

ALIA and QPLA Submission to the 2011 Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry

1 April 2011

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the peak body for the Australian library and information services sector, representing 6000 members, and the interests of over 12 million library users. It is also one of the pillar groups supporting Blue Shield Australia, the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross.

The Queensland Public Libraries Association (QPLA) is the peak representative body for public libraries in Queensland. It liaises with key stakeholders and decision makers on current issues, arranges training and networking opportunities for members, markets the role and value of public libraries, and facilitates co-operative projects.

Libraries, with ALIA and Queensland's state public library association, have responded in a number of ways to the Queensland floods:

- The role of libraries in the affected areas has been to provide a safe community space, a haven from the reality of the disaster and where necessary, short term emergency accommodation.
- Libraries provided councils with disaster recovery organisational capacity.
- Libraries provided temporary accommodation for commercial libraries and school libraries and classes allowing businesses and schools to continue operating.
- In the reconstruction and recovery phase, libraries have been seen as a welcome sign of a return to normality.
- Libraries, recognised as a community gathering point, have been a point of support and contact, where people can informally share their stories.
- Libraries across Queensland mobilised volunteers to rebuild school libraries and restore council library services.
- QPLA has provided financial donation to those library services affected by the floods.

The flood experience has once again demonstrated the role public libraries can play as part of the emergency management process and has reinforced their contribution, not only to information and learning, but also as a 'third place' – not home, school or work, but a shared community space.

1. Library and partner organisations

In the case of recovery work following on from the floods, ALIA led a collaborative effort which involved library services in the affected areas, Australian Law Librarians Association (Queensland Division); Queensland Public Libraries Association; State Library of Queensland; Queensland Disaster Information Network; the Australian School Library Association and School Libraries Association of Queensland. Partners were Arts Queensland; the Australian Booksellers Association; the Australian Society of Authors and the Australian Publishers Association. Other advisors and supporters included the Queensland Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority; Municipal Association of Queensland; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA).

Full details to supplement this summary paper are available on the ALIA website at www.alia.org.au/disasterrecovery.

2. Library services affected by the floods

Library services are active in all regions affected by flooding, including

- Brisbane
- The Lockyer Valley
- Toowoomba
- Ipswich
- Somerset / Esk
- Rockhampton
- Bundaberg
- Maryborough
- Goondiwindi
- South Burnett
- Western Downs

Ninety-two school libraries were affected by flooding but only six public libraries were significantly damaged, allowing public libraries to play an important role in providing respite for families caught up in the disaster. Four TAFE Qld libraries were damaged and remaining TAFE libraries have also played a significant role in assisting schools and communities.

The library services in the worst affected areas were the Lockyer Valley, which covers Grantham, Withcott, Gatton and Laidley; Somerset which covers Esk and Lowood; Ipswich; Emerald; Toowoomba and Brisbane. These library services played a key role in supporting the communities through the immediate aftermath of the floods and as they began reconstruction and recovery.

3. The Kenmore library experience

As areas around the Kenmore library were isolated by flood water and disconnected from electricity, residents were welcomed into the public library to access disaster recovery services. Kenmore library offered the community tea and coffee and a place to recharge mobile phones; assistance with children while parents rang banks and insurance companies; a listening ear and assistance connecting to the information they needed from the internet on the library's PCs. As travelling by roads became

impossible, families camped overnight inside the library - a safe, dry and welcoming shelter from the disaster.

4. The Theodore Library Experience

The town of Theodore in the Banana Shire was isolated by floodwaters for several days. Miraculously, the Theodore Library escaped the flooding that affected the town and surrounding countryside, with floodwater stopping at the top of the front steps. The Library was used from December 12 2010 to the end of January 2011 as a base by the Disaster Committee to direct operations. The Library was central to the provision of information during and post the disaster, and emphasised the significant role public libraries played in assisting people to return to normal life.

5. The Esk Library experience

The Brisbane Valley town of Esk was hit by severe flash flooding on January 10, 2011 closing roads and bridges across the Somerset region. The Somerset Regional Council library administration is based in the main Esk library which was inundated with water. Many new library resources as well as stock on the library shelves were lost. In addition, a library storage shed with furniture and resources was flooded and resources damaged beyond repair.

Community support to assist with the library branch recovery was overwhelming and highlighted the importance of the library service to the community. Council staff and volunteers were involved in the physical clean up, the discard of damaged furniture and thousands of books, the relocation of salvaged items to other library branches, and the processing of new material to shelf ready.

Despite the Esk Library closing for over two months for restoration, the Somerset regional library service operating through the Council's three other branches supported the community through the flood recovery providing internet access, community information, and programming to provide space to share stories and rebuild community spirit.

6. The State Library of Queensland experience

The State Library of Queensland (SLQ) was closed to the public for three weeks during and after the flood event in Brisbane. The building and grounds sustained some damage although there was no damage to its collections. SLQ staff are providing expert disaster recovery assistance and advice to public and other libraries, including how to restore water damaged books and dealing with mould which has begun to affect some collections in flood affected areas.

The State Library has also provided some public libraries with extra broadband capacity and laptops with which to better connect devastated communities to information and services. With families in areas such as Grantham expected to be in temporary accommodation for up to two years, the need for free, reliable internet access from community hubs including libraries will continue to be essential in the long term.

SLQ is also documenting the Queensland floods, collecting photos, stories, articles and other records for the collective memory of Queensland. This collection will form an important resource for the State. It will contribute to future planning and to material for historians and artists to use in the retelling of our history.

7. Coordinating communities

Staff within Brisbane City Council Library Services undertook the Herculean task of coordinating over 22,000 registered volunteers to help flood victims. Their efforts were critical to getting flood victims back in their homes, restoring neighbourhoods, getting the economic engine of Brisbane running and channelling the good will of Brisbane people to where it was most needed.

As after the Victorian bushfires of 2009, communities reacted quickly following the flood with offers of assistance to and book donations for libraries. Communities showed their support for libraries by helping with the evacuation of libraries including Fairfield, New Farm and Stones Corner in Brisbane and subsequently restocking those libraries which were not ultimately inundated.

Post-flood, ALIA is taking a lead role in coordinating the response to library disaster recovery. As the final report into the ALIA Victorian Bushfires Disaster Recovery Project showed, of the 182 pallets of books donated to fire damaged libraries in Victoria, only 20% were professionally assessed as being of a suitable quality for libraries. Libraries are better served by the donation of cash, book vouchers and skilled labour. To this end, ALIA is working with the library community and partner associations to gather and distribute the appropriate resources to libraries. The final report into the ALIA Victorian Bushfires Disaster Recovery Project can be found at <http://www.alia.org.au/disasterrecovery/ALIADRPfinalreportMay2010.pdf>.

8. Documentation

The status of libraries in affected areas, facts sheets and information on water damage in libraries, links to other associations and information as well as the report into the Victorian Bushfires response have been published on the ALIA website (<http://www.alia.org.au/disasterrecovery/>). ALIA used the bushfire experience to update disaster planning guidelines and advice for libraries around Australia and the experiences of libraries during and after the floods will also be used to inform planning and preparation in the library sector.

9. Issues and considerations

Libraries' experiences of the Queensland floods raised several issues and confirmed others.


- Libraries need to have emergency plans in place to minimise damage to their own property and collections.
- It would be beneficial for galleries, libraries, archives and museums in the same area to work in partnership, providing practical support to each other, for example a safe repository for books, artefacts and valuable items under threat.
- At each location, the safety of staff is imperative, both physical safety and mental well-being.
- Libraries contribute to the well-being of the community in a way that extends far beyond the bricks and mortar, vehicles, books and computers.

- Cultural institutions can play a useful role in helping communities reconstruct themselves after a disaster. In the immediate aftermath, the focus will be on food, shelter and clothing, but in the longer term, books on a shelf, photographs in an album, letters and other personal papers, are an important way of retrieving lost memories.

10. Key recommendations

- That public library managers should be invited and encouraged to play an active part in local government emergency planning.
- That the library's potential as a safe haven in a disaster zone should be recognised and factored into local government emergency planning.
- That libraries and other neighbouring cultural institutions should plan their disaster response both individually and in partnership.
- That public libraries be adequately funded to provide vital services such as internet access, and community programs to help heal traumatised communities.

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