



ALIA 2006 Biennial Conference



Australian Library and  
Information Association

## **Workplace Practice**

### **Debra Rosenfeldt**

Manager Public Libraries, State Library of Victoria

#### **Contact details**

Postal: 328 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000

Phone: 61 3 8664 7041

Email: [drosenfeldt@slv.vic.gov.au](mailto:drosenfeldt@slv.vic.gov.au)

#### **Biography**

Debra Rosenfeldt worked for many years in senior roles at several public library services around Melbourne before finding her way to the State Library of Victoria. After a short detour into the Public Programs area she re-connected with public libraries as manager of a broad range of State Library/public library development projects. She continues to oversee these projects in her new role as Manager Public Libraries at the State Library, where she is primarily responsible for relationship management, strategy and advocacy.

## **Libraries building communities – Next steps, leaps and bounds for a groundbreaking project**

### **Abstract**

The Libraries Building Communities (LBC) reports were published in 2005. They are the result of a three-year research program that involved all 238 public library branches in Victoria and sought the views of nearly 10,000 Victorians, making it the most comprehensive research of its kind in Australia. The reports present clear new data on who is using public libraries, why, and what it is that they most value about them. Case studies of some of the most innovative ways in which Victorian public libraries contribute to their communities are presented. The research also identifies groups that are not using public libraries, analyses the reasons, pinpoints the potential users and suggests strategies for increasing engagement. While highlighting the vital role that public libraries play in community strengthening and their potential to do more to advance government agendas in this area, the research also identifies the issues that must be addressed if public libraries are to realise this potential. The LBC research was auspiced by the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network. Since publication, the reports have been used extensively by all those in Victoria whose job it is to plan and advocate for public libraries.

This paper reports on the next phase of this landmark project, including development and roll out during May 2006 of a new annual LBC online survey to gather data about library users, which could serve as a model for other states. It outlines the LBC program conducted from March to June 2006, which aimed to develop the advocacy skills of Victoria's public library service managers. And it showcases some of the inspirational and innovative community capacity building projects that have been developed by Victorian public libraries and have received funding from the Library Board of Victoria.

## **Introduction**

Libraries Building Communities began in 2002 as a research project of the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network. While the research continues, the scope of the project has broadened to include a range of initiatives to support the efforts of Victorian public libraries in building the capacity of their communities. This paper briefly tells the history of Libraries Building Communities by way of setting the scene for the next exciting steps, leaps and bounds for a project which in many ways has been groundbreaking in Victoria, nationally and internationally.

## **Setting the scene**

The story began in 2001 at a planning retreat for Victorian public library managers, where they identified 'social engagement' as the top strategic priority for public libraries through to 2010. By mid 2002 there was commitment to a piece of research around this theme and funding of approximately \$200,000 had been secured from the Library Board of Victoria through its state-wide public library development projects. The State Library was charged with management of the project, working with an advisory committee of public library representatives. During the next two-and-a-half years the research was fully scoped, data was gathered and analysed and a five-volume report was written and finally launched, in March 2005, by the Victorian Minister for Local Government. The report has been talked about widely ever since. In April 2005 Victoria's public libraries and the Library Board of Victoria renewed their commitment to the Libraries Building Communities project. They agreed to give it another \$866,000 in funding from

the statewide public library development projects over the three years to June 2008.

## **Aims of the project**

The original Libraries Building Communities research aimed to demonstrate to government, the community and other stakeholders the scale and distinctive contribution of public libraries to the social and economic well-being of individuals and the communities in which they live. It recognised that there was a gap in the existing performance data around public libraries. In Victoria this data has been gathered by all public libraries since 1947 through an annual survey. It is focused around input and output measures, measures primarily of efficiency. Some public library services gather supplementary data around community satisfaction with the services offered. However, there had been no data gathered to address the fundamental issue of why public libraries are important to the community, what difference they make to the lives of community members, and why they ought to be supported. Addressing this issue was, and remains, particularly important in Victoria where government, the primary funder of public libraries, pursues a community strengthening agenda articulated through policy documents such as *Growing Victoria Together* (2003) and *A Fairer Victoria* (2005) and the *Department for Victorian Communities Outcomes Framework* (2004). An important aim of the original Libraries Building Communities research was to show how public libraries contribute to the State Government's strategies to build

stronger communities: communities that are resilient, active and confident.

In addition to supporting those who advocate on behalf of public libraries the Libraries Building Communities research report was also intended to assist public library service managers in the planning of their services. Clear new data was gathered about who uses and who does not use public libraries and why; potential new users were identified; the things that public libraries currently do well were highlighted; case studies were provided of some of the best and most innovative services; gaps in current service provision were pinpointed; strategies were proposed for both bridging the gaps and positioning public libraries to contribute even more to community life.

Data was gathered through a wide variety of methods including a telephone survey, focus groups, an online survey, and one-on-one interviews with a wide range of community leaders. This data was both quantitative and qualitative. The views of almost 10,000 Victorians were canvassed and all of Victoria's 44 public library services were included, making the original Libraries Building Communities research the most comprehensive Australian study of its kind.

### **Findings of the project**

The findings were ultimately not surprising to those involved in the delivery of public library services in Victoria. The research report highlighted four main ways in which public libraries contribute to their communities:

- Overcoming the 'digital divide' – by providing free public access to

computers and the Internet, often employing new approaches.

- Creating informed communities – by helping people navigate the vast amount of information now available to them; possessing information about the local community; and distributing information about government programs and services.
- Supporting learning and literacy – through the provision of comfortable study spaces and programs such as English language and literacy classes; seminars; lectures; homework clubs and a wide variety of reader development initiatives.
- Building connections between individuals, groups and government – simply by being pleasant places where people from all walks of life can happily and safely gather; providing community meeting rooms; delivering library materials to people who are housebound or living in residential care; and offering community noticeboards, displays and cultural events that celebrate the community's diversity.

The Libraries Building Communities report noted characteristics of public libraries that place them in an ideal position to play a greater role in supporting Government community strengthening strategies. Public libraries in Victoria hold a vast range of resources; they are well-known, well-used and generally readily accessible; they are innovative and responsive to community needs. However, if they are to realise this potential, the report also noted a number of challenges that must be confronted. Public libraries in Victoria will need more resources and staff training to take on new roles and responsibilities; facilities need to be

improved and technology infrastructure continuously upgraded; they must work harder at developing partnerships with community groups, business and other areas of government; and at promotion to non-users.

### **Next steps, leaps and bounds**

Over the three years from July 2005 to June 2008 the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network will begin to address some of these challenges. Through the state-wide public library development projects a significant piece of research and strategy development is being undertaken to address the staffing issue. It will identify the future workforce needs for public libraries and how these might best be met. In the area of technology infrastructure, nearly \$900,000 has been allocated to the development of a federated search portal for all Victorian public libraries and the State Library, which will facilitate searching across library catalogues, data bases and other Web resources. On top of this a further \$866,000 has been allocated specifically to the Libraries Building Communities project for work in three areas: assisting public libraries with initiatives that help build the capacity of their communities; advocacy support; and, ongoing research.

### **Building community capacity**

Firstly, to assist public libraries to help build the capacity of the communities that they serve, \$200,000 has been allocated for each of the three years through to June 2008 for 'demonstration projects' in individual Victorian public library services. Funding for these projects is sought through a competitive process. Emphasis is placed on

significant strategic initiatives that target groups in the community identified as not being well served by public libraries and address the issue of disadvantage. Projects must support the community building role of public libraries in any of the key areas of developing social capital; building skills capacity and well being; reaching out to communities; and, providing a gateway to information. Partnerships, innovation and the potential for replication across the public library network are also important criteria. In 2005/06 funding has been provided for four Libraries Building Communities demonstration projects:

- *Koori Library Pathways* (\$60,000) is an initiative of Goulburn Valley Regional Library Corporation with the local Koori Information Resource Centre. It reaches out to a segment of the community often overlooked by public libraries. The project will develop strategies, protocols and training for provision of services to the local Koori community, the largest in Victoria, and for piloting of programs.
- *Info Skills on the Move* (\$38,652) sees Upper Murray Regional Library Corporation partnering with Learning City Albury Wodonga and a range of other groups to work with segments of the community not readily able to access mainstream library and information services: middle years school students, seniors, other educational institutions and the business community, and the Koori community. It provides a mobile homework/training centre and volunteer team to work with these groups to develop their information seeking skills.
- *Wyndham Community Learning Portal* (\$39,960) enables the

Wyndham City Council Library Service to take the lead in working with other providers of learning opportunities in the local community to establish a single virtual focal point for libraries and learning in Wyndham. Through this it will increase awareness of and participation in learning programs. The Wyndham Community Learning Portal will make available both information relating to learning events and programs held in the local area and a directory of host organisations. Supporting content, such as catalogues for local digital and physical repositories, will also be brought together on the site, and it will provide a forum for dialogue concerning learning opportunities within the community.

- *Learning Advocates in the Community* (\$55,318) is an idea developed by Hume Global Learning Village Library Service to broaden the role of library staff from providers of resources and information, to that of pro-active Learning Advocates who can advise, refer and promote learning opportunities to the community. A training program, a communication package and a Community Information and Learning Database will support the Learning Advocates. The project also reaches more extensively into the community by training Council's frontline community service staff, members of the Hume Global Learning Village and professionals who work in the community as Learning Advocates and in the use of the Community Information and Learning Database. It will contribute significantly to the further

development of Hume City as a Learning Community.

Each of these initiatives will make a real and positive difference in the communities served by each library. They are genuinely innovative, involve each library in new partnerships, and will provide learning or models that will be of value to the entire Victorian public library network.

### **Supporting the advocacy effort**

The second area of work for the Libraries Building Communities project for the 2005 – 2008 tri-ennium is in supporting public library advocacy efforts. One of the key drivers for the original Libraries Building Communities research was to gather and present evidence of the vital contribution made by public libraries to the community in a way that would be meaningful and persuasive to the people who make decisions about public library policy and funding. In order to help public library managers make the best possible use of the report, and to assist with their ongoing advocacy efforts, in 2006 all 45 Victorian public library managers have had the opportunity to participate in a four-day customised advocacy skills development training program and to avail themselves of one-on-one coaching as they step through an advocacy process. To further support the advocacy effort, in 2007 an updated edition of Report 4 in the original Libraries Building Communities series will be published. Titled 'Showcasing the Best', this report provides case studies of some of the most innovative services and programs offered by Victorian public libraries in partnership with others.

### **Continuing the research**

The third area of work for the Libraries Building Communities project for the 2005 – 2008 tri-ennium is centred on furthering the original research. It was envisaged from the outset that the Libraries Building Communities project would include development of tools that public libraries across Victoria could use to gather consistent longitudinal data about their users and about the contribution of public libraries to community building. 2006 has seen both the implementation of the first ever Victorian public library user census and the refinement of the original online library user survey and its implementation state-wide. There has also been a commitment from the Department for Victorian Communities to oversee administration of this survey across the public library network on a regular basis. In 2006/07 funding has been allocated for more in-depth research through focus groups of those segments of the community identified as not being well-served by public libraries. Out of this community engagement, guidelines will be developed to assist public libraries to reach these groups.

### **The 2006 Libraries Building Communities library user census and survey**

The final section of this paper will look in some detail at the census and online survey and share some of the findings.

In May this year all 238 Victorian public library branches and 30 mobile libraries participated in the revised Libraries Building Communities survey of Victorian public library users. The survey was designed by I&J Management Services to be administered online, with paper-based

versions available in the six most commonly used community languages. However, some libraries chose to administer the survey almost entirely in paper format, and enter the responses themselves. There are 37 questions in the survey designed to give public libraries a better understanding of their existing user base and potential users, the main uses of the library, satisfaction with services, benefits of public libraries to the community and challenges for the future. A total of 12,927 surveys were completed, a significant increase on the 8,602 responses to the 2003 survey.

There are a number of features of the Libraries Building Communities user survey that make it unique:

- It is the only user survey in which all Victorian public libraries could and have participated, therefore giving a truly 'statewide' picture of library services in Victoria and providing data that allow library services to 'benchmark' their performance against each other.
- Data was collected where possible that is consistent with data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing (2001), allowing comparisons between the characteristics of library users and the Victorian population and communities served by each library.
- Data was collected where possible that is consistent with the data collected from the original 2003 Libraries Building Communities library user survey, thereby allowing public libraries to compare the findings over time.
- Data was collected about Victorian public library users that is not

collected through any other survey, for example: family type; educational qualifications; occupational categories.

- Although children under 14 years of age were not surveyed, there is a section in the survey that gathers data about children's use of services from the adults that bring them to the library. This section was not in the 2003 survey.
- The Libraries Building Communities user survey is the only public library survey in Victoria, and possibly Australia, that captures information on how public libraries add benefits to their users and their communities.
- Questions are included that give respondents an opportunity to comment on their satisfaction with services and the value they get from them. There were between 4,000 and 10,000 responses to each of these questions creating a deep well of qualitative data.
- The magnitude of response to the Libraries Building Communities user survey (12,927 surveys were completed) means that it provides a comprehensive database which can also be used to produce statistically valid analysis on the use of Victorian public libraries, and in most cases on use within library services.

A criticism of the original 2003 survey was that because it was implemented online some groups of library users were under-represented. This included the elderly, the very young, the computer-illiterate, people with low literacy levels and culturally and linguistically diverse library users. The perception that there had been low participation by these groups had made

it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the library user population. To ensure that a statistically reliable picture of who uses public libraries services was obtained this year, the Libraries Building Communities online survey of public library users was preceded by the Great Victorian Public Library User Census. The Census was specifically designed to include all groups of the population – it was kept very short (only half a page and less than two minutes to complete); it was paper-based (rather than online); it was translated into several community languages; and, library staff played a very significant role in encouraging participation. The result was 33,996 responses to the census with a strong representation of different age groups, cultural backgrounds, family types and people from rural, regional and metropolitan areas. There was particularly strong participation by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Public library users who responded to the library survey had similar characteristics to those responding to the census in terms of age, gender, languages spoken at home and family type. This allays any concern that the survey may have been biased towards specific groups in the community. Together, the census and the online survey mean that Victoria has the most comprehensive and high quality database on public library users and library usage nationally, and probably internationally.

### **A snapshot of census and survey findings**

While it is not within the scope of this paper to provide a full report on the findings of the April/May 2006 Libraries

Building Communities public library user census and survey, it is worthwhile to look at a sample to give a clearer picture of the kind of data gathered.

### **Library user profile**

Through both the census and survey a detailed profile of Victorian public library users was built. Amongst the more interesting findings at the statewide level were:

- The data relating to the percentage of public library users in various age groups and the comparison with the percentage of the Victorian population in those same age groups shows clearly that 15 to 24 year olds are severely under-represented as a group of library users (only half of their representation in the population); 25 to 44 year olds and 45 to 64 year olds are represented amongst public library users in approximately equal proportions to their representation in the Victorian population as a whole; while those 65 years and old are under-represented.
- Users from culturally and linguistically diverse background appear to be very well-represented amongst public library users. The data from both the census and the survey show that of the main languages spoken at home (other than English) Italian, Greek, Vietnamese, Arabic/Lebanese and Spanish speakers are represented amongst public library users as a percentage that is approximately equal to their representation in the Victorian population. Chinese speakers, however, represent a considerably larger group of public library users than their

representation in the Victorian population.

- In the 2006 survey data was gathered relating to the highest level of education attained by public library users, which was not gathered in the 2003 surveying. Thirty-four percent of Victorian public library users have a degree or a higher degree, considerably above the 12 percent for the Victorian population.
- Similarly, when we look at occupational groupings Victorian public library users, 53 percent classify themselves as professionals, managers or administrators, considerably above the 40 percent for the Victorian population. This data would seem to support critics of public libraries who claim that they are essentially a middle-class institution providing services primarily to parts of the community who have least real need or could well afford to pay for them.
- On the other hand, when we look at employment status we see that only 44 percent of Victorian public library users are employed, well below the 62 percent of the Victorian population as a whole. This suggests that the majority of library users are people on fixed or low incomes and without the means to pay for many of the services that they obtain without charge at the library.

### **Main uses of libraries**

Considerable data was gathered from both the census and the survey about usage patterns amongst public library users. For example:

- The survey found that that just over 50 percent of public library users

visit the library weekly or more frequently and about 60 percent of public library users have been using the library for over five years, which seems to indicate that public library users in general are a very loyal and dedicated group, and that the library probably plays an important role in their lives.

- Both the census and the survey gathered data on the main reasons for using public libraries. The survey data was much more detailed than the census data. In the interest of simplicity, the census data is referred to here. Borrowing books remains, overwhelmingly, the main reason that people use public libraries, with 93 percent of census respondents listing it as their main reason. Other main reasons for using the public library for many people are use of computers (21 percent of census respondents), to read, study or work (17 percent of census respondents) and to access children's services (14 percent of census respondents).
- However, different patterns begin to emerge when this data is broken down by gender, age group and cultural and linguistic background, especially in relation to using computers in the library. Overall, 21 percent of census respondents said that use of computers was one of their main reasons for using the public library. However, 27 percent of males, 42 percent of 15-24 year old and 31 percent of respondents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds said that use of the computers was one of their main reasons for using the library.

### **Satisfaction with library staff and services**

The survey asked many questions about user satisfaction with public library services overall and about satisfaction with staff. Respondents were asked to rate services and staff on a scale of one ('not satisfied') to five ('very satisfied').

It will perhaps come as no surprise to library practitioners that availability of parking and charging policies were the areas of public library service overall with which respondents were least satisfied. On the other hand they were generally well-satisfied with the 'look and feel' of library buildings, opening hours, the ease of finding books and information, and responsiveness to users' requests.

Satisfaction with staff was high in all areas including courtesy and helpfulness, professionalism, knowledge and competency, and ability to provide useful assistance and expand users' actual use of library services.

Thirty separate services offered by public libraries were also identified for satisfaction rating. These ranged from provision of books and audio visual materials for loan through to meeting room facilities, interpreting services, homework clubs and display areas for the local community. Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of each on a scale of one ('low'), two ('medium') or three ('high') and to also rate their satisfaction with each service using the same scale. The three most highly rated services in terms of importance were 'book loans' (2.9), 'help with finding information' (2.7) and 'the library website' (2.7). Analysis

of the gap between the importance assigned to a service and user satisfaction with it was used to identify instances where performance exceeds expectation and where it does not meet expectation. The only instances where satisfaction level was below the importance assigned to the service were in 'book loans' (2.8) and 'the library website' (2.6).

### **The benefits of the library to the individual and the community**

Finally, a brief look at the data that is, perhaps, most unique to the Libraries Building Communities library user survey. This group of data relates to the benefits of the public library to the individual and to the community.

Survey respondents were asked about their social interactions at the public library, as they were in the first Libraries Building Communities survey. Again, the results show that public libraries are seen at the very least as being safe havens in the community, a place where people feel secure and comfortable and are encouraged to interact with others, often with people they do not know and people from different social and cultural groups. The survey results showed that 95 percent of users talk with staff when they visit the public library, 65 percent talk with other library users, 61 percent talk with people from outside their usual social circle, and 50 percent think it is a good place to meet new people.

The survey also asked library users to respond to a series of eight statements about the ways in which public libraries add value to the community. They were asked to rate their library on a scale from one ('strongly disagree') to five ('strongly agree'). The four statements

with the highest average ratings were: my library 'has a reputation for being a safe place' (4.5); 'is easy to get to' (4.5); 'attracts users from all walks of life' (4.3); and, 'provides information I can't get elsewhere' (4.0).

Users were further asked to respond to another series of statements about the benefits they received from using the public library. Again, they rated the statements from one ('not at all') to five ('very much'). So, what do library users see as the greatest benefits provided to them by the library? For the majority it seems that their engagement with the library has, simply, 'made my life more enjoyable', 'encouraged me to read more' and 'introduced me to new topics of interest'.

There is six months of full-time analysis in the Libraries Building Communities census and survey data, and we have given it just three weeks. However, the data which has been presented in this paper is the rolled-up state-wide data. All 45 Victorian public library services will receive both the state-wide report and the data from the survey for their own service, with the comparative data for their Local Government Area from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and they will be able to undertake or commission their own detailed analysis.

### **In conclusion**

This paper has provided a whirlwind tour of the Libraries Building Communities project, with a little more depth around the most recent work. The project has done much in Victoria to shape the strategic thinking of public library service managers and the attitudes of many library staff, and it has captured the attention of decision-

makers about public library services in a way that has not been possible for many years. In this, as in so many other ways, it is indeed a landmark project.

One of the distinguishing features of the original Libraries Building Communities research was the way in which it drew upon both quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative data continues to be important in the ongoing research, so it is appropriate to conclude this paper with just a few of the comments by library users that came out of the 2006 Libraries Building Communities public library user survey:

*I am still a single, and a migrant. Library is a good place to spend time to be with other people. To improve my English by scanning newspapers, etc, to get rid of loneliness.*  
(Vietnamese respondent)

*The library is great for families who don't have lots of books at home. I know families where the parents*

*don't read much, but will still make an effort to take their children to the preschool story times.*

***The power and love of language and learning.***

*Gives a central community information centre, other than the council offices which may be intimidating to some people. I have used the library for 39 years.*

*I have access to a wide variety of information that I would otherwise have to purchase (and hence probably wouldn't).*

*Access to information and encouragement to learn and, for people without a computer, a chance to use another information and communication service.*

*A free public library is a common good like access to free good quality drinking water.*

## **References**

Department for Victorian Communities (2004) *Department for Victorian Communities Corporate Plan 2004-07*, November 2004. Retrieved September 30, 2006 from <http://www.dvc.vic.gov.au/about.htm#corporate>

*Libraries Building Communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries – a research report for the Library Board of Victoria and the Victorian public library network* (2005), Melbourne, Victoria, State Library of Victoria. Retrieved September 30, 2006 from (<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au>)

Victorian State Government (2005) *A Fairer Victoria*. Retrieved September 30, 2006 from <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au>

Victorian State Government (2003) *Growing Victoria Together*. Retrieved September 30, 2006 from <http://www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au>)