



## The intrinsic value of libraries as public spaces

Technology and digital services reflect the changing role of libraries

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# Introduction

## The connection between libraries and the advancement of society is clear.

From the earliest times when a cave painting presented the social, ethical and educational directions of a group of people, to magnificent collections of human knowledge, creativity and wisdom held in the Library of Alexandria, to the well loved local library, people have had access to the information which underpins our way of life.

But like everything, the process of digital disruption and technological advancement has meant that libraries are also changing, not in their core objective, but in the way they deliver their vital service.

Learning how libraries are changing and establishing the best ways to gain the most from these new resources is a task undertaken by Civica and its research partner University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

Civica is involved in ongoing research into the evolution of local government based resources in particular, and as part of these efforts, Civica Libraries engaged the UTS: Institute for Public Policy and Governance to undertake research into the value of libraries as public spaces. This data analysis includes:

- Use of data from recent research projects undertaken by the Institute, *Regional Library Management Models* and *Why Local Government Matters*. This new analysis relates specifically to the value of libraries for the purpose of this report.
- A tailored survey, which was prepared and sent to library and council staff across Australia and New Zealand. This has provided new data on the value of libraries as public spaces from the views and perspectives of professionals working in the sector. A topline analysis of the survey responses has been undertaken and prepared for this report.

As an additional research component, a focus group was conducted with council and library representatives. Participant perspectives from this

discussion have provided further insights into the key themes of the project and are included in this report.

The focus group, representing a number of library staff and managers from inner city to rural based libraries, provided their views on the ways in which library space can continue to be better used to the benefit of their communities.

Their experience as hands on practitioners delivering library services to the community provides vital insights into the disruptive nature of technological change and the way in which evolving library and community space concepts have stepped up to meet those challenges.

## Improved access

Ubiquitous internet connections have also brought access to library resources to anyone with a computer. On one level customers are able to access library services from anywhere, from their homes or from mobile devices. They are able to download books, research materials and other materials.

On another, library management believes that the provision of free WiFi allows them to offering library customers internet linked support for the development of new businesses, offering a business incubator for start-ups or hot desking facilities for small business.

These services provide tangible benefits to the community through business development, cash generation and ultimately the creation of job opportunities.

Libraries and the people who operate and maintain them are now actively rolling out the library of the future, which not only continues to provide access to literature, culture and a connection to the history of a community but also has the leading edge technology to ensure that access is offered to all members of the community.

# In the public domain - a preface from Civica

The rapidly changing landscape of business and service provision means that all aspects of life need to adapt to the new paradigm.

Libraries, so much a central part of any nation's cultural and intellectual heart and soul, have embraced this change. The fact is that libraries are constantly evolving and it is vital that they inform and educate the community about what they have to offer.

To remain relevant and meet the needs of fast changing communities, library spaces and services are innovative and forward thinking, and the consensus of community opinion remains firmly that libraries are a valued and vital resource in the way in which community members interact.

We at Civica are committed to assisting our colleagues in libraries to develop and implement leading edge solutions designed for the evolving needs of the community. The innovative ideas and processes identified in this research will go a long way to achieving that end.

The challenge is to offer those vital support services with the available financial resources.

This research aims to shed some light on the way in which libraries as a public space can continue to fulfil a vital cultural, educative and social role with local communities.

**Richard Fiddis**

Managing Director Civica International.





# This report

Public libraries are thriving and, by embracing digital technologies, library memberships continue to grow in line with and in some cases ahead of population growth.

The library has evolved into a hub around which the community grows, learns and communicates. It provides the space and the intellectual glue to allow communities, close knit urban and sparsely spread rural, to cohere and interact.

This report looks at key issues which will need to be addressed to ensure libraries remain a central part of community life. Those issues are:

## The future role of libraries in Australia

### 1. What is the need for libraries in modern society?

“The library definitely adds something to a person’s life. It adds to the experience, adds to the ability to perform tasks and adds another layer, to the cultural and intellectual experience of life.” Jan Richards, Manager Central West Libraries, Orange NSW.

### 2. What is the future role of libraries in Australia?

“We want to reach out to the people. Those who don’t or can’t come to the library. We want to get out into the community and provide on-line support, for women, for non-English speakers, for everyone.” Thuy Nguyen, Library Programs Co-ordinator, Fairfield City, NSW.

### 3. How library spaces are evolving

A snapshot of survey questions showed 77 per cent of respondents identified the provision by libraries of WiFi access as extremely important. 73 per cent believed activities, resources and programs for toddlers were of highest importance. 66 per cent cited services to the elderly as being of prime importance as a library offering. 65 per cent of all respondents said that the provision of books, reference works and literary material must continue unabated.

### 4. The increasing role of technology in libraries

“There are those who would like everything to stay the same, but the fact is that libraries are changing. We need to offer more general community based services, we need 24/7 libraries, we need to have internet access and digital services and we need to provide the people with the skills to match,” Janice Nitschke, Manager Libraries, Tourism and Information Services, Wattle Range Council, South Australia.

### 5. Libraries and the provision of public spaces

“Libraries are a third space for many community members, they are welcoming, safe, free and customers can stay all day – people can “escape” from their own spaces, meet and talk with others, participate in programs and events, study, read, relax, celebrate community diversity.” Survey respondent Queensland.



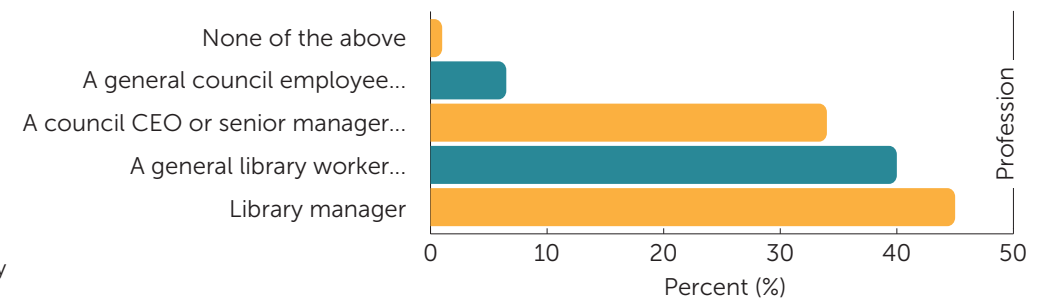
## The type of services libraries can provide in the digital age

This report includes findings from the recent survey to local councils on *The value of libraries as public spaces*. Relevant library based findings from the UTS:IPPG research projects *Regional Library Management Models* (ref 1) and *Why Local Government Matters* (ref 2) also informs this report.

For example, data from the Regional Library Management Models research which contained a survey of library managers across 45 New South Wales councils and one-on-one interviews with library managers and State Library of NSW staff.

Findings from this research included perceptions on the value of libraries to communities. Overwhelmingly, the respondents identified the library as a central community hub, the “heart” of the community, and a place which not only provided knowledge and learning but was also a safe haven without discrimination.

The respondents as per the table below held various positions in councils and libraries.



(ref 1) Hunting, S.A., Ryan, R. & Dowler, B. 2015. Collaborative library service delivery: A guide to regional library management models in NSW. Centre for Local Government, University of Technology Sydney.

(ref 2) Ryan, R., Hastings, C., Woods., R., Lawrie, A., Grant, B. 2015 Why Local Government Matters: Summary Report 2015 Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology Sydney Australia



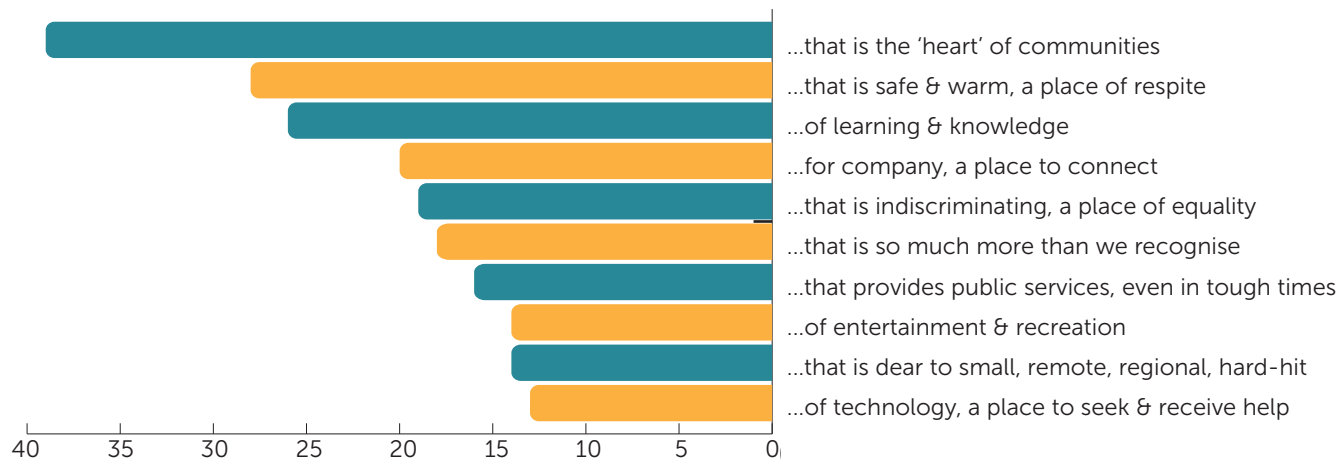
# The role of a library

Library and council managers who responded to the research, saw themselves as guardians of this unique space, providing in their words “a safe place to go for everyone” and “libraries are the heart of the community, the mind and the soul”.

Others spoke of the library as a place that was “genuinely welcoming to all. There are very few places where anybody can go, know that they are welcome to come in, they’re not going to be changed, they’re not going to be sold anything, and a range of supportive friendly services will be available.”

Respondents pointed to the fact that there has been an increase in borrowing rates within the community and more and more people are attending libraries.

## The library is a place...



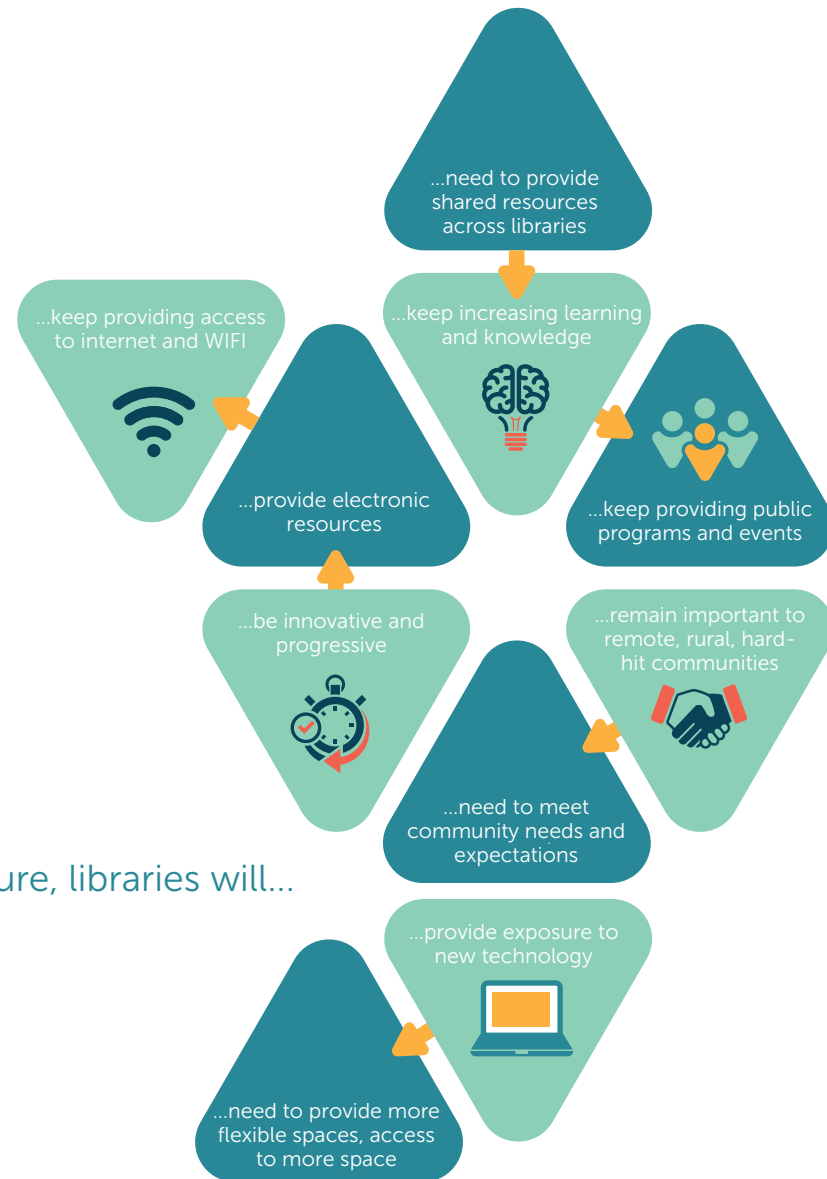


# What the future holds

Library staff and library managers also believed that the library was a venue for the showcasing of new technologies that will assist the community to gain better access to and use of libraries. WiFi, digitisation of books and other materials, availability of e-readers and audio books and access to the internet are but a few of those technology advancements.

The importance of libraries to rural and remote communities was also identified as a major role now and in the future, as libraries have the facilities and ability to keep communities connected. The vital role of disseminating community based information and the position of the library as a central community gathering point was also strongly identified.

In the 2015 document , the importance of the provision of library resources by local government bodies was seen as “very important” by almost 40 per cent and “extremely important” by a further 27 per cent.



In the future, libraries will...





# The Key Findings from The Value of Libraries as Public Spaces

In our most recent survey, we looked at the range of services provided by libraries and asked the respondents to rank them in order of importance.

The results showed clearly the view that libraries hold a central place in the community - a pivot for information, learning and cultural discourse.

More than 77 per cent of respondents said that WiFi access for general internet use was a resource of extremely high importance to the running of a library.

Activities and resources specifically designed for the use of toddlers and infants was also of critical importance for 73 per cent of respondents. This facility allowed parents to use the other facilities of the library.

For 66 per cent of council and library staff, the offering of services for the elderly, including home-bound services was important. The library and council staff recognised the isolation of many elderly members of the community and wanted to ensure that these citizens were not cut off from the books, reference works and other literary materials held by the library.

In terms of broadening the base of the library and providing additional services and technology, library and council staff rated as "very important" the need to offer ratepayers and community members access to entertainment materials such as DVDs for movies, documentaries and series and CDs for music and audio books.

The provision of support for migrant and non-English speaking members of the community was also viewed as a core responsibility of local library

services. Community group activities for socialising and interaction for clubs and groups was also a best use for the modern library space.

More traditional support services such as quiet spaces and homework help for students were identified as core to the operation of the library.



# The importance of public spaces for communities

The central belief of library and council staff is that libraries represent public spaces for the use of the community.

Australian and New Zealand are changing fast particularly in so far as the urban environment is concerned. Population density is rising rapidly; work patterns are changing to predominantly part time even shift based; high house prices are leading to lower home ownership, and increasing mobility in the job search has added to the feeling of isolation among many.

There was a majority view that public spaces provide the opportunity for communities to “come together” in a shared space. This concept offers one solution to growing social isolation and fosters social cohesion and interaction.

In many cases the public space is the local library, where local residents have access to key resources and information which are not readily available elsewhere.

A unanimous view was held that the local library had all of the facilities that made it a safe opportunity for isolated individuals to become more community active, something that would be advantageous to the whole of Australian and New Zealand society.

The Library staff and management noted that local libraries were already fulfilling the role of catalyst, providing venues to allow community members to meet and interact.

On one level libraries offered a place for groups to meet during the day, groups involved in maintaining and passing on cultural, artistic and creative knowledge. Book clubs, knitting groups, musical groups, such as the growing ukulele cohort, and a full range of school holiday activities arranged for kids were already in place.

Additionally educational opportunities were provided through author visits to talk about their books and about writing generally. There were history clubs, groups discussing sustainable living and recycling.

Most libraries offer study facilities for school and university students.

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**The fact that community members can enter a library without being a member, without an appointment, without having to disclose personal circumstances and without having to spend money makes this a truly democratic space.**

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## The role of libraries in providing digital spaces

Increasingly, the community is being required to interact online at a citizen, consumer, student and even employer level. Libraries offer one of the very few digital public spaces available to the community. The digital public space can be a zone of engagement through which anyone, anywhere, anytime can access, explore, share and create digital content.

A majority of library managers and staff believe that a library's role is to offer access to technologies which allow citizens to engage, free of charge, in digital spaces.

Free WiFi and the use of computers allows citizens access to government and community services, to look for work, and to find accommodation. These services also offer educational support, as one respondent commented: "Our library has a range of equipment, technology, training and help with digital devices, services, and online resources that can be access by all, not necessarily in the physical library."

Another commented: "We have introduced better WiFi throughout the library. We are also organising more technology focused training for customers and are increasing our e-resource collections.

"We are also in the process of digitizing much of the local history collection to allow 24 hour access to our resources."

The overwhelming view was that the library was a public space which, now and will in the future, continue to explore ways to facilitate improved quality of life for all groups in the community.

**Opportunities for customers to access free content online such as books, audiobooks, music and films was a major part of this process.**

# The Ideal Library

The respondents cast their minds to the concept of a perfect library and what would constitute the ideal library space.

## The top responses were:



**1.** A library with both indoor and outdoor space, with natural light



**2.** A library with extended opening hours



**3.** A library that is co-located with other services such as community services, job search, Centrelink, etc.



**4.** A library incorporating cafes and theatrettes and entertainment and food



**5.** A library with up-to-date technology



**6.** A library offering creative maker spaces including 3D printers, sewing machines, sound recording and movie equipment



**7.** A library whose staff provide technical training and have other professional qualifications



**8.** A place for business and workers, where people to start and operate a small business

These options already exist in libraries in different parts of Australia and New Zealand and there are models existing elsewhere overseas. The concept of the 24/7 library operates in Fairfield, an inner suburb of Sydney with a very high population of non-English speaking residents, for example, and co-location of services is widespread.

The co-location of services is also widespread for example LINC Tasmania which offers a combined catalogue including all public libraries, the State Reference Service, the Tasmaniana and Crowther Libraries, the Allport Library and Museum of Fine Art. LearnXpress adult education courses, adult literacy

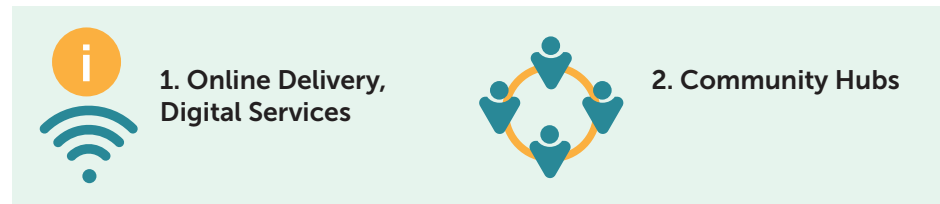
skills support, access to historical, archival and contemporary information about Tasmania's heritage and access to Tasmanian Government records and resources. The one stop shop approach to community services provides huge advantages for customers.

Offering the public library space as a business incubator and as a resource for local businesses to grow is seen as a vital component in the evolving library. With all of the resources a start up business requires, the library facility can help kick start new ideas and provide income generating opportunities for citizens.



# How Libraries will evolve

The research shows that there are two key areas of the evolutionary process:



In almost all cases, library staff, library managers and council staff believed that an increasing number of interactions with customers would occur online.

At the same time, there was likely to be a reduction in the reliance on physical literary resources such as printed books. There was a suggestion that an increase in availability of e-books and the digitisation of historical documents and the “on-screen” reading of materials would reduce the need for hard copy materials, however, book industry statistics have shown that there has been a strong revival in the use, purchase and demand for physical books.

The evolving library framework will, according to those who operate and manage them, result in smaller branches but they would incorporate improved facilities..

The concept of the library as a “community hub” is the current model where library staff are the conveners, managing the diverse activities and services offered.

As the library becomes the council’s face to the community, it will need to ensure that it continues to adapt to meet changing community needs.

In small and remote areas the role of the library will be pivotal to the process of disseminating community support and information.

One respondent said of the remote and rural library: “I think they (libraries) will become more important spaces for outreach social services such as legal assistance, Centrelink, job search, aged and disability services and so on.

The respondents said that in many country towns, basic services such as banks and even shops were disappearing, which would make the physical space that libraries offer even more important to the community.

Library managers recognised that they would need to gain new and broader skills in order to provide the library services of the future.

.....  
**“The skills, learning and training of library staff will have a much greater focus on customer services, on the ability to deliver formal and informal training and marketing than it currently has.”**  
.....

Another library manager commented: “I believe that library staff will no longer be predominantly librarians. The range of skills required to adequately meet the needs of the community in the future library will mean a much more diverse range of people will work in libraries.”

## Rural and remote areas:

The needs of rural and remote communities are often forgotten. The libraries panel which met to discuss the research document, noted that the rural and remote sector of the Australian community had unique requirements, as they represent a community often neglected

Changes in demographic mix, the high mobility of people in remote rural areas, the scarcity of employment opportunities, and the unavailability of further education resources has meant that the library offers a lifeline for community connection and support.

Given that in many rural and remote communities social and indeed physical isolation is the cause of social dislocation.

Business development opportunities and resources that people living in urban areas take for granted, such as internet and the full range of research and reference material may not be accessible. In addition, venues for community and cultural gatherings vital to reduce isolation are often not available.

Library services to support isolated people isolated by distance or by language, age, gender or disability. Helping people to understand changes in legislation, obligations under the law, access to government and community support services and so on will be offered to those in remote and rural communities.





# Comments from the respondents:

## **Selected comments from survey respondents and the focus group who collectively represent public libraries around Australia and the Australian Public Library Alliance (APLA).**

"The library will be a community hub, co-located with other services, a one-stop-shop"...

- [The library] will become increasingly important as a community hub for the less educated and poorer parts of the community who need help with forms and other official transactions.
- It will become the council's face to the community, the community centre, the council services etc. One stop shop.
- Libraries will be the convenor, for lots of community services, organisations and individuals being brought together to forge a collaborative and united action list - one with strength in numbers. Libraries will be a glue for these united endeavours.

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### • High emphasis on digital literacy and citizenship, access to resources for creation in sound, film, graphic and 3D design.

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- Libraries as we know them need to evolve into a community hub of interaction where they become the first point of call for assistance with information – it's no longer about books but information; all forms of information that help solve the day to day problems of life.
- The library will see increased digital service delivery, increased training in technology, and increased digital literacy...

- Provision of access to, and interactions with, new and emerging technologies which are too expensive for people to have in their homes i.e. 3D printers, programming and design software. Spaces (physical and virtual) for promoting digital interactions and progress...
- I think that libraries will increase their role in providing digital education. As more and more information goes online, there is a gap between community knowledge and online resources and no one is filling this gap...
- Libraries need to help the disadvantaged and aged, such as with literacy and technology etc. to enable communities to have strong economies and equity...
- Libraries will still need to maintain physical spaces and physical assets...
- I don't think that the digital world will remove the need for people and staff to interact. There is a growing understanding of the need for people to physically meet - as Hugh Mackay said, humans are mammals and mammals have a natural herding instinct... There will be a mix of hard copy and digital resources for a long while yet.
- Public-private partnerships for the provision of physical infrastructure.
- Spaces are becoming more important; spaces to read, engage, play, discover, or just sit and relax...
- Will become more about meeting space - more about space in general... Libraries will be places of creativity, vibrant, busy places...
- [The library will be] a place where information is created and shared rather than a place where information is consumed.





- More busy spaces - moving away from “hush” and “be quiet” to a space which invites interaction, discussion, activity.
  - Libraries will become community activators. They will not be the doers but they will pull the doers together in one place to agree on a shared purpose and/or project...
  - [Libraries will] become more of a meeting place, centre for investigation and experimentation through maker spaces... Libraries will continue to educate the community and increase literacy...
  - ...more up-skilling of the community...
  - Libraries will be less about lending and more about co-facilitating a well-read society regardless of how readers access books...
- 
- **Upgrades to physical infrastructure will be important to keep libraries vibrant and in touch with communities...**
- 
- ...taking the library to the community as people become busier in their lives, creating libraries as community spaces (so not a community centre with books but a centre for lifelong learning that has community at the core).
  - [Libraries] will become more important in the education process. [Libraries] will play an increasing role in literacy and digital literacy support.





## Future Changes to Library Physical Spaces

Changes to the physical environment of libraries is necessary if the vision of a community hub or one-stop-shop centre is to be fully realised.

The survey found that the spaces occupied by libraries will have to become more flexible to accommodate other activities. For example the concept of providing space as a business incubator or business hub will require the office environment set up, the areas for creative development through the use of sound, film and 3D printing will need other dedicated spaces.

The community hub model can offer greater efficiencies for councils and help to raise the profiles of individual services.

The pressures on council budgets could be somewhat alleviated from these shared or co-located services.

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The survey identified a wide range of services that could be co-located with libraries. They included music and arts facilities, maternal and child care services, shopping centres, sports and recreation facilities, aged care facilities, council chambers and offices and public schools.

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# The relationship between Councils and Libraries

The survey clearly shows there is not only a continuing need for change but also an appetite for innovative thinking within the library and local government sector.

With almost 82 per cent of surveyed individuals agreeing or strongly agreeing that “the community sees the library as one of the functions of council in my LGA” and with similar percentages agreeing and strongly agreeing that it was the responsibility of libraries to provide the community with information, services and program there is no doubt that libraries represent a strong arm of council and in a broader sense local government generally.

It also appears from the research that both library management and council management are broadly in agreement with the ways in which libraries should evolve and, most importantly, on the value provided by libraries to the communities in terms of the free space and services offered. Almost 83 per cent of respondents representing library management and council authorities strongly agreed that the library as a space is an asset to the community.

Less unanimously, but still a majority of respondents (77%) agreed that their libraries were well equipped to respond to the needs of the community.

It appears that there is a positive and symbiotic relationship between library management and council authorities and that this translates into a positive level of support for initiatives and innovation.

## Of surveyed individuals

82%

agreed the community sees the library as one of the functions of council

83%

library management and council authorities strongly agreed that the library as a space is an asset to the community

77%

agreed libraries were well equipped to respond to the needs of the community



## Conclusion

Increasingly commercialisation and the need for resources to show a bottom line benefit is impacting all aspects of modern life. This is true also for community based resources and indeed, as far as we are concerned, for libraries this paradigm holds true.

Increasing pressure on business and industry to deliver high levels of productivity and changing employment opportunities for workers means that the role for libraries a community support and educational hub is even more important.

Some libraries are now turning over some of their open space to assisting in the incubation of businesses, allowing library users to access the information and resources they need to compete in an open market.

This is one area where library and council managers believe the library can play a major role.

**Libraries are neutral places they are open to all and provide their services and support at no cost to the user.**



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Australian Public Libraries Alliance

Australian Library Information Association

UTS - IPP&G

# Start the conversation and get in touch with Civica

If you would like to know more about Civica or The intrinsic value of libraries as public spaces report please speak to your Civica account manager or contact us.

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