Libraries Building Communities: the vital contribution of Victoria’s public libraries: a report on a major research project of the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network

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Introduction

Libraries are our best chance to create a centre of community spirit and activity

The most important thing to a community is reading, and what better place to encourage this in the young than a library

It is the holder of much of the knowledge about the local area and gives us a link to our past, present and future

Civic pride and fondness is generated by a well-used and friendly library environment

The role of public libraries as key players at a community level in building learning communities, and helping to form skilled and information-literate communities is fundamental to the future wellbeing of Australian society

These are powerful statements about the role and value of public libraries and they don’t come from librarians, or academics, or politicians, or other particularly eminent people. They are the words of some of the 10,000 fairly typical Australian residents, many but not all of them public library users, who participated in the Libraries Building Communities project, which is the subject of this Paper.

It is appropriate that the Paper is being delivered today, under the Conference theme of ‘engage’. The Libraries Building Communities project is very much about how public libraries engage with and add value to their communities. It is also about public libraries engaging in the political process.

Libraries Building Communities is a collaborative project of the Victorian public library network and the State Library of Victoria. It has been a groundbreaking piece of research in terms of both its size and complexity. The project commenced in April 2002, the reports were published in February 2005, and the work is ongoing.

From the beginning it was our intention that the reports would become an essential tool for all those engaged in advocating for public library services to decision-makers. It was also intended that the reports would help drive the strategic direction of public library services in Victoria; that they would be used as a practical planning aid to library managers; and that they would act as inspiration to all Victorian public library staff.

This Paper provides an overview of the research model and presents the main findings. It begins with a little background about the Victorian public library network and the political context for the Libraries Building Communities project.
Victorian public library network

Victoria is geographically Australia’s second smallest State but second largest in terms of population. It covers an area of approximately 277, 800 square kilometres and is home to just over 5 million of Australia’s 19 million residents. Around 3 million of these live in Melbourne. Victoria is divided into 79 local government areas and they all offer a public library service. There are 238 branch libraries and 30 mobile libraries in total. They hold approximately 9 million collection items and provide free access to the Internet with 1,200 PCs. About 2.5 million Victorians, 51% of the community, are registered public library borrowers, although about 60% of the population uses public libraries. They make more than 26 million visits to a public library service point during the year. They make 2.7 million reference enquiries and they borrow approximately 50 million items. Public library services in Victoria receive annual funding of approximately 132 million Australian dollars, or approximately 26 Australian dollars per head of population.

The State Library of Victoria sits alongside the public library network. It is a public research rather than a public lending library. It neither governs nor provides recurrent funding to public libraries. However, the State Government’s 1988 Libraries Act does require that the State Library provide leadership to the public library network and promote cooperation and high standards in information service delivery across the state. It is in fulfillment of this role that the State Library funds and manages a number of statewide projects, including the Libraries Building Communities project.

Political context

The State Library is funded by the State Government. Public libraries are funded by both State Government and local government authorities. Until the early 1980’s local government authorities and the State Government shared this cost almost equally. Over the years the balance has changed. State Government funding has declined significantly as a proportion. Local government now provides around 80% of the funding to public libraries. The funding environment in which public libraries are placed has become difficult and this has been one of the drivers for the Libraries Building Communities project.

Another driver has been government policy. The past ten years have seen the ideas and practice of community building emerge as a key policy theme for western governments as they seek ways to address the increasingly complex issues facing contemporary society. The Victorian Government has identified the need to nurture more resilient, active and confident communities as one of its most important strategic directions. The Government has approached this task by focusing on the potential already available in the community. Rather than emphasise the deficits and problems, and respond to these with needs-based services, the Government’s community building activities draw instead on the strengths that exist within communities. Its approach is based on listening to local experience, supporting local connections, providing responsive services and investing in the infrastructure which makes communities good places to live and work.

If public libraries are not to be overlooked by local and State Government it is imperative that they demonstrate the strong synergies that exist between their work in strengthening communities and the Government goal of creating resilient, active and confident communities across Victoria. They must be able to show clearly how they engage with the whole community, especially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. And they must be able to show how they contribute to the specific outcomes that the Government is aiming to achieve in community strengthening. These outcomes are identified in the Department for Victorian Communities Corporate Plan for 2004-2007 and include:
- Improved skills in the community
- Access to services
- Government information is more accessible to a greater range of communities
- More people participate in cultural events and celebrations
- Community facilities are used for a greater range of purposes
- Increased partnership initiatives between community/business/government
- Increased sense of belonging in a community
- People feel safe at home and public

**Current performance measures**

Since 1947 Victorian public libraries have been required by Government to report annually on a wide range of statistical performance indicators, which they do with great zeal. Most of the data collected relates to numbers of service points, opening hours, numbers of staff, registered members, loans, reference enquiries, items in collections, numbers of acquisitions and public access PCs – and the related expenditure. It is about how much we do – inputs and outputs – and it is critically important data for measuring efficiency and cost-effectiveness of core public library services. As a result of State Government’s Best Value legislation of the late 1990’s we have also become skilled at measuring how well we do things in terms of customer satisfaction.

However, all of this falls well short of providing our funding bodies with a complete picture of what they are getting for their money – the public library’s breadth of role and diversity of services – and it does not say anything about who is using and not using public libraries, or about the impact of public library services: the difference they make in a community, what value they add to the lives of people and the communities they serve. During the scoping of the Libraries Building Communities research many library service managers echoed the comment that senior government decision-makers still have ‘a stereotypical image of the library – and it revolves around books.’

There was a clear need for rigorously collected new data about public library services giving a greatly expanded view of their activities and usage. The data was needed for individual public library services and on a statewide basis. It was essential for it to be interpreted and presented in a way that was both easily accessible and talked the language of Government policy, if public libraries were to continue to be seen as relevant and their potential realised. So – What data was gathered? How was gather it gathered? And what conclusions were drawn from the analysis of the data? First – the ‘how’:

**Research goals and methodology**

The Libraries Building Communities research began in the latter half of 2002 with employment of a consultant to develop a full specification, taking into account existing Australian and international research in the area and the views of public library staff across Victoria about what they wanted to get out of the research.

In addition to showing Government how public libraries can help achieve government policy goals, they wanted to increase community awareness of the range of public library services. They wanted data about who is using public libraries, the benefits they gain, the services they use, their satisfaction with those services and the value they place on them. Case studies of how public libraries lead in innovation were required. Public library managers also wanted the research to pinpoint those groups in the community who are not well served by public libraries, to identify strategies for increasing community engagement, and to create a vision for the future role of
public libraries. And they wanted to build awareness of and commitment to the critical community-building role of public libraries amongst their staff.

An independent market research company was employed for the development and implementation of the methodology. Data was gathered using a variety of techniques. The data is both quantitative and qualitative and it is both statistical and in the form of comments from research participants. The survey samples are very large. Members of the community from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were well represented, as were both metropolitan and rural residents. The majority of the data collection was carried out between May and December 2003.

It commenced with 24 focus groups conducted across Victoria with library staff, library users and non-users to identify the main themes, issues, opportunities and barriers. Thirty-five face-to-face interviews were conducted with community leaders across the State. These included local councillors, business people, school principals, and leaders of religious and other community groups. Data was collected on what public libraries currently do well, where the gaps are in services, and how community leaders see the role of public libraries in community development both now and into the future.

A telephone survey was then carried out with 400 randomly sampled Victorians, both library users and non-users. These interviews provided demographic data about library users and were instrumental in quantifying and validating the extent to which some of the qualitative issues raised in the focus groups and interviews were significant within the broader community. Finally, an online survey was used to collect data from users in every public library service in the state. Benchmark data was captured relating to library usage patterns; importance of and satisfaction with various services provided by libraries; social capital information, and demographic data. A mammoth 8,602 surveys were completed. This is the first time that comprehensive and consistent data of this kind has been collected from public libraries across the state. Much of the data gathered from the online survey could be cross-checked with the data gathered from the telephone survey to strengthen the robustness of the results.

During the first half of 2004 additional information was gathered in the form of 34 case studies that demonstrate the innovative ways that public libraries in Victoria are meeting the needs of their communities. The case studies describe the approaches that have been used by libraries, the outcomes they achieved, benefits that have arisen for the community, how the practice links to community building principles, and the key lessons for the library service.

**Survey results: Employment status of public library users**

It is not possible to present in this paper all of the results of all of the Libraries Building Communities surveying. The following provides a sample only.

As a result of the Libraries Building Communities research we now have a more detailed snapshot of Victoria’s public library users than ever before. We collected data about users relating to gender, age-groupings, household composition, employment status, occupational groupings, income groupings and language spoken at home. This data can be compared to Australian Bureau of Statistics data so that each library service can see how the profile of its users compares with the community profile and will be able to identify areas for improvement.

The data showed wide differentials in the extent to which public libraries have succeeded in engaging their communities. Some libraries have been particularly energetic and creative in their approach, and this is reflected in their user profiles – which show high levels of patronage and strong representation of groups who are socially disadvantaged. Other libraries have been less
successful – possibly due to low levels of resources, location of the library or the existing culture of the library.

The telephone survey results relating to the employment status of public library users statewide are particularly useful. It shows that across the state only 27 percent of library users work full-time. Another 27 percent work part-time, 5 percent are classed as unemployed and nearly 40 percent of users are not in the labour force (retirees; unpaid primary caregivers; students). These figures do much to refute the notion still held by some decision-makers, that public libraries are an institution for the elite who could well afford to pay for the services provided.

Survey results: Activities people undertake at the library

Data was also gathered from both library users and non-users about what they thought were the main benefits of public libraries, and users were asked about their patterns of public library usage, including frequency of use and the range of services used. Twenty-eight separate services were identified. These ranged from the obvious services of loans of library materials, access to PCs and the Internet, availability of daily newspapers and opportunities for children to attend storytimes and school holiday activities, through to seminars and language and literacy classes; special services for people with disabilities, indigenous people and the business community; access to local community information and services; local history services; use of meeting rooms by community groups, and opportunities to volunteer.

It was found that many people used the public library for social interaction. Seventy-one percent of users like to talk with staff when they visit the library, 34 percent talk with other library users, 22 percent talk with people who would not normally be their friend, and 18 percent meet new people.

Public libraries are clearly seen to be safe and comfortable places for people to gather, a focal point for the community. They have an important role to play in helping people to connect, especially for those users who are not in the labour force and live alone, and in this way they help to build social capital.

Survey results: Gap analysis between importance of services and satisfaction with services

In addition to asking users what services they used, they were asked to rate both the importance of a wide range of services offered by the library and their satisfaction with these services. The results were plotted against each other and where the satisfaction-rating fell below the importance rating a need to improve the service was identified.

The services that were considered most important by library users, in order of importance, are: book loans, computer services, audiovisual loans, magazine loans, access to daily newspapers, special services to children and young adults, availability of local community information, and remote web access to the library catalogue and databases. The satisfaction ratings pointed strongly to a need for improvement in the way the three most important services are delivered.

Focus group participants were asked to place a monetary value on many of the services offered by public libraries. Opinions were sought from both focus group participants and community leaders to help identify the main barriers to library use, and they were asked to suggest strategies for reducing some of the barriers. Community leaders were also asked to provide advice on how public libraries could play a stronger role in community building and to help identify what needs to be done if they are to realize their potential.
Main findings
Percolating out of the data gathering, and the subsequent analysis and report writing during March to November 2004, the Libraries Building Communities research concludes that public libraries in Victoria make a vital contribution in four key areas and that they must continue to develop their services along these lines.

Overcoming the ‘digital divide’
A community’s social and economic development increasingly depends on how well its residents can access and use information and technology. The Libraries Building Communities research found that the ‘digital divide’, the gap between those who have and those who do not have the ability to access and use information technology is a matter of growing concern among community leaders and that public libraries have a crucial role to play in ensuring that people on low incomes and other disadvantaged groups are able to access information and technology and develop the necessary skills to use these.

They do this by providing free access to computers and the Internet, often employing new approaches. The use of satellite technology by mobile libraries to provide Internet access in areas where residents do not even have television reception is an outstanding example of this. Public libraries also run diverse programmes aimed at assisting people to develop technology skills. A number of Victorian public libraries run computer clubs for seniors, which gives older, retired community members the opportunity to learn about computers at their own pace and in an encouraging, relaxed atmosphere. This is a segment of the community generally left behind in the IT sphere.

Creating informed communities
Helping to create informed communities was identified as the second main area where public libraries contribute to community building. The research revealed that many felt that information overload is a common problem faced by people today and that the growing volume of information is of no benefit unless it can be converted into knowledge.

A high level of confidence was expressed in librarians as ‘trusted’ information experts, helping people to navigate their way through the mass of available information. Libraries were also seen by both library users and non-users as an important point for dissemination of both local community information and information about government programmes and services. Many people in culturally and linguistically diverse communities believe public libraries could play an even greater role in providing a conduit to government information. Public libraries also increasingly provide a gateway to the world of networked information by having a web presence through which users are able to access the library catalogue and various databases.

Convenient and comfortable places of learning
The third area in which public libraries make a vital contribution to community building is through provision of a friendly environment in which residents can learn the basic skills they need to take part in the economic, social and cultural life of their community.

The Libraries Building Communities research has shown that public libraries are greatly valued because they provide comfortable study spaces as well as learning programmes, many of which are targeted at ‘vulnerable’ learners, those community members who are keen to learn but are not comfortable in more formal learning institutions or with the formality of accredited learning.

These programmes include English language and literacy classes for residents from non-English speaking backgrounds; topical lectures and seminars; and Homework Clubs for 13 to 16 year olds.
Building social capital

The fourth area in which the research shows that public libraries play a crucial community strengthening role is in building social capital: bringing people together from across the social strata; forging greater understanding of other perspectives and other cultures; offering a safe space that embraces diversity; and providing connection into the community for people who are otherwise excluded.

Libraries do this simply by being pleasant places where people from all walks of life can happily and safely gather and talk with each other; by providing community meeting rooms; delivering library materials to people who are housebound or living in residential care; offering community noticeboards and displays; and hosting cultural and festive events that both celebrate the community’s diversity and contribute to the idea that ‘this community is a good place to be’.

In addition to identifying the four main areas where public libraries already contribute significantly to community building, the research highlighted the unique blend of characteristics that strongly positions them to expand their current role in this area. Typically, libraries are free and accessible to everyone, even in the remotest areas. One out of every four named communities in Victoria has a public library physical access point and they are open a total of 515,480 hours annually, providing physical access levels well beyond any other service. And they provide 384,384 hours of virtual access. They are well-known in the community, even amongst non-users. They are used by over half the State’s total population. They hold an enormous resource base of over 9 million items and they offer a diversity of services responsive to the particular needs of their communities. In short, the public library network has developed substantial community building capability over the last fifty years or so, its various well-located buildings and mobile services provide a safe and non-threatening environment which is open outside normal business hours. There is potential to expand the range of services that could be delivered from these existing facilities.

Challenges if public libraries are to realise their community building potential

However, it was well understood by those who participated in the Libraries Building Communities project that a number of challenges must be faced if public libraries are to take on an enhanced community building role. These are challenges familiar to public library managers all over the world.

The research concluded that the way in which public libraries are funded needs to be completely re-assessed in light of the many new roles they have taken on in recent years. Despite a recent building programme subsidised by the State Government, many Victorian public library buildings date from the 1960s and ‘70s and need to be upgraded so that they remain a welcoming presence in the community and to support new roles.

During the late 1990’s the Victorian State Government also invested significantly in providing Internet access to the community through all Victorian public libraries. Victorian public libraries provide the best public library Internet access in Australia, yet the Libraries Building Communities research shows that more Internet terminals are needed to ensure that libraries remain relevant, contemporary services that meet the ongoing needs of learning communities.

The research also recognises that the public library workforce must have the necessary skills in the use of new technology and in many other new areas of service. Skilling of the workforce was seen as a major challenge. Finally, if public libraries are to fulfil their community-building potential they must strive to forge stronger partnerships with other agencies that already have strong links within the community, such as employment agencies, neighbourhood houses, schools, youth
programmes and church groups. Benefits were also seen to arise from stronger links between public libraries and key decision makers in local councils.

The Libraries Building Communities reports conclude that "These challenges cannot be tackled by public libraries alone. They require the cooperation of stakeholders from across the community, government and business. If managed effectively, public libraries offer benefits in terms of communities that are smarter and quicker at gaining and using information, more comfortable in the use of IT, have more educated and informed individuals who can contribute to a more successful society, have better social networks and are more tolerant of differences."

**Libraries Building Communities reports**

There are four Libraries Building Communities reports and an Executive Summary. Report 1, *Setting the Scene*, provides the background to the project. It introduces the key concepts around community building, Victorian Government policy, the Victorian public library network, similar national and international studies measuring the value of public libraries, the project objectives and the methodology. Report 2, *Logging the Benefits*, discusses who is using public libraries, the benefits of public libraries, the most important services offered and the future role of the public library. Report 3, *Bridging the Gaps*, provides information about who is not using public libraries and the barriers to use, identifies potential new users, and suggests strategies for enhancing their engagement. Report 4, *Showcasing the Best*, provides 34 case studies of exemplary and innovative Victorian public library programmes and activities that illustrate the many ways in which public libraries strengthen their communities.

**Next steps for the Libraries Building Communities project**

Since publication of the Libraries Building Communities reports in February this year, they have been widely distributed and spoken about within Victoria and nationally. Many public libraries have used the reports in their business planning and budget submissions.

The Victorian Minister for Local Government has indicated that the State Government will fund a statewide public library initiative coming out of the research that will increase public library engagement with vulnerable members of the community who are not currently public library users. The Department for Victorian Communities provides State Government funding to public libraries and conducts the statistical survey. It has agreed to partner with the State Library and public libraries to develop the online survey into an instrument that can be rolled-out annually with a view to creating some new and more relevant performance indicators for public libraries.

The State Library will conduct further in-depth research with community groups who are not currently using public libraries to create guidelines for increasing their engagement. It will also provide seed funding for a range of partnership initiatives in individual library services to increase their community engagement.

The Libraries Building Communities project is evolving and its impact will be felt on Victorian public library service delivery for many years to come. Nobody speaks better for the Libraries Building Communities project than the participants themselves, so it is appropriate to conclude where this paper began, with some of the views about public libraries gathered from the participants:

*Knowledge and information are empowering communities to better themselves and our libraries are central for people who have a language, other than English, as their main language*

*Library – it’s one thing the whole family can do together*
The library is an ‘alive’ place for people to interact – not just for collection users, but for the wider community.

When I wasn’t working I would say it saved my sanity.