

Public access internet services in public libraries

Public access internet services can justly be described as core public library services. Australia has extensive public internet access networks in its public libraries, and libraries have become key players in addressing the need for equitable community access to online services. Public libraries are a location for internet training, a resource for electronic access and providers of valuable online content.

In late 2002 ALIA conducted a survey of internet use in public libraries as a contribution to the public debate on the regulation of internet content in Australia. The survey demonstrates that libraries have developed use policies and service practices to manage access so that using the internet is a positive and rewarding experience for the great majority of users, including children.

Ninety-one institutional members of ALIA — local government library services in all states and territories, all State and Territory libraries and the National Library of Australia — took part in the survey. At the time of the survey these library services had 445 branches and other access points that provided services to more than four million registered users and with almost 2000 public access internet terminals. It was estimated that more than 50 000 people used internet access services each week in these libraries.

The survey included questions about internet use policies, community education and training, complaints from users about internet content, use of internet filtering software and children's use of the internet in libraries.

The survey provides data on the experiences of libraries in providing public access to the internet and on the impact on libraries of the online co-regulatory scheme introduced by the *Broadcasting Service Amendment (Online Services) Act 1999*. The survey gives insights into how people are using the internet and the ways in which libraries are promoting community education and assisting responsible and effective access to online content.

Key findings

Not surprisingly, the survey found that internet services in public libraries are popular, heavily used and in high demand. To meet demand almost all the library services participating in the survey operated booking systems and imposed time restrictions on internet use.

Almost all participating library services had well-publicised internet use

policies that included user behaviour policies

Ninety-seven percent of participating library services provided some form of community education about the internet. More than eighty percent offered internet training courses; many offered free training. In terms of community education the survey found a relatively low level of awareness of NetAlert, the Commonwealth government's internet education initiative and only eight percent of participating libraries reported actively using NetAlert.

Offensive or illegal online content and its regulation are issues that attract public interest and comment. The survey found that the level of complaints from library users about internet content was very low. Most negative comments from users related to the quality and capacity of internet access services, such as slow connection speeds and service restrictions or concern about the behaviour of other users, rather than offensive content as such.

Eighteen percent of participating library services were using internet filtering software.

The survey found that public libraries are significant centres of internet access by children. Many libraries have responded by providing recommended websites and links, internet training programs specifically for children and/or parents and some have set up separate terminals especially for children. Seventy-two percent of participating library services required parental consent for children to use the internet and twenty-nine percent required a parent to be present when children were using the internet. The age up to which a parent was required either to give consent for or to be present with a child using the internet varied widely among the participating library services.

What makes high quality internet access services?

The key components of a high quality and responsible internet access service are:

- well-publicised internet use policies and internal complaints procedures that are able to deal effectively with inappropriate use
- providing training and skilled assistance in information searching and using online resources
- good technical infrastructure, high speed connectivity, adequate numbers of internet access terminals and

maintaining the currency of hardware and software.

Internet content regulation

The survey findings reveal that there is not a high level of community concern or complaint from users of public library internet access services about offensive or illegal internet content. From this it can be concluded that the current regulatory scheme is meeting the underlying objectives of the legislation: providing a means for addressing complaints about internet content, restricting access to internet content that is likely to offend reasonable adults, and protecting children from content that is unsuitable for them.

Some issues for the library and information sector

The survey has highlighted the range of policies and practices among public libraries, for example in community education and in managing internet access by children. It has also highlighted the variations in measuring internet use. In the quest to improve services and to establish best practices these issues are worthy of further discussion and debate among libraries.

The survey report recommends that libraries and library organisations seek opportunities for discussion and sharing of experiences about policies and practices relating to internet access services and that library services internet use policies should explicitly cover access by children in their internet use.

Given the growing extent and significance of these services and their role in wider social and government policy objectives of addressing the 'digital divide' in the Australian community there would be a benefit in standardising a measure of use of internet access services in public libraries

More information

A detailed report of the survey is available to ALIA members at <http://alia.org.au/members-only/advocacy/internet.access/report.html>. The executive summary and a summary report are also generally available.

The survey findings have been used to update ALIA's guidelines for members relating to its statement on online content regulation. The guidelines also include and overview of the relevant federal and state legislation (<http://alia.org.au/members-only/advocacy/internet.access/guidelines.html>).