

## **CONTRIBUTION OF THE NOT FOR PROFIT SECTOR STUDY**

### **A submission by Friends of Libraries Australia**

Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) was established in 1994 to foster the development of Friends of Libraries groups in Australia. Those Friends groups are increasing in numbers and influence, as the supporters of their local libraries, and voice of their communities about them.

With its vision of ‘better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia’ FOLA is a lay voice of the 60% of Australians of all ages who use and highly value the Australian free not for profit public library sector, with its 1550 access points. Those libraries uniquely serve the whole population, from ‘cradle to grave’, and are facing increasing demands at both ends of that demographic range, particularly from the baby boomers and other older adults.

On behalf of those libraries and their users, FOLA therefore welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the study. Its submission provides the context for the Australian public library sector and, consistent with the study’s stated focus, a commentary on the

- measurement of the public library sector’s contribution to Australia.
- obstacles to maximizing the public library sector’s contribution to the nation.

#### **Context**

Australia is a longstanding and well regarded member of UNESCO. The UNESCO *Public Library Manifesto*<sup>1</sup> states

The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.

This Manifesto proclaims UNESCO’s belief in the public library as a living force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women.

On 15 March 2008, as a consequence of local government restructuring in Queensland, the last local authority in Australia not supporting a free public library service, the Shire of Fitzroy, was amalgamated. Australia, by international comparison, a late developer of public libraries, can now claim a national public library sector. This is a major achievement in less than 50 years, but which needs to be built on to address the manifest weaknesses and inequities in the sector.

Australia is far from world’s best practice in public library policy, investment and provision. Its per capita spend is only about 9c per Australian per day, one-third of that of countries such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden, and less than that of New Zealand.

Significant aspects of its public library sector are impoverished, and second-rate in terms of locations, buildings, hours of opening, staffing levels, collections, programs, information technology, online access, outreach, and services. Without the work of Friends of Libraries and other library volunteers – the contribution of which has yet to be measured nationally – many public libraries would be even more constrained in service delivery, due to lack of funds.

### **The measurement of the public library sector's contribution**

Public libraries, as very early adopters of computerised management systems, have for long maintained comprehensive data on how much they are used, for accountability, benchmarking and advocacy purposes. That data is aggregated annually by National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA)<sup>2</sup> and confirms the growing use of public libraries. During 2006-7, there were 111 million visits to them and they lent 183 million items.

However it has been accepted for some time that, although impressive, such data do not tell the full story of the very high return on investment(ROI) in public libraries, and that they have had small recognition by funders, both local and particularly the State and Territory governments. Public libraries provide many benefits to communities and individuals, but conventional measures of activity fail to capture the total contribution that libraries make to the economy, life quality and community wellbeing.

In response, the last 15 years has seen worldwide investment in qualitative and quantitative research in the ROI of public libraries.

One major Australian example of this has been the Victorian \$1.3 million research project *Libraries/Building/Communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries*.<sup>3</sup> This comprehensive study was completed in 2008 and confirms the high valuation that people place on their public libraries; their wish that more was spent on them; and that in addition to the 60% of Victorians who use those libraries another 13% of the population could improve their lives and life's chances by using them if they were better, more visible and more accessible.

The major work on identifying and testing the methodology for public library return on investment has been undertaken, over more than ten years, in the USA. It is comprehensively described in the 2007 *Measuring your library's value: how to do a cost benefit analysis for your public library*.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous American library systems have undertaken such an analysis, and typically identified an ROI of between \$4-\$6 for every dollar invested in them.

In Australia, the most recent application has been in 2008 by the Sunshine Coast Libraries, Queensland.<sup>5</sup> This demonstrated – using conservative methods which left uncounted other less tangible benefits delivered by public libraries – a \$5.45 return on investment.

Extrapolated to the \$757 million annual spend on the Australian public library sector in 2006-7, this indicates a total return of over \$4 billion. If that \$757 million were tripled to world best practice investment, the return would be over \$12 billion. Few other not for profit sectors in Australia would have that demonstrable present or potential ROI.

### **The obstacles to maximizing the contribution of Australia's public library sector to society**

The major obstacle is not, the difficult financial times notwithstanding, the overall national capacity to increase Australia's investment in its public library sector. The total national spend on the sector at present is less than 50% of that of just one medium sized Australian university, and about 1.5% of that on schools, to which public libraries are educationally complementary.

The major obstacle is the lack of connected comprehension at the three levels of Australian government about what the sector provides; how much it is used and valued; its present constraints and inequities; what it has the demonstrable potential to provide; and the very high return on investment in it.

- unlike other developed countries, Australia still lacks a national public libraries policy framework, and there is no engagement by its national government in the development

and condition of public libraries as specified in the UNESCO Manifesto. The Australian government is apparently unaware of the very severe underinvestment in the national public library sector by the States in particular, and of its consequences. As indicated by the failure to even acknowledge correspondence about the public library sector from Friends of Libraries Australia, there is no interest in the Australian public library sector by the responsible federal Minister and the Department of Environment, Heritage and the Arts, although the outcomes of the public library sector impact on the policy agendas of his, and other federal ministerial portfolio areas, such as Education, the Digital Economy, e-Government, Early Childhood, Health, Ageing, Immigration and Citizenship, Family and Community Services, Social Inclusion, Volunteering, and Local Government.

- there is a strong cost shifting tension in the state and local government policy and funding partnership which currently largely determines the capacity and performance of the sector. State governments have insidiously withdrawn from adequate funding of their public libraries for over 25 years, and have not been held to national or local account for this neglect. Local government now, perforce, generally provides at least 80% of funding to Australia's public library sector, compared with about 50% in the 1960 and 1970s. In NSW it provides 93%, in Qld 86%, and in Victoria 83%.
- local government also does not always fund public libraries to the best of its capacity. Some councils still provide only 2-3% of rates revenue to what is overwhelmingly the most used and valued service in their communities.
- some children, young people, adults, families, and older people in Australia now have ready access to public libraries with modern spacious buildings and good levels of staffing, collections, services, programs, technology, websites, hours of opening, outreach, and a community capacity building focus. Many others do not. At the present level of interest and invest in the sector by governments, many never will.
- what is required is national leadership towards acceptance by all three levels of government – Australian, state/territory, and local – of their shared responsibility for a transparent policy and investment partnership towards a better, more accessible, and more equitable public library sector for all in Australia.
- that leadership would benefit from the outcomes of a national inquiry into Australia's public library sector. This would be the first such inquiry since 1976.<sup>6</sup>

## References

- 1 UNESCO *Public library manifesto* [www.unesco.org/webworld/libraries/manifestos/libraman.html](http://www.unesco.org/webworld/libraries/manifestos/libraman.html)
- 2 National and State Libraries Australasia [www.nsla.org.au](http://www.nsla.org.au)
- 3 *Libraries/Building/Communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries* Library Council of Victoria, Melbourne 2005-2008 [www.slv.vic.gov.au/about/information/publications/policies\\_reports/plu\\_lbc.html](http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/about/information/publications/policies_reports/plu_lbc.html)
- 4 Elliott, D and others *Measuring your library's value: how to do a cost benefit analysis for your public library* Chicago, ALA 2007
- 5 Duncan, R The economic benefits of Sunshine Coast Libraries Queensland *Australasian public libraries and information services* 21(4) December 2008 pp140-153
- 6 Australia. Parliament. Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries *Public libraries in Australia* (A. R. Horton, chairman) Canberra, AGPS 1976

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