

Public Libraries Victoria Network

Submission to Infrastructure Victoria's draft 30-year infrastructure strategy

Public Libraries Victoria Network (PLVN) is the voice of Victorian public libraries. PLVN leads, shapes and represents the interests of Victoria's 47 public library services and the communities they serve – including the 34 library services operated by individual councils, 11 regional library corporations which provide services for a number of councils, one shared library service operated by the City of Ballarat for itself and six other municipalities, and the Vision Australia Information and Library Service which provides services to the print-impaired.

PLVN commends Infrastructure Victoria on the development of the draft 30-year infrastructure strategy which considers, and proposes solutions to, the many infrastructure challenges that will need to be addressed to help achieve better social, economic and environmental outcomes for the state. In particular, PLVN acknowledges the strategy's recognition of the importance of continued investment in provision of new or upgraded 21st century public libraries "which perform a crucial role in supporting lifelong learning and meeting multiple community needs" (Sections 1.4.5, 5.4.3 and 9.4.3).

Serving and supporting Victorian communities

Public libraries in Victoria, interstate and around the world are a vibrant, well-loved, trusted and well-used feature of the community fabric. They are an essential part of everyday life for millions of Victorians in every corner of the state through the network's 275 library branches, nearly 300 mobile library stops and more than 50 other service points. Library visitation continues to grow year on year, and in 2015-16 Victoria's public library network:

- had 2.1 million registered members, with more than 1 million active borrowing members
- hosted 30.1 million visits to its library branches and mobiles, and recorded 9 million visits to library websites
- made 47.4 million loans from its collection of more than 9 million physical and digital items
- engaged 1.9 million adults and children in literacy, learning, cultural and recreational programs
- provided free and convenient access to computers and the internet 7.3 million times through library computers and wifi services¹.

Most importantly, public libraries are universally accessible – free and open to all. They provide reading material for people of all ages and interests. Story Time programs build children's literacy skills and encourage reading in the home. The 1 in 7 Victorians who do not have household access to the internet can connect with one another and government and community services at the library. Students, researchers, small business people and others use the library as a place to study, discover, work and create. Library programs help people to improve their literacy skills, English language skills, digital literacy and work readiness. In the winter cold, the summer heat, times of emergency (e.g. Black Saturday bushfires) and times of celebration the public library is a place where people come together in a safe and welcoming environment.

The community, cultural and economic benefits of public libraries are well-documented in international research, but accentuated through a highly-regarded program of research undertaken by the State Library of Victoria and PLVN over the past 10 years.

- Libraries Building Communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries (2005)

¹ PLVN 2015-16 Annual Statistical Survey.

- Connecting with the Community (2008)
- Dollars Sense and Public Libraries: the socio-economic value of Victorian public libraries (2011)
- Internet and PC Usage in Victorian Public Libraries (2012)
- Creative Communities: the cultural benefits of Victoria's public libraries (2014)
- Reading and Literacy for All: Strategic Framework (2015).

Through their collections, programs, service and facilities Victoria's public libraries have been shown to deliver individual and community outcomes related to literacy and life-long learning. They are vital to informed and connected citizenship, digital inclusion, personal development and wellbeing, stronger and more creative communities, and economic and workforce development.

Australian and international research on the economic value of public libraries consistently indicates a benefit-to-cost ratio of 3:1 or better, which places libraries ahead of other industry sectors on the efficient use of tax dollars and the same as, or better than, the return from other government spending. The most recent valuation on the economic impact of public libraries found that as a conservative estimate Victorian public libraries return \$3.56 for every \$1 spent.²

Public library infrastructure

Public library services in Victoria are currently delivered through a variety of different infrastructure models. The traditional and most common model is the stand alone library branch, typically located in or around a town or suburb's central shopping or activity precinct. In the past 10 years, both in Victoria and globally, there has been a move to an activity centre model where the public library is co-located with other Council service outlets or in a community hub where users can access a variety of community, educational and/or cultural services in the one place. Co-location often provides financial benefits in the construction or refurbishment of civic infrastructure. It also increases accessibility for users who can attend the library and visit the shops, community and youth services, a maternal and child health centre, an art gallery, men's shed or sports facilities all in the same area.

Victoria has several outstanding, and internationally recognised, examples of public libraries featuring in an activity centre model. These include among others the Braybrook Community Hub, Craigieburn Global Learning Centre, Geelong Library and Heritage Centre, Doncaster MC2 and Realm Ringwood. These projects and their escalating, positive outcomes demonstrate the ongoing relevance and currency of public libraries in both challenged and established communities across the state.

The proposed library model noted in the draft 30-year infrastructure strategy of integrating municipal libraries on school sites is a much less-used approach. There are currently eight such libraries, decreasing to six in 2017 as new community libraries are opened in Sale and Cobram. The success of the joint-use model relies heavily on the extent to which the library is able to maintain its universal accessibility and reputation as a trusted, safe and inclusive space that is equally available to all in the community. Location relative to other community services and public transport, external and out of hours public access, implementation of Child Safe Standards, and the reticence of people who have had a bad experience of school to enter school grounds are all factors that need to be considered in this approach. Positioning new libraries in the heart of a town centre close to or adjacent to schools, with joint-use agreements to facilitate and to some degree prioritise student access site (e.g. Caroline Springs Library, Bannockburn Library, new Westall Community Hub), is seen as preferable to integrating the library into the school.

Living Libraries

While provision of public library services is the responsibility of local government, 80% of library operating income comes from local government, the state government has since 2011 supported

² *Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries*, SGS Economics, 2011.

investment in public library infrastructure through the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program. The program assists Victorian councils and regional library corporations to provide high-quality library infrastructure that meets the needs of communities by contributing funding towards new, redeveloped or refurbished public library infrastructure. The 2016-17 State Budget allocated \$4.5 million per annum for four years. Councils and regional library corporations are eligible to apply for a grant of up to \$750,000 through an annual application process.

A 2015 evaluation of the Living Libraries program found that it “is seen by Victorian public library services as a vital and integral part of the sector’s annual infrastructure funding. It contributes around 10% on average of public libraries’ infrastructure spending and is considered to play a vital role in locking in counterpart funding from local Councils.”³ The evaluation recommended a review of the maximum grant size (recognising that the maximum \$750,000 grant is a relatively small contribution in development of new libraries with total budgets of \$10-20 million), consideration of a continuously open grants round (to better fit with library services’ and Councils’ capital budget planning processes) and expansion of the program’s scope to non-fixed infrastructure.

Continued investment in public library infrastructure

There is a need for continued and increased investment in Victoria’s public library infrastructure over the next 30 years if libraries are to maintain and strengthen their vital contribution to individual and community outcomes. The thriving new library centres and library refurbishments in urban and regional Victoria contrast with an ageing stock of library buildings. Three priorities stand out:

1. Development of new libraries to meet the learning, cultural, digital and social needs of rapidly growing populations in the Interface Councils that ring metropolitan Melbourne. Libraries not only provide services that people need, they can also be a focal point in establishing an identity of a safe inclusive community.
2. Development of new and/or redevelopment of existing libraries in inner city areas that are experiencing (or are planned to experience) major population backfill. Higher density living means smaller ‘home’ sizes and the need to create community living and recreational spaces, of which public libraries are a prime example.
3. Development of new and/or redevelopment of existing libraries in regional and rural Victoria, in line with state government initiatives to grow regional centres and economies.

Public libraries are an integral part of community infrastructure. Investment in public libraries through programs such as Living Libraries and new investment from all levels of government, business and the community is essential if libraries are to be able to contribute to the infrastructure strategy’s vision of “a thriving, connected and sustainable Victoria where everyone can access good jobs, education and services.” In particular, the sector’s record of achievement demonstrates that public libraries can and already play a valuable role in fulfilment of four of the strategy’s objectives.

2. Foster healthy, safe and inclusive communities
3. Reduce disadvantage
4. Enable workforce participation
10. Build resilience to shocks.

PLVN looks forward to working collaboratively and strategically with Infrastructure Victoria, the state government, Councils and other stakeholders to achieve these aims.

³ *Evaluation of the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program*, ACIG for Local Government Victoria, 2015.