LIBRARIES/BUILDING/COMMUNITIES

Report One: Setting the Scene

State Library
of Victoria

Library Board
of Victoria

VICLINK

Libraries Building Communities is the first comprehensive Australian study of the value public libraries add to their communities. It includes all 44 public library services in Victoria and draws on the views and ideas of nearly 10,000 people.

The research aims to increase community awareness of the range of public library services and show government how public libraries can help achieve governmental policy goals. For library staff it:
• presents clear new data on the contribution libraries make to their communities;
• provides case studies that show how Victorian public libraries lead in innovation;
• identifies groups that are not currently well served by their libraries, and offers solutions;
• builds awareness of the critical social capital and community building role of public libraries.

Findings are presented in four reports with an *Executive Summary*:
• Report One: *Setting the Scene* covers the concept of community building, the Victorian Government's policy agenda, the Victorian public library network, project methodology, and relevant research.
• Report Two: *Logging the Benefits* outlines community views on the role and benefits of public libraries.
• Report Three: *Bridging the Gaps* provides socio-demographic profiles of library users and non-users and strategies for bridging the perceived gaps in public library service delivery.
• Report Four: *Showcasing the Best* gives over thirty examples of innovation and excellence in Victorian public libraries.

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1 Introduction

Public libraries hold an important place in people's hearts. Unlike many of the other services that are provided by councils, they are used out of choice rather than necessity. People come to them for information, recreation and advice, rather than to settle disputes or to resolve problems.

AUDIT COMMISSION, UK, 2002

1.1 Celebrating public libraries

Our public libraries offer us much to celebrate. Since the 1950s an extensive network of libraries has grown up across Victoria offering free access to an enormous range of information resources and services. There are now 238 branch libraries throughout the State, as well as 31 mobile library services which stop at almost 600 sites, mostly in rural and regional areas. Every municipality offers a public library service. As noted by the Australian Library and Information Association, public libraries represent a huge asset handed down by previous generations '… conveying the knowledge of the past and the promise of the future' (quoted in Bundy, 2003). They embody a significant investment in people and community by government.

Far from being quiet places with not much happening, contemporary library services in Victoria are busy, vibrant and responsive services (Manolis, 2003). Every second person in Victoria is a member of a local public library. In the last year 46.9 million items were borrowed from Victorian public libraries, 2.7 million reference enquiries were answered and home library services visited 14,500 housebound individuals. Free access to the Internet is available for all Victorians through their public libraries.

Going to the library to borrow books and find information has been a part of our way of life for many generations (DCMS, 2004). Traditions established in the 1950s continue today – the local library being a place that families visit together. Libraries are somewhere that people can find companionship. In many respects the importance of public libraries to the community is even greater now than in the past. Matarasso (1998) notes that in the United Kingdom

it is one of the most important aspects of libraries that they do not, cannot reject anyone. In a society which has become increasingly selective, and where public facilities are no longer automatically accessible, this is of truly vital importance …

This observation is equally true for Australia.

One of the most impressive things about public libraries is the positive way they have responded to changes in their environment. As the information revolution has swept across the world, public libraries have taken the opportunity to harness new technologies to provide services to their customers that were unimaginable a few years ago.

> *The Internet as a communications medium and World*
> *Wide Web technology ... are having a dramatic impact*
> *on how libraries deliver information and interact with*
> *their communities. In many regions, cities, and towns,*
> *it is the public library that stands as the community's*
> *information nexus.*
> *(The Council on Library and Information Resources,*
> *http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/case/analysis.html)*

And it is not only in the area of new technology that we are seeing changes in libraries. Many libraries are responding to the needs of their communities by providing a range of innovative services: helping people become ready for the workforce, connecting people with local government services, promoting and developing local cultural and art work and playing a part in economic regeneration by supporting the access of local business to knowledge, resources and training opportunities.

While it may seem incontrovertible that libraries occupy a critical place in the public domain, much of the evidence is anecdotal and taken for granted. Little has been done to identify and document through systematic research and evaluation the role of libraries and their value to the community. The more traditional measures of the library and its performance (e.g. circulation and acquisition statistics) tend to dominate public thinking, with libraries, as with other institutions, being 'identified in terms of their core business, and evaluated through performance measurement, usually in terms of economic benefits' (UTS and SLNSW, 2000: 7).

These measures, however, do not account for the range of functions libraries perform, which extend well past the provision of books and information. It is not surprising then that the role of public libraries is still generally not well understood by their major stakeholders – the public, policy makers, government and business.

The continuing lack of visibility and appreciation of the functions performed by public libraries makes them vulnerable. If funding bodies are unsure of the returns on their investments, they are less likely to support expansion in service delivery, and may even treat libraries as soft targets and cut funds (McCallum and Quinn, 2001). It also means that public libraries remain an underexploited vehicle for improving the wellbeing and developing the capacities of their communities and the individuals in them.

> *Despite the great – largely unsung – work of public*
> *libraries across Australia, few national, state and local*
> *government decision makers recognise that in the age of*
> *information lifelong learning and social capital deficit,*
> *investment in public libraries and public librarians is*
> *fundamental, not a soft option to be put lightly aside*
> *when other fiscal needs loom.*
> *(Bundy, 2003)*

Bundy (2003) and others urge public libraries and their supporters to take up the challenge of demonstrating how library services and activities contribute to the achievement of community and government goals.

> *The major challenge for public libraries and advocates of*
> *better libraries for all ... is just how to convey to decision*
> *makers the breadth, depth and potential impact on the*
> *whole community of the modern public library. It is a*
> *rare challenge because no other agency in society has*
> *the breadth of role, the user range and diversity and the*
> *potential impact.*

1.2 Libraries Building Communities

This challenge has been taken up by public libraries in Victoria, in conjunction with the State Library, through an ambitious study – the Libraries Building Communities (LBC) project. This is a comprehensive study that seeks to identify the contributions that public libraries in Victoria make to their communities through a process of rigorous, inclusive research that informs, challenges and influences the popular perception of the public library.

Specifically, the study:

• identifies and documents how public libraries in Victoria build their communities, what the potential barriers to this process might be, and how we can overcome these;

• provides a profile of current users, what services they use and their satisfaction with them;

• incorporates an analysis of groups that are not well served through current models of public library service delivery, and explores barriers to use;

• presents the views of community leaders concerning the contribution of libraries to their communities and the future role of public libraries in Victoria;

• provides case studies that illustrate the innovative ways public libraries can meet community needs.

The significance and breadth of the LBC project is underlined by the fact that over the course of the project the views and ideas of about 10,000 people were collected using a variety of methods. These included focus groups, an online survey, a telephone survey and face-to-face interviews. This research embraced all 44 public library services in Victoria. An independent research company gathered the data. The methodology is described in more detail in Section 5.3.

As well as an *Executive Summary*, four reports have been produced from the LBC project:

• Report One: *Setting the Scene*
• Report Two: *Logging the Benefits*
• Report Three: *Bridging the Gaps*
• Report Four: *Showcasing the Best*.

These will be distributed to a wide audience, including politicians, senior policy makers, the media, people involved in community building and staff across the public library network. The reports aim to provide:

• government, at the local, state and federal levels, with an enhanced understanding of how public libraries assist them to address key policy issues and achieve their strategic goals (e.g. in the areas of lifelong learning and learning communities);

• library management and staff with:
  – improved access to key performance information that will assist in the development of services, by providing tangible evidence of what works, what doesn't, and where the strengths and gaps are
  – the basis for a statewide approach to the development of particular strategies for social engagement, which will assist in creating greater awareness of the likely impacts of socio-demographic and economic trends on public libraries
  – greater awareness of the role that libraries play in developing social capital and community building, which will help support the development of future improvements through identification of strengths and weaknesses in current practice

• the broader community with increased understanding of the current and potential role of public libraries in community building and improved information on the availability of Victorian public library services for particular groups such as ethnic minorities and people in regional and remote communities.

The Libraries Building Communities project is a first step in documenting the contribution of public libraries to their communities. It is intended that in years to come libraries will build on this work to provide data about their actual contribution to sustaining social capital – and that this will be used when advocating their services to federal, state and local authorities. To support this work, public libraries are developing an online survey that can be used by libraries to collect information from their users on a regular basis. This will facilitate the collection of consistent and comparable data across the 44 library services in Victoria.

1.3   Report One: Setting the Scene

This is the first in the series of four reports from the Libraries Building Communities project. Its main aim is to provide the background to the LBC project and 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 government. A short, but focused, review is provided of the growing body of national and international studies that have measured the value of public libraries to their communities. These studies have helped shape the LBC project.

The report:

• introduces the key concepts around community building and social capital;

• describes the ways in which public libraries contribute to community building;

• provides a review of similar studies that have measured the value of libraries;

• outlines the structure, funding and governance of public libraries in Victoria and the policy context within which libraries in Victoria operate;

• provides the background to the LBC project:
  – why the project was undertaken
  – its objectives
  – the methodology used to conduct the project

• describes the reports published from the project.

Many of the ideas presented in the report have evolved out of consultation and discussion with State Library and public library staff across Victoria. These staff were instrumental in the scoping of the project and identifying the key issues that the report needed to address. They have also contributed to discussion through focus groups and involvement in the project advisory group.

2 Building communities

Communities are built by turning to what formed the community in the first place; building relationships between people with respect for culture.

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Community building is essentially about strengthening communities so that the individuals and organisations in them are able to cooperate with each other to develop a healthy community environment and respond confidently to change and embrace opportunities as they arise. As Considine* (2004) notes, what is exciting about the community building process is that it offers a breakthrough in harnessing the potential already available in many localities. Rather than emphasising the deficits and problems within communities and seeing solutions in terms of needs-based services, this approach focuses on building communities by drawing on the many strengths and assets that exist within them.

While the ideas and practice of community building have been around for many decades, the past ten years have seen the concept emerge as a key policy theme for western governments as they seek ways to address the increasingly complex issues facing contemporary society.

Governments world-wide have had to respond to people's disgruntled response to the loss of local services, sense of disconnectedness, loss of jobs and opportunities and the geographic clustering of disadvantage. The gap between the rhetoric and the reality and the downward spiral of whole suburbs, towns and regions has caused an unsettling political backlash. (Raysmith, 2001)

Approaches to community building vary but they generally encompass:

- the fundamental goals of promoting economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing;

- a set of principles around citizen engagement, local democracy and social justice;

- emphasis on a 'bottom-up' approach (i.e. driven by the vision of local residents rather than imposed by government);

- a concern with building stronger linkages across the myriad of institutions and groups in the community;

- a focus on the need for change in the way government (at all levels) delivers services to the community to ensure that this is more responsive to local needs and concerns.

These approaches also generally recognise that the basis for building strong communities is building relationships and people skills at the local level.

Community building ... strengthens the social environment and develops structures and provides opportunities for participation, self determination, collaboration and individual skill development. (Beilharz, 2003)

As noted by the Hon. Candy Broad MLC, Victorian Minister for Local Government, such activities and their resultant networks are increasingly being recognised and valued in our society; both as ends in themselves and also because they contribute directly and indirectly to other desirable objectives. There is a growing and compelling body of evidence to suggest that active, dynamic communities that are inclusive and supportive achieve better outcomes in health, education and economic development, among other things. Communities with high levels of social capital also have a greater capacity to handle conflict, make decisions, anticipate change, attract resources and represent their interests in the larger economic and political arena (Honadle, 1986).

Communities with less social capital have lower educational performance and more teen pregnancy, child suicide, low birth weight, and prenatal mortality. Social capital is also a strong predicator of crime rates and other measures of neighborhood quality of life, as it is of our health. (Bundy, 2003)

In his study of the factors that make cities and towns flourish, Richard Florida (2002) has established that having a 'solid people climate' is crucial. Cities that are thriving tend to:

- offer excellent lifestyle amenities;

- be welcoming of new people to their community;

- be inclusive of all people in the community;

- provide an environment in which people's talents can thrive.

Similarly, Putnam (2000) finds strong evidence that successful economic development depends upon our social wellbeing and not the other way around. An increase in social capital increases the community's productive potential and improves the chance that a community will be wealthier and healthier in the long term.

2.1 The ideas behind community building

The ideas behind community building are certainly not new. However, the terms used to describe it have varied according to the prevailing fashion. At present the terms 'social capital', 'social inclusion' and 'capacity building' have considerable currency. These concepts underlie the work of the Libraries Building Communities project. The following short definitions will help to guide the reader.

Social capital: the glue that holds a community together

Broadly speaking, social capital refers to the networks and links within a community. It encompasses the level of cooperation, trust, mutual support and participation of residents in community activities that strengthen their sense of social belonging and community wellbeing. Social capital consists of relationships between residents, organisations, businesses and government.

Examples of social capital in action include neighbours swapping fruit and vegetables with one another or a local council offering a reconciliation ceremony as a demonstration of tolerance of diversity.

Three kinds of social capital exist in communities (Cavaye, 2004):

- 'Bonding social capital', which refers to the ties between people and organisations that are alike, such as families and ethnic groups.

- 'Bridging social capital', which refers to ties across groups who are not alike. It seeks to forge greater understanding of the needs and perspectives of others and is thus more outward-looking. As Putnam argues, development of social capital requires that we transcend our social, political and professional identities to connect with people unlike ourselves (Putnam, 2000).

- 'Linking social capital', which promotes involvement and inclusion across social strata and focuses on inclusion of people who in the past have been physically or socially excluded from the day-to-day decision making within the community. This is one of the most challenging tasks facing community building.

Social capital is important because it creates a sense of identity and common purpose within the community and enables residents to act collectively. It provides a channel for exchanging knowledge and information.

Social capital provides a mechanism for strengthening communities. In Australia, as in other nations, social capital is being looked to as a means of stemming the tide of perceived community decline. It promises hope for social and economic regeneration – both said to come from those interactions among neighbours, citizens and governments that are characterised by strong norms of trust, tolerance and mutuality.

Cavaye (2004) notes that the concept of social capital

… remains hard for policy analysts to grasp; government and the private sector often struggle to see it as core business; measuring social capital requires sophistication and flexibility; and a service culture in many agencies struggles to incorporate it.

He argues that much of this is due to the very nature of social capital. It is necessarily intangible, often has indirect benefits and outcomes, rarely involves a clear cause and effect, and does not suit traditional performance indicators and measures of inputs and outputs.

Capacity building

Capacity building refers to developing the skills, competencies, tools and resources that are needed to strengthen a neighbourhood or community's processes and systems so that individuals, families and local groups may take control of their own lives. It encompasses both the concept of social capital and human capital, which refers to the knowledge, skills and talents brought to any activity by people in the community. Capacity can include developing people's ability to make active use of leisure time (e.g. reading, thinking and debating) by engaging people's interest and involvement in the arts.

Social engagement

Social engagement recognises the legitimate interest of communities and residents, as users of services, in decisions that affect them. It involves open dialogue with communities, providing information, drawing on community knowledge and promoting the active participation of communities in the decision-making process (People Together Project, 2000). As a critical 'new frontier' in government thinking, social engagement has led to a search for new and better mechanisms for

engaging communities. In the United Kingdom, best practice examples of consultation and engagement mechanisms are now available through key government sites. For example, the Borough of Burnley has produced a *Public Involvement and Consultation Kit,* which provides advice for effective public consultation and involvement and introduces a range of tools that can be used for this purpose.

Social inclusion/exclusion

The concept of social inclusion involves the quality of full membership and active participation of all people in a just, democratic and mutually supportive community. It ensures that all members of the community have the opportunity to participate in core institutions and experience a sense of belonging and ability to contribute to community enterprise (People Together Project, 2000).

The Community Services Group in its report *Social Inclusion and Libraries: A Resource Guide* (http://www.la-hq.org.uk/groups/csg/si/si.html) makes a distinction between the terms 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion'. It argues that social inclusion is a broader term that looks not only at the needs of socially excluded people but also at the needs of those who are already included in society.

> *Social exclusion focuses on the needs of groups and individuals who are excluded from services (such as those offered by libraries, museums and archive*s).

Certainly, one of the biggest challenges for community building is to ensure that those who are often excluded from mainstream society are able to participate in its activities. In libraries this translates into being 'open to all and benefiting most those least able to afford private provision'.

The issues around public libraries and social inclusion and exclusion are complex and are taken up in detail in Report Three from the LBC project, *Bridging the Gaps*.

Lifelong learning

Related to the idea of capacity building is the concept of 'lifelong learning'. This has been defined as 'all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective'. The emphasis is on independent study determined by personal needs, and moving away from learning as preparation for life and work to learning as an integral part of life and work (The EUROPA Communication: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lll/life/what_islll_en.html).

As the EUROPA Communication notes, lifelong learning is about:

- Acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications, from the pre-school years to post-retirement. It promotes the development of knowledge and competences that will enable each citizen to adapt to the knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, taking more control of his or her future.

- Valuing all forms of learning, including: formal learning, such as a degree course taken at university; non-formal learning, such as vocational skills acquired at the workplace; and informal learning, such as inter-generational learning. An example of the latter is where parents learn to use information and communication technologies (ICT) through their children, or where someone learns how to play an instrument with friends.

A recent statement on lifelong learning from Hume City Council (http://www.hume.vic.gov.au/content/news) captures these principles:

> *Everyone in Hume will be a lifelong learner. People will seek out information and learning opportunities. Our community will adapt to changing circumstances through being open to and able to access a wide range of learning opportunities. Learning will be enriching and enjoyable. Through learning, Hume City will lead the way in achieving social justice and all Hume residents will benefit from equality of opportunities. We will encourage early intervention to ensure high levels of literacy, numeracy and social connectedness.*

Joined-up government

'Joined-up government' is the term used to describe collaborative working across organisational boundaries to deliver shared services and tackle shared issues. It involves formal structures and procedures to ensure the coordination of activities – both within and between different levels of government. As described by the Office of Government Commerce in the United Kingdom, the notion of 'joined-up government' implies new points of connection between the many different elements of government: from policy making through operations to service provision (http://www.ogc.gov.uk).

Joined-up government has been used by the Victorian Government to describe efforts to put in place systems and processes that make the delivery of services more seamless (Digby, 2003). Currently many of the services people receive from councils and state and Commonwealth government departments and agencies are fragmented. An important aim of joined–up government is to integrate these government services, with the primary focus being on the needs of the recipient – be that an individual, an agency or a community.

'Joining-up' is also about providing individuals and communities with the opportunity to be more involved in setting priorities about what governments fund and how services are delivered.

A potential benefit to citizens, businesses and community organisations of the move towards joined–up government is a reduced need to understand the way in which government is structured in order to secure the services they require.

2.2   Community building in Victoria

The Victorian Government has identified the need to develop and nurture more integrated, inclusive and resilient communities as one of its key strategic directions. The *Growing Victoria Together* framework (2003) 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' (http://www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au).

The Hon. John Thwaites MP, Minister for Victorian Communities, comments:

> *Community building … is about harnessing the energy of communities so that they can shape their own futures … It is about finding new ways to tackle disadvantage and create opportunities, delivering tangible benefits such as jobs, educational options, safer places to live and work, better services and a healthy, sustainable environment. (http://www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au)*

In recent years there has been an explosion of community building activity across all parts of Victoria. The State Government has sought to strengthen communities by developing a range of initiatives and

projects that build local skills and knowledge, and increase opportunities for positive social interaction within communities.

The community building activities include:

- The Community Building Demonstration Projects, which comprise ten locality-based projects and one with the Indigenous community, funded for a three-year period. Each project focuses on one or more specific neighbourhoods or towns where social, economic or geographic disadvantages are of concern. The initiative involves partnerships between state government, local government and an extensive representation of organisations, businesses and groups in the community.

- The Community Capacity Building Initiative, which is a pilot project designed to explore how government can work with small rural communities to help them achieve sustainable social, economic and environmental development by strengthening their human, organisational and community capacity.

- The Neighbourhood Renewal strategy, which focuses on improving public housing estates and aims to tackle disadvantage in these areas and create stronger communities.

- The Local Learning and Employment Networks, which brings together education providers, industry, community organisations, individuals and government organisations to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people in communities across Victoria.

Funds from the Community Support Fund (CSF) are used to support community strengthening projects and provide investment in improved infrastructure in local communities. Living Libraries, the Public Library Infrastructure Program, which provides resources to local councils to develop and enhance existing library buildings, has been funded as part of the CSF program.

Other state programs, such as Learning Towns, play an important role in community strengthening. Learning Towns does this by fostering and supporting lifelong learning and contributing to the development of a learning culture by establishing collaborative learning partnerships.

Many of the State Government's community building initiatives involve pilot projects that are time limited. The Community Capacity Building Initiative was wound up in the middle of 2004 and the Community Building Demonstration Projects will be completed by the middle of 2005. A key issue is how the momentum and benefits from these projects can be sustained in the long term, and how the lessons learned from them can be applied to strengthening other communities. Consideration will need to be given to the types of practical support that can be provided to facilitate community building in the future. The potential role of existing community organisations and local infrastructure (e.g. schools, libraries and community halls) will be a crucial one.

Local councils across Victoria provide many of the services that are the foundations for community wellbeing; through the planning and regulatory roles of councils, they help shape the localities in which we live. Over the last few years many councils have taken steps to improve citizen participation in their decision making and to provide greater integration of the services they offer (e.g. through the development of community hubs). Some are working in broader partnership with communities and business to strategically progress the development of their regions (e.g. G21 in the Geelong area). And others such as Hume City Council are taking a much more active role on particular issues such as promoting lifelong learning.

However, the role of local governments in formal community building activities across Victoria is varied and, as Salvaris (2004) notes, has grown only gradually. In reviewing the kinds of experiences Victorian

municipalities have had with their own community building projects, Considine** (2004) makes the observation that most local councils have a genuine interest in and commitment to the principles of community strengthening. He also notes that councils are less likely to initiate projects based on their own analysis of situations and data than to do so in response to local pressure or external funding opportunities.

In looking to the future, many see local government as the best-placed agency to carry out community building strategies.

> Local Government is increasingly being viewed by many sections of the community as pivotal to clarifying and driving the community strengthening agenda. Local Government's focus on locality, its closeness to citizens and its interactions with many different levels of government, community and private sector interests, place it in a unique position to inform the direction of future policy. (Broad, 2004)

Salvaris (2004) argues that the recently passed *Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act 2003* is an ideal opportunity to begin the process of transforming local government into the prime carrier for community building. 'It contains most of the required ingredients: integrated community planning, citizen engagement, clear measures of wellbeing etc.'

While the Commonwealth Government is not as large a player in community building in Victoria as are the State Government and local councils, it has sponsored several innovative community building programs in rural and remote areas (Johnson, Headey and Jensen, 2003). This includes the Rural Communities Program, which seeks to encourage diverse, dynamic and self-reliant rural communities, and profitable and sustainable rural industries. Fifty-eight projects have been funded in Victoria through this scheme. Johnson et al. note that

one aspect of community building, much emphasised by the Commonwealth, has been the development of local leadership both to launch initiatives and for conflict resolution. 'This has been particularly important in local areas where the exit of banks, a range of health services and, more generally, educated people has meant the loss of sources of "natural" leadership.' The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which is about empowering communities to develop local solutions to local problems, has, among other things, funded 97 Community Building Programs and 188 Mentoring and Leadership Programs across Australia since its inception in April 2000.

3 How public libraries build their communities

Libraries have the ability to create social capital for their communities. The main way they achieve this is by providing public space where citizens can gather and work on personal and community problems. Libraries provide a wide range of innovative, creative programs that bring citizens together and break down the barriers of age, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, language and geography.

KRANICH, 2001

The functions and activities performed by public libraries extend well beyond the provision of books and information to playing a key role in the building of strong and vibrant communities. As described below, public libraries help build their communities in many ways – through the development of social contacts, links and networks; through building individual and community skills; and through encouraging lifelong learning and promoting wellbeing and outreach to more marginalised groups and individuals.

3.1 Providing access to information

A thriving culture, economy and democracy requires the free flow of information and ideas. Fundamental to that free flow of information and ideas are Australia's library and information services. (Bundy, 2003)

The ability to access and use the mass of information available to us through various media such as the Internet is a critical element of participation in the social, civic and economic life of the community.

Communities are bound together by information and, more importantly, by the sharing of information. The People Together Project (2000) observes that it is through the sharing of information that people are able to learn about the issues of relevance to them and the wider community and to take action around particular issues of concern. Ultimately, people increase their sense of connectedness and belonging to the community through their sharing of local information.

The capacity of communities to develop economically is also increasingly dependent upon the ability of their residents to use information and technology effectively. The new information economy is underpinned by information and knowledge, creativity and ingenuity, and has revolutionised the jobs we do – the majority

of which have been transformed from physically based to 'knowledge-based' (Carter, 2002). Houghton and Sheehan (2000) comment that as access to information becomes easier and less expensive, the skills and competencies relating to the selection and efficient use of information have become more important than ever.

In this context, there is a growing concern among social commentators that the ability to access and use information and knowledge is not equally distributed. People and geographic areas already suffering social and economic disadvantage often find they also have more restricted access to information resources. Fitzgerald and Savage (2004) note that in regional and remote areas poor telecommunications infrastructure combined with the high cost of connecting to existing networks has created inequitable access to information resources of all types and, in particular, the Internet, compared with services available to users in urban areas.

Public libraries take on a broad range of roles in supporting access to information and developing people's skills in the use and management of information and ICT. Libraries:

- enhance public access to the world's storehouse of knowledge and information through a strong information technology infrastructure (i.e. Internet services, databases and other key electronic information);

- act as the focal point for the community by providing information about the community and community activities;

- maintain local history and culture;

- signpost information from other organisations and agencies;

- provide information about local, state and Commonwealth government services and access to key government legislation;

- provide staff expertise to mediate between the user and the information;

- develop people's skills and capacity in the use of information and technology;

- promote greater equality of access to and capability in using information.

Fitzgerald and Savage (2004) note that in the last four or five years governments have increasingly turned to the public library network as a means of improving the general availability of ICT opportunities. They observe that public libraries are seen as one of the keys to the successful implementation of government policy in this area largely because they provide the opportunity and place to connect communities. Two projects – the State Government funded Libraries Online (LOL) project and the Commonwealth funded Rural Libraries Online (RLOL) project – have enabled Victorian libraries to offer Internet access and develop their network infrastructure.

> The key themes running through both the LOL and RLOL projects highlight the value that libraries provide for public access to online information and services because of the extensive physical network they offer. This physical network has skilled staff, access to a wide range of information resources and service philosophies that resonate with the rhetoric of the 'information society' policy agenda.

Public libraries, which are built on the assumption that access to information should be free and open to all, are seen as an essential institution in a democratic society. By providing unbiased access to information, they promote understanding of citizenship and democratic principles and encourage people to participate more fully and effectively in their democracy. Public libraries promote the democratic process through a variety of means – publicising details of meetings, making meeting space available, providing copies of, and information and guidance on, legislation (Rowlatt, http://pandora.lib.hel.fi/mcl/articles/slocro/rowlatt.htm).

3.2 Building relationships and connections

Writers such as Putnam (2000) have commented on the decline in social capital in the period since the 1970s. They see a 'pulling apart' of communities and an increase in social fragmentation within contemporary society, with many of the social activities that were once undertaken with others now being undertaken alone, if at all. Putnam demonstrates that on a range of indicators of civic engagement, including voting, political participation, newspaper readership and participation in local associations, there are serious grounds for concern. 'It appears that America's social capital is in decline.' The term 'bowling alone' has been coined by Putnam to describe this decline in social capital (http://www.infed.org/biblio/social_capital.htm).

In response to the perceived community decline that 'bowling alone' is understood to reflect, governments around the world are recognising that to maintain and build strong, resilient and prosperous communities, they must look to different models that emphasise collective benefits over individual gain.

Public libraries are already doing this in a great many ways including:

• providing a place for people to meet that has been likened to the 'village green' – and is inclusive and welcoming to everyone;

• encouraging greater tolerance and understanding of diversity as people share space with groups they would not usually encounter, and recognise commonalities and difference;

• developing a capacity for celebrating togetherness through exhibitions and displays that profile local talent;

• bridging the generation gap – libraries are one of the few places where all four generations cross paths;

• acting as a community connector and focal point (Bundy, 2003) – bringing together individuals, organisations, business and government and its constituent services;

• helping newcomers to the town to find a way into the community;

• nurturing new community groups (e.g. local history group).

In a telling example, libraries played an important role in providing comfort, companionship, news and resources to citizens, following the events of September 11 [terrorist attack on New York in 2001].

Libraries remained open to provide shelter for residents needing help. The libraries set up Internet and phone banks to allow residents to view news updates and connect with family and friends. Library websites linked citizens to disaster and recovery information, charitable organisations and helpful resources. (Kranich, 2001)

Communities often take great pride in their library – seeing it as a reflection of what they have been able to achieve and the value they place on learning. This contributes to the perception of place and local service, and can be particularly important in areas where libraries are the only accessible public building or where they provide the only safe, neutral space for people to meet. Equally, new construction or improvements to a library can play a major part in the physical improvement of the community, with the private sector seeking libraries as 'development anchors' that can spur public investment in urban regeneration.

A Safe Place To Go (2000), a study by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and the State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW), found that the library was not only accessed for its resources but for the opportunity to socialise. The library provided teenagers with a chance to socialise without the supervision of parents. Parents generally regard libraries as safe places and were more than happy to allow their children to frequently spend time at the library. Young girls in particular found the library a safe place to meet friends of both sexes. This increases their social networks and gives them the opportunity to broaden their contacts. Older users were also found to frequently use the library for social purposes. Staff reported forming relationships with older, frequent users of the library, often asking about their health and wellbeing and noticing when they did not come in at their usual time. Almost all libraries in the study reported that older users stated to staff that they had come just for a chat.

Public libraries play an important role in promoting social inclusion – giving isolated people greater connection to their community. They attract and involve a cross-section of people who would normally shun more traditional services. In Victoria visits by the mobile library service are often used to bring people together for a community meeting.

> *Over 50% of Victorians choose to use libraries, more than any other services except roads and rubbish. Importantly, using a library generally means face-to-face contact with staff – this does not normally happen with roads and rubbish. It is fair to say that people interact more with local government through public libraries than through any other service. (Digby, 2003)*

The UTS/SLNSW study found that carers of mentally or physically disabled people expressed feelings that the library is a place where their companions can venture with safety and encounter minimal trouble. Homeless people and those living alone were found to use the library as a shelter and source of social contact. The study concludes that people on the fringes of society experience less discrimination in the library than in the general community, and by attending the library have the opportunity to ease themselves into participation within society.

Libraries can 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.

> *Public libraries hold an important place in people's hearts. Unlike many of the other services that are provided by councils, they are used out of choice rather than necessity. People come to them for information, recreation and advice, rather than to settle disputes or to resolve problems. (Audit Commission, UK, 2002)*

Public libraries help promote health and wellbeing by encouraging a more active use of leisure time (e.g. reading, thinking, debating, learning) rather than 'bowling alone'; by engaging people's interest and involvement in the arts (e.g. hosting local art exhibitions, providing spaces for school holiday art and craft sessions); by helping people to connect more efficiently with local services (e.g. health and community services) and by building links and social contacts that promote positive health outcomes.

Some ways in which public libraries promote social inclusion

- Providing a neighbourhood resource and meeting place that is accessible to everyone – nobody is turned away.
- Helping newcomers to the town to find a way into the community.
- Enabling minority groups to demonstrate their ability to achieve and contribute to the local community.
- Working with people who experience isolation or difficulty in becoming involved in social activities.
- Providing books and information for excluded groups.
- Promoting access of excluded groups to council and other services.
- Helping seniors access electronic information and the Internet.
- Developing schemes to promote gay and lesbian literature.
- Acting as important conduits for information and knowledge to disadvantaged individuals and excluded groups.

3.3 Helping individuals develop their skills

As governments across the globe strive to encourage lifelong learning, one of the key obstacles they face is the gap that exists between informal learning and life-experience learning on the one hand, and formal, structured learning on the other (The Library Association, 1998). The Library Association notes that too great an emphasis on formal accredited learning can deter 'vulnerable' learners.

Widening participation is less about reaching non-learners than it is about enabling those who regard themselves as non-learners to recognise their own capacity for learning, and building their confidence on the basis of the learning that they already do.
(The Library Association, 1998)

They argue strongly for greater appreciation of the role of informal learning – citing evidence that learning in infancy by sharing stories and pictures with parents enhances an individual's propensity for learning later in life – and noting that informal learning is critically important for ensuring entitlement and access to learning in retirement.

Libraries, which offer an open learning environment more accessible than most, present enormous opportunities for progressing the agenda of lifelong learning.

Libraries and learning resources services have a very important contribution to make ... They provide for informal learning as well as support formal learning. They offer flexibility of access, a variety of modes of learning, support and confidence building for learners, and information and advice which can link informal to structured learning. (The Library Association, 1998)

Reading, literacy and learning are inextricably linked. One of the triggers of a desire for lifelong learning comes from the pure enjoyment of reading, which libraries can help to foster (DCMS, 2004). Research by Comedia in the United Kingdom has identified the major, potentially life-changing, contribution that library outreach work is making in supporting basic literacy, homework among older children and computer skills. These projects are observed to have a marked impact on participants' self-confidence and aspirations.

Public libraries ... have an integral role in underpinning education and lifelong learning. Being among the first learning agencies that children encounter, they play a key role in encouraging and promoting reading literacy among children. At their best they can be a focal point for the community, improving individual self-confidence and stimulating learning at all levels.
(Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, UK, 2001)

Story time, including bilingual story time, is an important way of enhancing the literacy skills of children and is especially important for families in which parents do not have these skills. The library also provides a non-stigmatising environment for the delivery of adult literacy programs. By increasing people's aspirations and confidence library use can be the first rung on the ladder to adult education.

The self-motivated learning which libraries promote is central to the creation of a lifelong learning culture in which people expect and want to learn throughout their lifetime. (DCMS, 2004)

In their support for learning, libraries are also increasingly strengthening their links to schools and institutes of further education, and developing learning-related services that support the development of workforce readiness. These connections include providing unemployed clients with computer training and career and literacy resources.

3.4 The natural advantage of libraries

People today are hungry for community. Since libraries of all types are often at the geographic center of the communities they serve, they are naturally positioned to be community-gathering places.
(Sarah Long, http://www.sarahlong.org)

Public libraries are in a strong position to take on a community building role. The way libraries approach their work, and the values that underpin this, are important in helping them build communities. In part, the community building potential of libraries stems from their 'natural advantages', which include:

• the ethos and style of libraries, which is inherently supportive;

• the fact that they encourage self-reliance and emphasise helping people develop a capacity to do things for themselves;

• the ability to provide a safe, non-discriminating and neutral meeting place;

• being free and accessible – people have a right of access regardless of their circumstance or background;

• offering access to enormous stocks of material – this ranges beyond books to include DVDs, videos, CDs and computer software, available in a range of community languages and print sizes;

• offering materials that represent all points of view on a given topic.

The distinctive skills of librarians also support the community building role of libraries. As noted by the Australian Library and Information Association (2003), these encompass knowledge of the broad context of the information environment and the ability to:

• identify and investigate people's information needs and information behaviour;

• identify and evaluate information sources to determine their relevance to information needs;

• identify required information and implement its acquisition, licensing or creation;

• provide and promote information access and client services;

• use research skills to provide appropriate information to clients;

• facilitate development of information literacy and the ability to critically evaluate information;

• design and deliver customised information;

• assess the effectiveness of library and information facilities, products and services.

Sarah Ann Long (American Library Association President 1999–2000) describes the talents of librarians as including tolerance for diversity of opinion, facilitation skills, familiarity and comfort with new technology. She says that these skills place librarians well as the catalysts for drawing communities together.

The evolving role of public libraries: international developments

Many countries are seeing a renaissance of interest in, funding of, and quality assurance of, their public library systems, as evidenced by the findings of Nerida Clifford following her study tour of libraries in Singapore, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, UK, Canada and the US. She found that there is a sense of excitement internationally about the future of public libraries. The most notable trends are:

• Usage of traditional lending services is generally continuing to increase at a steady pace.

• Libraries have redefined where their role in lifelong learning begins.

• Community demand for direct delivery of programs aligned to community learning and development of new skills is increasing rapidly.

• Libraries are an integral partner in the lifelong learning process not a competitor with other learning providers.

• There is an unprecedented demand for libraries to develop and facilitate access to online services and information.

• Governments are identifying libraries as key access points to ensure equitable access to information.

• Purpose-built technology/learning centres are being incorporated into library design.

• Human resource requirements to service the global increases in loans, in person visits, program development and delivery and online services are partially being offset by empowering the user through self-service facilities and automating materials handling.

• Increasing costs are being partially offset by sponsorships and partnerships.

(quoted in Bundy, 2003)

4 Measuring the contribution of public libraries: national and international research

Libraries, because of the wonderful, complex, multifaceted physical and virtual places they are, do face a challenge greater than any other institution in society in measuring and conveying the full extent of what they do and contribute.

BUNDY, 2000

Little has been done to identify and document the community building potential of public libraries through a systematic program of research and evaluation.

The more traditional measures of the library and its performance, such as the number of books borrowed and collection statistics, dominate public thinking. As with other institutions libraries are often identified in terms of their core business and evaluated through performance measurement, usually in terms of economic benefits. These, however, do not account for the range of integrated functions that libraries perform, which extend well past the provision of books and information. These additional functions are often unaccounted for and unrecognised in any formal ways.

As Matarasso (1998) argues: 'There is a need to demonstrate rather than assume that the public library is culturally significant using more effective and meaningful methods of monitoring, assessing and reporting on their wider social value to society.'

In response to these concerns, a number of research projects have recently set out to record and report the wider benefits of libraries for their communities. These studies have had a significant influence on the shape of the Libraries Building Communities project and are outlined below.

4.1 A Safe Place To Go

In Australia, the University of Technology Sydney, with funding from the State Library of New South Wales, has examined the social contribution of libraries as part of a broader set of studies examining the possible scope of social capital, and exploring how streets, shopping areas, public buildings and other places that may be shared with strangers can either contribute to or diminish the opportunities for developing relationships or trust.

The study *A Safe Place To Go* (UTS and SLNSW, 2000) revealed that libraries contribute to social capital in many ways. One of these is by inviting all citizens to participate. Libraries were perceived by most as a place where everybody has a right to access, regardless of their background, with 98.7% of participants agreeing with the statement that 'they are for everybody and that everybody can have equal access'. Library users feel that all others have a right to be there, which creates a sense of equity and entitlement and reduces any sense of marginalisation or exclusion. When people are treated equally it reduces the possibility of a 'them' versus 'us' mentality.

In preparing this report the UTS and SLNSW used a range of methodologies to collect information on public libraries and social capital, including:

- interviews with library staff;

- observation (i.e. looking at the ways in which people in the library talk to each and assist each other) – observing signs of acceptance of those in the community who are known to be different and difficult;

- short questionnaires to users and non-users to determine how people saw and used the library building and to explore their perceptions qualitatively.

The study examined ten public libraries from suburban Sydney and rural New South Wales, selected on the basis of their similarities and differences to enable both comparison and contrasts between them.

4.2   Re:source: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries

Re:source is a research and development agency in the United Kingdom which has a specific focus on the role and value of libraries, museums and archives. The agency has recently published a major study that assesses the impact of a new library building on local communities,

questioning the institution as a physical space and the role it plays in the wider community.

Re:source also commissioned *Neighbourhood Renewal and Social Inclusion* in 2002 (Parker et al.), a study to examine the role and value of libraries, museums and archives from the perspective of practitioners, and other community agencies and organisations who are working in the area of neighbourhood renewal. Interviews with these groups were used to establish views on the extent of involvement of libraries in neighbourhood renewal, the nature of their involvement and the impact it has. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research was used and included a detailed literature review, use of a questionnaire, interviews and case studies.

4.3   Comedia: Beyond Book Issues

This work by Matarasso (1998) draws on a small number of library projects to demonstrate the impact of libraries on a wide range of personal and community development issues. These studies were based on detailed interviews and discussions with the people involved in the library's projects, supported by extensive documentary research into the projects.

4.4   Audit Commission, UK: Building Better Library Services

This report from the UK Audit Commission (2002) pulls together the findings from a number of 'Best Value' inspections of public libraries and from research into perceptions and usage of libraries. The report provides useful discussion on the kinds of performance indicators being used in the UK to assess the value of libraries.

The Audit Commission makes a number of important observations about customer satisfaction surveys. While they note the importance of information from such sources, they caution that high satisfaction ratings among current users do not on their own necessarily

mean that the service is good – user satisfaction levels can be high even in services with low levels of access and provision. They point to the following facts:

- Those being asked are using the service and this means that they are able to access the service and do want the books, and other services, on offer.

- High satisfaction levels may reflect user loyalty, and users' desire to protect their service from cuts, rather than service quality.

They argue that to identify areas of dissatisfaction and to find out what would encourage current users to visit libraries more, councils need to probe and test users' views in more detail.

4.5 Economic valuation of public library services

McCallum and Quinn (2001) in the final report to the Council of Australian State Libraries on the business case for a new national body to represent public libraries in Australia, examine relevant recent research into public library value. They emphasise the need for more specific quantitative data sourced from investigating the dollar value of delivered services.

This work is particularly useful for identifying the techniques now emerging that enable librarians to quantify the return on investment in libraries and to promote the value of their operations to funding bodies. The studies they review identify the theoretical problems associated with valuation and issues arising from gaps in financial and other key information within library systems.

Glen Holt from the St Louis Public Library in the United States has developed a practical, transportable and conservative methodology to estimate the direct return from taxpayer investment in large urban libraries.

4.6 One current international study

An international study (see Bundy, 2003) is now underway to provide information on national, local and regional governmental attitudes to public libraries, in terms of:

- value for individuals and groups in society;

- contribution to economic development;

- contribution to political priorities.

This study involves a series of in-depth interviews with politicians and senior bureaucrats in Australia, Croatia, France, Norway, Sri Lanka, Uganda and the United Kingdom. The study is being coordinated by Bob Usherwood, Professor of Librarianship at Sheffield University in the UK, and led in Australia by Kerry Smith from Curtin University in Western Australia.

4.7 Linley and Usherwood: social audit

The social audit methodology has been used by Linley and Usherwood (1998) to measure impact of libraries in their community. Social auditing allows the assessment of the social impact of an organisation or initiative in relation to its aims and objectives and those of its stakeholders.

Linley and Usherwood adopt a largely qualitative approach that cross-checks the views and perceptions of selected stakeholders to ascertain as full a view as possible of how far library objectives have been met. Stakeholders include elected members of council, library staff and groups of library users and non-users. It is noted that qualitative data, if gathered properly, provides valid evidence and should be used as such by policy workers and professionals.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect information from local politicians and library staff. The interview guides and schedules (copies of which are provided in the report) were designed with reference to library and council objectives and themes found in the literature.

Focus groups were carried out with users and non-users of library services. As the authors comment, holding group interviews allowed data to be obtained from a larger number of respondents and for people to develop their original responses after they heard other people's views. Each focus group was designed to cover a specific target group (e.g. older people, parents' support group, disabled people and their carers).

Following collection of the key information and preparation of a paper summarising the results, workshops were held with politicians and practitioners to discuss and review the findings.

The final report from this research draws on quotations to illustrate key findings and indicates whether these views are widely held or represent a minority view.

Usherwood and Linley emphasise the importance of providing information that can be used by staff in public libraries to help them assess the impact of the services they provide and to enable them to identify the reasons for their success and failure.

4.8 The Library's Contribution to Your Community

The Library's Contribution to Your Community is a resource manual developed by the Canadian group IER Planning, Research and Management Services (2000). It brings together a range of tools that can be used by libraries to assess their economic and social contribution. The manual has been reprinted for sale in Australia and New Zealand. Many libraries in both countries are now using it.

The manual provides survey instruments and advice about collecting data and communicating benefits to stakeholders. It is particularly helpful for identifying the types of issues and questions that funding bodies are likely to want addressed through the research process.

The manual describes the information that will need to be compiled to demonstrate the social/personal and economic contribution of the library under a number of key headings (e.g. Lifelong learning, Search for employment). A range of measures is identified for each of these areas, covering performance indicators, benefit measures, benchmarks and customer satisfaction indicators.

Survey instruments in the report include:

- general community survey;
- questionnaire for library users;
- questionnaire for business users of the library;
- survey of community groups and agencies;
- survey of program participants.

These survey instruments include a number of questions that are intended to elicit specific information on the value people place on the services they get from the library.

The manual also provides advice on how libraries can collect better information through their administrative activities. These include collecting additional information from Internet users at the point of scheduling, including 'bookmark' questionnaires in key reference material and completion of simple forms by library staff that record the nature of services provided. They also suggest approaches such as sponsoring an essay on 'what the library means to you'.

5 Libraries Building Communities:
the Victorian experience

Public libraries in Victoria and indeed the rest of Australia help build their communities in many ways – through the development of social contacts, links and networks and promoting wellbeing as well as outreach services to more marginalized groups and individuals.

MANOLIS, 2003

The appearance of these reports in the late 1990s and early 2000s has stimulated discussion of the value of public libraries across the globe. The 'Library Odyssey 2001–2010' workshop, held in March 2001 to talk about the future of public library services in Victoria, took up the theme of 'libraries building communities' – inspired in particular by the work of Australian social researcher Eva Cox, who had written widely on the issue of social capital and had recently published the report *A Safe Place To Go*.

The idea for the Libraries Building Communities project was formally raised at a meeting of a group of executives from the public library network and State Library of Victoria in April 2002. It was envisaged as a project that would explore the role of Victorian public libraries in supporting the social cohesion and development of their communities. It was seen as important that it also examine the needs of groups not well served through current models of public library service delivery – including ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and those who live in remote areas. Funding for the project was endorsed through the Library Board of Victoria's Statewide Public Library Development Projects grants process.

Following a comprehensive scoping exercise in late 2002, which identified what stakeholders saw as the critical purpose of the research and development project and the types of information they would like to see collected, the Libraries Building Communities project began in March 2003. From May to December 2003 extensive data collection was carried out – with information gathered from nearly 10,000 people across Victoria.

The final section of this report provides a brief introduction to public libraries in Victoria, describes the main objectives of the research and development study, outlines the methodology that has been used and concludes with a brief outline of the empirical reports from the research.

5.1 Background: the public library network

As noted in the introduction to this report, Victoria has an extensive network of public libraries in locations as diverse as Carlton in inner urban Melbourne, Greater Dandenong in the outer suburbs, the regional townships of Geelong and Ballarat, and the small country town of Kerang in the far north. One of the strengths of these public libraries is that they do not offer a 'one size fits all' service but are responsive to the needs and priorities of their communities.

Altogether there are 44 public library services across Victoria covering all 79 municipalities. Twenty-six of these are single service libraries, which cover only one municipality, and seventeen are regional library corporations, which cover a number of municipalities. The remaining library is the National Information and Library Service, a specialist library for people with print disabilities. This was established in 1999 as a joint venture between the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, the Royal Blind Society of New South Wales and Vision Australia.

In 2002–03 total registered borrowers numbered 2.5 million, representing just over half the Victorian population.

All library services have a website providing information on services available. Most have their catalogue online. This allows potential around-the-clock access to information about the library resources and online information service delivery.

The Victorian Public Library and Information Network (VICLINK) and the Country Public Libraries Group of Victoria represent the interests of all public libraries in Victoria. At state government level, policy responsibility for public libraries rests with the Minister for Local Government. The Minister has appointed a Ministerial Advisory Council on Public Libraries to provide advice across a range of issues.

Municipal councils contribute the major proportion of recurrent funding for public library services in Victoria. In 2002–03 this amounted to 70% of total income of library services, with the State Government contributing 17% of total income. The balance of libraries' income is derived from a range of sources, including other government grants and revenue-raising efforts such as copying fees. Regional library corporations are funded jointly by the councils they service.

The State Government also committed $12 million over three years from 2000 for the Living Libraries initiative. This was funded from the Community Support Fund and managed by Local Government Victoria, Department for Victorian Communities. Living Libraries provides practical assistance and financial incentives to local councils to improve library buildings and services to their communities. In some cases the funds are being directed towards the construction of replacement library buildings and, in others, extending, renovating or refurbishing existing library buildings. A total of 44 projects in 43 of the State's 79 municipal councils were funded over these three years. In 2004 additional funds were made available through the Victorian state budget to extend the Living Libraries program for a further three years. Funds are being directed to address specific gaps in library service provision that exist in outer metropolitan areas and in rural and regional Victoria.

The State Government has also recently provided further support to public libraries through the:

- Public Library Initiative Grants Program, which provides funds to specific projects to encourage innovation and cooperation in the provision of public library services. Approximately $250,000 was available under this program for allocation to specific projects.

- Public Libraries Book Bonanza, which provides $5 million over the period from 2004–05 to 2006–07 for libraries to update their collections.

The level of council funding of public libraries varies greatly between library services. In 2002–03 this varied from a maximum contribution of $38 per capita down to $3 per capita. In addition, the Library Board of Victoria, through the State Library of Victoria, administers $1.1 million for research and development projects each year in the public library sector.

As Bundy (2003) notes, the investment by the Victorian Government was equivalent to 0.112% of state expenditure in 2000. This compared with Tasmania at 0.308%, the most generous of state governments, and New South Wales at 0.039% the least so.

> *State and local governments may contest their relative contributions to the decent funding of this nation's largest and most heavily used educational, informational and cultural resource. However, the reality is that the achievement of public libraries for nearly all Australians derives since the 1950s from their partnership. It is a symbolic, [sic] infrastructure and funding partnership which largely explains why 99 per cent of Australians now have access to a public library and through that to the nation's total library resources, and beyond.*

5.2 The Libraries Building Communities project

During the scoping of the research and development project, library staff and other stakeholders pointed to a number of critical issues that the project should examine.

People interviewed generally agreed that the role of public libraries in Victoria is not well understood by the community or by its key stakeholders.

> *There is a stereotypical image of the library – and it revolves around books. (LBC participant)*

A number of reasons were suggested for this lack of understanding, including:

• libraries not being good at marketing themselves;

• libraries having a diverse and complex role that is hard to communicate;

• difficulties experienced in overcoming entrenched views of the library.

And while many examples were provided of councils who have a strong appreciation of the role of libraries and who support their function, other examples were provided where the role of the library is less clearly understood. It was felt that some councils pay attention to the more tangible things libraries can do; for example, 'IT connectivity and access to the Internet "ring a bell with them" – but they are not as quick to recognise the social role of the library – this is often taken for granted'.

Concern was expressed that if the role and the value of libraries are not clearly understood they may be overlooked in favour of other services. Some commentators felt that this was already happening.

> *While libraries are an important community building arm of local council – some are ignoring the library and putting in place new structures – why ignore the library? (LBC participant)*

An important goal for this project is to raise the profile of libraries across all tiers of government and to get them to realise that they are missing out by not using the public library network more effectively – and that the community misses out too. It was seen as important to demonstrate that public libraries have the potential to be much more than they currently are – that they are poised to take on a more critical role in the knowledge society. However, it was strongly emphasised that this could not be achieved without appropriate funding.

Library staff stressed the importance of demonstrating to local councils that they are getting value for the dollars they invest and that public libraries achieve their goals efficiently.

Issues of social inclusion were also at the fore of people's thinking. While it was noted that public libraries have pursued innovative approaches to ensure that people in remote areas and people who are isolated have access to library materials, many stakeholders felt that there are misconceptions within the library system about how well it reaches and services the more disadvantaged groups within the community. They felt that it was important for the research and development project to assist public libraries to identify those segments of the population currently not well serviced who may have a lot to gain from it. These groups were seen as potentially important targets for government policy.

> *There are people you would like to use the library who don't. They may see the library as elitist – being surrounded by books may remind them that they do not have good literacy skills – or maybe they have bad memories of the library from their school life.*
> *(LBC participant)*

Stakeholders were keen to see the development of strategies and recommendations for social engagement as a key outcome of this analysis.

Many practical benefits were identified from the research project for library management and their staff. Great value was seen for libraries in sharing lessons from best practice and innovation across Victoria. Several librarians noted that they wanted to be challenged by the results of the project and that it should help them to look critically at current practice; to consider: what is working well? what is not?

The project was also regarded as a way of assisting library staff to more fully appreciate the value they add to their communities and providing an opportunity for staff to reflect on their objectives and the outcomes they are trying to achieve for library users.

5.3 Research methodology

Given the scale and complexity of the project, both qualitative and quantitative research techniques were employed in order to capture a diversity of information from a number of sources, including existing data and publications and new primary data sources.

During the consultation phases of the project, information was collected from:

- library users;
- non-users of public libraries;
- library staff;
- key influencers and stakeholders, including culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups.

This consultation used a variety of approaches, which are summarised in Table 1. An in-depth description of each stage follows.

Focus groups	• 9 library user groups
	• 9 non-user groups
	• 6 groups of library staff
Telephone survey	400 people across Victoria – random sample
Interviews with key influencers	35 interviews with key influencers – including representatives of CALD community
Online survey	8,602 library users (including 300 CALD users)
Collection of information on best practice case studies from library managers and staff	34 case studies from across Victoria

Focus groups with library users

The aim of the focus groups was to collect in-depth information that described experiences, opinions and views.

Information was obtained from library users, non-users and library staff regarding:

- why people do and do not use libraries;
- what value and benefits users gain from library use;
- what prevents people using libraries and what would make them use libraries more often;
- satisfaction levels with library services;
- suggested improvements to library services.

Staff views on these issues were collected as well to ascertain the types of activities that libraries are undertaking to provide services and resources to their communities.

A series of focus groups was run with library users and potential library users for whom there are clear barriers to access (as opposed to those who consciously choose not to visit a library). These groups provided an in-depth understanding of who uses libraries and the benefits they get from these services and explored the potential for libraries to act as hubs for community interaction and exchange.

The focus groups were also used to identify those factors that act as barriers to use of public library services by some sections of the community. The groups were held in several different local government areas to ensure that a cross-section of the community (age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, inner and outer metropolitan areas etc.) was represented.

Wherever possible, the focus groups were run in libraries themselves to enable the researchers to undertake some observational measures of activity in addition to the verbal feedback gathered through the focus group sessions.

Focus groups with library staff

Focus groups were also held with library staff to understand the ways in which libraries build communities – as seen from the inside. These groups were used to complement the focus groups with library users by building an understanding of who uses libraries, the

benefits they get from these services, and the factors that act as barriers to service use. Library staff from all public libraries were included to reflect the range, scale and quality of library activity and the 'connectedness' of the library to its community.

Telephone interviews

Having established the key themes, issues, opportunities and barriers from the focus groups, telephone interviews were carried out with 400 residents, randomly sampled from the general Victorian population in the period 11–16 September 2003. These interviews were instrumental in quantifying and validating the extent to which some of the qualitative issues raised in focus groups were significant within the broader community.

As part of this process, fifty 30-minute in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with residents in rural and regional communities across the State to ensure that rural and regional voices were heard. Issues of access, availability, services offered, barriers to use, perceptions of the library, role of the library and suggestions for improvement were explored in these interviews.

Because of the difficulty of interviewing non-English-speaking households by telephone, these groups were largely excluded from telephone interviews. Instead, their access and attitudes to Victorian public libraries were elicited through face-to-face interviews.

Online survey

An online survey was used to collect information from every public library in the State. This methodology was chosen as the most cost-effective way to collect such extensive data from a large sample scattered across a wide geographic area.

Hard-copy questionnaires were also made available in English for those who did not feel comfortable using a computer or who preferred to take the survey home and complete it at a more convenient time. Hard-copy questionnaires were also made available in Chinese, Vietnamese, Italian, Spanish, Greek and Arabic. These were deemed as the most populous CALD groups in the library user population.

The survey was pilot tested extensively in six libraries across Victoria for two weeks. This pilot test highlighted several methodological issues that needed modifying prior to the statewide implementation of the survey in November and December 2003, during which 8,602 responses were collected, with over 300 CALD responses.

Interviews with key influencers

Thirty-five telephone interviews were conducted with key influencers such as local councillors, bureaucrats, business people, school principals and teachers, people working in key community organisations such as maternal and child health, and religious groups. A group of key influencers from the CALD community was included specifically because this group had been under-represented in the focus groups. The purpose of the interviews was to document the various ways in which libraries impact upon the community – as seen from those who are crucially involved in developing and providing services (either alone or in partnership with a library) to their local community. The people interviewed were drawn from across a wide variety of local government areas, covering inner metropolitan Melbourne, the middle and outer suburbs, regional towns and rural areas.

Best practice case studies

All public library services across Victoria were invited to nominate case studies of best practice. They were specifically asked to nominate innovations that demonstrated:

• how libraries form strategic partnerships with their local council and community (e.g. schools, neighbourhood houses) in order to deliver benefits to the community;

• the benefits of strategic partnering with other organisations;

• the types of strategies and approaches being used by libraries to promote social engagement.

Final decisions on which case studies to include in the report were taken by a small committee of public and State Library staff. Initiatives were included only if they:

• were well established;

• had been evaluated, formally or informally, and found to be effective;

• had the potential to be replicated elsewhere (i.e. the principles of the project could be applied to other settings and environments and were not exclusive to the project itself).

It was also seen as important to showcase the full range of activities and services offered by public libraries in Victoria and to ensure that a representative cross-section of public libraries was included (large and small, corporations and single council services, metropolitan and rural).

5.4 Reports from the project

Three empirical reports have been produced from the Libraries Building Communities project – plus a short *Executive Summary*, which highlights the major findings. The issues discussed in each of these reports are briefly described below.

Logging the Benefits

This report presents the findings on how libraries add value to the community using information from the focus groups, telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews with key informants. It highlights where the community believes greater value could be added and what people see as the future of public libraries. The report illustrates the many ways that libraries assist government at all levels in achieving core objectives and strategic goals (e.g. in the areas of community health, lifelong learning, education, health promotion, e-government and community building).

Bridging the Gaps

Socio-demographic profiles of users and non-users are used to assess which segments of the population use the library and which segments appear to be less well serviced.

The report includes:

• analysis of library use by specific segments of the population, including disabled people, ethnic minorities, low income recipients and those living in remote areas;

• 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.

It provides examples of how public libraries in Victoria have used innovative approaches to engage different sections of the community; for example, ensuring that people in remote areas and people who are isolated have access to library materials. The report provides recommendations for enhancing social engagement.

Showcasing the Best

Case studies of innovative practice from a diverse range of Victorian public libraries are presented within a framework that identifies the key lessons from them, the sort of challenges libraries have faced in their implementation and the benefits that have arisen for the community.

The case studies demonstrate how libraries are:

- working in strategic partnership with other local organisations to achieve community goals;

- can be part of a council precinct or community hub that provides an access point for a wide range of services;

- helping support local businesses (e.g. through establishment of a televillage that is ICT-enabled and information-rich and acts as an incubator for small businesses);

- delivering services outside the library walls – taking the library to people (e.g. in high rise flats, in remote areas), and delivering library services through new delivery points (e.g. Rural Transaction Centres).

These case studies provide:

- A showcase of Victorian initiatives that show how public libraries in Victoria are at the forefront in innovation. It is intended that politicians and other key figures will be able to quote from these to demonstrate the value of libraries.

- Ideas for Victorian public library staff on the innovative ways in which libraries are working to provide services that meet the needs of their communities: what approaches they are using, what outcomes they are achieving and what are the key lessons regarding challenges for staff.

Copies of these reports are available from the Public Libraries Unit at the State Library of Victoria, or can be purchased through the State Library's online bookshop or downloaded from the State Library's website.

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