

LIBRARIES/BUILDING/COMMUNITIES

THE VITAL CONTRIBUTION OF VICTORIA'S PUBLIC LIBRARIES – A RESEARCH REPORT
FOR THE LIBRARY BOARD OF VICTORIA AND THE VICTORIAN PUBLIC LIBRARY NETWORK

Executive Summary



Library Board
of Victoria



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Foreword

One of the major challenges facing public libraries is just how to convey to decision makers, and others, the breadth, depth and potential impact on the whole community of the modern public library. As Dr Alan Bundy, former President of the Australian Library and Information Association, has noted, it is a rare challenge. No other agency in society has the multiplicity of roles, or user range and diversity, or potential to influence so many lives. The Libraries Building Communities research project aims to meet this challenge.

The project is one of many collaborative initiatives of the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network, managed by the State Library of Victoria. It has been two years from commencement of the research to publication of the reports, with considerable planning beforehand. Never before in Australia has research of this scale and complexity been undertaken into the community building role of public libraries.

I wish to thank all those who have assisted with shaping the project and making it happen, most notably my public library colleagues who served on the Advisory Committee, staff at the State Library who were responsible for project management, New Focus for designing and implementing the research phase, and Carol Oxley from I&J Management Services who wrote the final reports. It has been a tremendous team effort on a landmark project.

We hope that the Libraries Building Communities research reports will become an essential resource for all those who advocate for the support of better public library services and will help drive the strategic direction of these services in Victoria.

Anne-Marie Schwirtlich
CEO and State Librarian
State Library of Victoria



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



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.



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

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.

It doesn't matter who you are, when you walk through the door you have equal privileges.



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



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.

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

The library is an 'alive' place for people to interact – not just for collection users, but for the wider community.



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

Library – it's one thing the whole family can do together.



Libraries: helping to build strong communities

Access to knowledge is the superb, the supreme act of truly great civilizations. Of all the institutions that purport to do this, free libraries stand virtually alone in accomplishing this mission. No committee decides who may enter, no crisis of body or spirit must accompany the entrant. No tuition is charged, no oath sworn, no visa demanded. Of the monuments humans build for themselves, very few say: 'Touch me; use me; my hush is not indifference; my space is not barrier. If I inspire awe, it is because I am in awe of you and the possibilities that dwell in you.'

TONI MORRISON, WINNER OF THE 1993 NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

The public library is a profoundly important cultural, economic and social institution. Libraries collect and disseminate information; they provide comfortable and convenient places for people to read and learn; their physical spaces form meeting places for community groups; being free and open for all they help to create a fairer society. They are, as is borne out in the Libraries Building Communities study, highly valued by the communities they serve, and are uniquely placed to draw a diverse range of people and groups together.

In this vital community building role public libraries need to be supported, both politically and financially. This is the principal message of the Libraries Building Communities (LBC) project – the first comprehensive Australian study of the value that public libraries add to their communities. The study includes all 44 Victorian public library services and draws on the views and ideas of nearly 10,000 Victorians.

The LBC study shows that libraries and librarians make a fundamental contribution to our communities in four key areas: they provide free public access to computer and information technology resources; by helping people locate information they create better-informed communities; they run programs that promote lifelong learning and literacy in the community; and they build connections between individuals, groups and government.

Just how important public libraries are to community life can be seen in the following statistics. On average, every day every Victorian public library will lend about 500 items; each will receive nearly 270 visits from a total of 2.5 million registered users (over half the Victorian population) and respond to nearly 30 reference



enquiries. Libraries will provide these services from a resource base that amounts to about 9 million books, magazines, audio books and videos through a network of 238 branches and 30 mobile libraries open a total of 10,500 hours every week. Imagine our communities without them.

People place a high monetary value on these services. Survey respondents valued a small library with 20,000 registered users at about \$20 million a year; this figure ranged upwards to \$730 million a year for a larger library with about 150,000 registered users.

In its *Growing Victoria Together* (2003) framework the State Government identifies the need to nurture more resilient, active and confident communities. The Government has approached this task by focusing on the potential already available in localities (Considine, 2004). Rather than emphasise deficits and problems, and respond to these with needs-based services, the Government's community building activities draw instead on the strengths that exist within communities.

One of our greatest community strengths is our public library system. Libraries house a vast range of resources. Public libraries are well known, easily accessed and widely used. Visit your local library to see how responsive libraries are to community needs and activities; their notice boards are filled with announcements of meetings and community events, many taking place at the library.

Yet, as the Libraries Building Communities project finds, public libraries could assume a much greater role in community strengthening, but face several challenges if they are to realise this potential. They will need more

money to take on new activities and responsibilities, as well as provide extra training for staff. Further improvements to facilities and the ongoing upgrade of their technology infrastructure will be required. Libraries will need to forge stronger partnerships with community groups, government and business. The public library needs to be promoted to non-users, so that they become aware of the many roles that libraries fill and the services they provide beyond book lending.

The findings of the Libraries Building Communities research are presented in four easy-to-read reports.

Report One: *Setting the Scene* introduces the key concepts around community building and summarises the Victorian Government’s agenda in this area. It provides an overview of the Victorian public library network, the project methodology and relevant national and international research.

Report Two: *Logging the Benefits* presents community views on how public libraries add value to the community, where greater value could be added and the future of public libraries. It shows how public libraries assist all levels of government to achieve their goals in areas such as education, lifelong learning and community strengthening.

Report Three: *Bridging the Gaps* assesses those segments of the community that make good use of public libraries and those that are less well served – particularly ethnic minorities, people on low incomes, those with disabilities and those living in remote areas. This report identifies factors inhibiting use and suggests strategies for promoting libraries to non-users.

Report Four: *Showcasing the Best* provides over thirty examples of innovative programs and services in Victoria’s public libraries, emphasising partnership initiatives that range from homework clubs and telecentres to services for the housebound and vocational guidance programs.

The remainder of this *Executive Summary* focuses on the crucial role played by public libraries in overcoming the ‘digital divide’; creating well-informed communities, enhancing learning and literacy skills, and building social capital.



The contribution of libraries in four key areas

Overcoming the digital divide

A community's social and economic development increasingly depends on how well its residents can access and use information and technology.

Affluent families are far more likely to be able to give their children access to books, computers and the internet than poorer families. If we do not guard against it, the economic returns from knowledge and skills will go disproportionately to those groups and places that are already rich in both. (DCMS, 2004)

The 'digital divide' is a growing concern for the community leaders who participated in the LBC project. Leaders remarked that the ability to access and use information is not equally distributed. People and geographic areas already suffering social and economic disadvantage were said to have more restricted access to information and computer resources. Public libraries were seen as having a crucial role in ensuring that people on low incomes and from other disadvantaged groups are able to access information and technology and develop the necessary skills to use these.

Making technology accessible

Libraries aid development of information technology (IT) literacy among users in much the same way that they encourage literacy in the written word. For many people, libraries provide access to a range of otherwise inaccessible technologies and help overcome fears of using new media.

Access to the Internet is a crucial service offered by public libraries; they provide a gateway to information for those without Internet access at home or work, in multiple languages for non-English-speaking users.

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 [limited] access at home. (LBC participant)

Libraries are having considerable success in getting to segments of the community generally left behind in the IT sphere. The Computer Club for Seniors at the Bayside Library Service provides an opportunity for seniors to learn about computers at their own pace in an encouraging, relaxed atmosphere. In the Greater Dandenong area, where there are low levels of computer ownership, local libraries have become a valued resource in helping diffuse new technology more widely and equitably.

Exploiting technology to benefit the community

The information revolution has given libraries a unique opportunity to harness new technologies to deliver services unimaginable a few years ago. The Internet is being used throughout Victorian libraries to brighten, widen and enhance the world of residents.

At the Upper Murray Regional Library Service adoption of satellite technology means that the mobile libraries can offer users online access to the regional library system and free public Internet access.

The LibTel and Today's News Now (TNN) services developed by the National Information Library Service make it easier for people with a visual impairment to participate in social, learning, recreational, cultural and civic activities. LibTel allows clients to access the National Information Library Service catalogue by telephone and browse through it at their discretion. TNN, a telephone-based newspaper service, offers access to the current day's newspapers from 6.00 a.m. each day.

Creating informed communities

If done right [using IT], information needs are satisfied and communities become smarter and quicker at gaining and using information. (LBC participant)

Many community leaders commented on the information overload that people face today, largely as a result of advances in technology. They noted that the growing volume of information is of no benefit unless it can be converted into knowledge.

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

Houghton and Sheehan (2000) comment that as it becomes easier and less expensive to access information, the skills and competencies relating to the selection and efficient use of information have become more important than ever.

Community information

Communications and information are the lifeblood of sustainable communities ... the challenge is to help establish and sustain healthy conditions in which informal communication and the exchange of information can flourish. (DCMS, 1999)

Communities are bound together by information and, more importantly, by the sharing of information.

Ultimately, people increase their sense of connectedness and belonging to the community through their sharing of local information. (People Together Project, 2000)

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

Government information

Community leaders saw public libraries as a key distribution point for information about government programs and services. Many people in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities believe public libraries could play a greater role in providing a conduit to government information and could, more specifically, assist their communities to access government information on the Internet.

Providing a gateway to the world of information

In today's networked information environment people have higher expectations about the range and type of information they will be able to access and when they will be able to access it. Public libraries in Victoria all have a web presence through which users are able to access the library catalogue and various databases.

Public libraries in Victoria are working together to increase the efficiency and decrease the cost of information delivery. The Gulliver Consortium has allowed Victorian public libraries to join together to offer users access to a collection of databases that have over 21,000 resources, including full-text journals, books, newspapers and pictures. Without this consortium, many public libraries would have found the cost of individual subscription to online databases prohibitive.

Convenient and comfortable places of 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.
(Bundy, 2002)

Developing foundation skills

Libraries provide a friendly environment in which residents can learn the basic skills they need to take part in the economic, social and cultural life of their



community. This includes supporting the development of basic reading, information and computer literacy and learning habits and skills.

In the City of Greater Dandenong, just over half of the residents were born overseas and many are from non-English-speaking backgrounds. According to the 2001 Census, a substantial number have limited fluency in English. In response to this, the City of Greater Dandenong Libraries has been running the English Language and Literacy Access (ELLA) service since 1992. This service assists clients to develop their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. It also offers citizenship classes to teach clients about their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

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

Libraries also place a great deal of emphasis on outreach to 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.

The Moreland Reading Project seeks to develop a culture that values and acknowledges the importance of reading. As part of the project, and in cooperation with the Maternal and Child Health Centres, a BookStart Kit is distributed to every newborn baby in Moreland. Adapted from the UK model to target local needs, the program

encourages parents to read to their babies and foster early literacy development. The kit contains a board book, booklets giving advice on developing children's reading skills from an early age and recommended board books for babies, and information on parenting resources – all packaged in a calico library bag.

A large proportion of participants in the LBC project agreed that the library stimulates children and young people to learn and helps them develop learning habits and literacy skills.

Homework clubs have been established in a number of Victorian libraries as a way of providing a structured form of support for young people after school. Yarra Melbourne Regional Library Corporation runs a number of homework programs for young people at its libraries. These include the Youthlink Homework Program at the Carlton Library, which provides homework support for 12–18 year olds. The target group is disadvantaged young people from Carlton, including the South Carlton Housing Estates. Thirteen tutors participated in the program in 2003, teaching maths, science, English, and Studies of Society and Environment as the main subject areas.

Stimulating ideas and discussion

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

*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 ... 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.
(LBC participant)*

Supporting vulnerable learners

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

The relaxed atmosphere of a public library allows adults to build their confidence and develop learning skills; often this provides an avenue for moving on to more formal learning.

The Hume Global Learning Centre is an outstanding example of the many libraries that provide wide-ranging learning programs for adults. It is part of a bold strategy established by Hume City Council to address issues of social and economic disadvantage in Hume City. It is based on the premise that learning, education and information are essential to the economic and social wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. As part of this initiative, the council has decided to

emphasise the role of the library personnel as facilitators of learning in the community – using the library's collections as a resource base. From hosting training and learning programs in libraries, to advocating to parents about the importance of reading to babies, the libraries are taking a proactive, educative role.

Several of the libraries described in Report Four of the LBC project, *Showcasing the Best*, are partnering with local organisations to offer services that assist people to become 'work ready'. Hawthorn Library, for example, is working with the local community house to provide a career information program, Career Link, for local residents. People are able to book into a half-hour career information session with a counsellor from Hawthorn Community House. The library coordinates the sessions and helps those attending to tap into library and community resources that will assist in their career and course planning.

Supporting students

Community leaders commented that students in the formal higher education system are one of the biggest groups using libraries. Students use public libraries to access resources that may not be available in the libraries of educational 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 role of public libraries in the way it funds education.

Building social capital

Libraries are a morale booster for communities in the 21st century – we have had troubled times and a civic centre or global village centre engenders that feel good factor which many need. (LBC participant)

The LBC data shows that public libraries play a crucial role in building social capital: bringing people together from across the social strata; forging greater understanding of other perspectives and other cultures; offering a safe space that embraces diversity; and providing connection into the community for people who are otherwise excluded. For many, public libraries provide that first important link to government information and services.

A welcoming environment

David Matthews, President of America's Kettering Foundation for research into ways of making democracy work better, has said that smart communities are those where people know how to talk with each other. 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 library staff and other people who would not normally be among their friends or acquaintances.

The library was seen as channeling lonely people towards using libraries as a social outlet and away from services such as doctors and counsellors.

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)

For CALD communities libraries offer a safe place where they can meet others interested in similar issues. This helps to build a feeling of community and a sense of respect for each other. For those women from multicultural backgrounds who may be reluctant to participate in community activities, public libraries are seen as providing a reassuring environment that encourages them to take part. It was remarked that the importance of libraries for ethnic groups has been cemented since the terrorist attack in the USA on 11 September 2001 – as even more people from CALD communities are now seeking a safe place to access multilingual material, and libraries are the focus of that search.

Creating pride of place

For many communities the public library holds much of the knowledge about the local area and gives people a link to their past, present and future. New and renovated public libraries are being sensitively designed to reflect the needs of the 21st century and beyond.

The new library at Kerang is an excellent example of how input from the community has created a unique structure in which residents can take great pride. The building boasts a number of features created and donated by community members. Paving on the path leading to the library is inscribed with the names of community members who contributed to the building. The banners



SOURCE: KRISTIAN GEHRADTE PHOTOGRAPHY & DESIGN



Encouraging collaboration across the community

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

By bringing many residents, organisations and businesses together in the one place, the redeveloped Portland Library complex promotes effective partnerships. It has strengthened the relationship between the library and the Glenelg Shire business community – supplying business with information, access to technology and other supports – and through this has contributed to the economic life of the community.



The value people place on libraries

Regardless of whether they use libraries or not, the LBC research shows that Victorians value the availability of free public library services in their communities. Both users and non-users acknowledge that libraries provide a safe, comfortable, non-judgemental environment.

Participants in the LBC project were asked to place a monetary value on the library services available to them. Among users of large libraries with large resource bases, the following annual values were given:

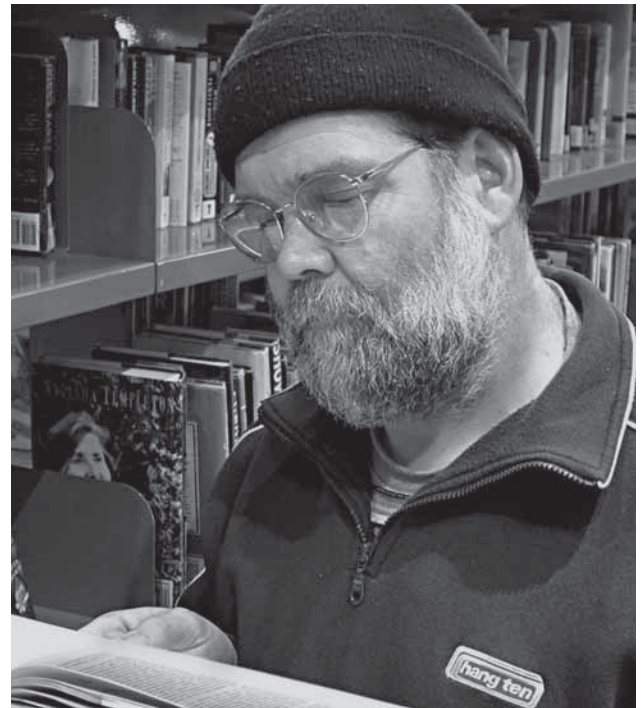
- \$500+ per year for light users;
- \$4,000 per year for heavy book readers;
- \$7,000–\$10,000 per year for frequent users of a range of library resources.

For smaller libraries the value was placed as:

- \$200–\$300 per year for light users;
- \$1,000 per year for heavy users.

This would suggest that a large library with about 150,000 registered borrowers would be adding value to users of about \$730 million each year and a small library with about 20,000 users somewhere in the order of \$10 million. This far exceeds the annual expenditure on public libraries – which varies from a minimum of \$350,000 to a maximum of \$11 million.

The fact that library services are valued highly in the community does not mean that there is a capacity to pay for service. Concern was expressed that if users were asked to pay for library services a significant proportion would be unable to meet such charges and many of the individual and community benefits described by the LBC project would be lost.



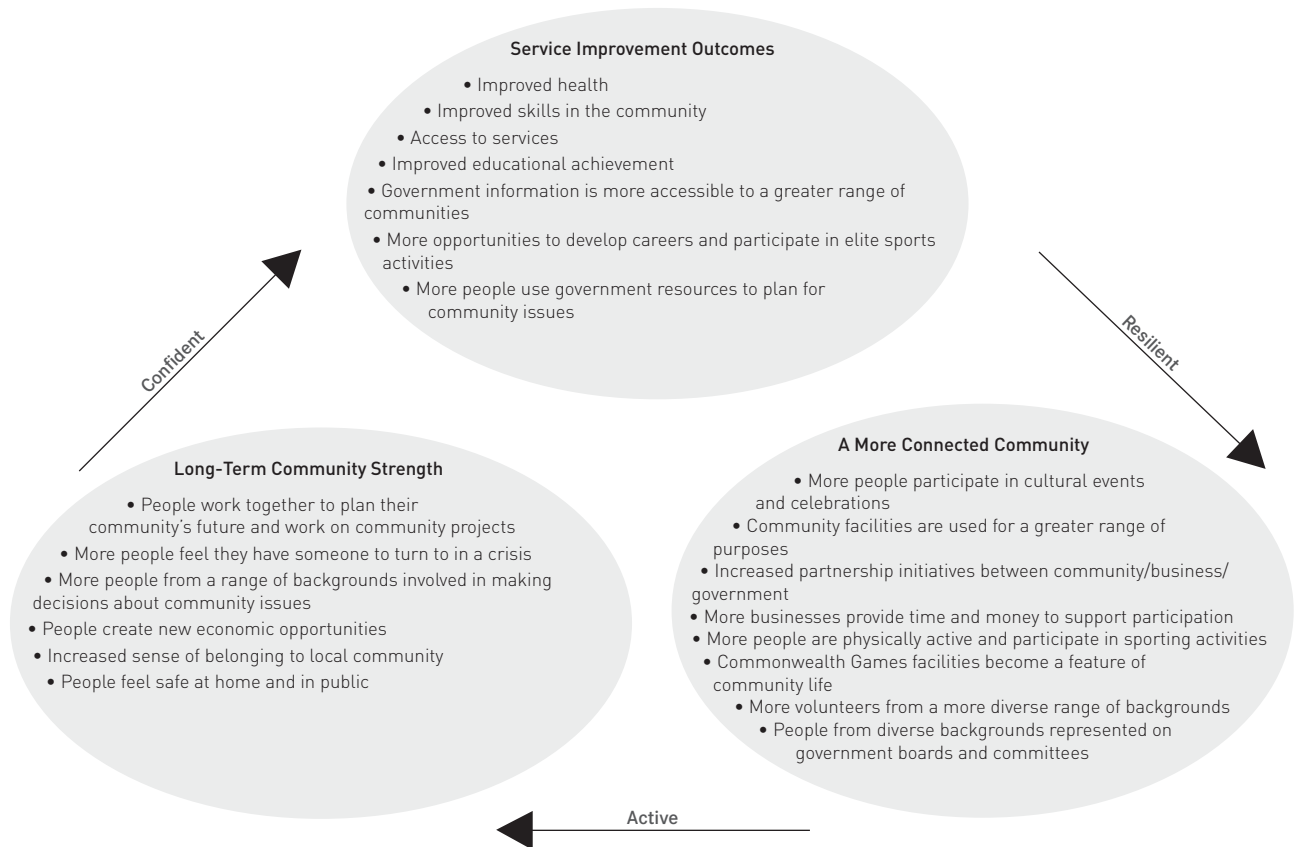


Libraries: reaching their community building potential

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)

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

DEPARTMENT FOR VICTORIAN COMMUNITIES OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK
 SOURCE: DEPARTMENT FOR VICTORIAN COMMUNITIES CORPORATE PLAN 2004-07, p. 7.



This diagram highlights the links between the achievements of libraries in supporting their communities and key outcomes that the Department for Victorian Communities is aiming to achieve in community strengthening.

- **Upgraded technology** – This is necessary to ensure that libraries continue to be seen as relevant, contemporary services that meet the ongoing needs of learning communities. More Internet terminals in libraries was a commonly cited requirement. It was also recognised that library staff must have the necessary skills in the use of new technology.
- **Development of stronger partnerships** – Stronger partnerships between public libraries and their communities, government and business were seen as offering enormous opportunities and benefits. While there are some excellent examples of where this is already happening, it was thought that many libraries find it difficult to forge these links. Community leaders saw excellent potential for raising the social engagement levels of libraries, through partnering with other agencies that already have strong links within the community, such as employment agencies, neighbourhood houses, schools, youth programs and church groups. Benefits were also seen to arise from stronger links between public libraries and key decision makers in local councils.
- **Workforce development** – Library staff – their skills, knowledge and commitment to a high quality of customer service – are widely regarded as a major asset of the public library network. However, the changing role of the public library places significant demands on staff and there is a requirement for additional training in a number of areas. Further staff training is not an optional extra but is a necessity; without ‘genuine understanding and commitment from staff, key programs won’t be delivered and new program funding will be threatened’ (LBC participant).
- **Development of library infrastructure** – Many who took part in the LBC project commented that the quality of library buildings throughout the State is extremely variable. Numerous buildings dating from the 1960s and 1970s 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 program Living Libraries has done much to improve facilities – but it was emphasised that much remains to be done. Without these improvements there are limits to the extent to which libraries can respond to the needs of their communities. For example, lack of space has an impact on the ability to offer computer access – and is contributing to long waiting times for these services in some libraries.
- **Promoting a new image for public libraries** – The LBC research indicates that the image of the public library has not kept pace with the changing times and the way libraries are now working with the community. The image of the library is caught in the past for some non-users and does not extend much beyond an awareness of book-lending services. Promotion is a vital ingredient to achieving better use of library resources.

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

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