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Biography

Wendy Quihampton has had an extensive career in public libraries, working in all areas from branch delivery to technical services, and systems coordination to senior management. She has also enjoyed external engagements with public libraries through employment with a competitive library software vendor and independent consultancy. Currently employed as a project manager in Vicnet, at the State Library of Victoria, Wendy's primary focus of work is the Statewide Public Library Development Projects, including project management of the Collections Audit and Blueprint Project.

A statewide approach to auditing collections and developing a blueprint for public libraries in Victoria

Abstract

This paper reports on the first ever statewide strategic asset audit of public library collections in Victoria, conducted between February and April 2006. The collection lies at the heart of every public library service and altogether the statewide collection is a very significant community asset. Victoria's forty-four public library services hold over nine million physical items in their collections and over \$22 million is expended each year on new materials for these collections. This paper focuses on the purpose and methodology of the audit and details significant findings and recommendations. There is particular emphasis on the management practice and levels of investment required to ensure Victoria's public library collections are of an established standard and are appropriately renewed. The audit findings and recommendations were an essential component in the development of a blueprint for Victorian public libraries, with a strong focus on content and access issues. The Blueprint is an important strategic document for the public library network, in providing a vision for service development along with practical strategies to achieve the long-term vision and details of specific initiatives for implementation over the next two years. The Blueprint and the audit reports are important new tools for public libraries to use, for both individual library services and the state as a whole, in the planning of public library services and in advocating for libraries to government and stakeholders at all levels.

Introduction

Victorian public library services and the State Library of Victoria have undertaken to audit the public library collection state-wide, and develop a strategic direction for future delivery. These landmark accomplishments will stand as testament to the shared industry commitment to providing the best of innovative and relevant services to the Victorian community.

Setting the scene

The State Library of Victoria supports public library services through the state-wide Public Library Development Projects, which are funded by Arts Victoria through the Library Board of Victoria. The partnership behind these projects is driven by the *Framework for Collaborative Action* (2004), which defines the way in which the Library Board of Victoria, through the State Library of Victoria, will partner with the public library network to deliver enhanced library services to Victoria's communities.

In 2004, the state-wide Public Library Development Projects moved to a triennial program to enable a focus on more strategic, innovative initiatives. Three large projects were developed, of which one is Content and Access. The Content and Access program includes immediate initiatives to improve access to existing collections, including the creation of a federated search portal, a touring significance and conservation assessment exercise for local history collections, and a statewide physical document delivery service. The other component of the Content and Access program is the Collections Audit and Blueprint project. As a demonstration of

leadership and partnership, the Collections Audit and Blueprint project will provide the Victorian public library network with a current assessment of the state-wide collection, and the ability to develop a clear path forward in its delivery to Victorian communities. The collections audit alone is a milestone enterprise, as an audit of this size and inclusion has never previously been conducted in Victoria, nor possibly in Australia.

Background

The Victorian public library network consists of forty-four public library services, all covering seventy-nine Local Government Authorities. The public library services include thirty standalone council services and fourteen regional corporations, which represent multiple councils. The parent Local Government Authorities provide the majority of recurrent funding for public libraries (approximately 75%), while the remaining funding (approximately 25%) is provided through the Department for Victorian Communities as a grant to each library service. As such, the governance of public libraries resides with the councils. In the context of this paper, it is important to note that, unlike the majority of Australian States and Territories, State Government recurrent funding is not tied to collections, nor is there any centralized responsibility for development and management of collections. Each library service is responsible for the funding and management of its own collection.

The relationship between the Victorian public library network and the State Library of Victoria is also different to that held in other Australian states. The

State Library of Victoria provides no recurrent funding to public libraries, and so has no role of governance, though the Libraries Act 1988 requires it to provide leadership and promote co-operation and high standards. The state-wide Public Library Development Projects provide the primary connection between the two, and the relationship between the State Library of Victoria and the Victorian public library network is one of partnership.

Each public library service has an independent status. However, there is a long history of formal and informal professional networking. With a legislative requirement to make core services available to all Victorians regardless of residence, there is a manifestation of a state-wide network. This state-wide network is more commonly recognized through its peak representative body Viclink, while the Country Public Libraries Group (CPLG) plays a strong role in the representation of rural services.

Collections Audit and Blueprint Project

The primary objective of the project is to create a Blueprint for enhancing Victorian public library collections and access to collections. The partnerships between Victorian public libraries and with the State Library of Victoria are vital for project success. To assure success, a project workgroup was established with representation from Viclink, CPLG and the State Library of Victoria. The Collections Audit and Blueprint Project identified three key deliverables: a long-term vision for collections and access for Victorian public libraries; a blueprint of collaborative projects; and specific costed projects. The Blueprint will be a

key strategic document for the Victorian public library network.

The methodology underlying the Blueprint included investigation into relevant policy and research, the inclusion of articulated community needs, wants and usage, and consultation with the major stakeholders. An instrumental contribution has also been the results and analysis of the Collections Audit, which was undertaken specifically to inform the advancement of the Blueprint. The purpose of the Strategic Asset Audit of Victorian Public Library Collections was to provide an assessment of the current status of Victorian public library collections, identify gaps in performance and recommend management practices and levels of financial investment to ensure optimal performance in the future. While the creation of a Blueprint was the initial vision driving the audit, the importance of collections to public libraries was an equally compelling driver.

The collection lies at the heart of every public library service, and is the primary reason communities use their libraries. As a part of the OCLC *Perceptions of libraries and information resources* review (2005, p.117), it was discovered that the 'top-of-mind' library image for respondents who were familiar with libraries was the brand image of libraries as books.

On a more local level, findings from the *Libraries Building Communities* research validated the worth of collections:

'A majority of respondents to the online survey, 88% of the total sample, used the library mainly to

borrow books and other resources ... nearly all users had borrowed books from the library, nearly two-thirds had used audiovisual lending material, and half had borrowed a magazine' (Library Board of Victoria, 2005, p.19).

Therefore, the general industry perception that Victorian public library collections are in decline (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p. 1) provides a strong incentive for public libraries to recognize ways to ensure their future.

Strategic Asset Audit of Victorian Public Library Collections

The deliverables for the Audit were two-fold: individual library reports based on the audits of individual library services; and a State-wide Report as a strategic review of the Victorian public library collection. For the purposes of this paper the focus is on the State-wide Report.

The main objective of the State-wide Report is to provide a snapshot of the current collection and the operating environment to inform a strategic review. The purpose of the strategic review is to articulate and justify funding levels for the state-wide collection to build to an appropriate standard, and determine the funding required for collection renewal. The State-wide Report is also to include gap analysis, recommended management practices and scenarios for levels of investment.

The perception of the state-wide collection as an asset is fundamentally important to the audit. Public libraries needed a report that would talk to funding bodies, to detail public libraries'

financial value and highlight the business needs of library service delivery. Antiquated and ignorant views that 'books on shelves' are 'valuable books on shelves', regardless of age or relevance have, in the past, cut short requests for increased collections funding. Clearly evidence is required to substantiate libraries' needs. However, with the audit encapsulating a customer-driven business view of public libraries, it should also be recognized that this view can be at odds with the traditional roles also associated with public libraries.

Audit Methodology

J.L. Management Services, with John Liddle as principal consultant, conducted the Strategic Asset Audit during the period January 2006 to April 2006. The audit was accomplished through two very different types of surveys. Firstly, a desktop investigation of the forty-four public library services, and secondly an in-depth examination of a sample group of libraries.

All public library services were requested to complete a survey, reporting on collection holdings, circulation, age of collection items, last borrowed date, number of items currently on loan, cataloguing methods, and the costs associated with acquisition of new materials. The in-depth audit involved visits, interviews and a survey focusing on stock condition, reservation practices and performance, holdings of bestsellers, languages other than English (LOTE), user satisfaction, turnaround time from order to shelf, aspects of collection management practices, and the use of outsourcing. (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p. 2)

Twelve library services were selected for the in-depth audit, with representation of metropolitan, outer-metropolitan and country public libraries, and both standalone council services and regional corporations. The Annual Survey of Public Libraries 2003-2004 (Department for Victorian Communities, 2005) was analyzed to ensure an even mix of services that rated below and above the state median of performance.

Collecting the data for the desktop audit was more onerous than originally anticipated. Many libraries submitted incomplete responses, with acknowledgements of difficulties in data extraction, obsolete library management systems and lack of in-house knowledge. Considering public library services independently operate seven different library management products with numerous versions of software, it is no surprise that J.L. Management Services noted 'the library management systems in place appear to present a barrier to effective collection management' (2006, p. 57).

Nonetheless, it should be remembered that the impetus for public libraries providing the requested data was collaborative goodwill. The participation by public libraries in the audit process was voluntary. The fact that all forty-four services responded, albeit at differing levels of completion, demonstrated a clear commitment to the objectives of the Collections Audit and Blueprint Project.

General Findings

The major findings from the Strategic Asset Audit were:

- Collections are the KEY strategic driver for library users.
- There is a vital need for collections to be kept fresh, relevant and viable.
- Neglect of collections has severe consequences.

For Victorian public libraries, there are two very powerful political messages:

- Victorian public library collections are performing well, with notable cost and operational efficiencies.
- The performance of Victorian public libraries is not sustainable at the current rate of financial investment, and will deteriorate if not addressed.

While these findings do not present any huge surprises to the Victorian industry, the audit report serves to substantiate libraries' claims to funding bodies.

Comparisons – Interstate and International

Results from benchmarking provide one means of highlighting the Victorian situation. A number of sources were drawn upon for benchmarking against different Australian states and territories. While the nature of public libraries Australia-wide is very uniform, the variability in data capture across the states and territories complicated the benchmarking process. (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.4).

Analysis across the states and territories discovered that though providing less floor space and less staff per capita, Victoria delivers more loans per hour open and has a higher collection turnover than the majority of other states. Victoria is shown to be operating very efficiently with well performing collections. However a

closer look highlights Victoria as ranking the third lowest in both expenditure on new materials per capita and in total items per capita, which portrays a less healthy image. (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p. 9-14)

International comparison only consolidates Victoria's position. New Zealand is a ready choice for its close proximity to Australia while the United Kingdom is worthy as a case study of the need to carefully and purposefully manage public libraries. Against both nations, Victoria has a higher collection turnover. Yet Victoria, again, falls short in a comparison of items per capita and expenditure on new materials. The main difference between interstate and international comparisons is that the disparity increases outside of Australia. (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p. 18-23)

Victorian public libraries continually demonstrate a strong performance in relation to collection turnover, indicating that collections are relevant to the Victorian communities. Victoria appears quite clearly as a 'lean operator of library services' (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.18). However, Victoria must also be recognized as under-resourced, with per capita expenditure on new materials substantially below industry averages. Long-term sustainability of Victoria's state-wide collection becomes questionable. (J.L. Management Services, 2006 p.18).

With an investigation of the recent trends in Victorian public libraries, Victoria's position doesn't improve. Analysis of the Annual Survey of Victorian public library services (from

1999/2000 to 2003/2004) was used to determine the trends. Public access floor space had increased (9.8%) as had hours open (6.6%), both in alignment with Victoria's increase in population (8.3%). However, with falls in membership of total population (-5.1%) and loans per capita (-1.7%) and a large decline in loans per visit (-10.5%), use of Victorian public libraries appears to be diminishing. (J.L. Management Services. 2006, p.5-6)

A review of collection statistics provides a possible contributory link. Though the number of collection items rose by 2.4%, items per capita decreased by 5.8% and real per capita expenditure fell by 7.1% (J.L. Management Services. 2006, p. 6). Keeping in mind that the greatest attraction for library services is the collection, it isn't difficult to conclude a weakening of collections could result in a weakening in use.

Collections analysis

The audit also closely examined the make-up of Victorian public library collections. Overall, Victoria offers over nine million items to its community, at a rate of 1.82 physical items per capita. Of the state-wide collection, 58.8% is adult print, 26.7% junior, 8.8% audio visual and 5.7% is reference materials (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.39). Turnover of these large collections is solid, with adult materials turning over at a rate of 4.5 per annum, junior items at 4.7 and audio visual at 12.3 (J.L. Management Services, 2006, Attachment 12). However, within the sub collections, turnover of adult non-fiction is low at a rate of three per year, and junior non-fiction even less at 1.9. The comparison with the higher performance of adult and junior fiction,

at turnover rates of 5.6 and 4.6 respectively, supports J.L. Management Services' view that 'the wisdom of maintaining larger non-fiction collections must be questioned' (2006, p.43).

Findings on collection age are a source of unease. Of greatest concern was the finding that 30% of the state-wide collection has a publication date pre-1998. Another 14% of items were reported with unknown publication dates, and a reasonable assumption was made that these items are most likely to be predominantly older collections items (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.53). This shows the state-wide collection as distinctly aged. The age of the collection is somewhat mitigated with the observation that 83.3% of the collection has been borrowed between January 2004 and January 2006. This depicts a relevant, functioning collection. However, with 16.7% of items not borrowed since January 2004 and a further 6.9% reported as never borrowed, a sizeable component of the state-wide collection is unproductive. Translating 16.7% of the collection into real terms equals 1.4 million items, which at an average unit cost of \$20.19 holds a value of \$29.1 million (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.55). As an under-resourced state, it is worrisome that Victoria is housing such a proportion of unproductive stock.

The location of the state-wide collections was reviewed, with geographic distribution generally reflecting the population distribution across Victoria. The average per capita holdings are reasonably evenly split, with 1.88 items across country services and 1.80 for metropolitan. The concern

here is the need of country public libraries to service larger areas with lower density population, and as such it would be expected that country public libraries should have far higher per capita holdings (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.40).

Large levels of duplicated effort across the state were confirmed by an evaluation of cataloguing and processing practices, with over 80% of new items reported as catalogued in-house. While this figure does include 39.6% for catalogue records downloaded from copy cataloguing sources, such as LibrariesAustralia, it also reflects over 40% of items originally catalogued (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.61). Outsourcing was recognized as an option by libraries, with the highest use of outsourced cataloguing being for LOTE materials. As well, over three quarters of respondents acknowledged outsourcing part of their technical services function (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p. 62). Yet, it is clear there are further opportunities for common benefit.

Examination of collection management practices across Victoria emphasized the lack of commonality. Application of collection depreciation rates varied widely, as did the rates of materials expenditure per capita and as a percentage of operating costs (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p. 66-68). From the in-depth audit of twelve public library services, there was also recognition of no formal controls to monitor the effectiveness of selection processes. (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.101)

Overall there are many implications for Victorian public libraries to consider. However, attention must focus on the future of the state-wide collection.

'To date the collection has demonstrated durability and much credit must go to the collective and individual efforts of the 44 library services to meet the challenges posed by under-investment and find ways to maintain acceptable service levels. However, just as the withering process transforms plants from durable to fragile, so too do under-funded library collections become increasingly fragile' (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p.117).

Recommendations

J.L. Management Services has made a series of recommendations for consideration. Victorian public libraries have been presented with the major audit findings and the recommendations, but have not viewed the full report. At the time of writing this paper, the State-wide Audit Report is only available in draft format and has not been publicly released beyond the Project Workgroup. The State-wide Report will be more widely released for comment in late July.

The principal audit recommendations, duplicating their order in the State-wide Report, are:

- A more comprehensive and standardized reporting structure for public libraries should be adopted Australia-wide.
- Collection mix should be demand driven.
- Undertake research into cooperative purchasing arrangements.
- Investigate means to reduce duplicated effort in cataloguing materials and improve technical services efficiency.
- All public libraries and key stakeholders should commit to industry-wide collection standards, of:
 - a. Base level holdings of two items per capita;
 - b. Base level acquisition and discard rate of 0.25 items per capita (equivalent to refreshing the collection on eight year cycle);
 - c. Collection weeding should be non-discretionary and be based on lists of items not borrowed within a designated period (12 to 24 months).
- All public libraries and key stakeholders should commit to a three year Collection Revitalisation Strategy, including:
 - a. Adoption of the collection standards outlined;
 - b. Discard of obsolete holdings within first twelve months;
 - c. Building the collection to the size specified by the collection standards, over three years;
 - d. Provision of adequate floor space to house and present collections of the scale specified by the collection standards.
- Capture and incorporate within the collection management process a wider range of statistical measures.
- Adopt a centralized approach to procuring and processing the materials identified by the Collection Revitalisation Strategy.
- The three year Collection Revitalisation Strategy should be

funded by the State Government of Victoria at the net present value of \$77.1 million.

- The ongoing responsibility for funding collection materials should be assumed by the State Government of Victoria, requiring an increase of 5.2% over existing Public Library Grant funding to \$28.2 million and a change to the status of Grants to ensure specific designation for collection materials only. (J.L. Management Services, 2006, p. i-iii)

In total, twenty-nine recommendations were put forward, with the more strategic represented above. The onus falls upon Victorian public libraries to either embrace or reject the recommendations, both individually in view of their own public library services and collectively in relation to the Statewide Collection.

Initial reactions from public library staff to the findings and, particularly, the recommendations have been wide ranging. Evidence supporting financial need has been generally welcomed, while comments on collection management practices and strategies for future sustainability have prompted more varied feedback. How public libraries will use the audit is still to be determined, but as an independent consultation on the state-wide collection, it was fully anticipated that the audit would present observations that would both support industry perceptions in some areas, while challenging them in others. One clear positive from the audit has been the emphasis placed on the need for collaborative and cooperative actions. For this purpose, the audit has provided

necessary support and ideas to feed into the development of the Blueprint.

Collections and Access Blueprint for Victorian Public Libraries

Earlier in this paper, it was highlighted that analysis of the audit was a part of the overall process for developing a Blueprint for enhancing Victorian public library collections and access to collections. In February 2006, Dr. Veronica Lunn, of AECGroup, was engaged to deliver the Blueprint.

As well as the audit findings and subsequent analysis, the development of the Blueprint incorporated the examination of the Victorian environment and international trends, issues and responses. The more significant component, though, has been the intensive consultation with key stakeholders.

Consultation on the issues surrounding collections and access for Victorian public libraries and potential future directions has been rigorous. The Public Libraries 2020 Summit was held in March 2006 to provide context and inspiration. Following the Summit, a workshop forum was conducted with a smaller group, incorporating public library and State Library of Victoria knowledge and industry expertise. Based on the work from the forum, six key outcome areas were identified. A further four public library workshops were held across Victoria, to expand the issues and needs of each outcome area and cultivate strategies in response. Throughout this process, interviews were conducted with spokespersons from relevant associations and organisations, such as Viclink, CPLG, State Library of Victoria, Department for

Victorian Communities, Municipal Association of Victoria, Public Libraries Australia, Advisory Committee on Public Libraries and the education sector. These discussions helped define the Victorian environment, political agendas, and industry trends, and explore the future role of public libraries.

Visioning

It was clearly identified that the Blueprint must sit within the longer-term vision of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Public Libraries, colloquially known as the *MAC Vision of The Library*. The following statements were identified as truths for Victorian public libraries:

‘Our vision is that *The Library* will be your consistent partner throughout your journey of life long learning acting as a broker and trusted guide to a wealth of valuable content. Our vision is that *The Library* is seen by decision makers as one of the most important and effective investments in building an innovative state with caring communities.’
(Viclink plan 2006-2009: strength and excellence through collaboration, 2005, p. 16)

The underlying goals of *The Library* were all firmly reinforced, through consultation, as being paramount to Victorian public libraries (Lunn, 2006, p. 9). Within this context, the purpose of the Blueprint is to ground the high-level mission of *The Library*, in tangible terms for public libraries, and to provide strategic direction to strengthen the framework and infrastructure required to progress the vision of *The Library*.

Outcome Areas

Six outcome areas were defined through the process, to concentrate

strategic focus for Victorian public libraries. These outcome areas are:

- Positioning - Pro-active intelligence gathering and strategic advocacy;
- Publishing and production – Engagement with the sources of production as well as the facilitation of production at the local level;
- Procurement – Effective and cost-efficient procurement;
- Relevance and capacity - Content that is relevant to the changing needs of Victoria’s diverse communities;
- Resource discovery and retrieval – state-wide content of public libraries easily accessed and retrieved; and
- Availability – Accessible and available content through appropriate infrastructure. (Lunn, 2006, p. 12-13)

Advancing the priorities of each outcome area is the responsibility of both public library services individually, and as a cohesive group. Many of the strategic initiatives must be owned solely by Victorian public libraries, but there are also a number of priorities that can be pushed forward collaboratively with the State Library of Victoria. These initiatives have the potential to utilize Statewide Public Library Development Projects funding to reach realization.

Collaborative strategic direction

A major aim was to identify specific projects that may be undertaken collaboratively by the Victorian public library network with the State Library of Victoria. At the time of writing this paper priorities are still being determined, however, it is valuable to canvass the range of initiatives. Ideas from the different outcome areas were

rearranged into distinct project areas. These projects are:

- **Standards development.** Areas of work include the development and adoption of standards for collection management, physical and technical infrastructure, online provision and community engagement.
- **Collaborative procurement.** Areas of work include cooperative purchasing, common specifications for shelf ready collections, collection profiling and source lists.
- **Content development.** Areas of work include strategies for local content production and mechanisms to facilitate access.
- **Discovery and retrieval.** Areas of work include the continuation of the Federated Search Portal project as a priority, development of training packages for information retrieval for diverse communities, and investigation of extended reference services.

The Blueprint as a document is still in early draft form, and prior to publication requires approval by the Library Board of Victoria. Yet, even before physical delivery, the concepts of the Blueprint are becoming concrete.

Conclusion

The last financial year has presented a considerable workload for both Victorian public libraries and the State Library of Victoria. The collation of data for the audit and the intensive consultation needs of the Blueprint development have strained the resources across the industry. Yet, as the jigsaw comes together to form an articulate and cohesive strategic picture for Victorian public libraries, the effort must be viewed as worthwhile. The accomplishment of an agreed forward plan will support both Victorian public libraries and the State Library of Victoria well through the next decade.

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