LIBRARIES/BUILDING/COMMUNITIES

Report Two: Logging the Benefits

State Library
of Victoria

Library Board
of Victoria

VICLINK
victorian
public
library
and
information
network

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

The public library's historical role in civic education; its openness to people of all ages, races and economic status; its role as a public meeting place for groups and individuals; its position as the repository of the community's history and culture; its popularity and long tradition of service; its highly educated staff; its extension of service to the homebound and others with disabilities; its leadership in providing access to new technologies such as the Internet; and the convenient hours and central locations of its buildings make the public library a good place to begin the work of strengthening communities.

1.1 The value of libraries

Across Victoria there is an extensive network of public libraries – consisting of 43 library services and 238 branch libraries, plus the National Information and Library Service for the visually impaired. The reach and accessibility of these services is underlined by the fact that public libraries have:

- 820 physical points of service delivery in the community – many of which are mobile library sites in rural and regional areas;
- a presence in just over one in four 'named' communities – of which there are 2,930 in Victoria.

Not many other services have this kind of community penetration. Nor would many offer the hours of access that public libraries provide. Estimates are of an annual total of 515,480 opening hours and to this we can add 384,384 hours of virtual access (8,736 hours per week x 44 library services).[1] Well over a half of Victorians more than 15 years of age are current public library users and about one-third of these visit their library at least monthly.

One of the key questions that the Libraries Building Communities (LBC) project has set out to answer is: 'What value do these libraries add to the lives of people and the communities they serve?'

In order to answer this and other related questions the project undertook an extensive data collection exercise between May and December 2003. Information was gathered from a diverse range of stakeholders – including library users, non-users, library staff and community leaders such as local councillors, bureaucrats, business people, school principals and teachers, and people working in key community organisations such as maternal and child health and religious groups. Data was from obtained from about 10,000 people.

1 John Binnion, presentation to VICLINK, the peak body for Victorian Public Librarians, August 2004.

Both qualitative and quantitative information was collected through the project. Focus groups and interviews provided an opportunity to explore key themes and issues in depth; while surveys provided statistical data and allowed validation of the extent to which issues raised in the qualitative research were significant within the broader community. The methodology for this data collection was designed and implemented by an independent market research company.

A clear picture emerges from the LBC research of libraries playing a crucial role not just in the lives of individuals, but in their communities and more broadly in promoting the health and wellbeing of the State. Findings from this research are presented in this report. These highlight the contributions of libraries in four key areas: information provision, access to information and communication technology (ICT) and development of computing skills, lifelong learning and education, and expansion of social networks.

Some key findings are:

• Regardless of whether they use libraries or not, Victorians place significant value on the availability of free library services in their communities. Community leaders commented that public libraries provide knowledge and information to those in the community who otherwise could not afford to pay retail prices for books and Internet access.

• Library users are very satisfied with the services they receive – 94% of the respondents to the telephone survey rated overall library performance as excellent or good.

• People in the community believe librarians have an important role in helping them navigate the mass of information now available. Librarians also help library users develop their own skills in accessing and using information.

• For many people libraries provide access to a range of otherwise inaccessible technologies and help overcome fears of technology.

• Libraries have an important role in promoting learning and encouraging reading. They are a source of stimulation, exposing users to a great variety of new ideas and literature. They help children and young people to develop literacy skills and learning habits.

• 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.

• Public libraries are fast becoming 'community hubs' – providing a place where people can meet and 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 people who would not normally be among their friends or acquaintances.

• Communities often take great pride in their library. Many who participated in the LBC research saw the public library as the 'jewel in the crown' for their area or neighbourhood.

The impact of public libraries can be observed in terms of communities that:

• are smarter and quicker at gaining and using information;

• are 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.

People who participated in the LBC project had a strong vision of the potential for libraries to play an even more substantial role in community strengthening. There was a level of frustration that the benefits libraries have to offer are not more widely available to members of the community.

- Libraries are seen as especially well placed to support government agendas in a wide range of areas, from lifelong learning to literacy development and community strengthening. It was pointed out that there has been significant learning and capacity development within the public library network that could be further developed and used for the benefits of communities across Victoria.

- There is a widespread belief in the great potential for public libraries to be developed as a key element in community hubs and learning centres.

- Libraries are seen as having a key role in ensuring more equitable access to information; with specific attention to meeting the needs of people on lower incomes who have more restricted access to information of all sorts including online information. The 'digital divide' is seen as a real and growing phenomenon, which libraries can help overcome by providing access to technology and training in its use.

- Community leaders also saw public libraries as a key distribution point for information about government programs and services.

It was well understood by community leaders that additional funding is required if public libraries are to play such vital and multiple roles in the information society. It was pointed out that public libraries have taken on new roles over the years without a proper re-assessment of their appropriate resourcing requirements, including skills needed to support these additional tasks.

1.2 Report Two: Logging the Benefits

Logging the Benefits is the second report from the LBC project. The first report, *Setting the Scene*, describes the background to the project, briefly reviews the growing body of national and international studies that have measured the value of public libraries to their communities, and sets the LBC study within the context of the community building activities of government.

The *Logging the Benefits* report presents empirical findings regarding:

- who uses libraries, what for and how satisfied they are with the services received;

- people's awareness of the services provided by public libraries;

- what libraries are seen as doing well and what it is thought they could do better;

- the benefits libraries provide for the individuals who make up the community;

- the benefits libraries provide for the community.

Analysis of the data allows comparisons of findings to be made across a range of variables including:

- library users and non-users;

- metropolitan and non-metropolitan Victoria;

- people from English-speaking backgrounds and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities;

- people from different age groups;

- males and females.

The report highlights where and how people believe libraries could add greater value to the community and what people see as the future role of public libraries in Victoria.

Information is used to illustrate how libraries assist government at all levels in achieving their core objectives and strategic goals; for example, in the areas of lifelong learning, literacy development, health promotion and community building.

A more detailed examination of social inclusion and exclusion issues is provided in Report Three from the LBC project, *Bridging the Gaps*. This report also presents data on each of the 43 municipal services in the Victorian public library network (not including the National Information and Library Service for the visually impaired) in order to highlight variations across libraries and demonstrate their responsiveness to the demographic and social environments in which they operate.

Data sources

Several phases of the empirical research for the LBC project have fed into this report, namely: the focus groups conducted with library users, non-users and library staff across metropolitan and regional library services; the telephone surveys conducted with a sample of Victorian library users and non-users across the State; and the in-depth interviews conducted with stakeholders and key influencers including community group leaders, politicians and members of CALD communities.

Focus groups

Twenty-four focus groups were conducted with library staff, library users and non-users over the period 24–27 June 2003. Sessions were 90–120 minutes long and most had ten participants. Each group was tape-recorded with participants' permission. Groups were held in libraries' own meeting rooms (for non-staff groups these were held outside of normal work hours). Nine of the focus groups were held in regional Victoria, twelve in metropolitan Melbourne and three in outer metropolitan Melbourne.

Library users were 'self-selected' by advertising the study on library notice boards and asking interested users to take part. Users needed to call a toll-free number to register their interest. As a result, some degree of self-selection bias was introduced into the sampling process, which may have led to more 'loyal' users being represented. In addition, given that the advertising was in place for only four weeks prior to the sessions, it was likely that recruitment was biased toward more regular users rather than infrequent library users.

Non-users were sourced via random telephone recruitment. Selection criteria ensured that this group:

- used libraries less than every twelve months or not at all;
- felt they could be enticed to visit libraries more often.

Users and non-users were reimbursed $50 each for their participation. Staff members were paid if they were not on shift. Individual libraries could choose to take a donation rather than pay staff for attendance.

Telephone survey

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.

The sample was taken from metropolitan and non-metropolitan Victoria at a ratio of 4:1. It was not segregated into users and non-users, but rather people were randomly called and natural fallout of users and non-users was obtained. Numbers were sourced from Australia on Disk, a computer package designed to source telephone numbers in a completely random fashion. The sample obtained can be seen in Table 1.

		Non-metropolitan		Metropolitan		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Group	Users	52	65	182	57	234	58
	Non-users	28	35	138	43	166	42
Total		80	100	320	100	400	100

The telephone survey initially determined whether a respondent was a user or a non-user of Victorian public libraries, and the subsequent question stream was tailored accordingly. Several questions regarding the benefits of libraries to the community and awareness of library services were asked of both groups so that comparisons could be made between users and non-users. Library users were also asked questions regarding satisfaction with the services provided by their library and areas of excellence of library service. Non-users were asked about the reasons for non-usage to determine the major barriers to library use. Demographic questions were asked of all respondents so that profiles of users and non-users could be developed.

Non-English-speaking households were largely excluded from the telephone survey. Instead, their access and attitudes to Victorian public libraries was elicited via face-to-face interviews (see below).

Those under the age of 16 years were not included in the sample for the telephone survey due to laws requiring permission from parents or guardians for those under 16 to participate in market research.

It should be noted that by its nature the telephone survey was a random sample of households rather than individuals. This is reflected in the fact that among those interviewed there was a much higher proportion of women than would be expected if a random sample of individuals had been taken – 65% of respondents were females and 35% males – this compares with general population statistics of 51% female and 49% male.

Interviews with community leaders

Thirty-five interviews were conducted with community leaders such as local councillors, bureaucrats, business people, school principals and teachers, and people working in key community organisations such as maternal and child health and religious groups. Key influencers from the CALD community were included specifically because this group had been under-represented in the focus groups and telephone survey. 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.

The purpose of the interviews was to document what people considered libraries to do well, what they could do better and what the gaps were in the services they provided. The interviews explored what people in the community think is the value of the public library and the contribution the library makes to literacy, community confidence, community networks, health and economic growth. The interviews also probed for ideas on the future role of public libraries, in particular the role libraries should play in community development, and in turn the impact those changes will have on libraries.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one at a location suitable to each participant, between 5 and 13 August 2003. Thirty-two interviews were conducted face-to-face, and three were completed by telephone due to time pressures and geographical difficulties for participants.

Online survey

An online survey was used to collect information from every municipal public library in Victoria (the National Information and Library Service did not participate). This is the first time that comprehensive and consistent data has been collected from public libraries across the State. Staff in these libraries made considerable efforts to ensure that as many responses as possible were received; this is reflected in the 8,602 completed surveys.

This survey was designed to capture benchmark data relating to library use, importance of and satisfaction with library services and resources, social capital information and demographic data. The objectives of the survey were to benchmark the above issues in order and provide a snapshot of the Victorian library community at one point in time.

During November and December 2003, a pilot test of the survey was conducted in six library service areas across Victoria followed by a statewide survey; 8,602 responses were collected, with almost 400 CALD responses.

Due to the nature of the online survey, sampling issues that are pertinent to the interpretation of this report need to be clarified. The online methodology chosen presents a sampling bias toward those who are computer literate. This issue was partially resolved by providing libraries with a hard-copy version of the survey for respondents to use if they did not wish to use the computers. However, the success of this measure largely depended upon each library advertising and presenting this option to library users. Therefore, at some libraries users may not have been aware of the option to fill this questionnaire out on paper. Library staff were also requested to help the elderly and computer-illiterate fill out the survey online. However, it is not possible to track if this was carried out in practice, and so the possibility of the sample being biased toward the computer-literate segment of library users cannot be discounted.

TABLE 2: ONLINE SURVEY SAMPLE COMPARED WITH THE VICTORIAN POPULATION
SOURCE: LBC STUDY

Segment	Sample	Victorian population*	Accuracy at one point in time
Total sample	8,602	4,644,950	±1.06
English responses	8,205	NA**	
LOTE responses	397	NA**	
Male	2,956	2,279,061	±1.80
Female	5,615	2,365,889	±1.31

* 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data taken from the ABS website (http://www.abs.gov.au).
** The criteria by which the ABS classified this was different from that in the results section, and therefore a direct comparsion was not made. Those classified as LOTE (language other than English) in this survey were those who filled out the survey in a language other than English, while the ABS classifies this as the primary language spoken at home.

The complexity and length of the questionnaire meant that only a small number of library users under the age of 14 years completed the survey. This must be taken into account when comparing the age of library users and the population, as results for the library users will be higher in all other age groups when compared with the population.

CALD library users were provided with the option of completing a paper-based version of the online survey. The survey and accompanying advertising material was translated into six languages (Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Italian, Greek and Spanish). These were deemed the largest CALD groups in the library user population. The success of this again depended upon individual libraries placing the advertising and surveys in a place easily accessible to this population. Several libraries reported that they did not use the CALD surveys provided. Other libraries noted that some people from the CALD community elected to fill in the survey in English so that they could do this online.

This could result in a bias toward the English-speaking population, and, in those libraries that did use the CALD surveys, a bias is still present toward the six languages available. Therefore, the comparisons of English and CALD populations in the library with those in the general population may be affected by this sampling bias, and these results should be treated with caution.

Despite some of the sampling restrictions of the online survey, it has for the first time provided public libraries with a wealth of data on users' characteristics and their views about library services. It has also provided many useful lessons in terms of the design of online surveys that will support further work to be undertaken in this area in 2005.

Structure of the report

The report is structured around five key sections:

- The first provides a profile of library users, the reasons they use libraries and the frequency with which they use them.

- The second identifies the benefits that individuals in the community get from their libraries. This focuses on two key issues – provision of information and development of skills.

- The third section examines the benefits public libraries provide to their communities, from social interaction through to bridging the generation gap.

- The fourth section examines how satisfied people in the community are with the services provided by public libraries. It draws out the difference in views between users and non-users and presents some preliminary information on the dollar value users place on the services they receive.

- The final section draws together community views on the role that public libraries could play in Victoria in the future – especially in the areas of community strengthening. It sets out some of the changes (e.g. in funding and staff training) that will need to occur if libraries are to realise their full potential.

2 Profile of library users

During 1999–2000 there were 99.4 million visits to local government, national and state libraries. Visits to local government, national and state libraries have increased by 11% since 1996–97. Of all library users more than 60% visit a library on six or more occasions in any one year. Four times as many people attend a library in any given year as attend a cricket match.

ATTENDANCE AT SELECTED CULTURAL VENUES, AUSTRALIA, AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS, DECEMBER 1999, CITED IN THE AUSTRALIAN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION ASSOCIATION SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT, 2002.

Public library usage is widespread across metropolitan and regional Victoria. The telephone survey indicates that about six in ten English-speaking Victorians over the age of 15 years are current public library users (i.e. have used a local public library in the past twelve months). About two in three public library users over 15 years visit their library at least monthly.

The survey also indicates that about 27% of Victorians do not use public libraries for lifestyle reasons. For example, they may have independent access to books and other resources; they may be working full-time with access to the Internet and library services at work; or they may have different priorities for use of their recreational time. On the other hand, there are about 13% of Victorians who are currently not using public library services yet who stand to gain significantly from this service. This includes people who are socially or economically disadvantaged, face physical barriers to accessing the library, or are not well catered for by the library.

More detailed data on the profile of library users and non-users can be found in section two of LBC Report Three: *Bridging the Gaps*.

2.1 Who are the main users of libraries?

As shown in Figure 1, young children and their parents form the backbone of library users. About half of all users come from households with a dependent child. A further 21% of users come from households with non-dependent children. Couples without children account for about 10% of users and single people about 14% (if we assume that a significant proportion of people in group households are single people).

FIGURE 1: LIBRARY USERS BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY

- Couple/dep child 42.5%
- Couple/non-dep child 19.3%
- Couple 9.6%
- One parent/dep child 7.9%
- One parent/non-dep child 1.8%
- Other family 4.4%
- Group household 3.9%
- Lone person 10.5%
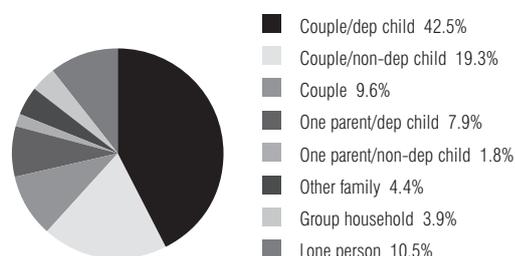
The telephone survey shows that more females than males use the public library – about two-thirds of library users are female and one-third male. This finding is backed up by data from the online survey, which shows that 66% of respondents are female and 34% male.

Female library users have quite a different profile from male users. While a similar proportion of males and females (about 42%) live in households consisting of a couple with dependent children, a higher proportion of females live in a lone-person household (12% compared with 6% of males) and a lower proportion live in couple-only families (7% females compared with 16% of males).

While 45% of female library users are not in the labour force, only 30% of males are in this category. Only 18% of females are in full-time employment but just over half of male users are in this category.

As shown in Figure 2 the largest proportion of library users fall into the age groups 30–39 years and 40–49 years.

FIGURE 2: LIBRARY USERS BY AGE GROUP – TELEPHONE SURVEY
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY

15–19	5%
20–29	13%
30–39	23%
40–49	23%
50–59	15%
60–69	11%
70+	10%
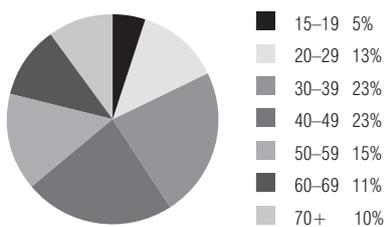
These figures are very similar to those provided through the online survey. It should be noted that both the online survey and telephone survey provide underestimates of users in the age group 0–16 years.

FIGURE 3: LIBRARY USERS BY AGE GROUP – ONLINE SURVEY
SOURCE: ONLINE SURVEY

0–19	10%
20–29	13%
30–39	17%
40–49	19%
50–59	16%
60–69	13%
70+	12%
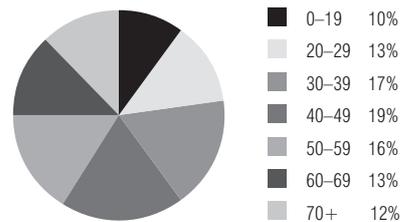
Compared with other age groups, library users in the age group 60–69 years and 70 years and over are far more likely to be living in a lone-person household. Fifteen of those aged 60–69 years and 54% of those aged 70 years or over live in such households. As noted above, 10.5% of library users overall are from lone-person households.

As shown in Figure 4 a greater proportion of female library users than males are in the age group from 20–49 years – partly reflecting the large proportion of library users who are mothers with young children. A greater proportion of male users than females are aged over 60 years. However, females still make up a greater proportion of users in the 60-plus age range (54%) than males (46%).

FIGURE 4: PROPORTION OF MALE AND FEMALE LIBRARY USERS IN EACH AGE GROUP
SOURCE: ONLINE SURVEY

14
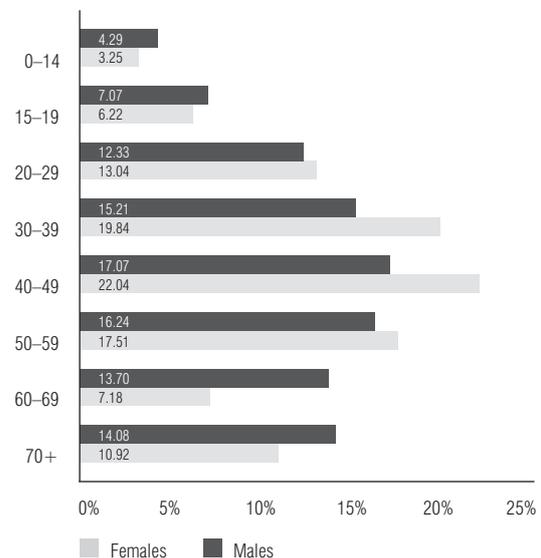
As Figure 5 shows the greatest proportion of library users are not in the labour force (NILF). This includes people who are retired, students and parents caring for children. There are equal proportions of users in full-time and part-time work.

FIGURE 5: LIBRARY USERS BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY

- Full-time 27%
- Part-time 27%
- Unemployed 5%
- Not in labour force 40%
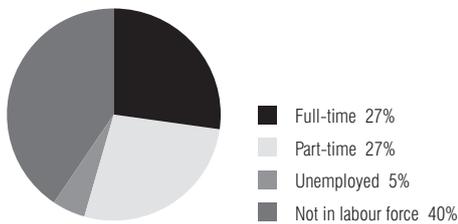
In metropolitan areas a higher proportion of library users are in full-time employment (30%) compared with non-metropolitan areas (19%). Balancing this, we find that a higher proportion of non-metropolitan users are not in the labour force (46%) compared with metropolitan areas (38%).

The online survey shows that about one-quarter of all library users were studying (see Figure 6). This figure is higher for CALD users (31%). A significantly higher proportion of female library users in this category (41%) were attending a university or other educational institution than were male users (34%). A significantly higher proportion of CALD users were studying at a technical or further education facility compared with English-speaking users.

FIGURE 6: LIBRARY USERS WHO ARE CURRENTLY STUDYING
SOURCE: ONLINE SURVEY

Currently studying
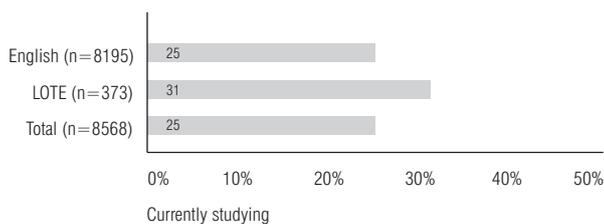
2.2 Usage rates

As well as considering who are the main users of libraries, it is important to get an idea of the extent to which different groups in the community are using libraries. This is estimated by either:

- comparing the proportion of people in a particular group who are library users with those who are not users;

- comparing the proportion of library users in a group to the proportion they represent in the population.

As Figure 7 shows there is a much higher proportion of users than non-users among couples with dependent children and one-parent families with a dependent child. For all other household types the proportion of non-users is greater than the proportion of users.

Couples are the least likely type of household to be using library services. This group would include a proportion of 'empty nesters'. Low usage may relate to having ample financial resources to buy reading material or source information online.

The telephone survey also indicates that use of libraries is more widespread among females than males: 62% of females in the survey were users of libraries while only 52% of males were. Females with dependent children – either in a couple or single-parent family unit – have a particularly high rate of library usage: 72% of women in this group use the library.

The online survey also found high rates of library usage by females in the age range 30–49 years. Typically these users are born in Australia, tertiary educated, with dependent children and either not in the labour force or employed on a part-time basis. While CALD users account for less than 5% of survey respondents, they too were typically in the age range of 30–49 years and were married with children. CALD users are less likely to be working and one-third of users were studying.

FIGURE 7: USERS AND NON-USERS BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY

FIGURE 8: AGE BREAKDOWN OF LIBRARY USERS AND NON-USERS
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY
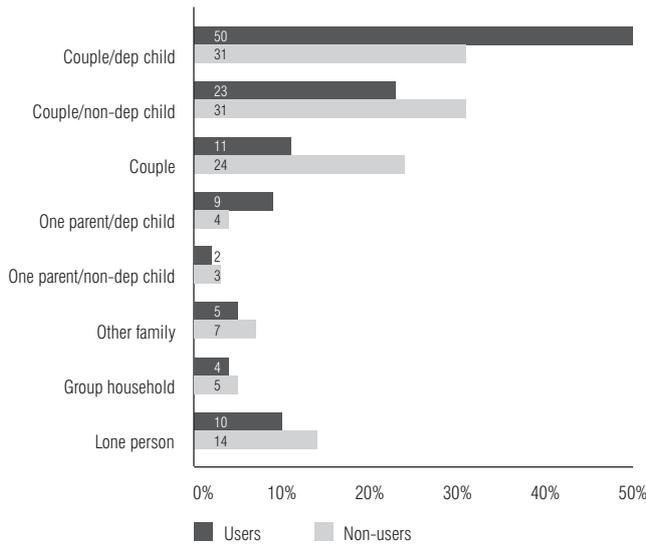
Results from the telephone survey (see Figure 8) indicate that the age groups where there tend to be more library users than non-users are 40–49 years, 60–69 years and 70-plus years. Those under 30 years of age tend to have proportionately more non-users in them, possibly because this group tends to create its own networks and sources of information; but also because of the poor image some people in this group have of public libraries (see Report Three: *Bridging the Gaps* for a discussion of these issues).

The online survey suggests that a library user is unlikely to be a male teenager. Access to the Internet in public libraries is seen as a way of encouraging library usage by teenagers and 'introducing a new generation of users to the value of the publicly funded facilities' (LBC participant).

Analysis of the differences based on employment status (see Figure 9) shows that those employed full-time are less likely than other groups to be library users and those who are not in the labour force are more likely to be library users.

FIGURE 9: USERS AND NON-USERS BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY
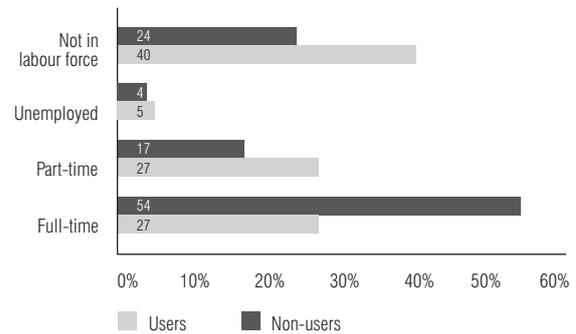
There is a low level of library use by full-time working parents of dependent children; being 'time poor' was identified as a major barrier to use for this group.

As Table 3 shows, the focus groups confirmed that, when compared with non-users, a greater proportion of users are either not in the labour force, are in part-time employment or are unemployed.

TABLE 3: USERS AND NON-USERS BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS
SOURCE: FOCUS GROUP

	Users (n=86) %	Non-users (n=82) %
Full-time employment	10	45
Part-time employment	36	23
Unemployed	13	10
Not in labour force	41	22

Of focus group participants who were in part-time employment, 52% were library users; of those who were unemployed 58% were users; and of those not in the labour force 66% were users. This contrasts with only 20% who were in full-time employment who were users.

English was the primary language spoken at home for 85% of respondents to the online survey. This compares with 75% of Victorians in this category in the 2001 Census. However, given that CALD library users were surveyed using paper-based copies of the online survey and that the survey was only translated into six languages, it is likely that the online survey presents an underestimate of the number of CALD users.

Compared with English-speaking respondents a higher proportion of CALD users were:

• married

• male

• had lower weekly household income.

They were also less likely to be members of their local library. This may be due to difficulties in requesting membership forms or filling out forms.

Library usage was found to be more common among non-metropolitan Victorians than among those living in metropolitan areas. The telephone survey shows that 65% of people in non-metropolitan areas were library users compared with 57% in metropolitan areas.

People on low incomes were found to be more likely to use public libraries than those in the highest income groups. The online survey shows that 42% of households with weekly incomes of $499 or less use library services while this group makes up only 27% of households in the 2001 Census. In contrast, the online survey shows that only 4% of households with incomes over $2,000 used a public library, although this group constituted 8% of households in the Census.

Access to the Internet at home or in the workplace does not appear to be a factor that determines whether people use their public library or not. The telephone survey (see Table 4) shows that in terms of access to the Internet about 70% of both users and non-users had access either at home and/or work. The majority of the remaining 30% of respondents who did not have any access to the Internet are in the older age groups.

The focus group results suggest that key user groups are:

• Time-rich and income-poor:
  – retired people
  – part-time workers
  – lonely and isolated (often elderly)
  – disability pensioners
  – people who have previously been in institutional care
  – struggling families
• Mothers and young children:
  – Some libraries see this group as an increasing proportion of their users, given the quality and popularity of children's programs.

		Group				Total	
		Users		Non-users			
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Do you have good access to the Internet at either home or work?	Home	83	35	44	27	127	32
	Work	17	7	16	10	33	8
	Both home and work	65	28	62	37	127	32
	Neither	69	29	44	27	113	28
Total		234	100	166	100	400	100

- Primary school students:
  - Many children were first introduced to their library as infants by their parents. 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 is 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 introductory Internet-use classes, which empowered them with the skills to become self-directed learners.

2.3 Awareness of the services provided by public libraries

The LBC research indicates a high level of awareness in the community of public libraries and many of the services they provide. For many this awareness extends beyond books and other information resources to the less traditional services.

There is a very good understanding of the types of services being provided, including the traditional and those involving new electronic technologies. People understand that libraries are not just about books – they see social interaction as also very important. (LBC participant)

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 that no services of this type existed.

Not surprisingly users had a higher awareness of library services than non-users. However, among non-users there is still a significant proportion of people who are familiar with libraries and the services they offer. Only 7% of non-users did not know the location of their nearest public library. Almost all (98%) were aware that books could be borrowed at the library and 78% knew of the computer services available. On the other hand, there was lower awareness among non-users of some types of services – only half were aware of story time for children and one-third of reading groups (32%). Only 40% were aware that public libraries have web pages from which they can access the library catalogue and databases.

Among both users and non-users there was remarkably high awareness of the availability of computers and computer facilities, as well as audiovisual resources (including CDs, DVDs and videos). The focus groups also found that these services were regularly mentioned by both users and non-users. However, several of the people who participated in the face-to-face interviews believed that there is a group of non-users who are largely unaware that libraries offer access to computers and the Internet or that libraries have websites from which users can access quality online information. They felt that there is a need to realign the public's image of libraries with the changing information environment. This belief is backed by findings from the telephone survey, which show that non-users without access to computers or the Internet at work or home have a low level of awareness of library computer facilities. This suggests an opportunity for libraries to better promote these services to this group.

The library services that are the least well known in the community are library transport services, home delivery services, information services for small business and English language classes. This may well be explained by the fact that some of these services are targeted at particular community segments or that the libraries that respondents visited do not offer these services.

The data was further explored to determine the awareness of transport to the library and home delivery services for those aged 60 years and over, as this is the target market for these services. It was found that this group is significantly more aware of these services than the sample as a whole. Prompted and unprompted awareness of the home delivery service for users for the 60 years and over age group (38% and 10% respectively) is higher than for the overall sample (19% and 5% respectively). Similarly, prompted awareness of transport to the library for the 60 years and over users group (28%) is much higher than for the whole sample (16%).

Despite strong awareness of library services, the focus groups show some perceptions of the library in the community – especially among non-users – that may not accurately reflect reality but which act as barriers to use. For example, the comment was made:

> *I didn't think the libraries were quite that up-to-date [having DVDs etc.] because their books aren't quite up-to-date, but they may be in technology. (LBC participant)*

Issues around non–users and their perceptions of the library are taken up in more detail in Report Three: *Bridging the Gaps*.

2.4 Frequency of library use

Data from the telephone survey highlight that many library users visit their library on a very regular basis. About two-thirds (62%) of library users who took part in the survey visit public libraries at least monthly.

FIGURE 10: FREQUENCY OF LIBRARY USE – TELEPHONE SURVEY
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY

Frequency of visits to public libraries (Library users only)

■ Non-metropolitan (n=52)   ▢ Metropolitan (n=182)
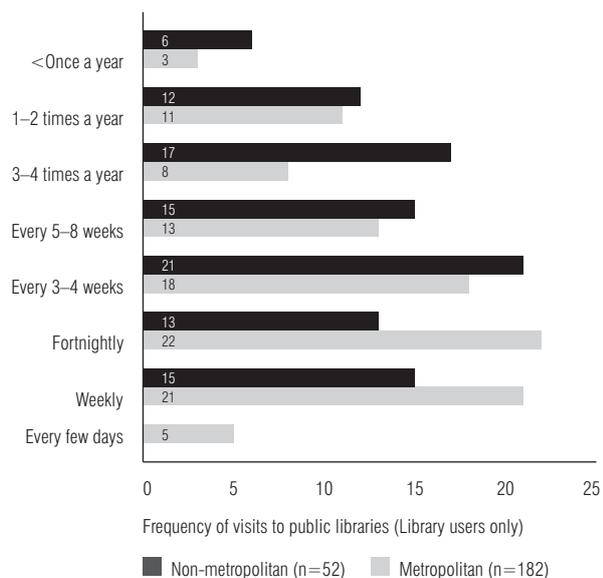
The online survey reported an even higher frequency of visits to the library than the telephone survey. As shown in Figure 11, the majority of library users who participated in the online survey visit frequently, with 76% of users visiting their library at least once a fortnight, 46% visiting weekly and 10% daily. The fact that this figure is higher than for the users interviewed in the telephone survey indicates that the online sample was more likely to include dedicated library users who had taken the time to complete the survey.

FIGURE 11: FREQUENCY OF LIBRARY USE – ONLINE SURVEY
SOURCE: ONLINE SURVEY

% response (n=8596)
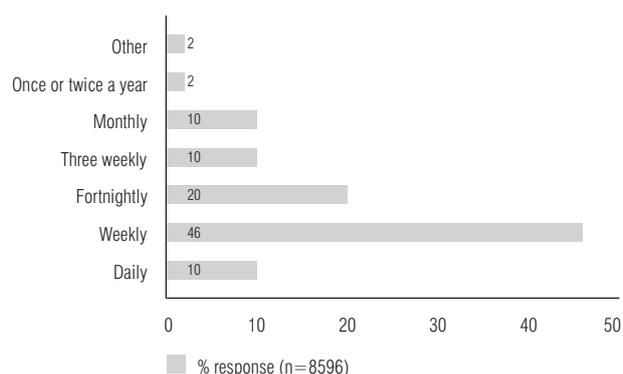
The online survey shows that metropolitan users are more likely to visit their library on a daily basis than those living in non-metropolitan areas. However, it also indicates that a greater proportion of people in non-metropolitan areas visit their library at least fortnightly (80%) compared with those in metropolitan areas (74%).

The online survey found that of those who used the library daily:

- 51% were male and 49% female (compared with 34% male and 66% female of the total sample);

- 37% were married (compared with 47% of the total sample).

The survey also found that CALD users were significantly more likely to visit the library weekly (60%) than other users (45%).

2.5 The reasons people use libraries

A majority of respondents to the online survey, 88% of the total sample, used the library mainly to borrow books and other resources, which is the traditional role of libraries. As shown in Table 5, nearly all users had borrowed books from the library, nearly two-thirds had used audiovisual lending material, and half had borrowed a magazine. Almost half had used computing services, including Internet access.

Usage of some other library services is also reasonably high. More than 10% of users had participated in:

- children's and young adults' services;

- school holiday programs;

- story time;

- regular programs of talks and cultural events;

- local history services.

A third of respondents to the online survey had made use of the community information and one-sixth of respondents had used information about council services. Holdings in languages other than English had been used by 14% of the sample.

Males were more likely than females to use the library for reasons other than borrowing books and other resources. The gender differences listed below are all statistically significant:

- 53% of males used computer services (computer/Internet), while only 44% of females reported doing so;

- 42% of males used newspapers/talking newspapers, while only 29% of females reported doing so;

- more females reported using story time (14%, compared with 7% of males), children's and young adults' services (22% of females and 14% of males), and school holiday programs (15% of females and 10% of males);

- 12% of females reported attending regular programs of talks/lectures/book mornings/cultural events, while 8% of males reported doing so.

Overall the CALD[2] users make greater use of the full range of library services on offer than do English-speaking users. The list below shows the difference in use of services between the two groups:

- newspaper/talking newspapers (79% for CALD and 32% for English);

- magazine loans (93% for CALD and 51% for English);

- computer services i.e. computers/Internet (77% for CALD and 46% for English);

- audiovisual lending i.e. CDs/cassettes/video/DVD (90% for CALD and 62% for English);

- transport to the library (26% for CALD and 6% for English).

TABLE 5: SERVICES USED AT THE LIBRARY
SOURCE: ONLINE SURVEY

Services used at library	% yes (n=8237)
Book loans	95
Audiovisual lending (CD/cassettes/video/DVD)	63
Magazine loans	53
Computer services (PC/Internet)	47
Community information	36
Newspapers/talking newspapers	33
Remote web access to catalogue and databases	29
Local history services	21
Children's and young adults' services	19
Information services for the council	17
Language other than English holdings	14
School holiday programs	13
Story time	12
Homework centre and school support	11
Regular program of talks/lectures/book mornings/cultural events	10
Volunteer/community programs	8
Meeting rooms	8
Reading groups/bookclubs	6
Transport to the library	6
Accommodation/other support for Friends of the Library group	5
Information services for small business	5
Home library service	5
Information literacy programs	5
Toy library	4
Advisory committee with community representation	3
English conversation classes	3
Adaptive technology for those with disabilities	3
Provisions for Indigenous people	2

As expected, language-related services were used more by CALD groups, with 87% using CALD holdings, compared with 12% of English-speaking users and English conversation classes being used by 29% of CALD users and 2% of English-speaking users.

2 In interpreting these results it needs to be recalled that the CALD population is most likely to be under-represented in the online survey because they were surveyed using paper-based copies of the survey – which was harder to administer – and because the survey was only translated into six languages.

3 Individual benefits from public library services

Libraries can be many things to the majority of Australians who belong to them: community centres, leisure centres, access points to the 'information superhighway', business and research centres, education centres and retail centres.

Table 6 summarises the responses obtained when respondents to the telephone survey were asked what they thought were the main benefits of public libraries. It indicates that for most people these benefits are resource-related, with free resources and access to additional resources beyond the school system or home environment being the most frequently mentioned. These results are discussed further below.

TABLE 6: MAIN BENEFITS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES TO THE COMMUNITY
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY

Benefit	% response		Benefit	% response	
	Users (n=215)	Non-users (n=147)		Users (n=215)	Non-users (n=147)
Provides books/reading material	53	38	Available for all ages/income levels/ ethnic backgrounds	6	6
Self-improvement through knowledge gain via research and/or accessing specific expertise	23	24	Tapes/CDs music loans	4	-
Free use/service	21	16	Can find whatever you need to know/want	3	3
Availability of more resources than school/home	17	28	Range of other language services/ books	3	3
Access to the Internet/computers	16	14	Newspapers	3	1
Great meeting place/focal point for community members	10	8	Magazines	3	1
Don't have to buy/if can't afford books	9	8	Video selection	3	1
Children's services/facilities good for kids	9	13	Study area/reading room	2	4
Wide range of educational material/ information/services	8	9	Entertainment/recreational	2	2
Information provision/support service for local area	6	13	Study programs	1	3

3.1 Providing access to information

Information discovery

The variety of books and other materials held by libraries allows community members to constantly discover new material and topics of interest. Of the library users who participated in the focus groups over half saw the variety of books as a key strength of their local library and, when prompted, most (85%) rated their library as good or excellent in regard to variety of books. Of those included in the telephone survey, 91% of users and 85% of non-users thought the library provided a great way to try new authors. Most users (88%) and non-users (85%) agreed that the library provided a wide variety of resources.

You often see things which you wouldn't know about otherwise. (LBC participant)

A number of the community leaders interviewed commented that public libraries provide knowledge and information to those in the community who otherwise could not afford to pay retail prices for books and Internet access.

When I wasn't working I would say it saved my sanity. I would have borrowed 10 or 20 books a week. Now I'm working, I haven't reduced the quantity I borrow – if it wasn't for the access to books and magazines, I would have lost my mind … it just filled such a void – I can't put into words how important it was. Now I make reading and DVD watching a priority. (LBC participant)

Access to multilingual services

The importance of free access to library resources was also emphasised by community leaders from the CALD sector who said that library services provide opportunities for CALD communities to be informed about key issues affecting them.

This was regarded as a very important role for libraries – with many of those interviewed noting that more highly educated and informed individuals contribute to a more successful society.

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

The key informants interviewed as part of the LBC research agreed that in general the diversity of multicultural needs is recognised by public libraries. However, there was also a feeling that more resources are needed to fulfil the growing demand, particularly in relation to computer technology. Internet access was said to be a crucial service, providing a gateway for information in multiple languages for those without Internet access at home or work, and for non-English-speaking users.

Public libraries are regarded as having a significant and particularly important role in areas where literacy rates are very low. They are also seen as providing women from multicultural backgrounds with a place in which they feel comfortable to participate.

Within the CALD communities libraries are seen as helping:

- young people seeking to enter the workforce;
- those seeking access to multilingual services;
- people with mental illnesses, providing information and a place for contact;
- carers who need to find information to help address specific health and welfare issues;
- support workers in the field;
- students, language tutors and parents who are learning side-by-side with their children.

The role of the public library in meeting multicultural needs is seen as even more important in regional areas, where many children – especially those from small private schools – have only limited access to multilingual information within the school system.

Expert advice

Many of the community leaders who were interviewed 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 seen as possessing the skills, qualifications and training to acquire, organise, maintain, and preserve this material, irrespective of the form in which it comes – print, CD-ROM, online or Internet. This expertise is highly valued because it makes it easier for the community to gain access to the information it needs and because it is perceived that no other institution carries out this long-term, systematic work.

> *Library staff have the training, skills and commitment to develop, implement and maintain the high standards of data control to ensure that the vast volume of information available online is not rendered useless by inaccessibility or inconsistency. (LBC participant)*

In the telephone survey 66% of users and 54% of non-users agreed or strongly agreed that their library employs information experts who are crucial for mediating between the user and the information available.

Maintaining local history and culture

Many of those interviewed through the LBC research commented that public libraries provide an important source of information for researchers, people from historical societies and those seeking information

on family histories. It was noted that while academic research is mainly done at universities, there is plenty of scope for public libraries to assist with local research and to be a repository of our histories.

Public libraries are also seen as providing an important venue for the display of work by local artists and community groups.

3.2 Helping individuals develop their skills

A large proportion of those interviewed for the LBC project saw public libraries as having an especially important role in promoting learning and encouraging reading: 90% of users and 93% of non-users who took part in the telephone survey thought the library offers educational benefits to all ages.

> *The role of public libraries as key players at a community level in building learning communities, and helping to form skilled and information literate communities, is fundamental to the future wellbeing of Australian society.*
>
> *As a visible part of civic life, libraries deliver a positive benefit to the education of our community. They are sometimes the main source of material for those with special needs such as hearing, language, physical and mental disabilities. Libraries are a place where you can follow a line of thought or entertain yourself – the latter being particularly important for lower socio-economic groups.*
> *(LBC participants)*

Learning in infancy and childhood

It was noted that education is one of the best ways to bring children out of poverty and that public libraries play a crucial role in promoting literature and education to children and young people. Libraries are viewed as placing a great deal of emphasis on outreach to mothers

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.

Young people/students

Of those who took part in the telephone survey 84% of users and 79% of non-users felt that the library stimulated children and young people to learn and helped them develop learning habits and literacy skills.

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

A number of 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 institutions, 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 in the way it funds public libraries. A comparison of funding was offered: the current total state and local government investment in local public libraries in Australia is only about $500 million per annum or about 6 cents per Australian per day. This is comparable with the annual expenditure of just one large Australian university with 35,000 students.

Supporting basic literacy and encouraging reading

Libraries open up another world to people – the world of reading. (LBC participant)

Public libraries are considered by users as being influential in expanding their reading repertoire. Library staff make useful recommendations on books to read and set generous upper limits on borrowings, making it easier for users to 'try' a range of authors and subject areas. Services such as Author Reading Programs and story-telling to young people were seen as excellent services. It was felt that currently there are far too few of these programs and consideration should be given to extending them.

It was pointed out that libraries are now facilitating development of IT literacy among users in much the same way that they have encouraged literacy in the written word.

Access to new technology and skills

The observation was made that the role of libraries, while still that of a repository of knowledge and a place from which to borrow books, is changing rapidly to meet the demands of new technology. The Internet is being used throughout Victorian libraries to brighten, widen and enhance the world of residents.

Free Internet is having a huge impact – it has changed the demographic user base and has helped those in remote locations who have poor telecommunications connection and therefore [poor] access at home. (LBC participant)

The online survey showed that a third of users make use of the Internet to access catalogues and databases. Workstations are also used to find and apply for jobs, for school and university assignments and for emailing friends.

Everyday, hundreds of Victorians access databases provided through the Gulliver project.

If done right, information needs are satisfied and communities become smarter and quicker at gaining information.
(LBC participants)

In the telephone survey 75% of users and 68% of non-users agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that libraries provide access to a range of otherwise inaccessible technologies; 59% of users and 56% of non-users agreed that the library can help overcome a fear of technology.

Community leaders noted that public libraries are regarded as at the leading edge in embracing new technologies for service delivery and they have done this on what many interviewed described as shoestring budgets. One person commented: 'Imagine the network that could be built across Australia if governments were to make public libraries a funding priority.'

Despite this, public libraries were seen to be experiencing constraints on their capacity to provide the community with access to ICT and skills in this area. While these constraints are being experienced to some degree by all types of libraries, it was pointed out that

the community is seeking more access to information, and they are coming into public libraries to get that information. Public libraries need the means to provide that information – for the good of the State, as well as the good of the individual. (LBC participant)

Library users placed particular importance upon libraries keeping pace with technological developments. This included not only providing access to appropriate hardware and software but also library staff having the

necessary skills in the use of new technology. It was thought that if libraries did not do this they would run the risk of lessening their relevance to the community.

The online environment has added another layer to the service delivery provided by public libraries. The demands for the traditional services provided have not diminished. Library staff have just taken on their new roles while still working in their old roles. Staff are the most important investment and will give the greatest return. They need to be constantly able to upgrade their skills as the online environment changes. They are the keys to the information. This is no longer available just in books so traditional skills need to be upgraded to work within the new and emerging online environments. They also need to acquire new skills for such things as web page design and maintenance, training the public in the use of online information, evaluating technologies and telecommunications options. (LBC participant)

Stimulating thinking

Many in the community recognise libraries as a very important source of stimulation, providing exposure to a great variety of new ideas and literature. Some Victorian libraries host community seminars and talks, which introduce a range of new skills and concepts to participants. The online survey shows about 12% of females attending regular programs of talks, lectures, book mornings and cultural events, and 8% of males doing so. Focus group participants commented on the learning and mental stimulation they get from regular library talks programs.

I am a professional person who's extremely busy with children ... but I need a lot of mental stimulation. I don't have time to read books at the moment. It's just not on. So for me to be able to come out and hear a seminar ... [on] parenting, or I had one on writing romance novels – was stimulating. I got to talk to other people. It didn't cost me anything. Thank goodness something was free for a change and I could go to it. I put all my money into the children pretty much.

I do really appreciate that I can do [short seminars] for nothing here. I don't have a lot of spare cash to do it for myself. There might be a craft course or whatever and I can come and do a night and have a go at it and it's not going to cost me $150 for a ten-week course and I then have to buy things on top of that.

I just think seminars are excellent. I would come every occasion they were available. I would hate to lose that because that's what the library is doing really well for me at the moment.
(LBC participants)

Participants in the focus groups noted that community seminars can inspire adults and introduce them to a range of new skills and concepts (e.g. creative writing) and this often encourages ongoing adult learning.

Libraries were seen by some community leaders as offering self-awakening for those who use the service. This was typified by a 40-year-old mother, who said:

I joined a rock 'n' roll dance group and I wish I'd done it years ago. I never knew things like that existed.

4 How libraries add value to their communities

The modern library is the community's cultural, educational and meeting place.

A. BUNDY (2003) *CHANGING LIVES: MAKING THE DIFFERENCE – THE 21ST CENTURY PUBLIC LIBRARY*, PAPER DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE FRIENDS OF MITCHAM LIBRARY SERVICE (SA), ADELAIDE, 31 JULY 2002.

Regardless of whether they use libraries or not, the LBC research shows that Victorians place significant value on the availability of free library services in their communities. Public libraries are seen as offering a warm and welcoming environment for people from all walks of life. Both users and non-users acknowledge libraries as a safe, comfortable and non-judgemental environment.

An overwhelming majority of library users and non-users who took part in the telephone survey saw the library as an important part of the community:

- 88% of users and 80% of non-users agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that public libraries make a positive contribution to their local community;

- 68% of users and 56% of non-users agreed or strongly agreed that their library had a very influential impact on community wellbeing;

- similarly, in the online survey 81% of library users strongly believed that the library is an important part of their community.

These views are supported by qualitative results from other stages of this research project, including the focus groups and key influencer consultation.

4.1 Social interaction

Community leaders noted that while explicit recognition of public libraries as the hub of neighbourhoods and communities is still in its infancy, the reality is that they are fast becoming the 'village greens', 'neighbourhood' or 'community hubs' in many parts of Victoria: places where people can meet, and exchange ideas and information. Many libraries now provide coffee and tea to strengthen this role. People come, spend time, interact and very often tap into the online environment for the first time. There is plenty of scope to expand this role within the nucleus of a small community, whether it is a country town or a metropolitan suburb.

Responding to the telephone survey, 75% of users and 72% of non-users agreed or strongly agreed that the library is a good place for community interaction.

> *The library is an 'alive' place for people to interact – not just for collection users, but for the wider community.*
> *(LBC participant)*

As Figure 12 from the online survey shows, a large proportion of users ask staff for help while at the library, and 71% talk with staff, which indicates a high level of interaction. The results that 34% talk with other library users and 22% talk with people who would not normally be their friend supports the notion that libraries have the propensity to enhance social capital through widening networks and providing an environment for interacting with other community members.

> *You have a group of people all interested in the same thing and you can really talk to each other.*
> *(LBC participant)*

FIGURE 12: ACTIVITIES PEOPLE UNDERTAKE AT THE LIBRARY
SOURCE: ONLINE SURVEY

When at the library do you …?

None of the below	11
Meet new people	18
Talk with people who would not normally be your friend	22
Talk with other library users	34
See people you know	43
Talk with staff	71
Ask staff for help	72

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

% response (n=8566)
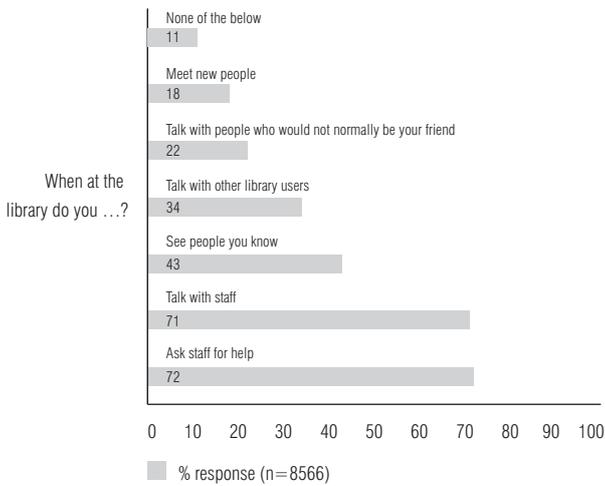
Some of the people who participated in the focus groups felt that the library was able to channel lonely people away from services such as general practitioners and counselling toward libraries as a social outlet.

> *You can come and sit in a library and you might still be by yourself and reading, but you're not alone, there are other people around you. So I think [that] is a certain aspect where community is important.*
> *(LBC participant)*

As expected, due to language barriers, CALD users are much less likely to:

- ask staff for help (62% compared with 72% of English-speaking users);
- talk with staff (45% compared with 72%);
- talk with other library users (15% compared with 35%).

Interestingly, however, the proportions that stated they meet new people at the library were similar (18% for English-speaking and 14% for CALD).

Among the community leaders from the CALD sector there is a strong belief that public libraries support social engagement and that this is directly linked to the development of healthier communities. Libraries are a focal point for the CALD communities and are regarded as safe places for people to enrich their lives through a range of activities. The library is a great social gathering place in which people from an ethnic background can meet others interested in similar issues. This helps to build a feeling of community and a sense of respect for each other.

4.2 Promoting social inclusion

> *It doesn't matter who you are, when you walk through the door you have equal privileges. (LBC participant)*

There is a general belief that the library serves a broad cross-section of the community. Many libraries were said to attempt inclusiveness by providing exhibitions of local groups' products, such as art or woodwork. Some particular libraries are reported as being successful in establishing book collections that reflect large ethnic communities in their area.

> *We are also aware of other nationalities because they not only see our Italian and Chinese collection but they then ask, 'Have you got German or Dutch?', so you become more aware of how many migrants are in our community. (LBC participant)*

Community leaders observed that people in the community generally hold the opinion that public libraries are there for all: 'You don't need to be rich or powerful to use libraries, so the broad cross-section of the community are potential users.' Libraries have a long track record of engaging with communities and providing access to information for all Victorians.

> *The service rates highly and usage is 'way up there' alongside the support shown for football.*
>
> *The local public library is available to all Australians from 'cradle to grave'.*
> *(LBC participants)*

Free access for lower socio-economic groups is seen as extremely important. The public library provides access to the Internet for people who can't afford such a service at home.

The mobile library is an excellent resource for smaller and remote communities. Mobile services were praised for their flexibility in service delivery and the fact that library staff are usually willing to be proactive and to try out new ideas.

Mobile libraries (and their drivers) play a crucial role in rural life and have an essential role in facilitating social interaction between rural residents, particularly lonely elderly people and farmers' wives who live out of town. Customers appreciate a librarian who takes a genuine interest in their lives and for one elderly housebound lady her weekly visit became the one thing she could look forward to.

> *The [mobile] library saved her life. (LBC participant)*

The mobile library drivers themselves can be what makes the difference, providing personalised service, talking to customers and picking out books for them.

> *It's the most positive job. People are very happy to see you ... they know they can talk to someone who cares. I make them feel good about themselves and then they don't go to the doctor so much ... You win their trust. You hear a lot of their troubles. (LBC participant)*

The service encourages community interaction. For some people, their mobile library visit is the only time they meet up with particular friends. Often there are five to six people using the facility at once.

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

Discussion at the focus groups suggests that public libraries enrich the lives of marginalised groups, including isolated elderly people, by providing a central access point for social interaction, information and recreation. Elderly users were said to look forward to their regular library visits. Caring and patient library staff were seen as an important factor in ensuring that marginalised groups felt welcome.

Public libraries are regarded as a great leveler 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. They offer people something meaningful to do. They can engage newcomers and help get them involved with other sectors of the community.

> *Libraries resource people and help them cope with their new environment, by providing a place to access local information and reports on community issues.*
>
> *Libraries have a big possibility of making people more community minded.*
> *(LBC participants)*

4.3 Bridging the generation gap

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

> *It's one thing the whole family can do together and we are all very different ... once we get there we all find our own little nook ... what we want to do, but we're here together.*
> *(LBC participant)*

4.4 Providing a focal point for the community

For many of the people who participated in the LBC research the public library is the 'jewel in the crown' for their area or neigbourhood.

> *It is the holder of much of the knowledge about the local area and gives us a link to our past, present and future.*
>
> *Libraries offer a local connection with a strong civic pride and a focus on our history.*
>
> *Civic pride and fondness is generated by a well-used and friendly library environment.*
> *(LBC participants)*

More than two-thirds of respondents to the telephone survey (67% of users and 66% of non-users) felt that the 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 benefit.

Findings from the online survey suggest the pivotal role libraries can play in disseminating community information. One-third of respondents had actually made use of the community information found within a library and one-sixth of respondents had used information services for the council.

Those who attended the focus groups noted the role played by the library in publicising and growing community group memberships. This occurred through library users being exposed to information about interest groups and seminars via library notice boards and brochure stands and displays of local products, artistry and crafts.

Community leaders noted that in many regional areas the library fulfils the role of a community centre, as well

as providing a source of information, whether through the Internet or books. Provided they have a good physical location close to local government offices and shopping centres, libraries are able to service their communities well. Accessibility is seen by many of those interviewed as being very important. If libraries are isolated, relocation to a site with good parking and accessible public transport was seen as an important option to be canvassed.

4.5   Differences between libraries

Involvement of libraries in their communities was seen as varying significantly from library to library. Some libraries were said to have limited involvement in their local community outside providing mothers' and young children's activities or networks, while others had more significant and wider involvement.

Those libraries that did try to extend their offerings to wider groups tended to use face-to-face initiatives such as:

- outreach to local shopping malls with registration forms, book selections and other displays;
- outreach to kindergartens;
- outreach to CALD groups to increase awareness of resources;
- presentations to clubs, societies and other groups.

It was clear from the consultation involved in this project that the strength of social engagement in metropolitan areas varied widely between branches. The geographic positioning of libraries adjacent to community facilities, such as shopping centres or main streets, enabled some libraries to engage the community better.

Key influencers believe that regional Victorian libraries are closer to the 'grassroots' than their city counterparts,

given that staff tend to live within the community and are more likely to be familiar with local people and organisations. The challenge for these libraries was seen as remaining neutral and not being involved in community disputes.

> *For a country town the library is a meeting place and reference centre which adds value both economically and socially. People take civic pride in the facility – take it away and you lose that first point of contact with local government. (LBC participant)*

The focus groups suggested that key predictive factors of community connectedness are:

- the time put into informal and formal community consultation (relates closely to staff commitment to marketing and community development);
- how well community consultation data is actioned by library management;
- whether libraries offer home library services (this predicted closer connections with their elderly ratepayers);
- whether libraries offer and effectively promote non-English language resources and activities;
- whether staff develop relationships with local groups (by sub-letting or providing meeting rooms free of charge);
- how innovative staff are in organising events and providing information of interest to their communities;
- levels of staffing allocated to community outreach/marketing;
- levels of staffing allocated to customer service (low levels mean inadequate time to connect well with user needs).

5 Satisfaction with library services

It still seems to come as a surprise to local authorities which engage in surveys of client satisfaction, just how highly libraries typically rate.

A. BUNDY (2003) *BEST INVESTMENT: THE MODERN PUBLIC LIBRARY AS SOCIAL CAPITAL*, PAPER PRESENTED AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF FRIENDS OF LIBRARIES AUSTRALIA, ALTONA, VICTORIA, 27 AUGUST 2003.

5.1 Library performance

When library users who took part in the telephone survey were asked to rate the performance of public libraries on a range of activities they rated these all highly, with average performance ratings all above 4.0 (corresponding to 'good' – see Figure 13). Multiple regression analyses were run to determine if any library attributes were key predictors of overall satisfaction with library services. Three variables emerged as significant predictors of overall satisfaction: variety of books, customer service, and Internet access and other computer facilities. These attributes all have very high current performance ratings, as does overall satisfaction with library services, which 94% of the respondents rated as excellent or good.

Users who attended the focus groups were also asked to rate their overall satisfaction with library services. Their responses showed high satisfaction ratings, with average ratings of 8.2 on a scale of 1 to 10.

A strong signal of the satisfaction with libraries is that 82% of respondents to the online survey had recommended their library to others. This recommendation was given for information resources, information technology, community information, job search and so on. In other words, a library is recommended for a multiplicity of reasons, including involvement in a community activity.

Community leaders from the CALD sector commented on the strong 'feel good' attitude to libraries within the community. It was remarked that the importance of libraries for ethnic groups has been cemented since the terrorist attack in the United States on 11 September 2001 – as even more people are now seeking a safe place to access multilingual material, and libraries are the focus of that search. Opinions among community leaders varied, however, regarding the standard

of services being offered. Concern was expressed that while many libraries are proactive in meeting multicultural needs, others 'haven't moved along with the times'.

FIGURE 13: RANKING OF LIBRARY PERFORMANCE ACROSS A RANGE OF ACTIVITIES
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY
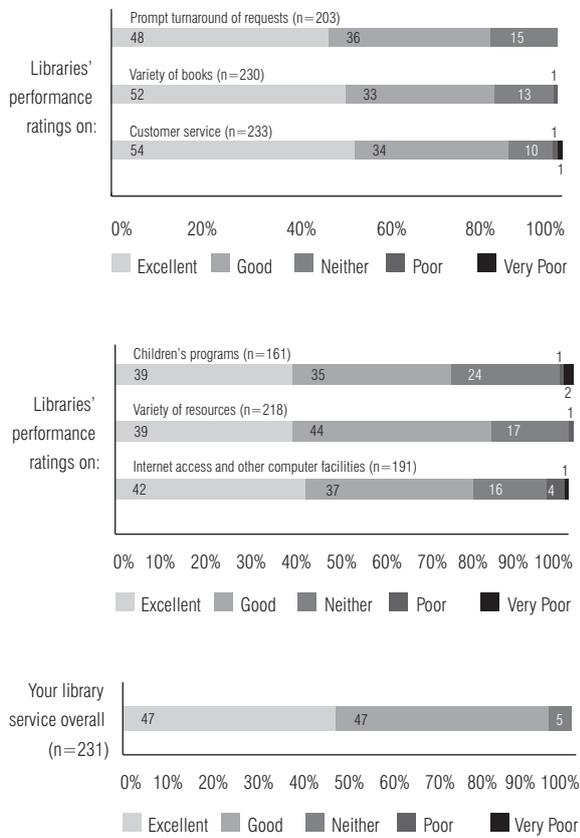
Differences between users and non-users

The telephone survey revealed that non-users of libraries were as likely to express a positive attitude to the library as regular library users.

Non-users rated highly all services offered by public libraries. This probably reflects the importance they place on libraries as a resource for the young, the elderly and the financially disadvantaged, rather than for themselves at this point in their lives. This hypothesis is supported by the high ratings given by non-users to computer services and adaptive technology for the disabled; this strongly suggests that such importance ratings are based on concerns for the wider community, rather than for themselves.

Community leaders suggested that there is a universal belief in our community that lifelong learning and self-development are important, which results in an acceptance of the need for free access to libraries. Government officers see the egalitarianism of the system as a huge asset.

> *... it is accessible to all and has a high approval rating, even by people that don't use the service. They want to know it's there. They are a high profile resource with an excellent capacity to deliver information and entertainment. Libraries are greatly valued by the community – try closing one! (LBC participant)*

5.2 Satisfaction levels

Importance of library services

Each focus group attendee was asked to rate the importance of 28 library services (a list of these is provided in the Attachment) to the wider community.

As Figure 14 shows, according to this rating the most important services offered by a library are lending services, computing services, remote access to catalogues and databases, children's and young adults' services, school holiday programs and story time. Book loans are clearly seen as a core service by all groups. These are also the services on which libraries achieved higher levels of satisfaction from users.

It is not surprising that children's services rank so well given that females aged 30–40 years with dependent children are high users of library services. It can reasonably be expected that such users will place high value on services for children, especially programs offered during school holiday periods.

It is likely that the library services rated at a lower level by users – transport to the library, small business information, provisions for Indigenous groups and LOTE (languages other than English) holdings – are simply less commonly used because they are not relevant to a cross-section of users.

The figure also shows just how passionately library staff believe in the services they are delivering. For 10 of the 28 services, staff provide a mean importance rating of over 80%. Lower ratings for toy libraries probably reflect the phasing out of this facility in many areas as other bodies take over this function.

FIGURE 14: MEAN IMPORTANCE RATING OF LIBRARY SERVICES BY USERS, NON-USERS AND LIBRARY STAFF
SOURCE: FOCUS GROUPS

Importance (mean) 1=low importance, 5=high importance

■ Users   ■ Non-users   ▢ Staff

Importance (mean) 1=low importance, 5=high importance

■ Users   ■ Non-users   ▢ Staff
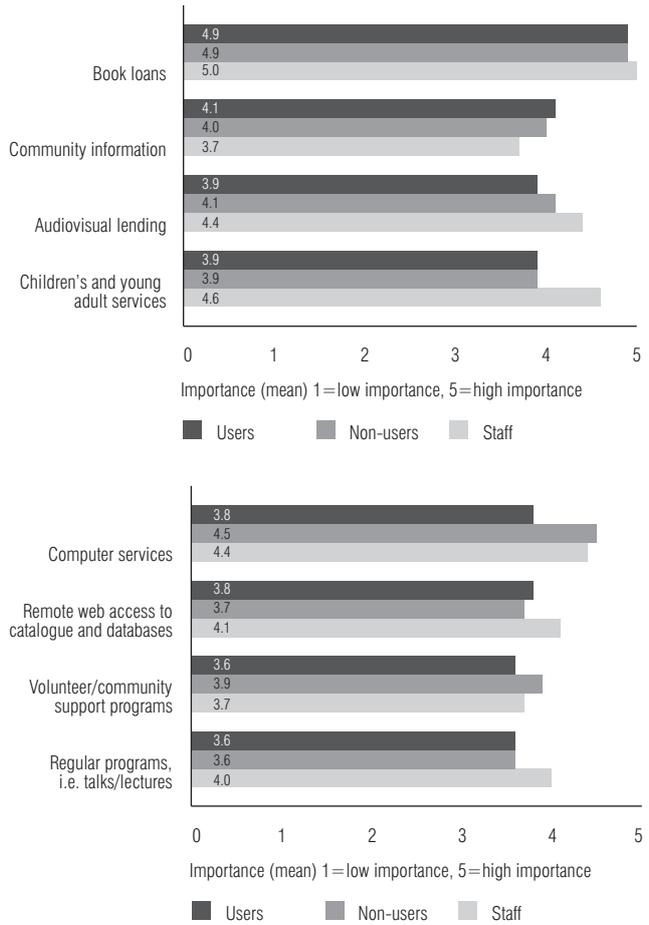
FIGURE 14 (CONT.): MEAN IMPORTANCE RATING OF LIBRARY SERVICES BY USERS, NON-USERS AND LIBRARY STAFF
SOURCE: FOCUS GROUPS

35

Chart 1 (top left)

Service	Users	Non-users	Staff
Newspapers/talking newspapers	3.5	3.9	4.1
Adaptive technology for those with disabilities	3.5	3.8	3.7
School holiday programs	3.5	3.7	4.5
Information services for the council	3.5	3.4	3.4

Importance (mean) 1=low importance, 5=high importance

■ Users ■ Non-users ▪ Staff

Chart 2 (top right)

Service	Users	Non-users	Staff
Meeting rooms	3.5	3.1	3.1
Local history services	3.4	3.8	4.2
Magazine loans	3.4	3.7	4.3
Homework centre and school support	3.4	3.6	3.8

Importance (mean) 1=low importance, 5=high importance

■ Users ■ Non-users ▪ Staff

Chart 3 (middle left)

Service	Users	Non-users	Staff
Reading groups/bookclubs	3.3	4.3	3.6
Information literacy programs	3.3	4.0	3.9
Home library service	3.3	3.8	4.7
Story time	3.2	3.5	4.4

Importance (mean) 1=low importance, 5=high importance

■ Users ■ Non-users ▪ Staff

Chart 4 (middle right)

Service	Users	Non-users	Staff
Advisory committee with community reps	3.2	3.3	3.3
Transport to the library	3.2	3.7	3.6
Accom/support for Friends of the Library	3.1	3.0	3.4
Information services for small business	3.0	3.5	2.8

Importance (mean) 1=low importance, 5=high importance

■ Users ■ Non-users ▪ Staff

Chart 5 (bottom left)

Service	Users	Non-users	Staff
Language other than English holdings	2.8	3.7	3.7
Provisions for Indigenous people	2.8	3.4	3.4
Toy library	2.8	3.4	2.3
English conversation classes	2.5	3.3	2.9

Importance (mean) 1=low importance, 5=high importance

■ Users ■ Non-users ▪ Staff

Gap analysis

Gap analysis – which examines the difference between the importance assigned to a service and user satisfaction with it – was used to highlight where library performance exceeds expectation, and where performance does not meet expectations.

Figures 15 and 16, drawing on data from the online survey and from the focus groups, display the importance of 28 services provided by libraries to their to users, the satisfaction with these services and the gap between them.

Figure 15, from the online survey, shows that of the 28 services tested, 23 satisfaction ratings exceeded the stated importance ratings, indicating that libraries are often exceeding the service expectations of their users. Resources that were both more important and achieved relatively higher satisfaction scores include the home library service, local history services and CALD/information literacy programs.

Community information showed equal importance and satisfaction ratings.

However, four services did not totally meet expectation (importance ratings). Those that showed a discrepancy were:

- book loans;
- computer services (computer/Internet);
- audiovisual lending (CD/cassette/video/DVD);
- adaptive technology for those with disabilities.

This discrepancy was very small in each case.

While users were generally satisfied with the level of computer services provided by libraries, it should be noted that the qualitative research revealed that users' expectations are not high regarding the number of computers available and their modernity. Remote web access achieved a lower satisfaction score. Reasons for this are likely to include speed of access and the level of ease with which searches are conducted.

The results also indicate scope for improvement in children's and young adults' services, school holiday programs and story time. While libraries satisfy users with these services, the scores suggest that libraries could either offer more of these services or a higher quality of service.

Compared with men, there was a tendency for women to assign higher importance to all the services that a library offers. Women were also likely to be more satisfied with the services provided.

FIGURE 15: GAP BETWEEN THE LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE USERS ASSIGNED TO LIBRARY SERVICES AND SATISFACTION WITH THESE SERVICES – ONLINE SURVEY
SOURCE: ONLINE SURVEY

Book loans
4.8   4.5
Computer services (PC/Internet)
4.2   4.1
Audiovisual lending (CD/cassette/video/DVD)
4.2   4.0
Magazine loans
4.0   4.2

0   1   2   3   4   5

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Newspapers/talking newspapers
3.9   4.1
Children's and young adult services
3.9   4.1
Community information
3.9   3.9
Remote web access to catalogue and databases
3.8   4.1

0   1   2   3   4   5

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Home library service
3.8   3.9
Adaptive technology for those with disabilities
3.8   3.6
Local history services
3.8   3.9
School holiday programs
3.7   4.1

0   1   2   3   4   5

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Homework centre and school support
3.7   3.8
Language other than English holdings
3.6   3.7
Information literacy programs
3.6   3.8
Story time
3.6   4.2

0   1   2   3   4   5

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Volunteer/community programs
3.5   3.7
Regular program of talks/lectures/book mornings/cultural events
3.5   3.8
Information services for the council
3.5   3.8
Transport to the library
3.5   3.7

0   1   2   3   4   5

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Reading groups/bookclubs
3.4   3.8
Advisory committee with community representation
3.4   3.5
Provisions for Indigenous people
3.3   3.4
Meeting rooms
3.3   3.8

0   1   2   3   4   5

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

English conversation classes
3.3   3.7
Information services for small business
3.2   3.6
Accom/other support for Friends of the Library group
3.2   3.6
Toy library
3.2   3.5

0   1   2   3   4   5

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

FIGURE 16: GAP BETWEEN THE LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE USERS ASSIGNED TO LIBRARY SERVICES AND SATISFACTION WITH THESE SERVICES – FOCUS GROUPS
SOURCE: FOCUS GROUPS

Book loans
4.9   4.4
Community information
4.1   3.8
Children's and young adult services
3.9   4.0
Audiovisual lending
3.9   3.4

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Computer services
3.8   3.8
Remote web access to catalogue and databases
3.8   3.7
Regular programs, i.e. talks/lectures
3.6   3.4
Volunteer/community support programs
3.6   3.4

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Newspapers/talkingnewspapers
3.5   4.1
Meeting rooms
3.5   3.8
School holiday programs
3.5   3.7
Information services for the council
3.5   3.4

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Adaptive technology for those with disabilities
3.5   3.1
Magazine loans
3.4   3.8
Local history services
3.4   3.6
Homework centre and school support
3.4   3.3

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Home library service
3.3   3.4
Reading groups/book clubs
3.3   3.2
Information literacy programs
3.3   3.1
Story time
3.2   3.8

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Advisory committee with community reps
3.2   2.9
Transport to the library
3.2   2.8
Accom/support for Friends of the Library
3.1   3.4
Information services for small business
3.0   2.7

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Toy library
2.8   3.1
Language other than English holdings
2.8   2.8
Provisions for Indigenous people
2.8   2.7
English conversation classes
2.5   2.8

1=low satisfaction, 5=high satisfaction

Importance   Satisfaction

Comparable findings came out of the focus groups as shown in Figure 16. These results were obtained from nine focus groups with library users. They indicate that libraries still have scope to add greater value to their respective communities by improving services in a number of areas, including audiovisual lending, regular programs of talks and lectures, support programs involving volunteers, information literacy programs, transport to the library and homework support centres.

This gap analysis also shows that satisfaction with community information services is low compared with its importance rating. Three-quarters of users rate it as important or very important, but only three in five are satisfied with community materials libraries provide.

Similar analysis of staff ranking of service importance and satisfaction show that library staff underestimate the importance of libraries as a source of community information for users. This has implications in terms of the attention that should be given to this area in the future. Other comparisons between the importance and satisfaction ratings by users and staff show that library users are significantly less satisfied than staff with small business information and CALD holdings, and that both staff and users recognise that public transport to many libraries is poor.

5.3 Particular strengths

When community leaders were asked what libraries do well, there was a wide variety of responses. In general these indicate that libraries provide a balanced book-stock – catering for a wide public need – inside a great public resource. The service generally reflects the needs of the community, particularly where staff have actively engaged with the community. The service provides books, DVDs, music, foreign language material, magazines and newspapers to those who cannot afford to buy these in volume, and is a good source of recreation for this sector of the community.

FIGURE 17: AREAS IN WHICH PUBLIC LIBRARIES EXCEL
SOURCE: TELEPHONE SURVEY

Variety of books 52
Customer service 37
Variety of resources 36
Internet access 21
Children's programs 12
Prompt turn-around of requests 10

% response (n=197)
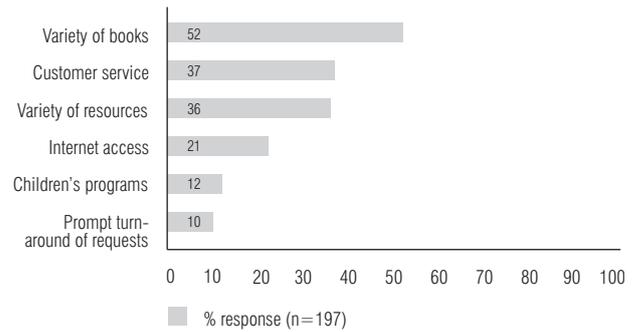
These sentiments are echoed in the results of the telephone survey (see Figure 17). Many respondents to the telephone survey mentioned that their library excelled in the variety of books available (52%). Customer service (37%) and variety of resources (36%) were also viewed as key strengths.

There was broad agreement that library staff were a key strength of public libraries as, in general, they had embraced 'the new way of doing things'. Community leaders thought that librarians had a high profile within the community and were able to engender loyalty among their customers. Other comments included:

They show good leadership by working closely with neighbourhood houses, cultural groups and the council of aging to fulfil an information and entertainment need in the community.

In some areas libraries specialise in areas such as local historical collections where they are regarded as the custodians of local knowledge and information.
(LBC participants)

Results from the focus groups and telephone survey also emphasise that library staff are a critical asset to the public library system, doing much to nurture the warm and welcoming environment in libraries. Over a third of library users mentioned customer service unprompted as an area in which their library excels. This attribute also gains the highest prompted ratings of all measured.

Participants in the focus groups recognised library staff as:

• providing personalised service and care;

• providing prompt turnaround of individual tasks;

• providing expert assistance in identifying relevant information;

• having good interpersonal skills;

• providing new users with self-directed information retrieval skills;

• having the ability to engage with a wide range of sectors of the community;

• showing persistence and commitment to their work.

Many regular library users said they felt empowered by their use of libraries. This partly came from a belief that library staff listened and acted on their suggestions for new book titles and seminars.

5.4   What libraries could do better

As well as being asked about the areas in which libraries excel, participants in the LBC project were asked what they thought libraries could do better. The responses focused on improvements in rural services, the need for more appropriate buildings and location, extended opening hours and outreach and, not surprisingly, the need to provide a greater amount of service to the community.

Rural services

Many of the community leaders expressed the view that country Victorians are not getting access to library services that are comparable with those available to city or regional users. Council amalgamations of the early to mid 1990s are seen as having had a particularly negative impact on rural library services – a perceived outcome is that the distribution of funding for public libraries is now more skewed against rural communities.

It was noted that given the distances between population centres, and the low population density outside the major cities, many Victorians use a library service that is not located in a traditional library building. Services are offered in a range of settings, including mobile libraries, depots where books and other materials are left by library staff, and joint school/community libraries. It was felt that in these circumstances many people are being denied access to the Internet and other facilities found in libraries. It was suggested that work could be done to investigate innovative ways of delivering these services to rural and isolated communities. (Report Four of the LBC project, *Showcasing the Best,* identifies some of the innovative ways in which libraries are responding to these needs.)

Quality of library buildings and location

Many people who took part in the LBC project commented that the quality of library buildings throughout the State is extremely variable. Numerous buildings date from the 1960s and 1970s and 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 Public Library Infrastructure Program, Living Libraries, has done much to improve facilities – but it was emphasised that much remains to be done.

The types of improvements needed include:

- buildings that are more vibrant and brighter;

- locating libraries close to shops and other facilities that people use on a regular basis;

- creating more comfortable spaces for people, with access to café style facilities;

- generally upgrading the quality of buildings and infrastructure.

It was argued that building depreciation is not adequate in funding allocations from the State Government.

Without these improvements there are limits to the extent to which many 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.

Information resources

The following observations and suggestions were made:

- Capital acquisitions, particularly of books, have decreased in real terms and this trend should be reversed.

- Topical information should be provided, especially for older people.

- Business listings for local services could be displayed in a prominent location.

- Welcome packs with information on the local area would help tourists and new residents – this could include such things as relevant government contacts and information on health, schooling, emergency services and transport.

Opening hours

The comment was made that the primary function of libraries as a public service is to 'open the doors', and that opening hours should meet the needs of the people. Longer opening hours were wanted – particularly on weekends.

Opening hours were talked about a great deal in relation to the CALD community where casualisation of the workforce has meant that people from these communities often have less predictable hours in which they can access public facilities. It was suggested that there is a need to give further thought to opening hours and researching the needs of each community.

Outreach

Community leaders felt that encouragement must be given to programs that are designed to engage people outside of the traditional library system. It was suggested that:

- mobile library services be extended – community consultation could identify the changing needs of the region;

- libraries become more involved in travelling exhibitions or become sites for organisations wishing for broader community exposure;

- libraries investigate the possibility of offering drive-through services;

- libraries explore options for allowing users to order library resources over the Internet.

Computer access

It was acknowledged that the State Government had funded the initial rollout of new technology in libraries, but there was concern that there is little money to expand and update this infrastructure to meet the growing demand in the community.

The service has been successful, but this hasn't been recognised and translated into more money.

Funding is needed to increase and upgrade the technology infrastructure – recurrent and replacement funding are the biggest hurdles to maintaining pace with expectations of users.
(LBC participants)

It was also felt that a system of training that helps users develop better computer competency should be in place.

Services for people with a disability

Services currently provided to older people and those with a disability are often seen as deficient, particularly for those with sight impairment. It was believed that studies are needed to better identify how public libraries can improve delivery to this sector.

More digital conversion of books would help some sectors of our community. (LBC participant)

Also, while it was noted that the layout for disabled people is good in newer libraries, it was felt that this is deficient in many older libraries. It was argued that funding for improved buildings is essential.

Services for young people

Gaps were seen to exist in some libraries in meeting the needs of young people in the community. Engagement of young people was seen as a high priority – especially in rural communities where many young people have only limited recreational activities and are often leaving the 'bush for the city' once they reach 18. Young males were identified by all groups as in particular need of customised offerings to interest them in reading and learning.

The kinds of things people wanted to see included:

- more youth programs;
- more creativity in the use of mobile libraries (e.g. linking them to a mobile youth centre and providing Internet access);
- better integration with existing government programs;
- introduction of theme nights and seminars of interest to particular parts of the community;
- consideration given to allowing youth organisations and play groups bulk loans from the library.

5.5 The dollar value of public libraries

Those attending the focus groups were asked to place a value on the library services available to them. Many saw it as nearly impossible to value the social capital of libraries in monetary terms. They felt that any reckoning must account for the contribution libraries make to community health and general community wellbeing. Aspects of the contribution of libraries to their communities that were seen as impossible to value in monetary terms include:

- their role in facilitating community interaction;

- the learning and mental stimulation people get from regular library talks and programs;

- the value a user puts on just being in a vibrant place, a place of warmth and comfort, and being able to share a chat and a smile with a librarian;

- the education of young people in learning habits and literacy;

- the satisfaction community groups get from showcasing their efforts in the library;

- the ability of library resources to channel lonely people away from services such as doctors and counsellors, toward libraries as a social outlet.

Nevertheless, both users and library staff did come up with estimates of the monetary value of particular library services.

TABLE 7: ESTIMATES OF THE MONETARY VALUE OF LIBRARY SERVICES AND RESOURCES
SOURCE: LBC STUDY

Service	$ Value
Children's programs • School holidays • Story times	$20 – $30 per child $10 – $16 per child
Adult programs • Talks • Day workshops	$10 – $15 per person $30 – $60 per person
Borrowing books	$20 – $30 per book
Reference books	$200 – $250 per book or $50 per month
Using written resources (e.g. newspapers on site)	$2 per item or $100 per month
Using audiovisual services on site	$10 per hour
Staff consultation on information retrieval	$60 – $100 per hour
Processing a loan	$3.50 per book
Home library service	$150 per person per year
DVDs	$7 each
CDs/videos	$4 – $12 each
Internet	$5 – $8 per hour or $50 per month

In terms of the value obtained from libraries overall, this was obviously seen to depend on the range and type of services to which libraries could provide access. Among users of large libraries with large resource bases, the following estimated annual values were provided:

- $500+ per year for light users;

- $4,000 per year for heavy book readers;

- $7,000 – $10,000 per year for frequent users of a range of library resources.

For smaller libraries the value was placed as:

- $200 – $300 per year for light users;

- $1,000 per year for heavy users.

Some library users were asked to imagine that they were in a country where governments did not fund public libraries and instead users paid library membership annually, like a health club membership. Given this scenario, many users felt that it would be reasonable to charge users from $200 – $500 per year for the library services they made use of (though many acknowledged their value as far beyond this).

Although people at the focus group realised they were being asked to consider a hypothetical situation, many expressed concern about the possibility of users being asked to pay for library services. They emphasised that a significant proportion of library users would not be in a position to meet such charges. There was overwhelming support for maintaining public libraries as a free service.

In this regard, a number of community leaders noted that the benefits flowing from free public libraries are not just individual benefits but benefits for the community in terms of better informed citizens and enhanced social networks and for the nation in terms of enhanced wellbeing, increased literacy and educational standards.

Many of these benefits would be lost in a user pays system.

An analysis of how library users benefit from and make use of libraries through the LBC project suggests that if local government and the Victorian Government were not funding a free public library system, additional public funding would be needed in the following areas to maintain current quality-of-life standards:

- support services for young mothers;

- aged care services;

- community counselling and psychiatric services;

- social workers;

- a significantly greater book budget for primary school libraries;

- additional primary school classes on how to source information;

- expanded/new community notice boards at local councils.

6 The future role of the public library

Libraries have the potential to do still more. Knowledge, skills and information are becoming more important to our lives economically, socially and as citizens. Libraries have a central role to play in ensuring everyone has access to the resources, information and knowledge they need – particularly those groups in society who will otherwise be disadvantaged, including people who are less affluent and people with literacy problems.

DEPARTMENT FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT (2004) *FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE: LIBRARIES, LEARNING AND INFORMATION IN THE NEXT DECADE*, DCMS.

The great majority of those who participated in the Libraries Building Communities project regard public libraries as a worthwhile investment, which provides returns to the community and to the Australian economy many times over any outlay. Libraries are seen as especially well placed to support government agendas in a wide range of areas, from lifelong learning to literacy development and community strengthening. It was pointed out that there has been significant learning and capacity development within the public library network that could be further developed and used for the benefits of communities across Victoria.

The following section presents responses from the LBC project to the question, 'How could the library play a stronger role in community building?' It should be noted that some of the activities nominated by people are already underway in libraries across Victoria. Report Four in this series, *Showcasing the Best,* describes a variety of innovative practices in Victorian libraries.

The concluding section of this report presents views on what needs to be done if libraries are to achieve their full potential.

6.1 Community hub and learning centre

There is a widespread belief among community leaders in the great potential for public libraries to be developed as a key element in community hubs and learning centres.

Libraries are our best chance to create a 'centre of community spirit and activity' which is important for healthy and active communities. (LBC participant)

It is envisaged that communities could build hubs that house a range of services, for example:

- library services;

- children's services;

- medical centres;

- maternal support groups;

- drop-in centres;

- other learning and community activities.

Collocation with art centres, local halls, notice boards, meeting rooms and other facilities are regarded as another way of enhancing social interaction.

Centres that bring these services and activities together are seen as an opportunity to provide a more significant meeting place for the local community. The fabric of the community could be reflected in the library centre and could provide a café style atmosphere for key groups. Ideally there would be a community development worker in every library who works within the community to discuss the social and industrial needs of the region and how the expanded library centre services community needs. In this environment libraries could focus more on being an effective connector to other community resources.

Greater potential was also seen for the library to become more of a display point for local arts and crafts. It was suggested that library management could involve multicultural and Indigenous groups in identifying the types of material that could be shown.

6.2 Supporting the information economy

> *It no longer makes sense to perceive libraries as repositories of information – libraries as a gateway to the world of information is the desired outcome.*
> *(LBC participant)*

Community leaders noted that libraries have a unique blend of characteristics that strongly position them to expand their role as information access points for their communities. Libraries are seen as having a key role in ensuring more equitable access to information – with specific attention to meeting the needs of people on lower incomes who have more restricted access to information of all sorts, including online information. The digital divide is seen as a real and growing phenomenon, which libraries can help overcome by providing access to technology and training in its use.

Other suggestions of the ways in which libraries can enhance the access of their communities to information include:

- Providing information on careers and linking this to career guidance. While the Internet can help people access a range of career information, the library could support this with more formal on-hand help. Links between the library and schools and employment centres could provide a very useful service.

- Providing a reference collection for councils, local corporations, small businesses and local industries – helping them to understand the local area and the issues of importance.

- Becoming a clearing house for issues of interest or concern in the community such as environmental issues.

- Providing a greater level of community information and cross-promoting the work being done by charitable groups in the area.

6.3 Disseminating government information

Community leaders also 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. This would require some effort being put into training people in the efficient use of equipment and how best to access information.

> *Public libraries should be the first thing thought of when there is a need to disseminate government information.*
> *(LBC participant)*

An opportunity was seen to better connect with health authorities to disseminate information to the community on important awareness issues. It was suggested that the library could take part in various health campaigns.

> *As a regular meeting place they could provide an ideal forum for people to discuss vital health issues in a non-threatening environment.*
> *(LBC participant)*

The library was also seen as a potential meeting point at which government and other decision makers could provide briefing sessions on topics that are of concern to residents in regional areas. The comment was made that libraries are seen as a safe and reliable place to discuss these issues.

6.4 Supporting lifelong learning

> *Reading literacy and information literacy are the critical underpinnings for Australians to be able to sustain lifelong learning during a century which will be characterised by information – the knowledge economy. This requires strong partnerships between public libraries and school libraries in particular. Public libraries because it is now recognised that reading development is critical for children before their schooling commences. School libraries because, in association with classroom teachers, teacher librarians are those best able to develop information-literate students. (Bundy, 2002[3])*

Public libraries need to be part of the lifelong learning philosophy and committed to providing training programs that encourage this. In meeting this objective, importance was placed on better integration of libraries with schools and other educational institutions.

> *Public libraries should connect better with the school system – they should be the second point of learning.*
> *(LBC participant)*

Community leaders were also looking for a commitment to improve the currently limited engagement between higher education and public libraries. It was noted that resources could be shared between public libraries and libraries within TAFE and universities. A more integrated approach to funding and service delivery was seen as leading to 'a bigger overall funding result for the system as a whole'.

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3 Submission by Dr Alan Bundy to the Inquiry into the Role of Libraries in the Online Environment, Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee, 22 July 2002.

6.5 Realising the potential of public libraries

> *The role for libraries and their staff is fundamental to the core of the work that needs to be done both culturally and educationally in our communities. (LBC participant)*

Resourcing

It was well understood by community leaders that additional funding is required if public libraries are to play vital and multiple roles in the information society. With the resources currently at their disposal, they cannot do all the things that are increasingly being expected of them. It was pointed out that 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 is generally agreed that there is indeed need for greater investment. Like any good investment portfolio – if properly managed the returns will be great. So it is in public libraries.*
>
> *There needs to be recognition of the critical information and service provision role that public libraries play and this recognition has to be translated into adequate resourcing of public libraries, both financial and human. (LBC participants)*

It was widely thought that public library funding should be completely reviewed in the light of the information society and the demands this is placing on them. There is general agreement that the three tiers of government 'need to stop passing the buck as to whom should fund public libraries and that a holistic approach needs to be adopted to resourcing'.

Community leaders from the CALD sector commented that cost shifting from state to local government has moved heavily toward increasing the local government contribution in recent times. They saw a case for

encouraging some Commonwealth involvement, particularly for ethnic and disabled needs and staff training and development.

Staff training

As noted above, 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, many of the community leaders argued that the changing role of the public library places significant demands on staff and that there is a requirement for additional training in a number of areas. Those mentioned include:

- Helping staff to understand changes taking place in the broader society and how these impact on libraries. It was noted that some library staff are switched on to the changing needs of their community but there is no overarching plan within the library network to ensure that staff are well versed in these issues.

- Awareness of Commonwealth, state and local government programs and how the library can and does support these. Familiarity with these programs was seen as low.

- The community strengthening role of libraries. There was seen to be a need for more formal recognition of this role and what it involves. It was regarded as particularly important that consideration be given to training staff in understanding the needs of non-English-speaking communities.

- New technologies. It was commented that training of staff must reflect the push to a more global learning centre rather than the traditional book-lending service. Staff training could have an aspect that focuses more on helping to provide access for people unfamiliar with the newer technology.

Many community leaders felt that enhanced staff training should not be seen as an optional extra but as a necessity, as without 'genuine understanding and commitment from staff, key programs won't be delivered and new program funding will be threatened'.

Technology updates

It was acknowledged that all types of Australian libraries are greatly challenged in developing policies that address the need to invest in electronic resources and technology, and at the same time continue to provide print resources, the publication levels of which continue at high levels. However, it was felt that public libraries have been especially effective in supporting government policy to overcome the digital divide within the community and that continuation of this role will require funding to undertake rolling technology upgrades.

Upgraded technology was seen as ensuring that libraries continue to offer contemporary facilities to meet the needs of learning communities and remain relevant by doing so.

The provision of more Internet terminals in libraries was a commonly cited requirement.

It was suggested that there should be an audit of existing resources to analyse what shortfall exists to meet the growing demands of new technologies. The rollover of equipment every three years (industry standard) was seen as ensuring that libraries can remain at the cutting edge of technology for the provision of online information services.

This will require big dollars and perhaps a national minimum standard for hardware for public libraries. Without access to updated hardware there is limited access to the new programs that are required to deliver online information in the most efficient manner.
(LBC participants)

As this was recognised as a significant cost, some suggestions were made as to how it may be contained. For example:

Maintain the small number of free Internet terminals for those who are prepared to wait and book, and provide additional pay-per-use terminals as part of an adjacent Internet café for those who don't want to wait.
(LBC participants)

Communication and consultation with the community

As discussed earlier there are generally high levels of awareness of library services in the community – especially among users; this extends to familiarity with the computer facilities and visual equipment on offer. However, there was a feeling among many of the community leaders that some library services are not as well known as they should be, especially among some groups of the population. Some examples include:

- poor awareness of services related to the community-enhancing potential of libraries, such as availability of meeting rooms and regular programs of lectures and cultural events;

- non-users whose image of the library is caught in the past and does not extend much beyond an awareness of book-lending services;

- lack of awareness of self-development opportunities, such as homework support and reading clubs;

- lack of awareness in the small business community of library resources available to them.

Promotion was seen as a vital ingredient to achieving better use of resources.

A broader engagement with the community is essential – libraries need to market themselves locally.

Staff need to work on having people recognise that libraries can fulfil their information, education and some entertainment needs.
(LBC participants)

Suggestions were made as to how this might occur:

- Representatives of local ethnic groups should be engaged and consulted to help set directions.

- Bring industry groups in for familiarity sessions.

- Develop partnerships with local businesses and consider any opportunities for support with advertising.

- Work through community networks and groups such as:
  - schools / playgroups;
  - medical centres;
  - senior citizens;
  - neighbourhood houses;
  - youth groups.

- Use strategies that bring the library environment to life and into the community (e.g. invite local groups to hold sausage sizzle fundraisers outside their premises to attract shoppers).

- Talk to more young people in schools and youth clubs. It was noted that this can influence others in the family unit – and this is particularly so for ethnic groups.

Many people interviewed also believed that libraries need to understand more about their potential client-base at a micro level through ongoing research. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics will only help them understand the macro level. More intimate understanding can be achieved through greater community consultation. It was suggested that local government could hold focus meetings in the community to discover what local people want their library to be.

Developing strategic partnerships

Community leaders agree that more work needs to be done by public libraries in establishing partnerships with other groups in the community. While there are some excellent examples of where this is already happening,

it was thought that many libraries find it difficult to forge these links. This may be due to management styles that hinder or prohibit this development or an attitude of 'what can libraries get out of this'. The comment was made that joint ventures are not always working because there is often not a meeting of minds with other service providers.

> *Staff and management must look ahead, be part of the community and comprehend the opportunities to be more of a community space.*
>
> *They need to come out of their front doors and be proactive within the community – library staff need to get out and talk to community groups.*
> *(LBC participants)*

Enormous opportunities and benefits were seen as flowing from stronger library partnerships with the community. The question needing to be answered is: 'How do libraries and staff integrate into the community?'

Some options were identified, including:

- Develop sponsorship relations with local business and community groups. Libraries were seen as not putting effort into approaching local companies and organisations to support events in the library or provide resources (e.g. through funding a collection that has a connection to the local district).

- Get to know local politicians, councillors and business leaders. It was suggested that librarians need to build and continually foster relationships with key people in the community. This should also be done as an industry and be more collegial – with the industry speaking with one voice.

- Have an active presence at grassroots level by forging links with neighbourhood houses, senior citizen groups, maternal and child health centres, childcare centres, community health centres and education

centres – all good places to promote cross-use. One of the benefits of connection with these groups was an improved ability of library staff to understand the needs, expectations and potential problems of specific client groups and how to deal with difficult situations and conflicts.

Although it was recognised that many public libraries have well-established relations with their local councils, it was suggested that others had not fostered these links. Benefits were seen to arise from working in conjunction and communicating regularly with decision makers in council. It was thought that by using planning forums conducted by councils, library staff could become more aware of the needs of the community, decision makers and those making funding allocations. Local government was seen as a potential champion of libraries with state and Commonwealth governments.

Improving image and location

There was much comment during the interviews about the need for a new image for public libraries that reflects the changing times and the way libraries are now working with the community.

> *I think there's a stigma attached to libraries. Quiet booky types or elderly people come here. It's not an 'in' place to be seen especially for young people. (LBC participant)*

Some of the views expressed include:

- Libraries must aim to be more of a fun place – old perceptions are being erased and this needs to be continued.
- The welcome mat must be out – staff must continue to be welcoming and the facility must be attractive. There is a need to upgrade furniture and lighting in many libraries. Music recitals in the evenings would give a greater use of a community space.

- There is a need to overcome the 'be quiet' attitude.
- A more positive and relevant image must be projected to the younger population.
- The system needs to debunk the elitist status of libraries and be seen as closer to the grassroots and dealing with 'bread and butter' issues.

Location is seen as extremely important in creating a more community-friendly and accessible library. It is generally regarded as important for libraries to be in or near shopping centres with adequate parking, and be easily accessible to public transport. A number of people are aware of a program in Singapore (Orchard Shopping Centre) that is encouraging the location of libraries in high traffic shopping precincts, and suggested the idea as a role model.

Libraries were also seen as needing the appropriate physical design to be appealing to the community. It was suggested that the space needs to be attractive, friendly and colourful to attract people and events.

Community leaders from the CALD sector felt that libraries can be difficult to navigate and that signage needs to be clearer, more obvious and easier to understand – particularly for those with visual problems. Signage was seen as needing to be presented in languages other than English.

> *There needs to be ready access to libraries using public transport and this should be well planned and ahead of the game.*

They also felt that as far as the location of libraries is concerned consideration needs to be given to public and community transport and how this can be linked to visits to the library. It was suggested that public transport information should be more readily available and better exhibited and that library management should have ongoing talks with public transport planners to ensure that the needs of library users are taken into account.

Attachment: Library services rated for their importance by focus group attendees

Book loans

Newspapers/talking newspapers

Magazine loans

Audiovisual lending

Computer services

Children's and young adults' services

Story time

School holiday programs

Toy library

Remote web access to catalogue and databases

Adaptive technology for those with disabilities

Homework centre and school support

Reading groups/bookclubs

Information literacy programs

Home library service

Information services for small business

Language other than English holdings

English conversation classes

Provisions for Indigenous people

Local history services

Transport to the library

Accommodating/supporting Friends of the Library

Meeting rooms

Regular programs (i.e. talks/lectures)

Advisory committee with community representatives

Community information

Information services for the council

Volunteer/community support programs