

From cradle to grave: the uniqueness of public libraries

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Public libraries have a unique cradle to grave clientele. Their challenge is to ensure that library funding decision makers are aware of the breadth of that clientele, and of the resources needed to respond well and equitably to it. To assist in meeting this challenge Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) commenced in 2004 a program of reports to the nation to emphasise to governments and agencies at all levels the potential of public libraries to achieve more for the whole community if investment in their funding, staffing and buildings is increased. The 2004 and 2005 FOLA reports, the first on the role of public libraries in the provision of books for babies and encouraging parents to read to them, and the other on services for older adults, demonstrate the age extremes of public library clientele. The number of Friends of Libraries groups throughout Australia is increasing but more are needed for public library support and advocacy and as the voices of the 12 million public library users. Public libraries without Friends groups are encouraged to foster and support them using information, resources and advice available from Friends of Libraries Australia. The 2006 FOLA report to the nation will focus on public library services and support for school and tertiary education.

It has been fairly observed that arguing and sustaining the case for better investment in public libraries has been bedevilled by Australia's complex three tiers of government. It is the case that the unique multifaceted educational, informational, literacy, cultural, recreational and social capital 'cradle to grave' remit of the modern public library straddles, at the federal and state levels, more ministerial and departmental portfolios than any other public service or agency.

At the federal level alone there are at least seven ministerial portfolios on which the work of public libraries impacts. Within state and territory governments a similar situation applies. Even at the local government level a council's public library service will impact on, and connect with, several areas of a council's responsibilities. This is at once a difficulty, but also an opportunity to broaden whole of government understanding of the breadth and impact of public libraries on individuals and communities, and of the now demonstrable return on better investment in them.

The first national public libraries conference

The first national public libraries conference and exhibition was held in Melbourne 1-3 February 1994. Its proceedings¹ make, just a decade later, interesting reading. Recorded therein for posterity are the wit and wisdom of Rod Quantock, who moderated a two hour session on information and democracy, a rare challenge from which we hope he has recovered. His participation today in this first Public Libraries Australia national conference speaks volumes of his commitment to our endeavours for better libraries for all, and his understanding of the implications of the words attributed to Thomas Jefferson that 'Information is the currency of democracy'. One of the delightful questions he posed for the panel in 1994 was 'If a library starts deteriorating, doesn't this result in more funds'. Even now, that question will undoubtedly attract a mirthful response from many librarians. He was clearly being seriously funny.

That 1994 conference also saw a perceptive address entitled *Local government and libraries* by Graeme Frecker, the then immediate past president of the Australian Local Government Association. In response to the frustration of public librarians about attitudes within local government to public libraries, he observed that one reason for the lack of appreciation of the scope and importance of public libraries within local government was that only one in six of its decision makers had access to a public library in their formative childhood years. This was a consequence of

the late development of free public libraries in large parts of Australia. He was suggesting that with the passage of time, as decision makers grew up having access to a public library, this would become less of an issue.

There is already, some ten years later, limited evidence that he was right. Councils are slowly, if very unevenly, becoming more aware that their public libraries are their best and most heavily used and valued asset, providing a council shop window to the community, and an outstanding return of between \$4 and \$7 for every dollar invested.²

A manifestation of that awareness, as the forthcoming seventh edition of the *Directory of Australian public libraries*³ indicates, is improving funding and staffing of numerous public libraries, and the construction of over 200 new buildings, major rebuilds and new mobile libraries between 2000-2006.

The challenge

That is the positive side of the ledger. On the other side still remains the formidable task — faced by public libraries in every country — of conveying to local, state and national decision makers why public libraries have this unique capacity and potential to enhance and change lives, and connect communities across all ages. A major part of the challenge is that, not only did many of today's decision makers not have access to good libraries in their formative years, they are still often middle aged or older males. This is the very population cohort which makes the least direct use of libraries, may infrequently enter them, and may thus have little sense of the scope, dynamic and usage of the modern public library. Not a few public librarians would still know of the local councillor who is happy to stand in blinkered or ignorant judgement on library funding and issues, but is less happy to ever darken the library's doors — even if he knows where the library, and its doors, are to be found.

In the 1935 Munn-Pitt report, which was highly critical of Australian local, state and national government inaction on developing free public libraries, a reason given for the lack of public outcry about the situation was that

...most Australians have had no contact with a progressive and complete library system and know nothing of its functions and facilities.⁴

In 2005 we could paraphrase that to read

...too many library funding decision makers still have had no contact with a progressive and complete library system and no nothing of its functions and facilities.

Conveying the message

So just how do we get the message across and assist those busy decision makers to make well informed judgements about investment in the libraries for which they have responsibility? One advantage we have compared with 1935 is that we have some excellent public libraries in Australia now. No longer are we the laggard public library nation of 70, or even just 30, years ago. Australia has caught up very quickly with other developed nations. It now ranks in the top ten public library nations in terms of national coverage, buildings, collections, services, programs and technology — and high usage. New Zealand, however, is still perhaps ahead of Australia, as it was in 1956 when it, the US, UK and Denmark were identified as the top four public library nations. Australia did not rate a mention then, and did not deserve to.

If it could be done, the quickest way of showing decision makers what modern public libraries are about would be nationally coordinated, all expenses paid, study tours of the best of those libraries. Except for the permanently blinkered ideologue to whom anything 'free' or for the common good is anathema, they could not but be convinced by what they saw, and return home committed to improving their own libraries. Even a national pictorial database or DVD of those best libraries of all types and sizes might help.

The FOLA reports to the nation

In this context of the need for awareness raising about the uniquely wide remit of public libraries, the national committee of Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) was pondering what it could do, as a voice of Friends of Libraries (FOL) groups and thus library users around Australia, to profile the achievements and needs of public libraries. It was decided to institute a series of annual reports to the nation directed to decision makers at all levels, and to other agencies.

Australian Bookstart: a national issue, a compelling case

FOLA started its program of reports to the nation with the launch during its 10th anniversary celebration at the National Library on 3 December 2004 of *Australian Bookstart: a national issue, a compelling case*.⁵ This was based on a May 2004 survey of public libraries about the extent to which they were involved in providing Bookstart or Books for Babies kits to the parents and caregivers of babies to encourage their awareness of the importance for early childhood literacy development of children being read to at the earliest possible age. The report's conclusions were

In the assessment of how well the individual local governments, states and territories of Australia are responding to these issues, the survey indicates that a form of *Bookstart* is available, or will be soon, to 1.76 million Australians, 7 per cent of the population. About 7 per cent of Australian babies *may* thus now receive kits, compared with 4 per cent at the end of 2002. This is some, but inadequate, progress. Progress at the same rate means that it will take over 25 years before *Bookstart* is provided to all Australian parents and babies.

In addition, there appear to be some *Bookstart* type programs which are provided by infant health agencies, or as initiatives by community organisations, but without public library involvement or connection. This lack of connection is unfortunate, as the public library is the community's major resource for quality reading resources for children and storytelling, particularly for lower socioeconomic, culturally and linguistically diverse and isolated communities.

The survey responses also indicate the extent to which Australian public libraries are attempting to promote family literacy and reading in school age children, young adults and beyond. A national consultation on *Australian Bookstart* would inevitably raise the need for better support for those efforts but nothing should distract from a focus – as the first priority – on *Australian Bookstart* provided to all babies regardless of the financial socioeconomic and educational circumstances into which they have been born

- The Australian Capital Territory has the most inclusive large *Australian Bookstart* program, similar to the UK program. Babies and their parents and caregivers in the nation's capital are advantaged relative to those in most parts of Australia. The City of Moreland in Melbourne also provides an excellent program and national exemplar.
- Tasmania's recently introduced statewide lending scheme *Babies who read, succeed* is a variant of the *Bookstart* program, which has been well accepted. Its limitation – like that provided by Mudgee and Wollongong libraries in NSW and Adelaide Hills in SA – is that it is primarily of benefit to babies whose parents already access a public library, who are more likely to be aware of the importance of reading to babies, and to be confident readers themselves. It is unlikely to be getting to those parents and babies who have most need, the 'at risk' parents and babies which have been the primary rationale for overseas *Bookstart* programs.
- Western Australia has more individual libraries – some quite small – providing *Bookstart* than any other state, with over 1000 parent toolkits given away in pilot programs. A reading gateway has also been established (<http://web.liswa.wa.gov.au/read.html>). Its *Better beginnings* family literacy program has potential to underpin a statewide *Bookstart* program, and as a template for a national approach. Importantly, it has a

quantitative *and* qualitative evaluation component involving researchers from Edith Cowan University, using funding from that university's commendable industry collaboration scheme grants.

- The State Library of Queensland's innovation grants have permitted local pilots of *Bookstart* programs, but apparently no ongoing funding.
- NSW, NT, South Australia and Victoria as yet have no inclusive and coordinated approach to *Bookstart*. However South Australia has recently established a working group of public librarians to develop a proposal for a statewide program, which has been provided with \$50,000 by the Libraries Board of SA to underpin the proposal. NSW has grant funded a few projects, as has Victoria under its *Best start* program (www.beststart.vic.gov.au) which aims to improve the health, development, wellbeing and learning of all Victorian children 0-8 years.

The report was sent to the federal and state/territory governments, drawing attention to its major recommendation that a national two day consultation should be held in 2005 to highlight the importance for literacy development and parent-child bonding of reading aloud to babies and young children, and how to provide parents and caregivers with the awareness, skills and access to good books to do so.

The national Read Aloud summit

That consultation came to pass in Sydney 31 August – 1 September 2005, during National Literacy Week, in the form of a national Read Aloud Summit generously funded by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training. FOLA does not claim credit for that summit being held but assumes that its report, which was sent to federal Minister of Education in December 2004, was a stimulus for it. During his opening address to the 200 delegates, from a wide range of institutions, agencies and interests, Minister Brendan Nelson committed the government to fund a second summit in 2006 – important, because that first summit produced no tangible outcomes or recommendations. It was, however, useful as a voyage of discovery and connection about how several agencies are responding to the issues, sometimes in complete isolation from each other. It became obvious early in the summit that those agencies had little idea about what public libraries are already doing and why they are interested in literacy development. By the end of the summit — through the PLA workshops run by Lynne Makin, Jan Richards and Robert Knight, workshops on the State Library of WA's Better beginnings program by Sue North and Nola Allen, complemented by displays from PLA, State Library of WA and the State of Library of Tasmania — participants were left in no doubt, as the summit chairman observed during his concluding remarks, that public libraries are indeed major players.

The role and importance of public libraries was also strongly emphasised in her keynote address by Rosemary Clarke, the head of the UK's world leading 12 year comprehensive and innovative Bookstart program. As she emphasised, the very successful UK Bookstart program has been dependent on strong public library involvement. Her presentations and others are now available on the National literacy and numeracy website.⁶

Whilst it produced a consensus on Bookstart for babies and reading aloud as a vital national issue, the summit did not take Australia any closer to coordinated and inclusive national action. Nonetheless, three states and one territory, individual organisations such as the Dymocks Literacy Foundation and The Smith Family, and more individual public libraries (sometimes with the support of their Friends groups) are implementing responses to the issues. Yet at the current rate of progress it will be over a decade before Bookstart will be supplied to all parents and their babies — and for every baby that is not read to there is potentially another semi literate or illiterate Australian who will not develop their full potential as an individual and as a contributor to society, and who will in some cases unfortunately and expensively add to the socially dysfunctional and the prison population. It will be important to have maximum library representation at the 2006 Read Aloud summit to push the case for coordinated national action to hasten the progress.

This is particularly in the context of PLA's advocacy strategy⁷ which the PLA Board endorsed in September 2004, with a national family literacy program based on the UK Bookstart as its first program. Among the critical messages of that program which we all need to work to convey to library and other funding bodies are that 'The impact of current critical illiteracy levels on the Australian community is too significant to ignore' and that 'Public libraries provide a key resource in the national drive to raise literacy standards'.

Community critical: Australian public libraries serving the seniors

FOLA's second report to the nation *Community critical: Australian public libraries serving seniors* was launched on 14 October 2005 at its fifth biennial conference in Adelaide. Like the first report it is being communicated — with a request for responses — to local councils, their state and national associations, public libraries, federal and state ministers, library and other appropriate associations. Consciously, it is a swing to the opposite end of the age pendulum from the first report to emphasise that unique cradle to grave remit of public libraries. The survey of public libraries on which it is based coincided with the Australian Local Government Association's (ALGA) excellent first *Ageing awareness and action survey report*⁹ about which we will be hearing from Alley Peck this afternoon. The FOLA report itself complements the ALGA report. Both reports broadly show that some local authorities and their libraries have grasped the issues for an ageing Australia well, some have good intentions and are making progress, but that some have yet to consider or develop a strategy in response to those issues. Funding their responses to the needs of the ageing population is clearly a concern within local government, and within its libraries. A real value of the ALGA and FOLA reports is that they cannot fail to be vehicles for awareness raising of the role of councils and their libraries in meeting the needs of Australia's ageing population.

As the executive summary of the FOLA report observes

In common with other developed countries Australia has an ageing population. Responding to the informational, learning, quality of life, wellbeing and independent living needs of that population will require increasing investment by all levels of government and agencies. This includes local government and particularly public libraries, local government's most heavily used and valued community provision.

A 2005 survey of Australian public libraries by Friends of Libraries Australia confirms that they receive high use from older adults, and that many libraries now provide more for them than their longstanding provision of large print and talking books. A few of those libraries are adequately funded to provide comprehensive and innovative responses to the varied needs of older adults. Most, however, are inadequately funded to provide such responses. Knowledge of what they currently provide, and have the potential to provide if properly funded, is considered to be not well recognised by the Australian, state/territory and local governments.

Public libraries play an important role in the lives of many older adults, particularly the lonely and isolated. However they often lack the accessibility, buildings, space, resources, professional staffing and funding to ensure that all older adults are able to take full advantage of what a modern public library can provide for them.

Their deficiencies include services for people who are homebound, services to institutional residents, services to older adults in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, physical accessibility, space and facilities appropriate for older adults, assisting older adults to bridge the digital divide, and marketing of services. Of particular concern is that many libraries do not strongly promote their home library services — an important contributor to independent living — because of fear of being unable to cope with the demand. Nor do any of them employ bibliotherapists to work with health professionals in identifying and recommending appropriate literature to help older adults and others cope with emotional issues, mental illness and life changes.

At present a minority of older Australians have access to the full benefits of what a public library should, and can cost effectively, provide for them. The majority, typically in lower socioeconomic urban areas, and in regional and rural Australia, do not have awareness of, or access to, those benefits. They are underserved.

Addressing this substantial inequity requires the interest and leadership of the Australian government and state/territory governments, and strategic planning by local government and public libraries.

The FOLA report has ten recommendations directed to federal, state and local government, the ALGA, PLA and ALIA, and to public libraries themselves.

A practical recommendation to public libraries is that they evaluate their services and facilities for older adults using a comprehensive best practice checklist appended to the report, which is developed from a Canadian and other checklists.

Another recommendation is that *Guidelines for library and information services for older Australians* should be jointly developed and promulgated by Public Libraries Australia and the Australian Library and Information Association. This is because Australia, unlike the US and Canada for example, does not yet have such guidelines as a reference point for public libraries endeavouring to improve their services to older adults. The only national guidelines currently available in the area are ALIA's *Guidelines for Australian home library services*.¹⁰

As a response to the report FOLA itself will be instituting in 2006, as one of its national awards, *The FOLA Eric Flynn award for library services to older adults*. The late Eric Flynn was a major contributor to the development of the Friends of Kew Library in Victoria, and to Friends of Libraries Australia. The award named for him will recognise excellence and innovation in services by a public library, on the recommendation of its Friends group.

Educationally critical: public libraries serving students

The 2006 FOLA report to the nation will be entitled *Educationally critical: public libraries serving students*. It will swing back closer to the cradle by surveying and reporting on how well public libraries are able to respond to the 30 per cent of their users who are school and tertiary students.

Twelve million public library users: worth an investment?

If your library does not yet have a Friends group, you may be wondering what exactly Friends of Libraries Australia is, how it is funded, and what it does — but more importantly why your library should consider developing a Friends group.

FOLA was conceptualised in the early 1990s by Daniel Ferguson, then and still a full time public librarian, now working in NSW. He is its busy but unpaid executive director. The concept derived from his long experience in library promotion and with Friends groups in Victoria, and from his knowledge of Friends of Libraries USA which was established in 1979. FOLA followed in 1994 as only the world's second national Friends association, with its patron as the Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC. There is now a Friends association in Canada and South Africa. Others are in development or consideration, including in New Zealand.

FOLA has no paid staff. It relies mostly on lay volunteers who believe that better libraries for all are very important, and that Friends can make a difference as the nonprofessional voice and support for their improvement. Its limited funds derive from sponsorships from a few library suppliers, particularly Bolinda Publishing, Baker and Taylor, James Bennett and Auslib Press, small subscription fees from FOL groups, individuals and libraries, and sales of its very useful *Friends of Libraries resource book*. The second edition of this was published in October 2005.¹¹

Its two other information resources of use to public libraries and library users interested in developing a FOL group are the *FOLA news update*, and its recently improved website www.fola.org.au. On the website you will find a paper *Twelve million public library friends: worth an investment?*¹² This is an information and issues paper for public librarians which you are encouraged to read if you have ever wondered about the value of Friends groups.

Relatively few councils have library advisory committees, and those that do may not provide for community representation on them. FOL groups are therefore often the only voice that library users have about their libraries. That voice may sometimes be a discordant one, a reason why their establishment is occasionally actually discouraged by council CEOs. However most councils view them as partners in the democratic process, and they can thus be influential far beyond their actual numbers. FOLA has increasing evidence of the difference that FOL groups, large and small, have made at critical times for libraries throughout Australia. Just by their existence they say something to a council about the importance of a library to the community as a whole. This is because few other council services are ever supported by a friends group.

As Alan Smith, the Director of the State library of SA, noted in a perceptive opening address to the recent FOLA biennial conference in Adelaide

Friends of Libraries groups bear living witness to the importance of libraries... a library without a FOL group is a library diminished.

And as Dr Christine Henderson, then the manager of the Public Libraries Division in South Australia, observed in 1988

The ramifications of citizen support for library services should not be underestimated as it has the potential to determine the future course of library services in this country.¹³

Since she made that observation Australia has seen a considerable growth in FOL groups, the establishment of FOLA to foster their growth, and the establishment of FOLA's Best of Friends awards to recognise achievement by them. However for FOL groups and FOLA to be more effective lay advocates for libraries, more public library services in Australia need to have a well informed Friends of Library group which sees itself as having a role in local and wider library advocacy, and able to say and do things such as apply for grants which public library managers by their employment sometimes cannot.

Awakening the giant

Some years ago Chris Williams, then the manager of the Newcastle Regional Library, observed to me that public libraries and their very large user base were a sleeping giant which needed to be awakened. That giant slumbers still but is becoming more restless, of which the establishment of Public Libraries Australia and Friends of Libraries Australia are fairly recent manifestations

The critical question remains of just how we stir that giant from its slumbers, and capitalise politically on that huge support base of 12 million cradle to grave Australian public library users, of whom 70 per cent are voters. It is a potential support base which would be the envy of any other profession or industry in Australia.

Pleading the cause

There is a legal axiom that 'He or she who pleads their own case has a fool for a lawyer'. That is often a limitation of professional and industry associations, including those in the library sector. Their advocacy for better treatment may be dismissed by government as yet another industry or professional 'bleat', and achieve little success. Librarians should thus avoid emphasising the need for better investment in them as a 'library' issue or professional issue. It is not. It is a library *user* issue.

An example of that misplaced emphasis is a very attractive leaflet produced about two years ago by the Metropolitan Public Libraries Association in NSW. On its cover it had 'A fair go for

libraries...public libraries need more state funding' Inside the leaflet were very persuasive comments from library users, including Nicole Kidman, about the importance of public libraries to them. However those words may have been read by few decision makers. They would likely have got no further than the industry 'bleat' on the cover. More effectively, it might have said something like 'A fair go for the 3 million voting public library users in NSW...our state's libraries are worth better state funding'.

The foreword of the 1994 public libraries conference proceedings concluded that perhaps the conference's major achievement

...was recognition of the need for a national strategic focus so that public libraries can *lead* in society's future. The state and territory parochialness which has thwarted national and coordinated advocacy of the importance of public libraries is at least now a debating point.¹⁴

At the conference a decision was, in fact, taken to establish a national working group to identify the best way of implementing a national organisation and focus for public librarians and libraries.

It is therefore terrific, following the short lived Confederation of Australian Public Libraries' Associations (CAPLA) and the Australian Public Libraries Network (APLN), that Public Libraries Australia is now developing so well as the national voice of public libraries and librarians. It is not however, and does not aspire to be, the voice of those 12 million public library users. In so far as they can be so, that is the role of Friends of Libraries groups across Australia, and of FOLA.

The challenge for public librarians

As partners in advocacy Public Libraries Australia and Friends of Libraries Australia can achieve much towards the recognition of public libraries as unique cradle to grave agencies demonstrably worthy of much stronger investment across Australia.

This will need more public librarians prepared, as a core professional responsibility, to put the work into initiating, fostering and supporting Friends of their libraries. Friends cannot operate well without that ongoing support.

It will also require more public librarians to see the immediate and long term value of supporting Public Libraries Australia as much as possible, financially and in other ways. What PLA has achieved to date derives largely from great volunteer effort by just a few outstanding public librarians, who also have full time jobs. They too need ongoing support.

We, and those very many others who believe in the absolute importance of better cradle to grave public libraries for all, are, and will remain, in their debt.

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