

FRIENDS OF LIBRARIES AUSTRALIA
Friends

Our vision *Better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia*

Looking ever forward:
Australia's public libraries
serving children and young
people

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A report to the nation by
Friends of Libraries Australia

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Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) is a nonprofit association of volunteers established in 1994 as the world's second national association to foster, advise and support the increasing number of Friends of Libraries (FOL) groups throughout Australia. These groups and FOLA are the voice of the 60% of people in Australia who use and value their public libraries, and the many other people who support them as unique multifaceted 'cradle to grave' educational, informational, cultural, recreational and community connection agencies freely available to people of all ages, backgrounds and circumstances.

Consistent with its vision of *Better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia*, in 2004 FOLA commenced a five year program of annual Reports to the Nation on issues critical to funding recognition of the needs of public libraries to respond to the diverse and increasing community expectations of them. Those reports contain recommendations and are sent to federal, state and local decision makers for awareness raising and responses. They are accessible at www.fola.org.au.

FOLA's first report *Australian BookStart: a national issue, a compelling case* focused on the importance of a nationally comprehensive approach to early childhood literacy and parent-child bonding through parents and caregivers reading to babies and children, and of public libraries being funded to support this. That report has informed and stimulated national and significant state initiatives in the area.

The 2005 Report to the Nation was *Community critical: Australia's public libraries serving seniors*. This emphasized the importance of their public libraries to the life quality of Australia's ageing population. It showed that many older adults – especially the homebound – are underserved because of the access, facilities, resources, and staffing limitations of the libraries to which they have access.

In 2006 the Report to the Nation was *Supporting students: the contribution of Australia's public libraries*. This revealed the wide range of student support provided by and through public libraries, the funding and other barriers to improving that support, and the general lack of awareness by funders and formal education of the major contribution which public libraries make to education and lifelong learning. That report has informed and stimulated state initiatives in the provision of online homework tutoring through public libraries.

This fourth Report to the Nation *Looking ever forward: Australia's public libraries serving children and young people* complements the 2006 report, and was launched at FOLA's annual general meeting hosted by the Friends of Stirling Library SA on 23 August 2007. Its title derives from John Curtin's 1932 admonition that a great university should find 'its hope in the future; it should look ever forward; for it the past should be but a preparation for the greater days to be'. That title has been chosen to encourage all of those many people in Australia who believe in, and are passionate about, the even greater contribution which Australia's 'street corner universities' can make to a better Australia for all, regardless of age and life circumstance.

Looking ever forward is accessible at www.fola.org.au. It will be sent to relevant federal and state/territory ministers, local government associations, public libraries and educational bodies requesting responses to the issues it raises.

Copying of the report in whole or in part for dissemination and discussion purposes is encouraged. FOLA welcomes feedback about the report through its president Dr Alan Bundy alan.bundy@auslib.com.au, or PO Box 622 Blackwood SA 5051.

The fifth FOLA Report to the Nation *Literacy and reading for life: Australia's public libraries serving the nation* will be available in late 2008.

Executive summary

A 2007 survey of Australian public libraries confirms that they generally place a high emphasis on resources and services for babies, carers, children and young people as part of their unique remit to meet the needs of people of all ages. It also confirms that babies, children and young people represent a high proportion of the users of public libraries, but that they are often not attracting teenagers.

Library usage by children and young people was reported to be increasing by 82% of the survey respondents. The majority of use by babies and their carers, preschoolers and primary students was very high or high. The majority of use by secondary students was high or moderate, and by teenagers moderate or low.

Manifestations of a high emphasis on children and young people in some libraries included attractive well located buildings with spaces for different age groups and meeting and study rooms, specialist children's and young peoples staff, interactive websites and extensive provision of pcs, toy libraries, bookstart programs, baby bounce and rhyme times, storytelling programs, homework centres, online homework tutoring, xboxes, collections to appeal to teenagers including graphic novels, Manga workshops for teenagers, junior bookclubs and author visits.

However many of the respondents were frustrated at their inability to provide better services and resources to their younger users due to lack of council and state (particularly from the NSW government) support, funding, staffing, and congested libraries unattractive to young people in particular. Other barriers to use identified included poor evening and weekend opening hours, the reluctance of parents to transport their children to the library, poor public transport, poor library parking, and lack of marketing of the library's resources and services.

Structure should follow strategy. Yet only 34% of the survey respondents indicated that their local government councils had a strategic policy commitment to supporting children and young people within the council's area. A higher proportion (44%) of the libraries indicated that they had a policy statement on their support for children and young people.

Only 9% of the libraries had ever formally surveyed the satisfaction of the user cohort with their services, and only 35% of respondents had a formal method to identify the library needs of carers, children and young people in their communities.

Most respondents (81%) considered that decision makers at all levels of government still lack awareness of the public library role breadth and its actual and potential contribution to individual life quality and better, more connected, communities. Several respondents suggested that this represents a continuing failure of public libraries and their advocating agencies to identify and 'sell' to funders their benefits and return on investment.

At about 8c per Australian per day, public libraries remain very underfunded for their multifaceted role, and to provide better support for Australia's future generations in particular. They have been fairly described as a major casualty of Australia's complex system of government, with local government unable or unwilling to fund them properly, most state governments – especially NSW – resiling from true partnership with local government in their funding, and federal governments not leading in having this addressed as a national issue.

Australia does not have a national public library strategic framework to focus connected federal, state and local government effort and funding towards better, more accessible, public libraries for all in Australia. It is time it did.

Recommendations

- 1 The Australian government initiate the development of a national public library review and strategy for Australia in association with state/territory and local governments.
- 2 The Australian Local Government Association and state/territory local government associations encourage local government councils to develop strategic policies for the support of babies, children and young people in their communities.
- 3 Public Libraries Australia, the Australian Library and Information Association and state/territory public library services units encourage public libraries to develop policy statements on services to babies, children and young people.
- 4 Public libraries develop formal methods to identify the needs, and barriers to greater library use, of babies, children and young people in their communities.
- 5 Friends of Libraries groups consult with their libraries about the support provided for babies, children and young people and how they may contribute to advocating for, and improving, that support.
- 6 Friends of Libraries groups and public libraries promote consultation with children and young people about their library needs, and support the development of Young Friends of the Library groups.

Australia's nearly 1600 local public libraries have a unique multifaceted 'cradle to grave' user range and educational, literacy, reader development, informational, cultural, recreational, technological, social capital and democratic impact. Over 160 descriptors have been attached to them (see www.foia.org.au)

They are the most heavily used public buildings in Australia and the most valued local and state/territory government provision. Nearly all people in Australia now have access to a local public library, and 12 million people – of all ages and circumstances – choose to use them.

Consistent with overseas trends and Australian and international research findings they are increasingly being recognised as *the* outstanding community investment, an indicator of which is that about 300 new or redeveloped libraries are being built in Australia between 2000-2008. However if public library services are to achieve their full potential for all in Australia, many need more locations, better and more attractive buildings, better opening hours, resources, technology, programs, websites, marketing and professional and other staffing.

This requires a greater awareness by federal, state/territory and local governments and the general population of how relatively poorly local public libraries are funded – a national total of only about \$600 million or 8c per Australian per day – and of the now demonstrable very high quantitative and qualitative return on investment they provide.

Looking ever forward: Australia's public libraries serving children and young people aims to contribute to that awareness.

In the beginning

Australia as whole was a late comer to recognition of the importance and value of free local public libraries compared with countries such as the USA, the UK, Denmark, Canada and New Zealand. The local reliance on the little used – by about 3% of the population – subscription libraries of the mechanics' institutes and schools of arts lasted too long, in some states into the 1980s. Few of those libraries provided any resources for children and young people. Also few schools had proper libraries, with the consequence that many Australian children before the 1960s did not have access to a wide range of reading in their formative years, unless they were fortunate enough to have such resources at home.

The extent of this deprivation was chronicled by American Professor Sarah Fenwick in her 1966 report *School and children's libraries in Australia*.¹ Whilst there were a few public libraries providing good service to children, mostly in metropolitan NSW and Victoria, she concluded that

...the great majority of children in Australia have no access to public libraries where a professional children's librarian has developed a good book collection and a program of library services to stimulate and guide reading development.²

Her contention was that 'an experienced, professional staff makes the library a centre for good reading guidance.'³

As Johnson observes in her 2007 book *Life after Fenwick: the rise, fall and future of library services for children in Australia*

Underlying all Fenwick's comments on the public library service to children was this need for qualified, experienced staff, with a wide knowledge and understanding of children's literature. Guidance available should also be available for parents...One of the problems she highlighted was the lack of understanding and 'failure on the part of library administrators, association executives, and library educators to recognise the levels and quality of service that ought to be provided'.⁴

Since Fenwick reported in 1966, local public libraries have become available to nearly all in Australia, a significant achievement by local and state governments which has placed Australia among the relatively few nations worldwide which have such comprehensive provision. All of those libraries, large and small, provide at least some resources for babies and their carers, children and young people. However it is evident from data in the *Directory of Australian public libraries*⁵ that there is a considerable difference in the range and depth of resources, services, programs, staffing and access for children and young people between and within the different states and territories of Australia.

The extent and quality of the access that a baby, carer, child or young person in Australia has to the individual and social benefits which public libraries provide depends largely on where, and in what circumstances, they are born and live.

Take them to the library?

There is now considerable research on why governments should give priority to investing in the early years. It pays off in the long term, both for individuals and society. The role that public libraries can play in improving the life prospects of children and young people is also now well researched.

Much of the recent research has emanated from the UK and is reviewed by Goulding in her 2006 book *Public libraries in the 21st century: defining services and debating the future*.⁶ She quotes leading educationalist Professor K Sylva who, when asked by the UK's Parliamentary Select Committee on Preschool Education what single most important thing carers should do for their children's learning replied

Take them to the library.⁷

Goulding reviews the research, and identifies that

- early learning is now accepted as central to ensuring all children achieve their potential
- the earlier children learn to read the better they will do in later life
- the early experiences of babies with books and being read to, can have a significant effect on their literacy development if they receive support and encouragement
- preschool children of parents participating in programs to develop their skills of communicating with their children showed greater developmental progress
- early language and literacy activities in public libraries encourage parents
- those activities should focus on social inclusion and improving the life chances, social and emotional development, health, ability to learn and family connections of disadvantaged children
- young children's learning through library based programs has impacted on their families and prompted parents and caregivers to seek support for their own literacy and learning needs
- such family learning programs in public libraries are a nonthreatening first step to literacy, language and numeracy programs and other learning opportunities
- encouraging young people to become enthusiastic learners and readers requires that they should be given access to
 - the library as *the* space in the community for young people
 - inspiring, relevant reading including creative reading activities
 - the chance to be involved in and shape the library service
 - the library as their Third Place, the place to participate in the wider community and in democracy
 - the library as the independent place for information and study support.

Much of the UK research confirms and illustrates how public libraries contribute to children's development by helping them to grow intellectually, socially and culturally. However one major investigation reported a challenge with which public libraries in Australia, and worldwide, are still too familiar. This is that

...although many of the parents, children, librarians and teachers interviewed endorsed the important role of libraries, decision makers responsible for educational and literacy initiatives often ignored the role of the public library or did not fully understand its potential.⁸

A UK report which is particularly relevant to the challenge often not well met by Australian public libraries and their funders is engaging young people, in particular teenagers. *Fulfilling their potential: a national development programme for young people's library services*⁹ analyses consultations with young people, research and trends. It concludes that public libraries can improve the life quality and socialisation of all young people, particularly those who are at risk. The premise is that that a child engaging with society from a young age is more likely to engage with society as an adult, and that a modern accessible and welcoming public library is one of the best investments which society can make towards this end.

The young people interviewed for *Fulfilling their potential* had strong views about the image of public libraries, views which have been expressed in studies in Australia. The negative images included

- dull, boring
- dark, never open
- daunting
- old, too small
- not enough new books
- computers are too busy
- sometimes the staff are not nice.

However despite these views, the consultation groups were also enthusiastic about what public libraries could offer. They had a vision of their ideal, which included

- a separate space for different ages and activities
- a library which sits alongside other facilities
- a high quality environment in terms of design and furniture
- a welcoming atmosphere, open more often and at convenient times
- walking distance from home, school or a bus stop
- a café area where they can read, talk, play music, without disturbing others
- wide choice of relevant reading material
- listening posts for music and talking books
- computers with internet access
- quiet spaces and areas where people could chat and read
- more men, young people and friendly staff who move around helping people, not sitting behind counters
- involvement in the design of their libraries and services, including staff appointments and training.¹⁰

The best libraries in Australia, as in the UK and elsewhere, are already responding well to those expectations. Many still are not. Because of their locations, buildings, funding and staffing levels they often cannot.

To inform the extent to which Australian public libraries are now able to provide for their younger users, in May 2007 FOLA undertook a national survey of them.

The Friends of Libraries Australia survey

A one page survey with nine questions was mailed to all Australian public library services, a total of 532 services with nearly 1600 branches. The questions focused on identifying the policy commitment of local government councils and their libraries to supporting children and young people; the extent to which babies, carers, children and young people use their local libraries; the services, resources and facilities available to them; and the barriers to improved support.

Responses were requested by 16 June 2007. Follow up of libraries not responding to the survey was not attempted. The response rate was 28%. By comparison the 2004 FOLA survey had a 27% response, the 2005 survey 33%, and the 2006 survey 29%.

This level of response to a single request was expected, as many individual public library services are still small rural libraries with no or very limited professional staff, particularly in Queensland and Western Australia. The 2008 consolidation of councils in Queensland should, in some cases at least, provide a stronger base for better library services in that state.

About 9% of Australian public libraries are now joint use libraries in partnership with formal educational providers, the majority with high schools but also with Tafe colleges and universities. This is most common in regional and rural areas, notably in South Australia where nearly 40% of public libraries are joint use. Consequently 6% of the survey respondents were doing so as libraries which support children and young people formally and informally.

All of the questions were answered by most of the respondents. The following summarises those responses as percentages, complemented by examples and commentary.

1 Does your council/s have a policy statement on its support for children and young people?

Yes 34%

No 66%

Commentary Although the number of positive responses is encouraging, the number of negative responses indicate that many Australian councils do not have an overt commitment to identifying and responding to the needs of children and young people in their communities. This suggests a need for the Australian Local Government Association and the state/territory associations to encourage their members to consider what they can do to work through their libraries with community agencies in the interests of children and young people.

2 Does your library service have a policy statement on its support for children and young people?

Yes 44%

No 56%

Commentary The number of libraries with a policy statement is higher than that of the councils. This probably reflects their direct and regular engagement with a diversity of young users, something less likely in most other parts of council services. However it is surprising that more public libraries have still to articulate their rationale, policy and priorities for supporting children and young people as a distinctive part of their clientele. One library reported that its council had a policy but had not developed its own. Another observed that 'It is time we had formal policy statements in all of these areas, and we have now started on them'.

3 Have you ever formally surveyed the satisfaction of children and young people with your library services?

Yes 9%

No 91%

Commentary Several negative responses indicated that children and young people were included in their general user satisfaction surveys. However, as with the 2006 FOLA survey, the very low

positive response rate to this question suggests a difficulty for public libraries in convincing funders of the extent to which they are used by children and young people, and of their satisfaction with what the library is able to provide. Although there are privacy and other issues in surveying library users and nonusers, public libraries and councils need to invest in more systematic ways of identifying how and why children and young people are using – and as importantly, not using – their local libraries.

4 *Estimated use of your library service*

	<i>Very high</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Low</i>
Babies and carers	29%	39%	26%	6%
Preschoolers	38%	41%	17%	4%
Primary age	22%	41%	32%	5%
Secondary age	7%	26%	35%	32%
Postschool teens	0%	18%	49%	33%

Commentary None of the respondents stated any formal statistical basis for their estimates. This was anticipated given the difficulty in correlating library usage – in all of its lending, inlibrary and online manifestations – with specific user ages. The results seem to be broadly consistent with library experience worldwide, in particular the low library use by teenagers. One library explained a factor in this low use as being ‘Postschool teens tend to leave our area, so there is low representation in library use’.

5 *Overall, is library use by babies, carers, children and young people increasing, steady or decreasing?*

Increasing 82%

Steady 15%

Decreasing 3%

Commentary As with the 2006 FOLA survey on student use of public libraries, a few responses noted that factors in increasing use included new and refurbished buildings, and longer opening hours. Population growth, the growing number of attractive and spacious libraries in Australia, greater internet access and online resources, and better opening hours especially at weekends were all identified as increased use factors. The few libraries in the survey reporting decreasing use by children and young people were all in rural areas, which may have static or reducing populations.

6 *Features of your library service which encourage awareness and use by babies, children and young people*

Examples included

- attractive modern building
- central location
- specialist staff in all branches
- designated areas for age use
- teens lounge
- long opening hours
- weekend opening
- bright and welcoming areas
- staff with a high level of children/youth skills
- storytime sessions at night
- dynamic programs
- Great Books Festival
- good marketing
- appealing collections eg music, graphic novels, dvds
- baby bounce/rhyme times
- Bookmania Book Club(primary)

- participation in Australian Library and Information Week
- involvement in National Simultaneous Storytime Day
- liaison with local playgroups, crèches and primary schools
- playstations and xboxes
- online homework tutoring
- homework centres
- special displays
- junior bookclubs
- HSC collections
- parents come with babies to collect their school children(school community library)
- staff visits to health clinics, schools, community centres
- quiet study areas
- excellent support by Friends of Library group
- take home storytime boxes
- closeness to kindergartens
- Mothers Day gifts to all playgroup mums
- children/young adults newsletters
- youth focused interactive website
- toy library
- listening posts
- lots of pcs
- school visits
- family fun days
- modern building
- funky furniture
- large screen TVs
- bookstart program (books for babies)
- Manga workshops for teens
- parent resource area
- local newspaper and TV promotion
- reading challenges
- program focused on single mothers helping their children
- author visits
- school holiday programs
- wireless access
- café
- Young Friends of the Library group
- young people help select resources

Commentary The responses indicate that some Australian public libraries, by international comparison, are responding broadly and well to the needs of babies, carers, children and young people. Particularly noteworthy were the number of respondents now providing bookstart or books for babies programs as part of state/territory wide schemes in the ACT, South and Western Australia, and Tasmania as well as a number in other states doing so as individual libraries. However the majority of respondents were still not providing this arguably basic public library service.

Also of note were the several respondents providing xboxes and playstations as marketing attractors to young people – especially males – to explore the resources and services of modern libraries. Disappointingly, one library indicated that it had not been permitted to do this by its narrow visioned council.

Although no responses were received from Queensland's developing system of local Indigenous Knowledge Centres, it is reported that these, and other such centres in Australia, are achieving some success in engaging young Indigenous people with the public library resources they provide.

6 *Barriers to awareness and use of your library service by babies, children and young people*

Examples included

- patchy resources
- no money for needed resources
- no cool space for teens to hangout
- very small children's area
- too small space for storytimes
- shelves high for some children
- no time for visits to schools etc
- lack of space
- poor opening hours
- not enough internet pcs
- young adults section is aimed at only 12-16 years
- no dedicated staff members for these age groups
- unattractive and complicated building
- high school students working in library(school community library)
- poor location
- young people just don't seem to like libraries
- when we visit schools the children often tell us that their parents will not take them to the public library because of work and time reasons
- low staffing levels
- history of lack of welcome to young people
- some staff not keen on teenagers
- poor parking
- poor public transport
- doors hard to open for pushers
- lack of xboxes etc
- no lending of videos
- parental backgrounds(low educational levels)
- books for babies program only funded for one year

Commentary The barriers listed most frequently were lack of space – especially for different age groups – limited or no specialist staff, poor hours and collection limitations.

7 *Do you formally identify the library needs and wishes of carers, children and young people in your community?*

Yes 35%

No 65%

Commentary Examples given by libraries doing so included surveys, feedback forms, young representative on library board, focus groups, outreach programs contacts, through council social plan, suggestion boards in libraries.

A high percentage of the respondents appeared to have no mechanism for formally identifying the needs and wishes of children and young people. This suggests that many libraries have no fully informed local basis on which to advocate with their councils and state/territory governments for greater library investment in children and young people.

8 Is there awareness by funding decision makers of the contribution which public libraries make, or can make, to meeting the needs of babies, children and young people?

Yes 19%

No 81%

Commentary Several respondents used strong words in indicating their frustration at library funding levels, the most polite of which was ‘a resounding no!’

Observations by the survey respondents

These included

- The biggest issues we confront are 1) no staff designated to run programs, so they are done in an ad hoc fashion 2) insufficient space to create good teens area 3) limited hours for teens access.
- We are about to embark on a comprehensive strategic planning process which includes a large component of community consultation, as we are one of the lowest funded library services per capita in (state).
- (As a joint use library), our library is caught three ways between stakeholder bodies – the (state/territory) government, local council and high school/Education Department. It’s a real tug of war, with their aim not be the body left funding the library... *but* we do have very strong community support.
- In our joint use library there is a great deal of passing costs by the school to the community to get any real improvement in facilities etc.
- The recent literacy program launched in (state/territory) did not involve public libraries in the research. It totally disregarded literacy services provided without additional funding as a core library service.
- Support in recent years by Public Libraries SA has been terrific for our country school community library, with programs such as The Little Big Book Club, Baby Bounce and Rhyme, Storytimes etc. Parents and children have been very responsive and appreciative of our initiatives.
- Early literacy needs broad community understanding.
- Through marketing the libraries we have a high profile and very supportive council. Our monthly reports are commented on by council, and three branches are being renovated.
- Until we have a formula to show the \$ value of what a library brings to its community, it makes it very difficult to gain better funding.
- There are some on council who are very supportive of libraries, but a few very vocal people are very anti free library service and anything cultural. We do quite well, but we can always do better.
- There is still not a high level of awareness by senior management and government about the very positive contribution which young peoples services@the library have on literacy levels and the development of young people. Young peoples services provided by public libraries are often overlooked by funders and governments, where the emphasis is always on schools and education departments. Instead, there should be a joint public library and education focus.

Opportunity and challenge

The aggregated contribution made by Australia’s public libraries to early learning and socialization of future generations is already considerable, if largely still unrecognised. That contribution is tending to increase but there is still little indication that public libraries and those agencies with the main responsibilities for public library advocacy have succeeded in convincing funders of the value of higher investment in public libraries. Indeed, in one state in particular the opposite seems to have

occurred, with NSW's 2007/2008 funding subsidy for local public libraries now at an all time and risory low of less than 7% of their total annual cost. Apart from its impact on public libraries and the many people in NSW who use them, this sets a very poor lead for improved NSW local government investment in public libraries. It also risks the unproductive surfacing of the direct library user pays issue.

Nonetheless, the FOLA survey confirms that some Australian libraries are working at a sophisticated level of proactive innovation in meeting the developmental needs of babies, children and young people. They are the exemplars which set the benchmark for better public libraries for all children and young people in Australia.

Further confirmation of this was evident at the March 2007 transTasman *Learning futures* conference held in Adelaide.¹¹ This conference showcased many Australian and New Zealand examples of public library initiatives and excellence in serving babies, carers, children and young people. However it also profiled one area of government and public library support for young people which remains a significant challenge.

One of the respondents to the FOLA survey observed that 'young people just do not seem to like libraries'. This self defeating generalization is invalidated by the reality that young people *do* like, use heavily and appreciate libraries which are bright, attractive, welcoming, friendly, accessible and meet *their* aspirations and needs for connection, spaces, resources and services. That much has been the experience overseas, and of those Australian councils and states/territories which have had the foresight to invest in such libraries.

Nonetheless, there remains a major issue for funders and public libraries worldwide in connecting young adults, especially teenagers, with the unique socialization potential of the public library as *their* Third Place, after their home and school or work.

That challenge was described by US authority Patrick Jones at the *Learning futures* conference

Strong communities tend to have strong schools and libraries. We know this. We know that young people with assets are more likely to contribute to, rather than take from, society. We know the cost to the community of kids without assets, in social services, correctional and other institutions. We know that libraries can and do build assets. Libraries thus build communities. Assets create positive outcomes and positive outcomes create stronger communities. We serve teens because libraries build community.

Connecting young adults and libraries is not about treating them as special, but it is about serving them uniquely just as services to other market segments of the public library do – toddlers, genealogy, seniors, college students and small business people. Each group of users has different demands upon libraries due to different needs based on what they are trying to accomplish.

Above all, teens are trying to accomplish one thing – form an identity. If we believe that libraries are good things for a community, then does it not follow that we want teens, as they are forming this identity, to recognise this value? If we believe our work has value, then we will want teens to learn that by our deeds and action. If we believe that our work has value, then we need to know that it matters. If we believe that libraries should be supported by the community, then we need to show and prove to the community that matters. Communities allocate resources based on what they value.

So, we are poised to make a choice. We can lock the doors and shut out a generation of library users. Or we can unlock the creativity, excitement, energy, and passion of both those teen users and the librarians that serve them.¹²

A challenge is thus for councils, and their public libraries, to reassess their strategic priorities. Too often, services to teenagers do not appear to be high in those priorities at present.

The leadership issue

Even more of a challenge, however, is to identify how – and which – Australian governments will provide leadership for better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia.

In the responses to the FOLA survey one respondent noted the apparent determination of the four stakeholders in her joint use library to minimize their contribution to it, despite its high level of community support. It has similarly been observed that public libraries nationwide have been one casualty of Australia's complex three level system of government, given that system's proclivity for leadership avoidance and towards financial buck passing.

The outcome is that something used by 60% of Australians of all ages and circumstances operates at an annual total cost of only \$600 million – about 75% from local government, 25% from most state/territory governments(except NSW at less than 7%), and nothing directly from the national government. This is far less than 1% of the quantum expended annually on Australian institutional education. It needs to be at least doubled in real terms if public libraries across the nation are to contribute what some of them have already shown is possible.

This would represent an increase from about 8c per Australian per day, to the 16c per day already received from taxpayers by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. There should be no doubting that there would be broad community support for that increased investment. Evidence of this support is to be found in research commissioned by the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian Public Library Network in 2004.

The findings of that quality research have Australia wide, indeed international, applicability. Published as *Libraries/building/communities*¹³ the findings of the study derive from the views and ideas of nearly 10,000 Victorians about their public library services. Those findings provide hard, incontestable, evidence about just how important public libraries are to individuals and community life throughout Australia, the high value that people place on them, and their desire that public libraries should be better funded.

Respondents to the study valued a small library with 20,000 registered users at \$20 million a year. This figure ranged upwards to \$730 million a year for a large library with 150,000 registered users. Such a large library would be currently operating on an annual budget *of only about \$8 million*. Children's programs alone, such as school holiday programs and storytimes, were respectively valued at \$20-\$30 per child and \$10-\$16 per child.¹⁴ There was overwhelming support for public libraries remaining free at the point of use.

The *Libraries/building/communities* study shows, with case studies, that some of Australia's public libraries are able to innovate and achieve excellence in addressing the diverse needs of all people. However it also confirms that local public libraries lack funding appropriate to their broadening role, increasing expectations of them, their extremely high return on investment, and their potential contribution to the learning and life quality of all in Australia, young and old. *A wealthy country like Australia can, and should be, doing much better*, as countries from Finland to Singapore have demonstrated.

Friends of Libraries Australia therefore considers that an Australian public libraries strategy,¹⁵ informed by a review of the issues and options for funding of better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia is long overdue – and now requires national government leadership.

References

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