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Libraries Building Communities: Project Information Guide

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1. Background

'The public library's historical role in civic education; its openness to people of all ages, races and economic status; its role as a public meeting place for groups and individuals; its position as the repository of the community's history and culture; its popularity and long tradition of service; its highly educated staff; its extension of service to the homebound and others with disabilities; its leadership in providing access to new technologies such as the Internet; and the convenient hours and central locations of its buildings make the public library a good place to begin the work of strengthening communities.'

Sarah Ann Long 1999-2000 President American Library Association

1.1 Libraries Building Communities

The functions and activities performed by public libraries extend well beyond the provision of books and information to playing a key role in the building of strong and vibrant communities. Public libraries in Victoria help build their communities in many ways – through the development of social contacts, links and networks, through building individual and community skills, through encouraging lifelong learning and promoting well-being and outreach to more marginalised groups and individuals. To help create greater awareness of the ways in which Victorian public library services both individually and collectively build their communities, Statewide Public Library Development Grant funding is supporting a research and development project: Libraries Building Communities.

The Libraries Building Communities project is concerned to identify and document the various ways in which libraries contribute to community building. It takes as its starting point the premise that libraries *do* contribute to and develop the social infrastructure of their communities through a number of programs and practices, broadly summarised as:

- developing literacy skills
- meeting information needs
- promoting democratic principles and active citizenship
- providing a gateway to government information and services
- supporting IT connectivity and skills development
- providing social contacts
- building civic pride
- developing links across community organisations

By providing these and other opportunities, libraries have the potential to build stronger communities whereby community members feel supported and valued, services are integrated and partnerships can develop across the sector and with other government agencies and departments. Libraries, in other words, have the potential to 'join up' communities and services.

The need to develop and nurture more integrated, inclusive, resilient communities has been identified as a key strategic direction of the Victoria Government, with the notion of community building lying at the core of the Government's policies. The Growing Victoria Together framework summarises the approach: 'the Victorian Government's community building approach is based on listening to local experience, supporting local connections, providing responsive services and investing in the infrastructure which makes communities good places to live and work' (www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au).

There is a growing and compelling body of evidence to suggest that active, dynamic communities that are inclusive and supportive achieve better outcomes in health, education and economic development, amongst other things. We need to build on these lessons. Critically for this project, many of these lessons of community building are lessons that can be learned in the public library, through their provision of a whole range of services, activities and opportunities by which to connect people in ways that are mutually supportive and inclusive.

However, while it 'makes sense' that libraries occupy a critical place in the public domain, much of this is anecdotal and taken for granted. Little has been done to identify and document the community building potential of public libraries through a systematic program of research and evaluation. As Matarasso argues 'there is a need to demonstrate rather than assume that the public library is culturally significant using more effective and meaningful methods of monitoring, assessing and reporting on their wider social value to society' (1998: 5). Thus, the concern of this project is to systematically record and report the wider benefits of libraries for their communities.

The pressure on libraries, as with other public institutions, to respond to economic outcomes means that issues of the significance of social relationships have slipped from public agendas (UTS 2002). Indeed, there is concern within the sector (and elsewhere) that the broader role of libraries is not well understood or is possibly overlooked by governments, policy makers and the wider community (see UTS 2002; Lance, Logan & Rodney 2001; Usherwood & Linley, 1998). The more traditional measures of the library and its performance (e.g. the number of books borrowed, circulation and acquisition statistics) may dominate public thinking, with libraries, as with other institutions, being 'identified in terms of their core business, and evaluated through performance measurement, usually in terms of economic benefits. These, however, do not account for the range of integrated functions libraries perform which extend well past the provision of books and information. These additional functions are often unaccounted for and unrecognised in any formal ways' (UTS 2002: 7).

Accounting for these additional functions is the framework that underpins the Libraries Building Communities Research and Development project. It seeks to identify the social contributions that public libraries in Victoria make to their communities through a process of rigorous, inclusive research that can inform, challenge and influence the popular perception of the public library.

1.2 About this report

This report - *Libraries Building Communities: Project information guide* - is intended as a reference document that can be utilised by the Victorian public library sector when gathering information on the contribution to and impact of their own libraries on their local communities. It is the first of seven reports to be provided as part of the Libraries Building Communities Research and Development project.

The main aim of this report is to provide a framework and background to the project. It does not offer any empirical research or commentary on any of the Victorian public libraries, but rather, the report draws on preliminary consultation with stakeholders and a review of relevant secondary data and publications in order to locate the current research within a broader context. The report reviews relevant research in a number of fields (i.e. social capital in a range of settings, the role of libraries in building communities, frameworks of community building etc), so that the current research can complement and build on work undertaken elsewhere in Australia and abroad.

Having said that, this report does not intend to provide a definitive review of the literature – the considerable body of research done in this area means that we can only hope to scratch the surface in this initial document. Indeed, part of the project involves the continual analysis of research, data and publications, and aspects of this review will be more appropriate to draw on in future reports supplied over the life of the project, when we have our own empirical data to refer to and compare with.

The report brings together two main sets of information:

- conceptual underpinnings (origins, uses and definitions of community building and social capital, the role of libraries in building communities)
- the methodology New Focus will employ to conduct the Libraries Building Communities project

The first two chapters are essentially theoretical or framing chapters, while the third chapter is intended to be more practically oriented, as it documents the methodology New Focus will be employing to conduct the statewide Libraries Building Communities project. A separate report - *Conducting Your Own Social Capital Audit: A Guide For Libraries* - will be produced and distributed later in the life of the project, and will offer advice and guidance for library staff and managers to implement a social capital audit in a local library.

2. Conceptual Underpinnings of the Libraries Building Communities Project

This chapter outlines the conceptual underpinnings of the Libraries Building Communities project. It canvasses a range of theoretical and other frameworks in order to provide a necessary context within which to locate the current research project. In broad terms, the research is situated against a framework of community building. A key mechanism through which this occurs is the concept of social capital. Both terms are discussed further in this chapter.

2.1 A framework of community building

Community building has emerged as a key policy theme as governments around the world seek ways of addressing increasingly complex issues facing contemporary society. It is a process whereby communities, government, business and philanthropy work together to achieve agreed social, economic and environmental outcomes.¹ It works by government listening to what local people believe could improve their community and sharing ideas about how these changes can be achieved. Community building can be relevant to any community but often targets communities that are characterised by inequity and disadvantage (www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au).

Community building is a major Victorian government priority that recognises the importance of supporting local communities to strengthen and apply their capacity to improve their social, economic and environmental conditions. It recognises that communities are often in the best position to develop ideas on how to achieve positive change but often need support to mobilise skills energy and resources to address issues that matter.

As stated by the Hon John Thwaites, MP Minister for Victorian Communities:

‘Community building lies at the heart of our approach to government in Victoria. It is about harnessing the energy of communities so that they can shape their own futures. It is about fostering new and lasting partnerships between communities, government, business and other sectors. And it is about changing the way Government works, to better understand and respond to the needs and aspirations of Victorian communities. It is about finding new ways to tackle disadvantage and create opportunities, delivering tangible benefits such as jobs, educational options, safer places to live and work, better services and a healthy, sustainable environment. It seeks to achieve these benefits through revaluing community participation and local decision-making’ (www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au).

Processes that are closely related to, or may be part of, community building include community capacity building, community renewal and place management.

The emergence of capitalism and neo-liberal democracies has seen a ‘pulling apart’ of communities; an increase in social fragmentation within contemporary society, with many of the social activities that were once undertaken with others now being undertaken alone, if at all. In the words of Robert Putnam (1995) we are now ‘bowling alone.’

¹ Definitions of community can be contested concepts. For the purpose of this project ‘community’ is defined as the geographic areas serviced by the public libraries i.e. by local government area.

In response to the perceived community decline that bowling alone is understood to be reflective of, governments around the world are recognising that to maintain and build strong, resilient and prosperous communities, we must look to different models that emphasise collective benefits over individual gain.

A key mechanism through which community building can be achieved is the notion of **social capital**. As Stone and Hughes point out 'social capital is seen as one of the essential ingredients of sustainable communities, as it facilitates regional growth and enables community renewal' (2001:1). While we will discuss the role of social capital in community building later in this chapter, it is worth noting here, that, broadly speaking, we are referring to 'social capital' as being those relationships of social connectedness that enable people to act collectively.

2.1.1 How does community building work?

The fundamental premise of community building is to engage local people in a shared vision for revitalising their communities. This can be done by developing a range of community initiatives and projects to achieve long-term positive change, by building local skills and knowledge to increase participation in government programs, by increasing opportunities for positive social interaction within communities or by encouraging and celebrating social and cultural diversity.

Potapchuk and Crocker (1997) propose a 'ladder of community building'. The first stage of the ladder is social interactions; the basis for bonds between individuals produced by their interactions with one another in daily life. Social interactions do not always lead to the levels of social capital required for effective collective action on shared problems. The challenge in this stage is to provide structures and processes that combine naturally occurring social interactions into social capital that can be used or invested in other situations. This can be achieved by libraries, which provide public space where community members have the opportunity to interact and work together on activities and community problems (Kranich, 2001).

The second stage of the ladder is social capital – discussed further in this chapter. This is attained through the social interactions of different groups and individuals. While there are different kinds of social capital (i.e. generalised or collectively shared, localised or partially mobilised, bonding and bridging etc which we discuss later), in the context of community building, the constant challenge is to reduce interactions that may destroy social capital and nurture those collaborative relationships that strengthen the community (Potapchuk & Crocker, 1997).

Potapchuk and Crocker (1997) propose that the next ladder to community building is community infrastructure. This involves the more formalised ways that individuals come together to create community. It includes involvement in private organisations such as those discussed by Putnam (1995); bowling leagues, choral societies and communities of faith, as well as public organisations which are frequently involved in the processes of governance such as neighbourhood associations, community development corporations and citizen advisory committees.

The top rung of the ladder, civic culture (what Cox 1996 calls a civil society) refers to the values and norms that collectively characterise a community. High levels of 'generalised' social capital create the common ground essential for building a vision of the community that represents diverse interests and points of view. Low levels often translate into antagonistic visions of how shared decisions get made, conflicts get dealt with, and ultimately what being a community means. We should emphasise that, especially in distressed communities, progressing up the rungs of the ladder is not a one-way journey. It is necessary to move up and down, engaging in community problem solving, then using the results to strengthen 'localised' social capital.

It is this framework of climbing the rungs from community organisation to civic culture that becomes important in creating strong communities. In such a formulation, new partnerships can develop between community members, organisations and government that lead to reform of government services. There is greater community capacity to address critical issues and develop action strategies, and there is greater social cohesion and participation in community activities that can lead to new opportunities for social, economic and environmental development.

It is into this framework of community building that the role of the public library can be situated.

2.2 Libraries and community building

'The modern library is the community's cultural, educational and meeting place'
(Bundy 2003: 40).

In light of the framework of community building presented in the previous section, it should be reasonably self-evident that libraries can play an important role in community building. Indeed, a significant and growing body of literature recognises that public libraries are in a strong position to take on a community building role.

In part, the community building potential of libraries stems from their 'natural advantages', including:

- the fact they provide an open learning environment that is more accessible than most
- the ethos and style of libraries is inherently more supportive
- libraries encourages self-reliance and helping people develop a capacity to do things for themselves
- libraries frequently work in partnership with other community organisations
- libraries as a safe and legitimate place for most people. They are non-discriminating and neutral - free and accessible. People have a right of access regardless of their circumstances or backgrounds – nobody is turned away

Building on their natural advantages, public libraries' contribution to their communities can be summarised under four key themes:

- developing social capital
- capacity building
- promoting well-being
- economic and community revitalization

Given the complexity of the topic we will discuss libraries and social capital as a separate section. Below is a summary of each of the remaining themes. The future work of the Research and Development project is concerned to explore and elaborate on each of these themes through the collection of accessible, innovative case studies.

2.2.1 Capacity building

Capacity building refers to developing or acquiring the skills, competencies, tools, processes and resources that are needed to strengthen a neighbourhood or community's processes and systems so that individuals, families, and local groups may take control of their own lives. Capacity building is an explicit intervention that is intended to improve a community's potential to achieve its objectives in relation to its environment.

Understood as such, libraries play a key role in capacity building by equipping people with a number of skills and competencies such as literacy and lifelong learning. This is especially important for families in which parents do not have these skills. 'Being among the first learning agencies that children encounter, libraries play a key role in encouraging and promoting reading literacy among children. At their best they can be a focal point for the community, improving individual self-confidence and stimulating learning at all levels.' (UK, Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions: 2001). The library also provides a non-stigmatising environment for the delivery of adult literacy programs and increases personal control over issues through access to easy to understand information.

Libraries also contribute to capacity building by increasing knowledge and information. The library acts as a gateway to government information and services by providing all manner of services and information about State and Commonwealth government services and access to key government legislation. Libraries also enhance public access to the world's storehouse of knowledge and information through the provision of a strong information technology infrastructure (i.e. Internet services, databases and other key electronic information) that is critical to the development of the knowledge economy. The development of computer-based skills – especially for groups such as older people – is also an important component of library services. Anecdotally, it is reported that in libraries that service a large multicultural population, many users of the Internet use it to keep in touch with information and events from their homeland.

Public libraries are also seen as an essential institution in a democratic society. By providing access to unbiased information, they promote understanding of citizenship and democratic principles and encourage people to participate more fully and effectively in their democracy. Public libraries promote the democratic process through a variety of means - publicising details of meetings, making meeting space available in libraries, providing copies of, and information and guidance on legislation (Rowlatt). Further – in other studies, it was observed that communities often take great pride in their library – seeing it as a reflection of what they have been able to achieve and the value they place on learning.

Finally, libraries help build the capacity of their communities through workforce development such as providing unemployed clients with computer training workshops; job, career and literacy resources; and other special programs as part of community-wide initiatives to support workforce development.

2.2.2 Promoting well-being

Public libraries help promote health and well-being by encouraging a more active use of leisure time (reading, thinking, debating, learning rather than 'bowling alone') by engaging people's interest and involvement in the arts (hosting local art exhibitions, providing spaces for school holiday art and craft sessions), by helping people to connect more efficiently with local services (e.g. health and community services) and by building links and social contacts that promote positive health outcomes.

One of the biggest barriers to health and well being is social exclusion: for those who are socially isolated, the library can offer greater connection to the community. Public libraries are generally seen as inclusive and welcoming to all broad demographic groups, with a common metaphor being the library as the 'village green.' Indeed, in some areas the mobile library is the only service that regularly visits and the only human face of Council, while smaller libraries are more likely to be seen as a community centre and there is often a strong sense of community ownership of the library. As Matarasso points out: 'it is one of the most important aspects of libraries that they do not, cannot reject anyone. In a society which has become increasingly selective, and where public facilities are no longer automatically accessible, this is of truly vital importance....the principles of unquestioned inclusivity is kept alive today by the Library Service almost single-handedly' (Matarasso 1998).

2.2.3 Economic and community regeneration

'Public libraries have an important role to play in economic regeneration through support for small and medium-sized businesses by providing access to knowledge, resources and training opportunities. They support individual learning and skills-development. This contributes to the competitiveness of local enterprise.'
UK Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions

Libraries contribute to economic and community development in a number of ways, such as partnering with local financial institutions and economic development agencies to provide support services (i.e. access to reference materials, online business and finance databases) to businesses, especially to the small business sector, by providing community information, and business and personal financial planning and counselling either as direct services or in collaborative community arrangements. Equally, new construction or improvements to a library can play a major part in the physical improvement of the community, with the private sector seeking libraries as 'development anchors' that can spur public investment in urban regeneration.

While we address the issue of social capital further in the following section, it is worth noting that the extent to which social capital facilitates economically disadvantaged people and communities to 'get by' (bonding) or to 'get ahead' (bridging) offers two useful contexts within which to consider community based economic development strategies (Stone 2000). In more disadvantaged areas, the individuals within these communities tend to be less able to access the 'bridging' social capital that could facilitate their access to more 'resource rich' networks. Attention must be given to policy designs and partnerships that can provide the supports needed to do this.

2.3 Social capital and community building

'The glue that holds a community together'

Community building places particular emphasis on the role of social capital as a mechanism through which to build communities. In Australia, as in other nations, social capital is being looked to as a means of stemming the tide of perceived community decline. It promises hope for the regeneration of benefits – both social and economic – said to come from those interactions among neighbours, citizens and governments which are characterised by strong norms of trust, tolerance and mutuality.

2.3.1 Origins and definitions of social capital

The term 'social capital' means different things to different people in different contexts, and it serves different strategic aims and agendas. While its meaning is contested, there are nonetheless certain common principles that underpin its application.

Broadly speaking, 'social capital' can be understood as networks of social relations which are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity and which lead to outcomes of mutual benefit' (Stone and Hughes, 2002). It is a 'bottom-up' phenomenon based on the principles of trust, norms, mutual reciprocity and tolerance of diversity (Stewart-Weeks & Richardson 1998: 2). The work of Robert Putnam (1993, 1995), James Coleman (1988) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986), amongst others, has further refined the definition of social capital as being those features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate co-operation for mutual benefit (Lochner et al 1999). As Putnam points out (1995) the central premise of social capital is that social networks have value. Thus, social capital refers to the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. Understood as such, social capital provides a framework for conceptualising and measuring the social resources that individuals can invest in and draw upon in order to actively engage in the communities around them, so as to develop their collective capabilities to address common social and economic issues.

Examples of social capital can include neighbours swapping fruit and vegetables with one another as an example of reciprocity, it can include a tightly knit community of Hassidic Jews trading diamonds without having to test each gem for purity (Putnam 1995) as an example of trust, or it can include a local council offering a reconciliation ceremony as an example of tolerance of diversity. Each of these is an example of social capital in action.

The ideas of social capital have already been used in a number of areas including: health; education and employment; housing, transport and urban design; crime and community safety (ABS 2000). The concept of social capital has been used to account for schooling and educational attainment (Coleman, 1988), as well as for the smooth functioning of democracies and civic institutions (Putnam, 1993). More recently the benefits of social capital in relation to health have been examined (Baum 1999, Baum & Palmer 2002).

Debates about social capital

Despite wide interest in social capital, considerable debate remains about the term – for example, whether it is a process or an outcome, how to situate it in its social context and whether it is the 'property' of individuals or groups (Woolcock 1998; Portes 1998). Debate also surrounds the appropriateness of using the language of economics and production to speak of human capabilities.

In the experience of the author, it is most useful to consider social capital as an *outcome* of a range social processes that draw on social capital producing resources. These resources include norms and networks, as well as features of geographical areas such as the availability of local services and opportunities for interaction and identity building. Social capital, in other words, is produced if these resources are accessed, within particular social contexts. That is, in this formulation, social capital is an outcome that is context dependent, and relies heavily on human agency. People produce social capital when they are equipped with the tools and resources to enhance the quality of their lives. That is, social capital relates to the resources that are available to a community as a **consequence** of networks of mutual support, reciprocity, tolerance, trust and obligation, or, in other words, social capital can be accumulated when people interact with others in families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, local associations and a range of informal and formal meeting places (ABS, 2000: 1).

There is also a growing body of literature that distinguishes between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital. The term 'bonding' social capital relates to the resources available within socially homogenous networks. In contrast, 'bridging' social capital relates to more heterogeneous connections whereby members can access resources from a diverse range of networks and sources. The challenge for community and economic development is to create alliances across difference; to turn bonding social capital into bridging social capital. From a strategic planning point of view, this means understanding how homogeneous forms of social capital based on common racial, class or ethnic ties can complement heterogeneous forms so as to create broader linkages and partnerships across these boundaries.

Another debate is that social capital is not necessarily beneficial. Putnam (2000) devotes a chapter in his most recent study to the 'dark side' of social capital, noting that some people's social capital can have negative consequences for others. For example, the norms of reciprocity and mutual aid which characterise social capital can be a benefit to some (the recipients of such aid) but a strain to others (those called upon to provide the support). Equally, social capital can be used by certain groups to exclude or dominate other groups in society. Lochner, Kawachi, Brennan and Buka, (2003). Fukuyama (2001) suggests that groups with a narrow radius of trust where groups achieve internal cohesion at the expense of outsiders are more likely to produce negative externalities that affect outsiders, such as corrupt practices (he gives the Ku Klux Klan as an example). However, most analysts believe that the benefits of social capital tend to outweigh the down side (Kilpatrick, Field, & Falk, 2001)

2.4 Libraries and social capital

'Libraries have the ability to create social capital for their communities. The main way they achieve this is by providing public space where citizens can gather and work on personal and community problems. Libraries provide a wide range of innovative, creative programs that bring citizens together and break down the barriers of age, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, language and geography' (Kranich, 2001).

Libraries contribute to the building of social capital in many ways: by establishing and nurturing links and networks between people (i.e. the history group, partnerships with local community organisations), by encouraging trust through social inclusion and cohesion (by providing a neighbourhood resource and meeting place that is accessible to everyone, by enabling minority groups to demonstrate their ability to achieve and contribute to the local community, by working with people who experience isolation or difficulty in becoming involved in social activities, and by providing books and information for excluded groups). Libraries also build social capital through encouraging greater tolerance and understanding of diversity (i.e. provision of culturally inclusive services and activities), and by promoting the democratic ideals that underpin a civil society.

In a telling example, libraries played an important role in providing comfort, companionship, news and resources to citizens, following the events of September 11th. Libraries remained open to provide shelter for residents needing help. The libraries set up Internet and phone banks to allow residents to view news updates and connect with family and friends. Library websites linked citizens to disaster and recovery information, charitable organisations, and helpful resources (Kranich, 2001). Citing the many places that support and enhance our sense of community including libraries, community centres, childcare centres and arts centres, the NSW government stated 'without them, it is unlikely that many of the activities, services and social interaction that we value as part of 'community' would exist' (UTS 2000).

In other words, libraries operate as key sites in the production of social capital. Understood as such, they are central to community building in that they develop local skills and knowledge, they increase opportunities for positive social interaction within communities and they encourage and celebrate social and cultural diversity.

The following case study of social capital in action in a New South Wales library gives some concrete examples to the often abstract notion of social capital:

2.4.1 A Safe Place to Go: a case study

In Australia, the University of Technology Sydney has examined the social contribution of libraries as part of a broader set of studies examining the possible scope of social capital, and exploring how streets, shopping areas, public buildings and other places that may be shared with strangers, can either contribute to or diminish the opportunities for developing relationships or trust.

The study (UTS 2000) revealed that libraries contribute to social capital in many ways. One of these is by inviting all citizens to participate. Libraries were perceived by most as a place where everybody has a right to access, regardless of their background, with 98.7% of participants agreeing with the statement that 'they are for everybody and that everybody can have equal access.' Library users feel that all others have a right to be there, which creates a sense of equity and entitlement and reduces any sense of marginalisation or exclusion. When people are treated equally it reduces the possibility of a 'them' versus 'us' mentality.

Libraries are used by social 'misfits'. Carers of mentally or physically disabled people expressed feelings that the library is a place where their companions can venture with safety and that they will encounter minimal trouble. Homeless people and those living alone were found to use the library as a shelter and source of social contact. UTS (2000) conclude that people on the fringes of society experience less discrimination in the library than in the general community, and by attending the library have the opportunity to ease themselves into participation within society.

Another way libraries facilitate the building of social capital is by creating greater reciprocity among diverse cultural groups. Libraries provide a safe place where many groups who would not otherwise mix are given the opportunity to do so. By mixing with other cultures, individuals gain an understanding and greater tolerance of those cultures. Positive interaction between diverse groups signals the presence of social capital. The important role that libraries play in building greater reciprocity between diverse groups was highlighted by UTS:

'As important areas for integrating diverse groups and developing recognition and respect for the needs of others, libraries need to be protected and extended as part of the community infrastructure' (2000: 5).

'Sharing of the same space encourages a sense of harmony and trust, diminishing feelings of mistrust which pervade the broader society. It was found that most libraries were felt to be safe places where high levels of trust operate. Feelings of trust were reciprocal between staff and users and between different groups of users themselves. Positive experiences with strangers assist in forming trust relationships which are the core of social capital.' (UTS: 2000: 7)

The study found that the library was not only accessed for its resources but for the chance to socialise. The library provided teenagers with a chance to socialise without the supervision of parents. Parents generally regard libraries as safe places and were more than happy to allow their children to frequently spend time at the library. Young girls in particular found the library a safe place to meet friends of both sexes. This increases their social networks and gives them the opportunity to broaden their contacts. Older users were also found to frequently use the library for social purposes. Staff reported forming relationships with older, frequent users of the library, often asking about their health and well-being and noticing when they did not come in at their usual time. Almost all libraries in the study reported that older users stated to staff that they had come just for a chat. One elderly man who had recently lost his wife stated 'I was so lonely I thought if I go for a walk to the library, my friend up there will have a few words with me' (UTS, 2000: 17). The library gives those who don't have anyone else the chance to have contact with people.

Libraries were also found to provide a place of safety and security for children in the after-school period. Many unaccompanied children go to the library after school and stay there until their parents pick them up. Parents seem to prefer their children to stay in the library than an empty house, showing that they regard libraries as a safe place and trust their children to wait there. Some of the libraries in the study provided homework services, food for children who are there for a number of hours and took telephone calls from parents who were checking on their children. Staff also reported that sometimes the social interactions carried on outside of the library with some of them driving children home and having colour competition sheets left on doorsteps at the homes of staff members to be taken into the library (UTS, 2000).

2.5 Wider significance of project

It is important to note that the Libraries Building Communities project is not simply a record of the community building potential of libraries – there is also considerable *political* importance to this project. Public libraries are not guaranteed survival in the future and there is a need to attract more or different funding to the public library sector. McCallum & Quinn (2001) note that: ‘determining and promoting the value of public libraries is a chronically underdone activity in Australia. This makes libraries vulnerable. If funding bodies are unsure of the returns on their investments, they are less likely to support expansion in service delivery, and may even treat libraries as soft targets and cut funds.’

There is a need then to demonstrate how library services and activity contribute to the achievement of Government goals and wider policy objectives. Critical, will be the need to illustrate the centrality of libraries to the Government’s strategic direction of placing a priority on partnerships and joined up services. Sarah Ann Long, past president of the American Library Association, has been a keen advocate and spokesperson for the growing importance of partnerships to the delivery of key services: ‘building community, going into partnerships, all of these efforts take us out of our comfort zone. But we need to go there because partnerships are truly what we must do if we want the goals of our libraries to be achieved. The days of staying in our libraries and expecting people to come to us are over. We’ve got to get out and work with other groups’ (www.sarahlong.org).

In this kind of political climate, it is all the more important to be clear about what this project is seeking to deliver. While there is significant recognition and support for the social role of libraries, some commentators are cautious about the balance that needs to be struck between this and the core activities of the library. Some ask whether social role may involve a diversion from mainstream activities of libraries and give an impression of diffuse aspirations and lack of focus. ‘There is a danger that, as a result of the high profile of these objectives, the core role of the service will be neglected. Library services should not focus on these broader social objectives to the exclusion of delivering a good core service – as it is because libraries are a trusted and valued local resource that they are able to make these wider contributions in the first place’ (Audit Commission, 2002).

Thus, this project is focussed around delivering a number of outcomes that respond to the complexity of the undertaking:

Overall outcome:

- to provide an important showcase for the contributions that libraries make to their communities

Outcomes for library management and staff:

- improved access to key performance information that reflects the contribution of libraries to their communities. This will assist in the development of services, by providing tangible evidence of what works, what doesn't, where are the strengths and where are the gaps
- access to case studies and other information on best practice. A series of case studies documenting innovative approaches to library services will be collected and made available for your reference
- a series of local community profiles that identifies groups in the community who are not well serviced by their libraries, and it will provide the basis for a state-wide approach to the development of particular strategies for social engagement. This will assist in creating greater awareness of the likely impacts of socio-demographic and economic trends on public libraries
- greater awareness among library staff of the role that libraries play in developing social capital and community building. This will help support the development of future improvements through identification of strengths and weaknesses in current practice

Outcomes for the broader community

- provide greater awareness of the scope and range of library services and activities, i.e. beyond loan of books
- increase understanding of the current and potential role of public libraries in community building as well as providing improved information on the availability of Victorian public library services to particular groups such as ethnic minorities, people in regional and remote communities and people with disabilities

Outcomes for government

- provide government, at the local, state and federal levels, with an enhanced understanding of how public libraries assist them at all levels to address key policy issues and achieve their strategic goals - for example in the areas of e-government, health promotion, lifelong learning and learning communities

3. Methodology Used in the Research and Development Project

This chapter details the methodology used in the large-scale Libraries Building Communities research and development project. It documents the methods we will employ to collect the information necessary to illustrate the range, scale and quality of library activity - across the public library network – as well as the connectedness of the library to its local community. The focus of this chapter is on the methods that New Focus will draw upon to collect information relating to activity and engagement in libraries. This will act as a point of reference for researchers eager to undertake similar projects in future years. A separate report – *Conducting Your Own Social Capital Audit: A Guide For Libraries* – will document a similar methodology to that employed by New Focus (albeit on a smaller scale) which provides library staff and managers with a ‘checklist’ of questions to ask, material to gather and observations and activities to record in order to conduct their own ‘audit’ of social capital producing resources present in their own libraries.

3.1 Methodology for the Libraries Building Communities project

The Libraries Building Communities project is concerned to document the various ways in which public libraries across Victoria contribute to community building. As Debono (2002) notes, there is a need to gather the information that can document *outcomes* (i.e. consequences of service usage or social interaction, for example) rather than outputs (i.e. services provided). As Debono recognises ‘outcomes based research brings to a fore the impacts, the human experience of library use, and gives value to these experiences’ (2002: 80).

What New Focus is undertaking is essentially an audit or a stock-take of social capital producing resources in public libraries across Victoria in order to identify a range of innovative practices that are currently or potentially implemented by libraries in contributing to the social and economic value of their communities. The methodology that follows will enable identification of the factors (both positive and negative) that impact on the capacity of libraries to add value to their community, and develop strategic, actionable recommendations to encourage community engagement through the social capital building potential of public libraries. Summarised in this section are the core **research**, **strategy** and **implementation** tasks New Focus will conduct to complete the Libraries Building Communities project.

Given the scale and complexity of the project, a number of methods are needed in order to capture the diversity of information and data across a number of sources, including existing data and publications and new primary data collected through both qualitative and quantitative research techniques ‘to gather the richest picture of the impact’ (Proctor, Lee & Riley 1998: 5).

3.2 Research tasks

New Focus will undertake several research tasks to gather a broad range of information, data, stories and examples of innovative practice. This includes the analysis of existing data and the collection of new primary data through focus groups, telephone and face-to-face interviews, community forums, workshops and telephone surveys with community members, stakeholders, politicians and other key influencers as well as library management and staff.

Involving multiple methodologies allows the research team to gather a wide range of different kinds of community and stakeholder feedback.

The subcomponents and tasks involved with the research include:

3.2.1 Analysis of the degree of correlation between local community demographics and characteristics of library users

The project team will conduct a thorough literature review of relevant research and data in the area to develop a profile of community use of public libraries. Comparisons with the profile of the overall population in these areas will allow assessment of the extent to which different groups are using library services. As a starting point, we will draw on work done by the Victorian Multicultural Commission on access of LOTE populations to local council services, the community profiles developed by the Department of Infrastructure as part of the 'Facts about your area' publications, as well as data collected by public libraries across Victoria through the Annual Survey compiled by the Department of Infrastructure, and by libraries themselves on users and customer satisfaction.

This will allow the research team to establish a community profile of library users by LGA in order to tease out some of the subtleties and nuances in the following qualitative research component.

3.2.2 Qualitative research tasks

Focus groups with library users

A series of focus groups will be run with library users and potential library users for whom there are clear barriers to access (as opposed to those who consciously choose not to visit a library). These groups with public library users will be used to provide an in-depth understanding of who uses libraries and the benefits they get from these services. It will also explore the potential for libraries to act as hubs for community interaction and exchange. These focus groups will be used to identify those factors that act as barriers to use of public library services by some sections of the community.

The focus groups will run for approximately 1½ hours, will include between eight and ten participants in each group and will be split approximately 50:50 male to female. The groups will be held in several different local government areas (LGAs) to ensure a cross section of the community (age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, inner and outer metropolitan areas etc) is represented as we gather feedback from a broad slice of the community.

The focus groups will be conducted by the Project Manager and other experienced focus group researchers from New Focus. New Focus will design the discussion guide for the focus groups, with input and final approval from the Library Board and the Project Advisory Committee.

Wherever possible, we will conduct the focus groups in libraries themselves to enable the researchers to undertake some observational measures of activity in addition to the verbal feedback gathered through the focus group sessions.

Focus groups with library staff

Focus groups will also be held with library staff to build an understanding of the ways in which libraries build communities – as seen from the inside. These groups with library staff and management will be used to complement the focus groups with library users to build our understanding of who uses libraries, the benefits they get from these services, and those factors that act as barriers to use of public library services.

We will ensure that library staff from each of the 44 public libraries are included to reflect the range, scale and quality of library activity and the ‘connectedness’ of the library to its community.

As was the case with the general community focus groups, the groups will be moderated by the Project Manager and other experienced moderators from New Focus, and the discussion guide for ‘staff’ focus groups will be designed in consultation with the Project Advisory Committee.

Telephone interviews

To ensure that rural and regional voices are heard, New Focus will conduct a series of 50 x 30 minute in-depth telephone interviews with residents in rural and regional communities across the state. Issues of access, availability, services offered, barriers to use, perceptions of the library, role of the library and suggestions for improvement will be explored in the in-depth telephone interviews.

In addition, 30 x 30 minute telephone interviews will be conducted with key influencers such as local councillors, bureaucrats, business people, school principals and teachers, people working in key community organisations such as maternal and child health, ethnic welfare centres and religious groups in order to document the various ways in which libraries impact upon the community – as seen from others who are crucially involved in developing and providing services (either alone or in partnership with a library) to their local community.

This data capture will be important to qualitatively validate the profiles of library usage within the communities and LGAs established during the previous research task.

Research questions

At this point it is worth clarifying the kinds of questions we will be asking of people in the focus group discussions. In broad terms, discussions around the contribution and impact of public libraries to building communities will be grouped by ‘impact areas’, which group participants will then be given concrete issues to consider against. The results of the focus groups and telephone interviews will then be collated to give a picture of the social impact as a whole. A number of studies including Matassaro (1998) and Usherwood & Linley (1998) have approached the topic of libraries building communities in a British setting using the same technique.

The impact areas which we will be seeking feedback on include (but are not exclusive to):

- basic literacy
- business/career
- library as place
- information literacy
- local history/genealogy
- culture/arts
- equity
- democracy
- general information
- empowerment
- health and well-being
- personal development
- social cohesion/inclusion
- imagination/creativity

How this translates to an assessment of benefit and impact is to plot the ways in which libraries contribute to the development of the above areas. For example, in the area of business/career, local business owners might cite the fact that they can use a community notice board in a library to promote their services, or they may talk of being able to access online business and finance databases. In the area of information literacy, seniors might talk of using the free Internet terminals to keep in contact with friends or relatives overseas, or newly arrived groups might cite their use of the Internet to keep informed about news and events in their homeland. In the area of empowerment, this may include the learning of new knowledge or it may include gaining access to information about Council legislation that enables them to act as more informed citizens.

An audit of independent measures will also be undertaken to capture data against which to triangulate the qualitative research findings. This audit of independent measures, described in Bundy (2003), would take the form of essentially a checklist of social capital producing resources such as:

- a vision/mission statement
- a client charter
- highly visible and well sign-posted location
- spacious, attractive and comfortable facilities
- remote web access to catalogue and data bases
- community information
- information services for small businesses
- information services for the Council
- children's and young adult services
- local history services
- student support services such as homework programs and support in accessing information resources
- transport to the library
- reading groups/book club
- adaptive technology for those with disabilities
- volunteer program and/or community support program/s
- information literacy programs
- accommodation and other support for a Friends of the Library group
- school holiday programs
- advisory committee with community representation

In addition to Bundy's checklist, the following are important inclusions:

- services for special needs groups (eg Koori peoples)
- community consultation mechanisms such as feedback forms, surveys and forums
- regular liaison with community groups/service providers such as neighbourhood houses
- partnerships with other community service providers to provide additional services
- provision of meeting rooms for community groups at community rates
- provision of 'performance' space to enhance self development and creativity
- community notice-boards and display facilities
- home library service
- regular story-time for babies and pre-school children
- regular visits to kindergartens, creches and new parents' groups
- a program of talks, lectures, workshops, new book mornings/afternoons and cultural activities

The above list should be seen as indicative, rather than exhaustive.

Being able to plot the concrete ways in which libraries impact on communities in these broad areas provides crucial evidence of the central role of libraries in building communities.

Community groups and workshops

However, in order for the results of these impact studies to have an impact themselves, the findings must be disseminated. Indeed, an important by-product of researching social capital is the *building* of social capital by developing a feedback mechanism through which to include and involve the research participants in the discussion of research findings. For this reason, we will undertake three community forums as a way of boosting awareness of not only the research, but also of informing residents of the social capital building potential of their local libraries.

Three workshops will also be conducted with library staff to enable staff to learn from the research findings. This will provide an opportunity for reflection and learning as the project proceeds. Importantly, it will provide an opportunity for increased awareness of the social contribution libraries make to their communities, and the processes through which this occurs.

3.2.3 Quantitative telephone survey

Having established the key themes, issues, opportunities and barriers from the qualitative research, New Focus will then conduct a 12 minute quantitative telephone interview with 400 residents, randomly sampled from the general Victorian population. This will allow a one point in time error margin of +/- 5%, where there is a total population of 4,766,800. (ABS Demographic Statistics, June Quarter, 2001).

For the interviews we use our dedicated in-house telephone staff headed up by our National Field Manager. The field room is accredited to the industry quality standard, IQCA.

This survey will be instrumental in quantifying and validating the extent to which some of the qualitative issues were significant within the broader community. A key component of this survey will be the inclusion of several questions that act as an indicator of social capital (i.e. trust, reciprocity, belonging, informal networks, mutual exchange, collective benefit, hubs for facilitating community interaction etc). We would recommend that in future years a set of questions relating to social capital measures are added to the Annual Survey of Victorian Public Libraries conducted by the Local Government and Regional Services Division² to track the building of social capital over time.

Summary of research methods

The sample frame for the primary research components is outlined below:

| Method | Segment | Sample size | Location |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Focus groups | Library users | 9 groups (10 people in each) | Melbourne and Regional Victoria |
| | Potential library users | 9 groups (10 people in each) | Melbourne and Regional Victoria |
| | Library staff | 6 groups (10 people in each) | Melbourne and Regional Victoria |
| Telephone interviews | General community | 50 | Rural and regional Victoria |
| Face to face interviews | Key influencers | 30 | Melbourne and regional Victoria |
| Community forums | General community | 3 forums | Melbourne and regional Victoria |
| Workshops | Library staff | 3 workshops | Melbourne and regional Victoria |
| Telephone surveys | | n=400 | Metro and regional Victoria |

3.4 Strategy

Having conducted the research and analysed the various data to identify key trends, issues, barriers and opportunities for building social engagement through public libraries, New Focus will then develop a clear set of steps or strategic actions for promoting the social capital enhancing role of public libraries in their communities. Building on the qualitative and quantitative data collected in the research stage, New Focus will develop a consultation and communications strategy that can be used to increase the understanding of the role of public libraries and awareness of the value they contribute to their communities.

Part of our strategic focus will be matching the policy and vision statements of individual libraries and councils, along with broader state wide policy statements from professional associations and peak groups (eg VICLINK and CPLG) in order to link library activity to local, state and commonwealth government policy initiatives. This will be critical to ensuring the consultation and communication strategy is well received by maximising stakeholder 'buy in' and ownership throughout the consultation process.

The strategy New Focus will develop will spell out very clearly the steps that need to be taken (and possible barriers to achieving this) to raise awareness of public libraries as being important sites of community capacity and social capital. The community consultation and communication strategy will be a 'living document' that relevant parties can access and reference as needed. It will speak to the needs of the communities and libraries whose stories and best practice inform it.

² Previously Department of Infrastructure.

3.5 Implementation

Based on the research and strategy, New Focus will develop a range of tools and materials that will build awareness of the social capital building role and potential of public libraries. It is anticipated that these materials will be used to communicate the key messages and findings from the Research and Development project at federal, state and local government level.

Documents that can be accessed and used by the community as well will be a critical part of this implementation phase.

In broad terms, these tools and materials will take the form of seven key documents or pieces of information:

- a short report outlining the key findings from the analysis of data and key performance indicators. This will summarise the key information on each library service and provide state and regional averages for comparison
- a guide for library staff that will assist them in the implementation and analysis of these measures in future years
- a short, simple and persuasive document that presents the findings from library users and community consultations
- a report on social engagement issues identifying what individuals in the community want from their library and barriers in accessing library services
- a document that presents the case studies of innovative practice in an accessible and attractive form that engages readers
- a strategy document that outlines an approach for raising awareness of the research and development project and its findings with various stakeholders and includes practical advice and examples
- documentation of the research methodology, including guidelines and advice for its implementation, to enable public libraries to collect information on their contribution and impact in future years

To summarise, this report has been concerned to outline the conceptual framework within which the Libraries Building Communities Research and Development project is located. It has also documented the methodology to be used in the statewide Libraries Building Communities Research and Development project. It is clearly a more complex and involved methodology than that needed by local libraries to conduct their own social capital audit (for the objectives of the project are far broader). Nonetheless, issues such as the need to detail the benefit and impact of libraries will remain a crucial concern for library staff and managers and they promote the importance of measuring the outcomes as well as the outputs of public libraries in Victoria.

Future reports to be provided as part of the Libraries Building Communities project are:

- a guide for library staff that will assist them in the implementation and analysis of these measures in future years
- a short, simple and persuasive document that presents the findings from library users and community consultations
- a report on social engagement issues identifying what individuals in the community want from their library and barriers in accessing library services
- a document that presents the case studies of innovative practice in an accessible and attractive form that engages readers
- a short report outlining the key findings from the analysis of data and key performance indicators. This will summarise the key information on each library service and provide state and regional averages for comparison
- a strategy document that outlines an approach for raising awareness of the research and development project and its findings with various stakeholders and includes practical advice and examples

4. Glossary

Capacity

Capacity refers to the potential for sharing assets, resources, gifts and talents. In order to reach capacity, people and organizations recognize they are willing to share these assets for community building.

Capacity Building (also community capacity building)

Capacity building refers to developing or acquiring the skills, competencies, and tools, processes and resources that are needed to strengthen a neighbourhood or community's processes and systems so that individuals, families, and local groups may take control of their own lives. Capacity building is an explicit intervention intended to improve a community's potential to achieve its objectives in relation to its environment.

Community Building

Community building is to engage local people in a shared vision for revitalising their communities by developing a range of community initiatives and projects to achieve long-term positive change, by building local skills and knowledge to increase participation in government programs, by increasing opportunities for positive social interaction within communities and by encouraging and celebrating social and cultural diversity.

Community building recognises the importance of supporting local communities to strengthen and apply their capacity to improve their social, economic and environmental conditions. It recognises that communities are often in the best position to develop ideas on how to achieve positive change but often need support to mobilise skills energy and resources to address issues that matter. Processes that are closely related to, or may be part of, community building include community capacity building, community renewal and place management.

Community Development

Community development refers to the ways, models and paths that communities, cities and services take to develop geographic communities or communities of interest physically, economically and socially.

Community Profile

A picture of the community which reflects the demographic, economic, human, social, visual and natural resources of the community. It also includes both needs and assets of the community.

Empowerment

This term recognizes and utilizes the power that all people have. It usually means identifying this power (asset mapping is one way) and mobilizing this power for positive community change

Needs Assessment

A needs assessment is a determination of the needs that individuals and communities have. It is sometimes called a deficit index because it determines the degree to which a community has deficits. Items such as adolescent pregnancy, drug abuse, poverty, suicidal behaviour, depression, blight indexes, burned out buildings, etc. are part of needs assessment. They are almost always used to determine the need for new programs.

Partnership

Two or more groups or individuals joining together in a shared and mutually beneficial relationship working toward a common goal.

Social Capital

Broadly speaking, 'social capital' can be understood as those features of social organisation such as networks, norms, reciprocity, trust and tolerance of diversity that facilitate co-operation for mutual benefit. Social capital refers to the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. Social capital provides a framework for conceptualising and measuring the social resources that individuals can invest in and draw upon in order to address common social and economic issues.

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