

**Libraries Building Communities:
the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries
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Introduction

This paper will discuss the role of public libraries in community building and specifically tell you about a very exciting and groundbreaking research project recently completed in Victoria titled *Libraries Building Communities*.

This has been a major project devised by local government library managers, managed and funded by the State Library of Victoria and steered by an advisory group made up of public library representatives. Over a two year period the views and opinions of 10,000 community members has been collected and analysed.

This project has coincided with an increased recognition by the State Government of the need to develop and nurture more resilient, active and confident communities as one of its key strategic directions.

The Growing Victoria Together Framework states:

“the Victorian Government’s community building 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”

The LBC research demonstrates the strong synergies between the work of public libraries and the goal of the Department for Victorian Communities to create resilient, active and confident communities across Victoria.

This research project is the first comprehensive Australian study of the value that public libraries add to their communities. It includes all 44 library services across the State and draws on the views and ideas of 10,000 people through a process of rigorous research designed by an independent market and social research company.

I’m going to give you some background to the research, that is, why it was undertaken in the first place, a little bit about what the actual research entailed in terms of methodology, a summary of the key findings and some information about where to next.

Background

Before I talk about the research and its findings however I would like to give you very briefly some contextual and statistical information about the Victorian Public Library system. I think it helps when thinking about libraries and community building to actually

have a picture of the reach and therefore current and potential impact that public libraries have here in Victoria.

The population of Victoria is 4.9 million with 68% of this figure living in Melbourne. The State has 79 Local Government areas all of which provide a public library service either independently or in cooperation with their neighbours through regional library corporations

Funding for Victorian public libraries is about 20% from State Government and 80% Local Government. The level of funding varies greatly between library services ranging from a Council contribution of \$35 per capita down to \$7 per capita. Unsurprisingly, the level of service provided in terms of bookstock, opening hours and quality of buildings varies in proportion to the money spent.

Total registered library borrowers number 2.5 million representing over 50% of the population. In the last year public libraries received 26.1 million visits, loaned 47 million items, books, videos or other library resources representing 9.5 loans per capita and 19 loans per member. Collectively across the State, library resources include approximately 9 million books, magazines, audiobooks, videos and dvds available through a network of 238 branches and 30 mobile libraries totalling 820 physical points of service delivery and open a total of 10,500 hours per week. This makes them a key part of the community's asset base.

Public libraries in Victoria answered 2.8 million information enquiries and visited 14,500 housebound individuals and institutions to deliver home library services. In addition to these services libraries undertook a range of other innovative and creative programs some of which I will highlight later.

I think you would have to agree from just looking at the statistics alone that far from being quiet places with not much happening, contemporary library services in Victoria are busy, vibrant and responsive services. What other service, club or organisation can boast active membership by well over half the population?

As well as being well-used, libraries are very well-regarded. A recent community survey conducted on behalf of a syndicate of public libraries asked respondents to rate on a score out of 10 how important it is for the community to have a public library. 76% of all respondents and even 58% of people who never use libraries gave a score of 10 out of 10.

In 2000 the AustraliaScan survey asked respondents about their satisfaction with a range of services including public libraries, post offices, banks, public transport, schools and so on. Public libraries topped the list with 36% very satisfied. Banks came last with 63% dissatisfied.

It is increasingly acknowledged that the functions and activities performed by public libraries extend well beyond the provision of books and information to playing a key role in community strengthening. Public libraries help build their communities in many ways.

Public Libraries are one of local government's and the community's existing great strengths and assets. The breadth and depth of public library resources, their high profile, accessibility and widespread use, combined with their responsiveness to community needs already makes them a vital contributor to community building, with the potential to do a great deal more.

The Libraries Building Communities Project

This project is concerned with identifying and documenting the various ways in which libraries contribute to community building. It takes as a starting point the premise that libraries do contribute to and do develop the social infrastructure of their communities through a numbers of programs and practices.

While it 'makes sense' that libraries occupy a critical place in the public domain, the basis of this belief has been mainly anecdotal. Little has been done to identify and document the community building effect and further potential of public libraries. Thus the concern of this project has been to systematically record and report the wider benefits of libraries for their communities.

Accounting for this potential is the framework that underpins the Libraries Building Communities Project. It seeks to identify the social contributions that public libraries in Victoria make to their communities through a process of rigorous inclusive research that informs, challenges and influences the public perception of the public library. The main objectives of the project are to:

1. Demonstrate the contribution made by Victorian Public Libraries to building their communities encompassing:
 - Direct benefits from provision of core library services and programs eg. Skills development
 - Indirect benefits which are associated with the provision of core services or with the physical presence of the library in its community and which enhance the social capital of the community
 - Benefits arising from innovative approaches to delivering library services – including projects being undertaken through strategic partnership with local groups eg. To create learning communities.
2. Analyse by local government area of the degree of correlation between local community demographics and characteristics of library users to provide:
 - an assessment of which segments of the population use the library and which segments appear to be less well serviced
 - analysis of the extent to which specific segments of the population – including disabled people, low income recipients, ethnic minorities, and those living in remote areas – access library services

- an understanding of the factors that may act as barriers to some segments of the community using public libraries and identification of the types of services and programs these groups want from the library

3. Develop strategic approaches and recommendations for enhancing social engagement that:

- draw on existing best practice for social engagement across Victorian public libraries
- are responsive to local issues and requirements
- can be applied on a statewide basis

Methodology and Research

Research for the project was very far-reaching. It was conducted by the Adelaide-based consultants New Focus and the reports were later written up by Carol Oxley of I and G Management Services. The Public Libraries Unit of the State Library of Victoria managed the project with a steering committee made up of representatives of urban and rural public librarians.

Research activities were quantitative and qualitative and included:

- An on-line survey with 8,600 responses across all library services
- 24 focus groups with users and non-users across Victoria
- 400 telephone surveys
- 35 interviews with Community leaders

The result of the project has been a series of 4 published reports and an Executive Summary which are available for download free of charge from www.slv.vic.gov.au or can be purchased in hardcopy from the State Library of Victoria.

The Reports and some findings

Setting the scene is the first volume and its main aim is to provide the background to the Libraries building communities project and to set the scene for the empirical reports coming out of the project.

The report explains the motivation for carrying out the LBC project and sets the study within the broader context of the community building activities of the government. A short and focused review is provided of the growing body of national and international studies that have measured the value of public libraries to their communities.

The report discusses the key concepts and jargon around community building and social capital including the various types of social capital and the concept of joined-up government.

Setting the Scene also provides the State Government context describing the strategic directions and the various projects around at the moment including Demonstration projects, Neighbourhood renewal, Community Capacity Building and LLEN – Local Learning and Employment Networks. In addition, the report describes the public library environment in terms of structure, funding and policy context.

The second report *Logging the benefits* includes the results of the research and presents community views on how public libraries add value to the community, where greater value could be added and what stakeholders see as the future of public libraries. It illustrates the many ways in which public libraries assist government at all levels in achieving their goals in many areas including education, lifelong learning and community strengthening.

One of the first aims of the research was to identify library users and compare their profile to that of the Victorian population as a whole.

There is a perception that library users are predominantly middle-class, middle aged housewives but in fact library users comprise the full age and income spectrum. Some of the key user groups at present are:

- Time-rich income poor:
This group includes those not in fulltime employment for reasons such as age or disability, family responsibilities and lack of opportunity.
- Mothers and young children
Frequent and increasing users of children's programs such as storytimes and holiday programs.
- Primary schools students
Many children were first introduced to their library by parents as infants. A common reason parents cite for use by children in primary school is to obtain reference material for school projects.
- Book lovers/heavy readers
This segment are heavy consumers of fiction and non-fiction. As a result, key motivations for use of public libraries are financial (money saving) and an affinity with the library environment.
- Self directed learners without other sources of information
This segment tended to be older women with adult children or unemployed people, without access to university resources or the Internet. Many found libraries useful for their Internet classes which empowered them with skills to become self directed learners.
- People on low incomes were found to be more likely to use public libraries than those in high income groups. 42% of households with weekly incomes of \$499 or less use library

services. In contrast only 4% of households with incomes over \$2000 used public libraries.

In terms of frequency of use library users visit often. 76% of on-line survey respondents visited the library at least once a fortnight. Interesting also is the finding that CALD users are significantly more likely to visit the library weekly than other users.

A majority of respondents (88%) use the library to borrow books and other resources which is the traditional role of libraries. Nearly all users borrowed books from the library, two thirds had made use of audiovisual materials and half of the users had borrowed a magazine. Almost half had made use of computing services including internet access. Usage of other library services is high with more than 10% of users having participated in children's storytimes, booktalks and other cultural events and local history services.

Satisfaction ratings were found to be very high – 94 % of respondents rated overall library performance as excellent or good and this is consistent with findings of other surveys conducted by Councils and libraries. Another strong signal of the satisfaction with libraries is that 82% of respondents to the online survey had recommended their library to others.

It was also possible to profile non-users.

To a large extent public library usage is related to stage of life. School children are heavy users but drop out in young adulthood returning later with their own children and continuing, in some cases, to use the library through retirement.

The researchers estimate that about 27% of the population have no need for libraries – they are higher income earners who can buy their own books and have their own information sources.

However, they also estimated that about 13% of the population do not use libraries but would benefit from them. This group includes young adults, people with disabilities, retired people and members of minority CALD communities – where the numbers are not sufficient and/or materials in the relevant language are not available to the extent that the library can develop a collection. It is suggested that this is the group to target in library marketing and the groups which would benefit a great deal from accessing library services.

Survey respondents, focus group participants and community leaders describe the following **benefits to individuals**:

- Access to information by way of access to a variety of books and other materials covering a vast range of subject areas and interests
- Access to multilingual resources and services
- Expert advice from librarians as experienced navigators of the world of print and online knowledge
- Maintaining local history and culture

- Building literacy and reading skills
- Access to new technology and related skills
- Providing recreation and enjoyment

Benefits to communities

- Social Interaction

While explicit recognition of public libraries as the hub of neighbourhoods and communities is still in its infancy the reality is they are fast becoming the “village greens” and neighbourhood hubs a place where people can meet, exchange ideas and information. This applies across all cultures with community leaders recognising the positive role of public libraries in engaging positively with many diverse groups.

- Promoting social inclusion

It is widely held and recognised that the public library serves a broad cross section of the community. Public libraries are regarded as a great leveller within the community – a place where access is available to all and a place where people can go to and be part of the community

- Bridging the generation gap

Community leaders in particular commented that public libraries are seen as very much a family friendly service where parents or grandparents can take children for a welcoming and friendly experience.

- Providing a focal point for the community.

Libraries are often seen as the jewel in the crown for their area or neighbourhood. The majority of respondents felt that the library was a good place to find out what is going on in the community with both users and non-users regarding the distribution of community information as a key benefit.

The third Report ***Bridging the Gap*** explores the extent to which public libraries in Victoria connect with and engage with their communities and the individuals who live within them. It is specifically concerned with issues of social exclusion and how libraries engage with residents who are harder to reach – people who are often from the more disadvantaged social group in the community - people on low incomes, those who are unemployed and people who face special difficulties in using the library eg. People who are housebound, disabled or living in remote communities.

The analysis complements and extends the analysis in the earlier mentioned report *Logging the Benefits*. The focus of this previous report was on demonstrating the many ways the library strengthens their communities. One of the factors identified in the report as making public libraries an effective contributor to community building is their capacity for social inclusion. - their capacity to reach out and include diverse members of their community – including people who are excluded from other local services.

Bridging the gap explores this social inclusion issue in more detail. It presents quantitative data to illustrate how well represented different groups are amongst library

users and qualitative information that tells in people's own words what encourages them to use their public library or alternatively, what barriers exist to using the library.

The report presents detailed profiles of library users for each of the 44 library services across Victoria. Comparison of these profiles with demographic data for each area provides an indication of the extent to which differences in user characteristics across libraries is a sign that they are responding to the varying needs of their communities or alternatively have adopted a different approach to social engagement.

The data from the research shows usage of public libraries is very strong. On average libraries are able to attract 60% of the population – many on a regular basis. Reach and accessibility is highlighted by a high level of awareness of libraries and the services they provide. A significant majority 92% of respondents to the telephone survey (which included users and non-users) were aware of free public library services in their community. Only 6% did not know of such services and 2% said no services of this type existed. Only 7% did not know the location of their nearest public library. As well as being services which are highly accessible and well known libraries are an effective vehicle for social inclusion in a number of ways as follows:

(i) Resources and activities that meet people's needs

- Libraries provide users with more than books – and this is reflected in the high level of usage of the range of services provided. These include storytimes, internet classes, book groups, author talks, information sessions.
- Libraries are services respected for their quality. As mentioned earlier 94% rated their library service as excellent or good.

(ii) A welcoming environment that engenders confidence.

- Many of the people who spoke to the LBC project commented that libraries provide a safe, neutral space for people to meet. The fact that library services are free was mentioned frequently and was seen as communicating the message that everyone has right of access regardless of their circumstances or backgrounds.

(iii) Reaching out to the community

Case studies from across Victoria demonstrate the many ways in which public libraries are reaching out to their communities to attract and support a wide group of users, eg.

- Providing exhibitions of local groups products such as art work
- Running parent groups promoting services available to them from their library
- Promoting to traditional non-users through programs that celebrate the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community
- Providing a venue for Indigenous groups to hold learning circles, workshops and monthly meetings.
- Running homework clubs for young people
- Distributing book kits to new parents to encourage them to read to their babies and foster early literacy development and the list goes on and on.
- Home Library Services

- Visits to playgroups and New Parents groups

During the course of the research it was argued by many people that libraries can only engage with their communities effectively if they understand them. This includes understanding the demographic composition of the community, the information and social needs of the different segments of the community and the profile of current library users.

The report discusses the various mechanisms used by libraries to understand their communities. Some of these are:

(i) Responding to Best Value

- As part of local government Victorian public libraries are obliged to undertake continuous review of their service in accordance with Best Value principles. Part of this review involves extensive community consultation and benchmarking.

(ii) Participation in local council research and surveys

- Examples are Household surveys, community satisfaction surveys, analysis of health and welfare data and ad hoc surveys.

(iii) Syndicated surveys

- Since 1997 a syndicate of regional library corporations has commissioned an annual market research survey and is conducted by a professional research company and includes users and non users. Three hundred randomly selected households from each area are surveyed each year.

(iv) Library reviews

- A number of libraries have undertaken extensive reviews of their service by independent consultants to examine issues related to their operations and customer satisfaction.

(v) Resident based advisory groups

- Many libraries recognise the importance of involving local residents in library decision making as a way of ensuring library services are relevant to the community

(vi) Linking with other organisations

- Creating strong links with local schools, parents groups, community groups, agencies and other service providers. Libraries learn a great deal about their communities through the relationships.

Barriers to Library use.

This part is the main focus of this report and provides very significant information to assist library services in addressing the barriers.

For most people in the community public libraries are accessible and the services that are provided are effective in meeting their needs. However for a smaller group of people there are barriers which prevent them from using libraries or restrict the benefits they can obtain when visiting their local library.

The main barriers to socially inclusive use of libraries tend to be:

(i) Institutional Barriers

There is a strongly held view amongst some library users and non-users that the books held by public libraries are old and that new releases are not available in a timely fashion.

Comment was made about the small multicultural collections held by some libraries. People belonging to specific language groups that make up a small proportion of the population are specifically identified as missing out with very few collections catering for their needs.

Libraries were also said to have inadequate adaptive technologies. It was also felt that student's needs were not always being met because public libraries do not provide a good stock of technical, academic and textbooks.

Insufficient access to the internet was identified by users as a barrier to library use. While information technology resources in libraries continue to expand the demand for these services in most locations still exceed supply.

Some participants at focus groups pointed to the fact that there are no or limited activities available for older people or disenfranchised groups at the library.

Fines for late returns were seen by some as a disincentive to use the library.

Many respondents felt that opening hours should be extended further into after hours and weekends.

Staff attitudes and structure. While comments from the focus groups and from other surveys indicate that people generally hold library staff in high regard a number of instances were raised where staff attitudes provided a barrier to use for example the reluctance of staff to engage with high maintenance groups such as male teenagers. It was also suggested that libraries consider employing people from smaller ethnic minorities.

(ii) Barriers related to perceptions and awareness

A big barrier to using the library for some groups is that they don't perceive it as being for people like us. In the eyes of some members of the community public libraries continue to be associated with a middle class intellectual culture. Libraries' daggy image can present a barrier to use for example with younger people. A lack of awareness of the full range and variety library services is a significant barrier. This was mentioned repeatedly by non-users of library services.

(iii) Barriers related to personal and social circumstances

Include fear of asking for help, physical barriers in accessing library

(iv) Barriers related to infrastructure and environment

Physical design, access to public transport, parking, physical obstacles for elderly and disabled users. The location and physical design of libraries are vital factors in ensuring they are well-utilised.

The fourth report **Showcasing the Best** highlights some specific programs conducted by libraries in the community-building area and demonstrates the contribution in 4 key areas.

1. Overcoming the digital divide

The capacity of communities to develop socially and economically is increasingly dependent upon the ability of their residents to access and use information and technology effectively.

The ‘digital divide’ is a growing concern for the community leaders who participated in the LBC project. It was commented that the ability to access and use information is not equally distributed. People and geographic areas already suffering social and economic disadvantage were said to be experiencing more restricted access to information and computer resources.

Public libraries were seen as having a crucial role in ensuring that people on low incomes and other disadvantaged groups are able access information and technology and develop the necessary skills to use these.

Libraries facilitate development of IT literacy amongst users in much the same way that they encourage literacy in the written word. For many people libraries provide access to a range of otherwise inaccessible technologies and help overcome fears of technology.

Internet access is recognised as crucial service offered by public libraries - providing a gateway to information for those without Internet access at home or work and providing access to information in multiple languages for non-English speaking users.

Libraries are effectively exploiting technology to benefit the community. The information revolution has provided libraries with a unique opportunity to harness new technologies to deliver services unimaginable a few years ago. The Internet is being used throughout Victorian libraries to brighten, widen and enhance the world of residents.

Examples of programs

Moonee Valley Library Service - Flemington Library – Promoting computer literacy

Flemington is a culturally diverse community with a high proportion of members from language backgrounds other than English, and varying degrees of language and literacy

proficiency. Many have limited economic resources and restricted access to information and communication technologies. They are generally unable to afford mainstream user pays services.

The Flemington Reading and Writing Program (FRWP), a not-for-profit community based provider of community education, and the Flemington Library are working in partnership to meet the further education and learning needs of the community. Community building and community education are mutual goals of both organisations

The program has developed from teaching literacy to also promoting computer literacy. Classes are conducted at the Flemington Neighbourhood House and the Flemington Library 5 days a week. Since 1993 FRWP has been conducting computer classes in a computer lab it established in the Library. Teachers are funded through the Flemington Reading and Writing Program.

These classes have been very successful with high retention rates of students who begin by learning English and then move through the computer classes to other programs where, for example, they may write their own stories on the Internet. Students are able to learn at their own pace. A high social value is placed on the classes and they are very popular with seniors wanting to pick up email and Internet skills.

The partnership between the Flemington Library and FRWP is mutually beneficial since the language and literacy classes encourage participants to access library resources. Similarly, library users are made aware of the availability of English, literacy and computer classes in the building. FRWP has provided training to library staff in Word and EXCEL software packages. The Library staff also has access to the computer lab and has conducted Internet classes for patrons of the Flemington Library.

This year a 'Learning Shopfront' will be set up next to the Flemington Library as a classroom for young people. This facility will be used by the FRWP as part of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) 'Learning on Track' program. Location next to the library will ensure VCAL students have easy access to library resources

The establishment of the Shopfront is being supported by a grant from the Victorian Government's Public Libraries Initiative Grants program which is designed to enhance the community role of libraries and the ways they work with other organisations in the community

The combined skills of the Flemington Library staff and FRWP staff, as well as the material resources of the respective organisations, provide a valuable service to the Flemington community and have the potential to build stronger community links through future collaborative projects with local education networks.

Community building principles		
Developing social networks	Encouraging active citizenship	

Promoting social inclusion	√	Developing community capacity	√
Working in strategic partnerships	√	Promoting health and well-being	
Nurturing community organisations	√	Supporting community revitalization	

Other examples include Introduction to the Internet sessions held on a weekly basis at Maribyrnong Library Service. These classes are held in English and community languages including Vietnamese, Chinese and Spanish on a regular basis. Maribyrnong will also be introducing classes in relevant African Languages to support the skill development of the newest CALD group in the area.

2. Creating informed communities

Many community leaders interviewed as part of the LBC project commented on the information overload that people are facing today, largely as a result of the advances being made in technology. They note that the growing volume of information is of no benefit unless it can be converted into knowledge.

Librarians are regarded as having an important role in helping people navigate this mass of information. A high level of confidence was expressed in librarians as ‘trusted’ information experts. Librarians are also seen as playing a key role in helping people develop their own skills in navigating and accessing information.

Libraries were seen as good information providers in the following areas:

Community information. Communities are bound together by information and, more importantly, by the sharing of information. Ultimately, people increase their sense of connectedness and belonging to the community through their sharing of local information (People Together Project, 2000).

Participants in the LBC felt that the public library is a good place to find out about what is going on in their local community. Both users and non-users regard the distribution of community information as a key service provided by libraries.

Government information. Community leaders saw public libraries as a key distribution point for information about government programs and services. Many in the CALD sector believe public libraries could take an enhanced role in providing a conduit to Government information and could specifically assist their communities to access government information on the Internet.

Providing a gateway to the world of information. In the networked information environment that exists today people have higher expectations about the range and type of information they will be able to access and when they will be able to access it. Public libraries in Victoria all have a web presence through which users are able to access the library catalogue and various electronic data bases.

Two examples to illustrate this area are the Hume Global Learning Village and the Kilmore Library – One stop shop.

Hume Global Learning Village Library Service – developing Hume as a learning community

Hume is a large, socially and culturally diverse and in places economically disadvantaged municipality in Melbourne's north. Hume Council has taken on board the premise that learning, education and information are core determinants of economic and social wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. It has adopted a 5 year Learning Together strategy in which Hume Libraries play a key role.

Until recently, Hume lacked a public library in the main population centre of Broadmeadows and Council recognised that a well-resourced library would be central to its strategy. Rather than aiming just to build a traditional public library, Hume Council developed the concept of the Global Learning Village. Funding was obtained through the State Government's Community Support Fund and also corporate sponsorship from large firms operating in the municipality. These included The Age, VisyCares and Ford.

Through the Village, Council has decided to take a leadership role in the education agenda in its municipality- something that has traditionally not been the case with Councils in Victoria.

The Village brings together a consortium of 200 formal and informal learning providers in the area. These include schools, neighbourhood houses, the local TAFE, universities, community groups such as the historical society and many others. Access is provided to social support and local training and employment programs.

A major focus of the Village is the new Hume Global Learning Centre opened by the Victorian Premier Steve Bracks, in March 2003. The Centre includes a large public library which attracts more than 1000 visitors per day and provides library materials in English and a range of community languages, a large IT access area, an historic record centre and reading and study areas. The Centre also includes:

- A computer and internet centre.
- State-of-the art multimedia equipment.
- An infotainment area and café.
- A training facility for further education and employment.
- A cultural exhibition centre.

Hume has five libraries plus a mobile service and staff at all of these are closely involved in implementing the Learning Together strategy. The staff conduct traditional library activities such as educating parents about the importance of reading to children and teaching library visitors how to navigate the Internet and are also working out in the community with schools and other educational providers developing ways for the libraries to assist in furthering the Learning Together strategy.

The Global Learning Village is a fine example of a successful partnership between State and Local Government, private industry, educational institutions and the community.

Community building principles			
Developing social networks		Encouraging active citizenship	
Promoting social inclusion	√	Developing community capacity	√
Working in strategic partnerships	√	Promoting health and well-being	
Nurturing community organisations	√	Supporting community revitalization	√

Mitchell Library Service – Kilmore Library - One-Stop-Info-Shop

As noted in the Age July 20, 2004, ‘Victoria’s oldest inland town, Kilmore was the first overnight stop on the Cobb and Co coach route to Sydney. Thousands of hopefuls passed through Kilmore on their way to the central goldfields – but there has always been, and still are good reasons to stop for a while.’ And one of these is the Kilmore Library – situated in the heart of the town.

Kilmore Library, serving a community of 4000 people, provides an inspiring example of how a public library can take the lead in fostering cooperation across local services drawn from Council, State Government, and the private and educational sectors.

When the library opened eight years ago it provided service twenty-three hours a week – today it is open seven days a week and its hours have increased to fifty-eight. The Toy library and TAFE were already negotiated partners. Since then the library has added new partnerships and is now acting as an agency for Vicroads, V line, DX Courier, U3A, It provides visitor information, is able to issue shooters and boat licenses and provides a venue for, among other events, funerals.

Among the most important links forged by the library are those with the education sector – including connections to the new secondary school opened in the area. TAFE classes and other educational services are available at the library.

Understanding customer needs is the core consideration driving service development at Kilmore library. Staff say they sympathise with customers frustration at being sent from office to office, phone extension to extension or building to building when they seek to make a transaction with government. This had led them to look more closely at what their different users require and to consider how local organisations can make their services accessible through the library. In summary they found that:

- Visitors want the person, a map and a story.
- Delivery people want directions.
- 16 year olds want to get a driving license.
- Shooters want to be able to get a shooting license.
- Older people in particular want to be able to buy their train ticket.
- Vicroads wants access to EFTPOS.

- VLine want to offer seat booking
- DX just need access

Talking about the philosophy behind the service, library manager Chris Payne makes the observation that ‘Joined up government is a buzz word today, but what does it mean? To me it means cooperation, resource sharing, going that extra mile to provide services that are desired and seem obvious to the customer to get from one place to another.’

The benefits of providing a one-stop-info-shop for services are many and include:

- Getting people back into the library – people who would not normally come in. They see the library is a pleasurable place to be.
- Bringing back civic pride.
- Consolidating the library’s position in the community. People would rally if anyone tried to cut funding to the library.

The Kilmore library has won a Local Government award for its approach to multiple service delivery.

Community building principles			
Developing social networks		Encouraging active citizenship	
Promoting social inclusion		Developing individual skills and confidence	
Working in strategic partnerships	√	Promoting health and well-being	
Nurturing community organisations	√	Supporting community revitalization	√

3. Providing convenient and comfortable places of learning. Facilitating lifelong learning

Developing foundation skills. Libraries provide a friendly environment in which residents can develop the 'foundation skills' necessary for participation in the economic, social and cultural life of their community. This includes supporting the development of basic reading, information and computer literacy and learning habits and skills.

Public libraries are seen as having an especially important role in encouraging reading and promoting literacy. The variety of books and other resources held by libraries allows community members to constantly discover new material and topics of interest.

Libraries also place a great deal of emphasis on outreach to parents with young children - encouraging them to read to their children from an early age and providing an environment in which they can enhance their social support networks. A large proportion of participants in the LBC project agree that the library stimulates children and young people to learn and helps them develop learning habits and literacy skills.

Stimulating ideas and discussion. Libraries are recognised as a very important source of stimulation. Participants in the LBC project pointed to the community seminars and talks hosted by libraries as a crucial way of introducing a range of new skills and concepts to participants. It was noted that community seminars play a part in encouraging ongoing adult learning.

Supporting vulnerable learners. Although many adults in the community are keen to undertake further learning, not all are comfortable with the idea of returning to an educational institution and the formality of the learning process associated with it. Too great an emphasis on formal accredited learning can deter 'vulnerable' learners.

Supporting students. Community leaders commented that students in the formal higher education system are one of the biggest groups using libraries. Students use public libraries to: access resources that may not be available in the libraries of educational institution, for the study environment they provide, and for the level of assistance they receive from library staff. It was observed that Government does not currently recognise this role of public libraries in the way it funds education.

Examples to illustrate this area are the Homework Programs at Yarra-Melbourne Regional Library Corporation and Literacy Classes CALD communities at the City of Greater Dandenong Libraries.

Yarra-Melbourne Regional Library Corporation - Homework Programs

Yarra Melbourne Regional Library runs a number of homework programs for young people at its libraries. These vary in approach, content and delivery according to community needs and established partnerships with key community providers.

The Youthlink Homework Program has been running at Carlton Library for four years in its current form. The aim of the program is to provide homework support for 12-18 year olds. The target group is disadvantaged young people from Carlton, including the South Carlton Housing Estates. Thirteen tutors participated in the program in 2003 covering maths, science, English, Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) as the main subject areas. There is a Project Coordinator who liaises with library staff to seek grant opportunities and to generally oversee the program. Demand for the service is high from VCE students including a group of students from Horn of Africa. On average eight students use computers per session and an average of six students request tutoring. The 2004 program will run in partnership with Carlton and Parkville Youth Services, which is expected to lead to increased sustainability for the project and growth for the future.

The Homework Group @ North Melbourne is aimed at students from a Somali background aged 8 to 18 years. Volunteer tutors can help with homework and school assignments. The program is run in conjunction with MacKillop Family Service, United Somali Women's Organisation of Victoria and Yarra-Melbourne Regional Library Corporation.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence Homework Centre is based in the Fitzroy Library and is open 4-6pm Monday to Thursday. It provides free academic and personal support to secondary school students with a particular focus on students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and those who lack space or resources at home. Students can receive assistance in all VCE subjects and work independently or in small groups. The Library offers a relaxed and supportive environment which is well resourced with computers, printers and photocopiers. The Fitzroy program differs from the other two in that the tutors are paid.

The success of the homework programs depends upon:

- Strong partnerships with relevant community providers in education.
- Sustainable funding.
- Effective project coordination.
- Library commitment to provide expertise, support and resources.

The library is seeking a more coordinated approach to homework programs within the region and will be setting up a forum of the groups who are currently running the programs to ensure that there is positive collaboration and to maximize funding opportunities.

Community building principles			
Developing social networks	√	Encouraging active citizenship	
Promoting social inclusion		Developing community capacity	√
Working in strategic partnerships	√	Promoting health and well-being	
Nurturing community organisations		Supporting community revitalization	

City of Greater Dandenong Libraries – Literacy classes for the CALD community

The City of Greater Dandenong is a diverse community with just over a half of its residents born overseas – coming from any of 140 countries. This is the highest proportion of overseas-born residents in a Victorian community, and the fourth highest in Australia. The city is now recognised as a premier destination for newly arrived migrants.

Almost half of the city’s overseas-born residents come from non-English speaking backgrounds and, according to the 2001 Census, a significant proportion have limited fluency in English. The English Language & Literacy Access (ELLA) program offered through the City of Greater Dandenong Libraries supports these residents through provision of English as a Second Language (ESL)/Literacy classes. These classes can be accessed at a level which suits each student, and have been designed to take into account working hours, childcare needs, transport and financial situation. In the last four years 5771 students have been assisted through the program.

ELLA has been running since 1992 and is staffed by trained (ESL) teachers. Students can use the Open Learning Centres at Springvale and Dandenong, and computer assisted English language learning programs, to help them improve their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Students are also offered Internet training. This enables them to research, use interactive English sites, read their own language newspapers, listen to the news in their own language, and e-mail. As a further assistance to its students, ELLA is now offering citizenship classes to teach students about their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

ELLA provides the first introduction to computers for the great majority of its clients and has increasingly become a referral centre for computer classes and life long learning. ELLA works closely with all local providers, community houses, AMES, TAFEs and private providers. Centrelink and job network providers send their clients to the libraries for assessment and classes.

As an adjunct to ELLA, the libraries also provide access to ‘WebZones’, which offer free access to Internet, e-mail and word processing services. Complementary training, on topics such as “Introduction to internet banking”, can also be provided by library staff.

The low level of computer ownership by households in Greater Dandenong (33%, compared to national average of 45%) make these services especially important to residents – and this is reflected in the increasing demand for the service - the computers are accessed by more than 4800 people each month. A Skillsnet grant to the libraries in 2003-2005 will enable them to extend access to computer classes.

Community building principles			
Developing social networks		Encouraging active citizenship	√
Promoting social inclusion	√	Developing community capacity	√
Working in strategic partnerships	√	Promoting health and well-being	
Nurturing community organisations		Supporting community revitalization	

4. Building social capital

The LBC data shows that public libraries play a crucial role 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. For many public libraries provide that first important link to government information and services. They are a welcoming environment that engenders confidence

Public libraries are fast becoming 'community hubs' - providing a place where people can meet, exchange ideas and information. Users told the LBC project that libraries provide an environment for interacting with other community members. When they are at the library, they said they often talk with library staff and people who would not normally be amongst their friends or acquaintances.

The library was seen as channeling lonely people away from services such as GPs and counselling towards libraries as a social outlet.

Libraries are a focal point for the CALD communities offering a safe place in which they can meet others interested in similar issues. This helps to build a feeling of community and a sense of respect for each other. Public libraries are seen as providing women from multicultural backgrounds with a place in which they feel comfortable to participate.

Creating pride of place. For many communities the public library is the holder of much of the knowledge about the local area and gives them a link to their past, present and future. New and renovated public libraries are being sensitively designed to reflect the needs of the 21st Century and beyond.

Libraries provide an important community and cultural resource and contribute to the idea that 'this community is a good place to be'. This helps attract new users and enhances the enjoyment of visiting the library.

Attracting users from all walks of life. Public libraries attract users from across the social strata, generations and various cultural groups. The perception that the middle classes are over represented among library users still persists amongst some sections of the population - but data from the LBC powerfully demonstrates that libraries can and do serve people in the community who are least able to afford private alternatives. People who are unemployed and those who are on low incomes are well-represented amongst library users.

Libraries often have collections that include a variety of material in languages other than English. Many strive to attract disenfranchised groups using displays, entertainment and exhibitions to encourage them to visit the library. The LBC data indicates that libraries in areas with a high proportion of people in the community who speak a language other than English at home have a higher proportion of users from these groups.

Reaching out to the community. Public libraries have gone to great lengths to ensure that people who are isolated and those living in remote areas have access to library materials. Participants in the LBC project regarded the mobile library service as an excellent resource for smaller and remote communities. Mobile libraries (and their drivers) were seen as playing a crucial role in rural life and have an essential role in facilitating social interaction between rural residents.

Services which deliver books and other resources to people who are housebound or living in residential care and other institutions were also seen as a critical service for a group of people in our community often overlooked by service providers.

Appreciation of cultural differences. Cultural events and displays at public libraries are an important means for encouraging greater tolerance and understanding of the diversity of people living in a community.

Building bridges to government. Libraries provide a bridge between the community and the different levels of government - acting as a conduit to local council services, offering a more friendly face of government and acting as a public statement of government commitment to the community.

For many users libraries are their first point of contact with Local Government. They are also a vital source of information about Commonwealth and State Government programs and services. Librarians are able to assist users to navigate online government information.

Encouraging collaboration across the community. Public libraries play a critical role in connecting local people, organisations and services and through this foster a sense of community belonging. Provision of free space in which local groups can run their meetings was regarded as very important especially by small community organisations.

Examples of Building Social Capital:

City of Boroondara Library Service - Home Library Service

Most library services in Victoria hold to the principle that people who are housebound or living in institutional settings such as nursing homes should be able to access the same services as those able to walk in the library door. Due to its aging population profile, Boroondara Library Service has a particularly well-developed home library service but most other public libraries provide a similar program.

Considerable resources have been invested in the Boroondara home library service, with each of its five library branches having qualified librarians responsible for coordination. Apart from book selection, the 'Home Library Staff' librarians are responsible for liaising with the recipients of the service, developing and managing reading profiles, organising delivery rosters and recruiting and training volunteers and supporting them in their work.

Library staff deliver books and other materials to institutions, and volunteers do deliveries to people in their homes. Every month services are provided to approximately

51 institutions and 252 individuals. Users can access a wide range of resources through the service - books, talking books, videos and magazines are probably the most popular

The service has approximately one hundred registered volunteers. Many of these started off as borrowers at the library and overtime have become increasingly involved in its activities. The training and induction they receive encourages them to spend time with recipients of the service discussing books and exchanging ideas. Important social connections and real friendships have built up through this service.

Volunteers with an intellectual disability provide delivery services for two of the Boroondara Libraries. The volunteers are drawn from the Naroo Learning Centre in Kew and Rochester Further Education Services in Balwyn. This program helps Home Library staff by providing extra deliverers and also gives the volunteers a meaningful task and a connection to the local community. The Rochester Further Education Service has used data on the home library routes and drop off points as a case study to teach their clients spreadsheet and other computer related skills.

Home library services are expensive and time-consuming to operate but they provide immeasurable benefit to the recipients.

Community building principles			
Developing social networks		Encouraging active citizenship	
Promoting social inclusion	√	Developing community capacity	√
Working in strategic partnerships	√	Promoting health and well-being	
Nurturing community organisations		Supporting community revitalization	

Maribyrnong Library Services - Maribyrnong Detention Centre, Library Outreach Service

The Maribyrnong Detention Centre currently managed by ‘Group 4’ is located in the northern part of the Maribyrnong municipality. There are approximately 80 persons, including children, detained at this Centre at any given time. Maribyrnong City Council is a strong supporter of the release of suitable asylum seekers into the community and has taken a strong advocacy role on this matter, including representation to the Commonwealth Government.

In February 2002 Council adopted an action plan in support of asylum seekers detailing a range of practical support to be provided to detainees and advocacy actions to be undertaken within the community. Practical support has been made available in the form of: provision of information and health services; access to recreational opportunities; participation in the detainee visitor program and access to local schools in the area. Information has been provided to the general community dispelling myths surrounding asylum seekers,

The Maribyrnong Library Service visits the detention centre on a monthly basis to provide reading materials in English and other relevant languages including Vietnamese, Farsi, Chinese, Greek, Serbian, Hungarian, Khmer, Macedonian, Indonesian, Punjabi,

Tamil, Sinhalese, and Swahili. As it is not possible to provide material in all these languages from the Maribyrnong Library Services, the public library network in Victoria is generously supporting the service by loaning relevant materials from their collections (to the tune of over 1000 items in 15 languages to date) to Maribyrnong Library Service.

Community building principles			
Developing social networks		Encouraging active citizenship	
Promoting social inclusion	√	Developing community capacity	
Working in strategic partnerships	√	Promoting health and well-being	
Nurturing community organisations		Supporting community revitalization	

Conclusion: Public libraries – an ideal vehicle for community building

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.

Community Leaders who participated in the LBC research noted that libraries have a unique blend of characteristics which strongly position them to expand their current role in community strengthening. These include the fact they are:

- **Accessible** – As mentioned at the beginning of the presentation there exists across Victoria an extensive network of public libraries
- **Responsive** – Public libraries are proactive in responding to the needs and priorities of their communities rather than offering a ‘one size fits all’ service.
- **Well known** - The LBC research indicates a high level of awareness in the community of public libraries and the services they provide
- **Well used** - Public library usage is widespread across metropolitan and regional Victoria. Around six in ten English-speaking Victorians over the age of 15 years are current public library users.
- **Well resourced** - Public libraries hold an enormous stock of resources which has been built up over time in response to community need.

Great potential exists within public libraries that can be harnessed for the benefit of the community. These include the significant learning and capacity development within the public library network which has occurred over the last fifty years or so and the network of well-located buildings and mobile services which provide a safe and non-threatening environment accessible outside normal office hours. More recently, libraries have developed strong resources in the information technology area and these are made available to the community, together with expert advice on how to use them, free or at nominal cost. There is potential for an expansion of the range of services which could be delivered from these existing facilities.

Public Libraries provide a ready-made base for community building by local and State governments and this should be fully utilised.

Requirements for an enhanced role:

To better realise the potential of public libraries, a number of things are needed:

- Additional financial resources.

Public libraries have taken on new roles over the years without a proper re-assessment of the appropriate resources, including skills needed to support these. It was widely thought by LBC participants that public library funding should be completely reviewed in the light of the information society and the demands this places on them.

- Upgraded technology.

This is necessary to ensure that libraries continue to be seen as offering contemporary facilities to meet the needs of learning communities and remaining relevant by doing so. The provision of more Internet terminals in libraries was a commonly cited requirement. It was also recognised that library staff must have the necessary skills in use of the new technology.

- Development of stronger partnerships.

Stronger partnerships between public libraries and their communities, government and business were seen as offering enormous opportunities and benefits. While there are some excellent examples of where this is already happening, there is potential for this to be extended and expanded. Partnerships provide a cost effective way for services to be delivered and avoid duplication of facilities and services.

- Workforce development.

Library staff - their skills, knowledge and commitment to a high quality of customer service - are widely regarded as a major asset of the public library network. However the changing role of the public library places significant demands on staff and there is a requirement for additional training in a number of areas. Enhanced staff training can not be seen as an optional extra but is a necessity - without 'genuine understanding and commitment from staff key programs won't be delivered and new program funding will be threatened.'

- Development of library infrastructure

Many who took part in the LBC project commented that the quality of library buildings throughout the State is extremely variable. This was seen as including numerous buildings dating from the 1960s and 70s that need replacement or major extension, particularly to meet the demands for more space resulting from adoption of new technology. It was recognised that the State Government 'Living Libraries' program has done much to improve facilities – but it was emphasised that much remains to be done. Without these improvements there are limits to the extent to which libraries can respond to the needs of their communities. For example, lack of space has an impact on the ability

to offer computer access – and is contributing to long waiting times for these services in some libraries.

- Promoting a new image for public libraries.

The LBC research indicates that the image of the public library has not kept pace with the changing times and the way libraries are now working with the community. For some non-users their image of the library is caught in the past and does not extend much beyond an awareness of book lending services. Promotion is a vital ingredient to achieving better utilisation of library resources.

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

But wait there's more!

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 well received at the highest levels of State Government, including to the Secretary of the Department for Victorian Communities which has primary responsibility for State Government funding to libraries. The reports have been spoken about within Victoria, nationally and internationally.

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. There is a growing awareness of both the strength of the public library network and its potential to advance the State Government's community building agenda.

Having invested so much in the research and begun the communication process it is important to build on the findings and recommendations of the LBC reports. The Library Board of Victoria has approved funding for the period 2005-2008 to this end with three key strategies proposed:

1. Further Research

The on-line social capital survey was the key component of the LBC research providing data about library users covering a wide range of variables including gender, age, language spoken at home, household type, occupation and income group. Never before had Victorian Public Libraries collected such detailed demographic data about their users and with such consistency across all services. The data was collected in such a way that it could be compared to ABS data for the communities served by each library. Public libraries now have a more detailed snapshot than ever before of who is and isn't using

their services and how well this reflects the community. They also had data that was reflective of the public library network as a whole.

In the first year of this next phase the State Library of Victoria and the public library network will work in partnership with the Department for Victorian Communities to refine and further develop the social capital online survey into an instrument that can be rolled-out annually with a view to creating new and more relevant performance indicators for today's public libraries.

Further in-depth research will be conducted with individuals and community groups who are not currently using public libraries and in particular the marginalized in our communities. The findings will be used to create guidelines for increasing their engagement. The gathering of best practice case studies will be continued in relation to public library community building programs and initiatives.

2. Demonstration projects.

Seed funding will be provided for a range of partnership initiatives or in individual library services will be provided for each of the three years of this next phase. These will be significant and innovative partnership projects between public libraries and other government departments and/or community agencies that support the community building role of public libraries in the key areas of developing social capital, building skills capacity and wellbeing, reaching out to communities and providing a gateway to information.

3. Communication

The LBC research was intended to be an essential resource for all those who advocate to decision makers for the support of better public library services. With the publication of the reports a window of opportunity exists in which to increase advocacy activity. Funding will be provided to communicate the findings of the research widely and to develop initiatives and submissions that tap into community strengthening funding programs at all levels of government.

The Libraries Building Communities project is evolving and its impact will be felt on Victorian public library service delivery for many years to come.

Bibliography

Most of the information in this paper is derived from the *Libraries Building Communities* reports written by Carol Oxley of I & J Management Services and published by the State Library of Victoria for the Library Board of Victoria. The reports are available for purchase in hardcopy or can be downloaded free of charge via the State Library of Victoria website – www.slv.vic.gov.au

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Further references can be found in the reports themselves.