

LIBRARY AMENDMENT BILL 2011

25 May 2011

Bill introduced on motion by Mr George Souris.

Agreement in Principle

Mr GEORGE SOURIS (Upper Hunter—Minister for Tourism, Major Events, Hospitality and Racing, and Minister for the Arts) [10.07 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

I am delighted that the first bill I introduce as the Minister for Tourism, Major Events, Hospitality and Racing, and Minister for the Arts is an amendment to enhance the Library Act 1939. The New South Wales Government is committed to supporting our public libraries. We acknowledge that public libraries provide a wide range of services that are greatly valued by the community. It is pleasing to note that in 2009-10, New South Wales public libraries had 3.3 million members—46 per cent of the population—received 37 million visitations, administered 50 million loans and used 2.44 million internet hours.

The object of the Library Amendment Bill 2011 is to enable two or more local authorities to enter into an arrangement for the provision, control and management of libraries, library services and information services in any of their respective local government areas. The bill provides an alternative to the current situation under section 12 of the Library Act 1939 whereby two or more local authorities may enter into an agreement with regard to which one of the local authorities should undertake these functions in the area of any local authority that is party to the arrangement.

There are 19 libraries in New South Wales controlled or managed between 70 local authorities under agreements made pursuant to section 12 of the Library Act 1939. Located throughout the State, they are what are colloquially known as regional libraries. In general, these arrangements work well. By pooling resources, regional libraries provide services for communities that would be difficult or impossible for any individual council to fund. The 19 regional libraries are: Central Murray, comprising Deniliquin, Conargo and Murray local government areas; Central Northern, comprising Tamworth Regional, Liverpool Plains, Narrabri, Uralla and Walcha; Central West, comprising Orange, Blayney, Cabonne, Cowra and Forbes; Clarence, comprising Clarence Valley, Bellingen and Nambucca; Macquarie, comprising Dubbo, Narromine, Warrumbungle and Wellington; Monaro, comprising Cooma-Monaro, Bombala and Snowy River; Newcastle, comprising Newcastle, Dungog, Gloucester and Port Stephens; North Western, comprising Warren, Bogan, Coonamble and Gilgandra; Northern, comprising Moree Plains, Brewarrina, Gwydir, Walgett; Queanbeyan-Palerang, comprising Queanbeyan and Palerang; Richmond-Tweed, comprising Lismore, Ballina, Byron and Tweed; Richmond-Upper Clarence, comprising Richmond Valley and Kyogle; Riverina, comprising Wagga, Coolamon, Cootamundra, Gundagai, Junee, Lockhart, Temora and Tumut; South West, comprising Young, Boorowa and Harden; Southern Tablelands, comprising Goulburn Mulwaree, Upper Lachlan and Yass Valley; Upper Hunter, comprising Muswellbrook and Upper Hunter shire; Upper Murray, comprising Urana, Corowa, Greater

Hume, Tumbarumba; Western Riverina, comprising Griffith, Carrathool, Hay, Jerilderie, Murrumbidgee and Narrandera; and, finally, the only one in the metropolitan area of Sydney, Ryde, which comprises Ryde and Hunters Hill.

The bill acknowledges that there should be greater flexibility for local authorities in the arrangements for the joint provision of library services. The Government wants to permit local authorities to enter into a cooperative model that provides for the collective or joint management of regional libraries, and specified aspects of library services, by some or all of the councils concerned. Of course such a model should have at its core appropriate governance arrangements that are consistent with the broader policy framework for local government in New South Wales. A collaborative arrangement should take many forms, as set out in the Division of Local Government's "A Guidance Paper: Collaboration and Partnerships between Councils". Councils wanting to enter into new regional library arrangements under the bill will need to consider guidelines and other resource material issued by the Division of Local Government relating to the formation and management of collaborative arrangements between councils.

There are precedents for collective management at the local government level. For example, section 355 of the Local Government Act 1993 provides that a council may, subject to chapter 12 of that Act, exercise its functions jointly by the council and another council or councils. This power is used for collaborative arrangements covering areas as diverse as companion animals, community services, economic development, environmental management, health, social justice, skills development, tourism, waste and water. The bill provides the Minister administering the Library Act with responsibility for approval of alternative arrangements for regional libraries. Of course, in practice, the Minister will seek advice from the Library Council on proposed alternative arrangements. The key issues for the Library Council will be ensuring that any proposed alternative arrangements meet the requirements for public libraries under the Library Act and will result in a sustainable library service that meets the needs of library users.

Given the central role of local government in the provision of public libraries and the need for consistency with the State's local government policies, the bill provides that the Minister for Local Government must also agree to any arrangements under new section 12A of the Library Act. In terms of implementation of the arrangements and amendments, the State Library will continue to support local councils in the framing of arrangements. I reiterate that the amendments provide enhanced flexibility for councils while ensuring proper consideration of library policy issues and alignment with State local government policies. The bill is supported by the Library Council and representatives of the Public Libraries Consultative Committee, which includes Public Libraries New South Wales, Public Libraries New South Wales-Country, Public Libraries New South Wales Metropolitan Association and the Local Government and Shires Associations. These stakeholders uniformly describe the bill as very positive and worthy of their support.

New arrangements between councils potentially could improve services across local

government areas through initiatives such as greater collection, sharing and joint purchasing. In areas such as home library services, councils also could collaborate to improve services and decrease costs. As I stated at the outset, this Government understands the importance of public libraries in our communities. I am pleased to note that there has been significant growth in demand for New South Wales public libraries in the State over the past five years. The latest public library statistics for New South Wales show that library visits have increased by 15 per cent over the past six years, loans of books and other materials have increased by 10 per cent over the past six years, and that Internet use in libraries has increased by 30 per cent in the past five years. Although demand for public libraries has grown significantly over the last five years, the funding base for public library grants and subsidies remained static from 2007-08 at \$23.58 million to 2010-11. The Library Development Grants program, which is used to improve buildings, collections and technology services and to enable innovative library projects for communities, has decreased from \$3.3 million in 2005-06 to \$1.1 million in 2010-11. While some relief was provided by the temporary allocation of an additional \$2 million a year to country libraries until 2012-13, this has not addressed the problem of inadequate core funding.

The Government is addressing public library funding. We will further examine the current funding system for public libraries. This bill, along with the Government's public library funding commitments, demonstrates that we are responding to a much-neglected but crucial sector. In conclusion, I acknowledge the efforts of the Hon Catherine Cusack, MLC, in bringing to the attention of the Parliament the need for greater flexibility in regional library arrangements. I commend the bill to the House.