



AUSTRALIA'S 2009 INAUGURAL PUBLIC LIBRARIES SUMMIT

Creating the Future

The Strategic Direction and Sustainability of Australia's Public Library System

Submitted by
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ABSTRACT

Australia's 1500+ public libraries receive around 100 million visits per year by 12 million Australians. The libraries are primarily funded by Local Government to \$750 million per annum, which consists of both capital investment and annual operating expenditure. There are varying financial contributions from State and Territory Governments.

The Australian public library system is under financial pressure. Some public libraries need to revitalise their infrastructure, programs and offerings. The 2008 *"Enriching communities: the value of public libraries in New South Wales"* report revealed the value of public libraries, including quantified economic value.

The development and implementation of a *Strategic Framework and Direction* for Australia's Public Library System is now critical.

1. Introduction

Public Libraries NSW Metropolitan Association (PLM) is very pleased to submit this paper to Australia's inaugural Public Libraries Summit.

PLM represents and supports the interests of 42 Local Government Area (LGA) public libraries in the greater Sydney region. These 42 LGAs collectively represent two thirds (~4.5 million) of NSW's population, and 20% of Australia's population.

The goals of this inaugural Summit include:

- Developing a stronger relationship with the Australian Government in achieving its agendas in a range of portfolios
- Engaging with all three levels of government in Australia to develop a framework that supports public libraries across Australia.

PLM strongly supports and encourages the engagement of all three levels government in the future Australian public library system, and the need to develop and implement a clearly articulated strategic direction for the system.

Key elements of this strategic direction should include a focus on:

- Collaborative and partnership arrangements with a range of stakeholders, including the three levels of government, that will benefit local communities in using and accessing the wide range of services available through Australia's public libraries, and
- Sustainable public library funding sources for (i) new infrastructure development, (ii) improvements to existing infrastructure, and (iii) recurrent operational funding.

2. The Broader Australian Public Library and Local Government Environment

Australia's 1500+ public libraries contribute to the social and economic fabric of their local communities. They provide valued *educational (lifelong learning), recreational, information access and cultural services* in safe, multipurpose community spaces.

With the recession in the USA now one year on, it is noted that:

- *"As people shy away from restaurants and department stores, more and more individuals are going to the public library. Not long ago, many believed that libraries had been destroyed by the Internet, but now money-minded patrons are flocking to the facilities to take advantage of free WiFi, computers, books and videos."*¹
- *"While Canada is behind the United States in job losses, foreclosures and the full impact of the recession, North Americans have begun to turn to their public libraries to assist them through difficult economic times. Initial data shows spikes in library usage, particularly in the United States; the impact of use in Canada is just beginning to emerge."*²

Australia's 1500+ public libraries:

- Receive around 100 million visits per year (~5 visits *per capita*)³.
- Are used by 12 million Australians annually, over 50% of Australia's population of 21.6 million.
- Are funded to the extent of \$750 million per annum⁴, which consists of both capital investment and annual operating expenditure.
- Are principally funded (~85%) by Local Government, with the remaining funding provided by the State and Territory governments.

There are approximately 600 Local Government Areas (LGAs) across Australia, which expend just under \$20 billion pa, or 2% of GDP, and employ around 150,000 staff. The investment in public libraries by Local Government equates to 3% of their total expenditure and ~7,500 to 8,000 staff.

In 2006, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) reported⁵ on the sustainability of Australia's Local Government. PwC estimated that approximately 10% to 30% of Australia's councils had sustainability issues, and that between 25% and 40% of councils in the states (eg NSW) analysed could be unsustainable.

The 2005-06 independent inquiry into the *Financial Sustainability of NSW Local Government*⁶ undertaken by Professor Percy Allen found that 25% of NSW councils were financially unsustainable, a further 50% of councils were at risk, and only around 25% were in a strong position.

NSW, with 6.9 million people or 32% of Australia's population, has 152 LGAs. Ninety three percent (93%) of the just under \$300 million annual investment into NSW's public libraries is currently provided by Local Government in NSW.

The NSW Government contributes \$23.5 million annually to the state's public library system, the lowest *per capita* investment by any State or Territory Government into public libraries.

¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/2009/1/recession-helps-public-libraries-make-comeback>

² <http://www.library.ns.ca/node/1340>

³ [http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4172.0Feature+Article42008+\(First+Edition\)#PARALINK8](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4172.0Feature+Article42008+(First+Edition)#PARALINK8)

⁴ <http://www.nsla.org.au/publications/statistics/>

⁵ <http://www.alga.asn.au/policy/finance/pwcreport/>

⁶ <http://www.lgsa.org.au/www/html/262-local-government-inquiry.asp>

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Ray Pincombe, President of *Local Government Managers Australia* (LGMA), was recently quoted in the February 2009 edition of *GovernmentNews*⁷:

- *"Significant work needs to be done in relation to infrastructure planning in order to facilitate long-term financial management plans for local government. The challenges of 2009 are endless, and question marks hang over local government's capacity to delivery on the long-term infrastructure needs of its communities...."*

...Our challenge is to build the capacity of local government and entrench the industry as a critical part of the partnership with state and federal government in building Australian communities, especially in these difficult times."

Geoff Lake, President of the *Australian Local Government Association* (ALGA), in the same magazine, was quoted as saying:

- *"...Focussing on the practical advantages of a system where local government expanded from its traditional roles of roads, rates and rubbish into areas such as libraries, aged care and youth centres.....these days councils are spending at least 50% of their budgets on people services."*

The Australian Government is not a traditional funder *per se* of Australia's public libraries.

The *"Broadband for Seniors"* initiative⁸, funded by the Australian Government (the Family and Community Services portfolio), will witness the roll-out of 2,000 internet kiosks for seniors. Australia's public libraries have the opportunity to be part of this initiative. An NEC Australia consortium was awarded the contract in late 2008 to manage the rollout process.

The *Broadband for Seniors* forms part of the Australian Government's *Making Ends Meet - Plan for Older Australians, People with Disabilities and Carers*, and commits \$15 million over three years (2009-11) to create these 2,000 senior internet kiosks.

Thirty percent (30%) of Australia's population is 50 years of age or older (2006 ABS Census⁹).

3. Enriching communities: the value of public libraries in New South Wales

In 2008, the Library Council of New South Wales released the report *"Enriching communities: the value of public libraries in New South Wales"*¹⁰.

The NSW Public Library Network Research Committee, on behalf of the Library Council of NSW, commissioned research that measured *the economic, social, cultural and environmental value* of public libraries. The research explored the ways in which New South Wales public libraries sustain the community in social, cultural and environmental terms.

The study found that public libraries contribute positively in terms of economic value, benefit and activity. The key findings from the study are presented below.

⁷ www.governmentnews.com.au

⁸ www.necseniors.net.au

⁹ http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/census+data?opendocument?utm_id=LN

¹⁰ http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/services/public_libraries/publications/docs/enriching_communities.pdf

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- Library users visit for an average of 35 minutes, view the library more as a cost-saver than a time-saver, and are attracted mainly by the fixed collections, the availability of professional support and the friendly atmosphere.
- The top five outcomes from public library use were:
 1. Enhanced quality of life
 2. Enhanced enjoyment from hobbies
 3. Ability to obtain information not available elsewhere
 4. Facilitation of lifelong learning, and
 5. Support for children's education.
- The top five contributions to the community were:
 1. A safe and pleasant place to visit
 2. Supporting educational facilities
 3. Facilitating lifelong learning
 4. Encouraging responsible social behaviour; and
 5. Ensuring access to the Internet for all.
- Public libraries principal contribution to community culture is through their lending, reference and local history collections. There is an appreciative audience for cultural activities such as local art displays and talks by visiting authors.
- Economic value as measured by library users' willingness to pay averaged \$58.20 per annum, which valued public libraries statewide at \$392 million.
- Economic benefit, that is, the financial amount saved relative to the cost of purchasing materials, was found to average \$325 per annum among surveyed library users. This aligned closely with a more structured estimate of a statewide benefit of \$1.216 billion, which equates to a benefit-cost ratio of 4.24 against the 2004-2005 investment of \$287 million.

Thus, for each dollar expended on public libraries, \$4.24 of economic benefit is generated.
- Economic activity measures the contribution of public libraries to the economy in real terms and was estimated at \$810.2 million.

Thus, for each dollar expended on public libraries, \$2.82 of real economic activity is generated.

4. NSW Public Libraries' supporting Government Programs, Initiatives and Services

NSW public libraries contribute to Australia and NSW government programs, initiatives and services. NSW public libraries are very effective avenues for the achievement of several goals in the NSW State Plan. This has occurred without any additional financial support.

In recent years, NSW public libraries have been involved with a range of Australian and State Government programs, initiatives and services that have included:

- Early reading and literacy programs including the NSW Premier's Reading Challenge
- Practice driver knowledge tests for the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority, utilising the libraries' computers
- The engagement of young people in Community Homework Help Centres and Reading Clubs
- Cross-cultural and inter-faith activities
- Access to both Australian and NSW State Government department information via *e-government*.

5. The Strategic Direction of the Australian Public Library System

The Australian public library system is under pressure. Some public libraries will need to revitalise their facilities, collections, electronic infrastructure, social networking technologies and tools, and programs.

They will not achieve this alone. They will need to achieve this in partnerships and through collaborative activity.

The development and implementation of a *Strategic Framework and Direction* for Australia's Public Library System is both critical and essential at this time. It will identify key elements which will include:

- Collaborative and partnership arrangements with a range of stakeholders, including the three levels of government that will benefit local communities in using and accessing a wide range of services available through Australia's public libraries.

Opportunities exist for strong collaboration and partnering between NSW public libraries, for example, and departments and agencies in the Australian and NSW Governments such as:

- Australian Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
- Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
- NSW Department Premier and Cabinet
- NSW Roads and Traffic Authority
- NSW Department of Education and Training
- NSW Department of Health
- NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care.

Other key stakeholders that will be critical for collaborative arrangements and partnerships with public libraries include community groups and library industry vendors.

- Identification and evaluation of sustainable funding sources for (i) new infrastructure development, (ii) improvements to existing infrastructure, and (iii) recurrent operational funding.

New Zealand (2006 *Public libraries of New Zealand: A strategic framework 2006 to 2016*¹¹) and the UK (2003 *Framework for the Future: libraries, learning and information in the next decade*¹²) both have developed strategic frameworks that address the growth, development, value and sustainability of their public libraries.

Australia now needs to do the same, to ensure a strategic, coordinated approach to the sustainability of a very well utilised and valuable public library system.

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¹¹ www.lianza.org.nz/library/files/store_011/StrategicFramework2006.pdf

¹² www.mla.gov.uk/programmes/framework