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Disaster preparedness at the National Library of Australia

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Introduction

The National Library of Australia is full of flammable materials, sits next to a lake which is fed by a river, co-inhabits a precinct with many other high profile institutions and buildings, allows many hundreds of visitors through its doors every day, and regularly employs people to work with dust, flames, water and chemicals within its walls.

Within those walls are collections treasured by the community and valued in billions of Australian dollars. There are staff and visitors to whom the Library has a duty of care, and physical assets worth millions of dollars owned by the taxpayers of Australia.

Seen from such a perspective, it is not surprising that the Library devotes considerable attention to making sure disaster is unlikely, and its impact if it does occur, as minor as possible.

The paper describes some of the experiences and approaches of the National Library of Australia in facing its disaster risks that potentially threaten sudden damage to the Library's collections, staff, assets, and business.

Some themes

Three themes underlie the National Library of Australia's approach to disaster management: preparedness, risk management, and integration.

While hoping there will never be a major disaster emergency to deal with, Library management know that hope is not enough. In preparing for a disaster that we hope will never happen, we increase our ability to recognise threats and respond to them.

At the same time, the Library is in the business of providing services and maintaining collections. Disaster preparedness cannot be the only claim on its resources, so the Library takes a risk management approach, identifying and assessing risks as they appear and deciding the level of attention they warrant if the Library wants to stay in business.

Just how seriously the Library takes disaster preparedness can be gauged by the level of integration in its planning processes. For many decades the main focus of attention was fire safety for staff: preventing fires and getting staff and visitors safely out of the building if a fire occurred. Somewhat later, arrangements were put in place to prepare for emergency impacts on collections. In more recent years, the Library has brought together its disaster planning on all fronts, to ensure they all work. This means that the Library's disaster preparedness encompasses:
- a range of targets – collections, people, IT systems, data, physical assets
- all kinds of risks that affect any of these targets in unacceptable ways not covered by normal workplace planning, including fire, major flood, water leaks, terrorist threats, building collapse, security incursions, vandalism, insect pests, dust, air conditioning failure, and so on

- all relevant players with a responsibility

- all processes involved in recognising, preventing, preparing for, reacting to, and recovering from such situations

- external dependencies, including intelligence and warning systems, emergency service providers, and other agencies with similar needs.

These approaches – being prepared, based on a realistic assessment of what is needed, and engaging all relevant issues across the Library – seem to serve the National Library of Australia well by encouraging both broad planning and specific detailed work on particular issues.

The track record - disaster experiences at the NLA

Overall, the Library has been extremely fortunate in its experience of major disasters. The critical, and formative, experience has been a fire that was quickly controlled but poured smoke and water through much of the building, leaving the Library with a few burnt items, many more wet items, and very large numbers of volumes with smoke and soot damage (largely from burning plastic sheeting that, ironically, had been used to protect collections from building works that were ultimately the source of the fire.)

This incident, which occurred after hours on a weekend in 1985, found the Library poorly prepared. Staff had no plan of action to follow, not guide to the decisions they must make.

The Fire Brigade had no detailed knowledge of the building or of which areas contained the most sensitive materials. Plant and building plans were only available inside the building. No plans existed at all for dealing with the media who were keen to tell a story, or the hundreds of people who turned up to see if they could do something to help. Even the smoke detectors had been turned off to facilitate the building works. Many Library staff and long-term Canberra residents still recall that night of standing in the Library carpark, gazing dumbfounded at the smoking building, the vast amounts of water pouring from it, and the feelings of helplessness.

Recovery from this incident of a few hours took more than a year and many, many hundreds of thousands of dollars. And yet, it was a minor incident, hardly noticeable on the scale of major library, archive and museum disasters over the years. The Library was fortunate to have had such a sobering warning of the destructive capacity of sudden disaster, as it led immediately to the kinds of preparations that might have prevented such an event or at least made recovery both easier and less traumatic.

Since that time, the Library has had a regular diet of small but immediately impressive water leaks from internal faults such as malfunctioning fire sprinklers; ingress of water from outside the building in heavy rain; dust from minor building works in which contractors have failed to comply with contract requirements; and a few periods of air conditioning failure.

While relatively minor, these incidents are sufficiently disruptive to motivate staff to remain vigilant and many potentially more serious incidents have been avoided. Response to the incidents that have occurred has generally been well managed and effective.

Aims

In addressing its disaster risks, the National Library of Australia aims to:

- Minimise the chances of any incidents occurring
- Mitigate the impact of any incidents that do occur
- Respond as appropriately, effectively and efficiently as possible
- Recover as quickly and completely as possible
- Ensure any relevant lessons are learnt and applied from the Library's experience and the experience of others.

Issues

Library management have determined that the Library's counter emergency planning has to consider many issues including:

- Detailed risk assessment, to ensure that risks are understood, responsibilities allocated, management decisions and procedures are put in place and monitored to achieve an acceptable level of risk
- Management of people and their safety: virtually all the risks that threaten the collections are also threats to staff and visitors
- Building management and site restoration
- Communications, public relations and the media

- Specific planning to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from specific kinds of disasters
- Library-wide awareness of and commitment to the disaster planning process
- Appropriate training at all levels
- Resources to support disaster planning and preparations
- Maintaining operations and services
- Sustaining disaster preparedness over time, with an awareness that the unexpected can be expected.

Key organisational structures

The Library uses an Emergency Planning Committee (EPC) to manage its disaster preparedness responsibilities. This standing committee is responsible for all disaster planning processes in the Library. It is chaired by the Assistant Director General for Corporate Services and reports directly to the Director General. The EPC is made up of six of the Library's eight most senior officers, along with other key personnel with emergency related functions, such as building services, security, preservation, media liaison, exhibitions, collection storage, and risk management. The Committee meets every two months but also convenes at need in emergency situations. It oversees the setting up, implementation and review of all risk management, business continuity, and counter emergency related matters, including policies, manuals, agreements and reports.

The high level representation, drawn from across the Library, and the delegated authority from the Director General, ensure that this committee is able to look strategically at the risks the Library manages, and is able to make decisions that stick.

This does not preclude very detailed work on specific issues. Operating below the EPC, and answering to it, a number of work areas in the Library prepare policies and procedures that address the day to day details of disaster readiness.

Some key tools

The Library relies on a number of key tools or processes in its disaster preparedness approach, such as:

1. Business continuity planning. Through these processes, the Library defines its critical business processes, and decides how much disruption is acceptable. This sets a good framework for looking at the likely causes of disruption, and the measures the Library does and should take to manage them.

2. Risk assessment and risk register. Like all organisations, the Library lives with risks of many kinds every day. Through this process, Library managers identify the risks that are likely to matter, their likely impact, ways of controlling them, and allocated responsibility and priority for managing them. This information is recorded in a register which is reviewed at least annually. Many of the risks are disaster related, but many are not. However, bringing all risk assessment into the one process allows a high level corporate group like the Emergency Planning Committee to make good decisions about relative priorities and resourcing, which feeds directly into corporate work planning and commitments to address the key threats.

3. The <u>Counter Emergency Manual</u> (CEM). This overarching manual describes roles and responsibilities and incorporates and harmonises a number of manuals that address specific aspects of emergency management. These include building emergency procedures (including staff alarms and evacuation procedures); an IT disaster recovery manual; a communications plan; and a Collections Disaster Plan. The latter includes instructions for all stages of disaster planning relating to collections, including the chain of command and decision making in an emergency, contact details, immediate response instructions, detailed information on recovering specific kinds of materials, and sources of expertise and services available to the Library. All components of the CEM are maintained and regularly updated.

The National Library of Australia's Collections Disaster Plan is based on some assumptions that warrant emphasis:

- People have to make decisions on the spot: it is not realistic to expect a plan to provide detailed instructions for dealing with every imaginable kind of incident. Therefore, the role of the plan is to help the right people make the right decisions at the right time.

- Different people have different roles and need different kinds of information, so the plan targets different levels and kinds of information to different audiences.

- Many people have specific roles in responding to emergencies, so it is important not to expect key individuals to be in two, three or more places at the one time, doing half a dozen different things.

- Emergencies can be expected to happen when the appropriate responsible person is unavailable, so planning need to provide enough back ups and enough cross overs in people's roles and knowledge to ensure the right things happen without depending totally on particular individuals.

- Order is the librarian's answer to chaos, but one can still expect 'messiness' in responding to real disasters. Planning must look for ways to maximise the chances of things working satisfactorily, even if they do not go exactly as planned.

- Someone must be responsible, and resourced, for keeping information, including contact information, up to date.

- Needs change over time, so the whole plan needs regular review, not just updating of contact details.

4. A <u>Register of Nationally Significant Materials</u>, which clearly identifies and locates priority collections and items for protection and salvage.

5. <u>Standard storage practices</u> that provide short term protection for collection materials, such as raising shelving off the floor, not placing collections on top shelves, and enclosing some materials in boxes or folders.

6. <u>Staff training and awareness</u>, supported by well understood rules concerning use of fire, water and hazardous chemicals, and readily available and well maintained equipment and materials for use in responding to emergencies (such as plastic sheeting to cover shelves). Ongoing scenario training and evacuation practice are routine.

7. A range of <u>agreements</u> with other agencies to support the Library's disaster preparations. These include ongoing liaison with local Emergency Services regarding the Library's special needs in dealing with incidents; weather and flood warnings; emergency accommodation for a Library disaster management team if the building cannot be occupied after a major disaster; and agreements with other Canberra-based collecting

institutions for mutual support in managing disaster risks. The Library also maintains a number of contracts with service providers likely to be needed in responding to a major emergency, such as transport and freezer services for water damaged books, microfilm recovery and IT hardware replacement services.

These arrangements have provided the National Library of Australia with an effective level of disaster preparedness, but it is a preparedness always needing to be tested and renewed.