all Board members.

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