NALI submission from the National Librarian

Below is my response as National Librarian to the five questions asked of the stakeholders of Archives New Zealand, the National Library of New Zealand and Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision.

What are the two or three key challenges for the national archival and library institutions (Archives New Zealand, the National Library of New Zealand and Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision)? What is the most urgent challenge?

NALI consultation workshops have provided a clear message that, after seven years of financial pressure and staff reductions, stakeholders and staff of the Library now strongly believe that, despite the Library’s best efforts, we are failing to perform properly in each of our three statutory roles of:

(a) collecting, preserving, and protecting documents, particularly those relating to New Zealand, and making them accessible for all the people of New Zealand, in a manner consistent with their status as documentary heritage and taonga; and
(b) supplementing and furthering the work of other libraries in New Zealand; and
(c) working collaboratively with other institutions having similar purposes, including those forming part of the international library community.

The key challenges for the National Library include:

- Mounting backlogs in collecting NZ publications, inadequate budgets for digital collecting, preservation and access to collections
- Stronger leadership for the library sector - building digital systems and support at scale
- Capacity to provide backbone for collaborative projects with other agencies

In all of these challenges the urgent need is to restore our capacity to invest in innovative change, to make collections secure and build new digital services for preservation and access at scale. Ever tightening budgets have removed our ability to research and keep pace with digital opportunities and manage the cost of change.

Does the position of National Librarian have the independence and authority necessary to carry out the responsibilities of that position? Why/why not?

No. Prior to 2011, when the National Librarian was Chief Executive, any operational decision they approved was able to be acted upon immediately because no further authority was required. In contrast, since 2011, any major plans for the Library require approval from the DIA Executive Leadership Team.
The National Librarian is a third tier manager in DIA and not a member of ELT, so when I approve any significant operational plan it usually requires an extensive process of further approvals by a number of colleagues across the DIA. Even when supported by those colleagues this process of governance has repeatedly caused significant delays with negative impact on the libraries we serve across New Zealand. Two examples are the National Library Digitisation Strategy 2014-2017 and the refresh of APNK.

The National Librarian does not have independence and authority to engage and make agreements with other public sector agencies or with international partners. The work of the Library has hardly ever been a priority for the Department.

Note – I am not making comment on the Chief Archivist as he can speak for himself in this process.

What changes, if any, would you suggest to the role or structure of Archives New Zealand or the National Library?

Firstly, both institutions have critically important relationships with iwi. Feedback from iwi leaders during the NALI consultation emphasised the need for any change to reflect the Treaty of Waitangi. The National Library’s strategic directions document ‘Turning Knowledge Into Value’ emphasises the need to work in partnership with iwi if the desired outcomes are to be achieved. He Tohu has taken both institutions to a new level of strategic partnership with iwi but we fall far short of the bicultural governance of Ngā Taonga.

I think we need to explore the possibility of all three NALi institutions being governed by one bicultural board as a Crown Entity. As long as we are in a Government department we cannot be truly bicultural in our governance. While there are some pragmatic advantages of becoming a Departmental Agency within DIA, I believe there is a more important fundamental principle around governance and the commitment of all three institutions to the Treaty partnership.

Secondly, with the experience of working alongside Archives NZ for the last seven years I also feel strongly that a joint executive for the three institutions would be the best way to manage the opportunities for more effective collaboration at scale.

Thirdly, I think it would be unhelpful to alter the identities of each of the three institutions. I would like to explore the possibility of one Crown Entity being created to govern the three institutions while retaining the current identity of each institution within that new entity.

What opportunities exist for the national archival and library institutions to work more effectively together in collecting, preserving and providing access to New Zealand’s documentary heritage? In particular, what opportunities exist in relation to digital preservation and access?

All three agencies will be managing large collections of analogue and digital materials for many years to come, some of it in perpetuity. More coherent planning for investment in shared digital infrastructure and expertise could be achieved in a single new Crown entity building on the National Library’s platforms of the National Digital Heritage Archive, Digital NZ and PapersPast.

A new Crown Entity would provide the benefits of shared resource to support specialist property needs. There is an immediate opportunity to bring the core operations of all three institutions together in one physically connected building complex. By linking the National Library to a new building in Aitken Street both Archives NZ and Ngā Taonga could be relocated from unsafe buildings to protect staff and collections of national importance. Archives NZ and Ngā Taonga would benefit from connection to the existing public spaces for events and exhibitions in the National Library. In addition to this new Wellington building a shared new repository is also needed for analogue collections relocated from Wellington for safekeeping.
Digitisation of analogue collections is essential for access for all citizens and it also provides safeguard of content in the event of catastrophic loss of the original physical collections in an earthquake. APNK could be used as a shared platform for community access in public libraries to the digitised collections and services of all three institutions. The National Library’s Services to Schools could provide reach for all three institutions to deliver increasingly digital learning materials to teachers and students across the country. If we had funds to digitise the three institutions’ collections of Te reo Māori material it would contribute a wealth of content to help revitalise the language.

Digitised and born-digital content needs to be preserved if it is to be accessible in future and the National Library has an internationally renowned centre of expertise in digital preservation. It requires further investment which would also benefit both other institutions and the wider system by offering digital preservation as a service to libraries and other institutions across New Zealand. In a single Crown entity shared technology support services could focus on the specialist needs of these three collecting institutions. DIA shared services are less specialised and the loss of the specialist expertise that the Library previously had built is the key reason for low engagement scores from the Library’s digital preservation team for the last seven years.

What does the public need in the next 30 years from the national archival and library institutions?

From stakeholders and staff of the National Library there was a strong message in the NALI consultation workshops that they have confidence in the strategic directions in our document ‘Turning Knowledge Into Value’ https://natlib.govt.nz/about-us/strategy-and-policy/strategic-directions that was published after lengthy consultation with staff and stakeholders two years ago. The NALI consultation workshops have provided clear support for investment in pursuit of the outcomes set out in the document around Taonga, Knowledge and Reading. All of these outcomes require collaboration at scale not only across Government agencies but with partners in communities across New Zealand.

Repeatedly in the NALI consultation workshops stakeholders expressed dismay at the inability of the National Library to provide leadership across the knowledge system in New Zealand. In ‘Turning Knowledge Into Value’ we state our ambition that ‘New Zealand libraries, educational, cultural and research institutions will act as one knowledge network, to facilitate New Zealanders sharing knowledge’. As a result of pressure on operational budgets the Library has very little capacity left to lead the collaborative activities needed to achieve system shift.

There are many benefits to be achieved from collaboration at scale but the National Library needs to renew its capacity to provide the backbone support for collaborative projects, for example digital preservation as a service to other libraries. Prior to 2011 the Library was able to invest in successful initiatives such as Digital NZ, PapersPast, APNK, Kōtui and the National Digital Heritage Archive. Since 2011, very little service development has been possible. We have seen National Libraries elsewhere around the world making significant progress in developing digital library services.

The public also need to have full confidence that public record-keeping is being properly managed today and in future. They also need full confidence that public records are available for them to scrutinise today and in the future. Most importantly, they need to be assured that neither of those activities are subject to political or official interference. From feedback at the NALI consultation workshops it seems evident that stakeholders do not have sufficient assurance from current arrangements.
I am truly proud of the spirit of public service which is still very strong in the National Library despite the difficulties of the last seven years. Staff across the Library have gone the extra mile again and again to provide the best service they can “doing more with less”. To rebuild public confidence in this institution responsible for taonga, knowledge and reading we need to invest not only in rebuilding our capacity to perform our core statutory roles properly; we also need to strengthen our partnerships with iwi and provide innovative leadership for the knowledge system across New Zealand.

With the announcement on 29 August that New Zealand will be hosting IFLA’s World Library and Information Congress in 2020, there is now a unique opportunity to create a very positive story about the future contribution of the library sector to the wellbeing of New Zealanders. The Prime Minister sums it up perfectly in her video message to this year’s IFLA Congress here:  
https://www.dropbox.com/s/7tr4qm7lp62br53/IFLA-Video-V6.mp4?d1=0

The NALI process can restore the National Library’s ability to play its part properly.

Nāku noa, nā

Bill Macnaught
National Librarian