

STATE LIBRARY — INTERLIBRARY LOAN SERVICE

Grievance

MS R.S. STEPHENS (Albany) [9.51 am]: I rise today to raise a grievance with the Minister for Culture and the Arts concerning the well-utilised and highly valued interlibrary loan service. I thank the minister for taking my grievance.

In regional settings, the public library is the heart of the community. It is a place where people go to not only borrow books, but also meet friends, study, connect, find out about community events, attend story time with their children and myriad other things. This is the case for Albany as it is, I am sure, for many small regional towns in the great southern region and across WA.

Over the last week, my electorate office has received correspondence from numerous concerned constituents who have been advised by the Albany Public Library that interlibrary loans will be suspended. Constituents are also walking into my office reporting that they are advised by our library that they can no longer borrow books via the interlibrary loan service. This advice is upsetting my community and as I know it to be incorrect I believe we need to set the record straight. My understanding is that the interlibrary loan service is still available to all public library users and I seek the minister's confirmation that this is the case.

My understanding is that since 2018 material requested by public library users that is not currently in a library's collection is supplied in electronic format in the first instance. I understand that when an electronic version is unavailable or cannot meet the needs of the user, titles are purchased if they are still in print. Interlibrary loans are available when requested material cannot be supplied in either of these ways. I am advised that from 1 July 2023, there will be changes to the delivery method of requested titles. Postage to some locations will be used rather than the current freight system. I understand that the method of delivery is the only change and will take place from 1 July. I am advised that 25 regional public libraries have suspended their interlibrary loan service since being advised of the change to the method of delivery.

The City of Albany posted a message on its website on 26 May 2023 that stated —

Due to impending changes to the State Library's Inter-Library Loan system and associated courier service, we will temporarily suspend consortium reservations and Inter-library Loan requests from 1st June 2023.

My office is providing responses to concerned constituents clarifying that interlibrary loans are indeed available and will still be available. Can the minister please update the house on the status of the much-loved and well-patronised interlibrary loan service?

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Minister for Culture and the Arts) [9.54 am]: I thank the member for Albany.

Mr P.J. Rundle: Very disappointing!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: No, member for Roe, this is a very important issue.

Ms R.S. Stephens: I missed the member for Roe's interjection.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: He said it was disappointing. That is sad, but anyway. The member just has to be careful about what he says.

I thank the member of Albany for this important grievance. In this place we are all great supporters of our library systems, and I want to pay tribute to all of those library officers who work in our public libraries throughout regional Western Australia and the metropolitan area for the wonderful job they do. There is no more loved institution than the public library, and this government will continue to support public libraries very, very strongly. I was at my local library, the Mandurah Library, only two weeks ago reading as part of the simultaneous storytelling reading that took place around the nation, and I think other members may have been included.

I want to put to bed any concerns that the member for Albany and some of her constituents may have had about the ongoing services provided by public libraries and supported by the State Library. As the member is aware, the interlibrary loan service has been integral for communities and will continue. It is coordinated by the State Library, and it ensures that lending and transport of library materials can continue between all 232 Western Australian public libraries. Of course, times have changed, as have the way materials are accessed. The service was established many decades ago when books and other materials were not so readily available at low cost or online. A lot of books were not available online and, indeed, the cost of printing was higher. Much of those costs have reduced. Borrowing between libraries provided a viable method for Western Australians to access the materials they needed. Although the interlibrary loan service remains vital for materials that are not readily available for purchase, the library, publishing and transport sectors have changed significantly. With the ever-increasing online availability of library materials and rising transport costs, it is imperative that the State Library works with the public libraries to deliver more sustainable, efficient and effective services to the community.

In 2019, changes were made to the service with minimal impact on library users. Requests by public library users for material that is not currently in an individual library collection will be supplied in electronic format in the first instance, and for many that will be a very effective way of accessing the borrowing. When an electronic version is unavailable or cannot meet the needs of the user—some people will not appreciate or like to use that method, which is fair enough—the title will be purchased if it is still in print. Quite often, purchasing a publication is cheaper than sending or posting a copy that might be in some other library. It is an efficiency and it makes sense. Interlibrary loans will be available if the materials requested cannot be supplied in either of these ways. It makes sense. First, they will be supplied electronically. If that is not an option, there will be the option to purchase the book. When that is not an option, the traditional, older method of interlibrary loan will take place.

I assure the member, and ask her and all members to assure their constituents, that they will continue to be able to access the publications they seek to access, and those three methods, in that order, will be the methods of delivery. It will be much more efficient and timely in getting publications to individuals. The member is lucky and fortunate because a member of staff at her public library is a member of the Library Board of Western Australia. I would certainly hope that a staff member who is cognisant of the State Library board's operations would be an advocate for disseminating this information and ensure that people are not panicked or concerned. It is incumbent on all of us to be aware of those changes so that access to library materials and resources can continue. It is very important that no matter where someone lives in Western Australia they continue to have access to the resources and the publications that people seek through libraries. During COVID, I was very impressed by a number of libraries. Even though they closed down during COVID, they came up with innovative ways for borrowing to continue. Indeed, there were a lot of learnings out of COVID by the State Library and other libraries around the state that were able to adapt quickly to ensure that people remain connected through their local library, even though it may have been physically closed for certain periods of time for COVID-safe purposes.

I thank the member for bringing this grievance to me. As the member highlighted very clearly and sought clarification of, the method of delivery by those three means is the only change, and there is no need for a suspension of any of the processes. They should be continuing now and I urge those libraries that have perhaps sought to temporarily close to reopen them, because access is important for their constituency.