ABSTRACT

In 2007 the More Than Just Equipment report was released. This report identified a number of issues for people with a disability in accessing their public library resources and services via the internet. Following the release of this report, library representatives worked through the report and the issues it raised, establishing priority areas to address these issues. One of these was the development of an online resource/directory to provide all Victorian library staff with the tools and information to enable their library service to support the independent use of public libraries by community members with disabilities, along with their families and carers.

The result is THE PLEASED (Public Libraries Enabling Accessible Services Encompassing Disability) website, launched in October 2009. PLEASED is a high quality accessible web portal. It is a first for public libraries in Australia, demonstrating the innovative use of web technology to assist library staff in providing services to community members with a disability.

This paper will provide a background to the development of the Public Libraries Enabling Accessible Services Encompassing Disability (PLEASED) website, highlight the site’s features and also briefly discuss the learnings and future of the website.

1. Background

This project had its beginnings with the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Disability Working Group, convened by Vicnet. Vicnet is a Division of the State Library of Victoria which has responsibility for helping the library meet its goal of providing ‘access to information for everyone’, strengthening communities through the use of information technology.
The initial purpose of the ICT Disability Working Group was to improve the provision of ICT facilities and service in Victorian public libraries to community members with a disability.

The group has diverse membership, with representation from peak bodies such as Vision and SCOPE, interested groups including government agencies, Metro Access Officers and the Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN).

I joined the Working Group in September 2006 as the PLVN representative.

2. ICT Disability Working Group Key Project

The key work on the agenda at that time was a research project that was being funded by the Winthrop Foundation, with the purpose of investigating public library internet access and participation for people with a disability, assessing their needs and issues in relation to access and participation, and making recommendations to improve access and participation.

Equity Research Centre was engaged to carry out the research.

The main element of the research was a survey conducted with 246 community members with a disability, 40 carers and 152 Victorian public library staff. Although the project’s focus was related to the needs and issues of those with a disability, it was identified as most important to survey library staff to establish what problems and barriers they were experiencing in delivering internet services to community members with a disability. It was recognised that there was a willingness to improve services, but confusion about the best way to go about it.

The results of the survey were analysed and the More than Just Equipment report released in August 2007.

An electronic copy of this report can be downloaded at:


The report identified key issues and themes for both the disability sector and public library sector.

For the disability sector these were:

1. Internet access at the library
   a. problems with adaptive equipment either being incompatible or not available;
   b. problems with booking computers, with those PC’s with adaptive equipment not being available when required and bookings not being long enough;
c. the need for introductory training with the requirement for this to be done by someone who is disability aware and either in small groups or one-on-one; and

d. the need for ongoing help and assistance from staff
2. Access to the library via the internet
   a. often remote access to catalogues and resources was difficult or impossible due to the software format and platform; and
   b. web accessibility issues in relation to vision impairment and literacy with many library websites not World Wide Web (W3C) compliant.

3. Support from library staff
   a. the need for library staff who were disability aware and trained in both the use of the adaptive equipment provided and the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992.

4. Knowing what/who is available in the library
   a. the need to raise the disability community’s awareness of what public libraries offer;
   b. the need to raise awareness within public libraries of community members with a disability; and
   c. the need to improve and develop networks across the community.

5. Getting to, getting in and being comfortable in the library
   a. the need to address the issue of physical access to libraries, including things such as ramps, parking, transport and adjustable desks.

This last point is not specifically related to ICT but was identified as critical to improving participation.

For the public library sector these were:

1. Adaptive technology
   a. the high cost of adaptive equipment was a barrier to purchasing equipment and seen as difficult to justify to funding bodies;
   b. the complexity of the equipment with few staff confident in using it; and
   c. confusion around what to purchase, where to purchase it from and who would benefit from the equipment.

2. Training
   a. the need to provide training on the use of equipment and disability awareness.

As can be seen, there was an overlap in the themes and issues of the two sectors.

4. Recommendations of the Report

The key recommendations from the report were to:

1. Improve physical accessibility both in getting to the library and within the library through improved parking and embracing the principals of universal design in relation to library buildings.

2. Ensure the spirit of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 was responded to through such actions as one-on-one staff assistance, continued support and expansion of home library services, and training and ongoing support for library staff.
3. Provide support to library staff to deal with specialist adaptive/assistive equipment through training and identification of best practice.

4. Develop websites and provide online resources that are accessible through compliance with W3C and the Victorian Government Website Management Framework Standards and the procurement of accessible products.

5. Make funding available so that libraries can increase the availability of internet facilities, adaptive equipment and software.

5. **Public Library Response to the Report**

The Convenor of the ICT Disability Working Group Colleen McCombe and I presented the findings of the report to public library managers in December 2007 and received their approval to hold a workshop of library staff to develop projects in response to the report.

This workshop was held in April 2008 and was attended by 20 enthusiastic staff members from Victorian public libraries.

The workshop established three priority projects:
1. The development of an online resource/directory for library staff.
2. The creation of guidelines to aid in the development of accessible websites.
3. The development of a best practice guide to designing accessible library buildings.

6. **Project Development**

Three working groups were established to progress each of these projects.

The Online Resource/Directory Working Group's first priority was to source funding for the development. As luck would have it, the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) had announced a Small Grants Program, the intent of which matched the aims and objectives of the project.

An application was made, and funding of $30,000 was approved in June 2008. Darebin Libraries was the funding applicant on behalf of PLVN for this project.

The working group then held a number of workshops to develop fully the requirements for the website and a specification. I will add, at this stage we were all very interested in the then trendy online technology of wikis, but wisely did not specify an online solution in the specification.

Following a quotation process, Vicnet was appointed to develop the resource. They reviewed our needs and recommended a website solution using Joomla, a free open source framework and content publishing system, and PLEASED (Public Libraries Enabling Accessible Services Encompassing Disability) was born – [www.pleased.net.au](http://www.pleased.net.au)
In terms of the name, like the development all good project names we sat around a table and juggled words to fit our acronym, which needed to include the words accessible, public, libraries and disability. I do believe it was Colleen McCombe who finally succeeded.
7. Other Projects

Touching briefly on the other two projects, research established that guidelines were already available in relation to web accessibility, and what was required was a consolidation of these guidelines. Vicnet agreed to take on this project, accessing residual funding from the Winthrop Foundation grant. The PLEASED website was identified as their natural home.

The best practice guide to designing accessible library buildings was deferred until the completion of the other projects, as it was just not feasible to work on all three projects concurrently. This project will now become a focus of attention.

8. Final Website Features

Our initial workshops identified a list of required elements for the website. Based on further discussions with Vicnet which covered both functionality and cost, we established the final features as:

- A directory of service providers listing agencies, service providers and other stakeholders who could provide specialist knowledge and advice on areas such as appropriate adaptive equipment or suitable training;
- A directory of assistive technology held by public libraries in Victoria;
- A knowledge base providing information and guidance about disability service provision;
- A discussion forum to enable ongoing dialogue between users of the site on subjects of interest;
- Articles on topics of interest such as case studies, successful programs or solutions available in the market;
- Frequently asked questions (FAQS);
- Links to other websites of interest, such as technology vendors and resellers;
- News with chronologically ordered items such as upcoming events, training opportunities, festivals and special days; and
- Web 2.0 features including an RSS feed and word clouds.

The major items excluded from our initial list were a training calendar and instant messaging as we felt the needs these features were included to address could be met by other areas such as the discussion forum and news area.

9. Website Launch

The PLEASED website was launched in October 2009 at the State Library of Victoria by the Acting State Librarian Sue Hamilton. The website accessibility guidelines were launched at the same event. The website was then presented and demonstrated to PLVN in December 2009.

It has been well received by a wide range of stakeholders, which has been most satisfying for all involved.
10. Ongoing Development

The approach we have taken to ensure the website continues to grow and develop was for each public library service to appoint a ‘champion’ for the website. This was generally a staff member who had a specific interest in the provision of disability services within the library. So far, we have champions from around a third of our library services.

Vicnet conducted training for the champions, and training notes have been developed and made available on the PLEASED website.

The PLEASED Working Group now has an ongoing role to promote the site and ensure it continues to develop. We have put together a range of marketing collateral and have developed a communication strategy to recruit further champions and ensure the website remains visible in the public library arena.

A slight measure of the success we have had in this regard is that the PLEASED banner is now the de-facto name for all projects disability related within the Victorian public library network.

11. Lessons Learnt

We learnt a few lessons along the way, mostly good. Firstly, detailed and considered planning achieves good outcomes. The considerable effort we put into scoping our requirements was rewarded, with few changes required to our original list.

Secondly, choose the technical solution that best fits your needs, not the latest trend. As mentioned earlier, the work group originally thought a wiki was the way to go and we were of a mind to detail this in the specification. However the technical solution offered in the proposal by Vicnet was much more appropriate to address the requirements we set out.

Thirdly, this was a project supported by a volunteer working group and we achieved our outcomes successfully because we had members who were not only enthusiastic and interested in the project, but also had the specialist skills needed to achieve a good result. Of particular note was a member who had the technical IT skills to work collaboratively with Vicnet to translate our vision into a reality.

And finally, one thing I am sure you are all aware of, but I continually tend to forget - volunteer projects take a long time!