



Libraries Change Lives

An initiative of Victoria's public libraries

COVID-19 Recovery Update to Budget Submission to the State Government



Executive Summary

Victoria's 47 public library services and 1800 direct employees have the geographic reach, trusted relationships and skills to support local communities to recover after COVID-19. They are powerfully positioned to act as a vehicle for initiatives addressing social and economic inclusion, as well as emerging vulnerabilities within the community.

Last year Public Libraries Victoria, the peak body representing the sector, and State Library Victoria asked the Victorian Government for an additional \$40 million in funding over four years to manage growing demand for services. The sector sought funding for new library resources to support health and well-being outcomes, to enhance library infrastructure, and to arrest the decline in per capita operational funding. The submission highlighted the value of libraries as safe spaces offering universal access to free resources and programs, which deliver \$4.30 of community benefit for every \$1 of investment (SGS Economics and Planning, *Libraries Work!*, 2018).

The pressures libraries were experiencing in 2019, particularly in relation to connecting vulnerable members of the community to social services and technology, have become only more stark during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public Libraries Victoria has therefore reprioritised its request for investment to meet the most urgent needs exposed during the pandemic.

Public libraries were forced to close their doors in March 2020 to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, however, their critical work continued.

A library network that welcomes 30.5 million visits a year moved early literacy programs online for tens of thousands of families, linked students to free tutoring, made Care Calls to thousands of vulnerable community members, delivered books to local residents across the state, offered online resumé support to jobseekers, and provided step-by-step technology support to help isolated Victorians access the digital world.

A staggering 10,700 new members joined their local libraries in April 2020, even though they could not physically attend the premises. Many of the services they accessed were brand new, and they were delivered by library staff working from closed branches and from home.

Libraries understand that the social and economic repercussions of COVID-19 will fall disproportionately on some groups within the Victorian community, and are committed to offering even more support to those most affected.

In this updated submission for funding in State Budget 2020–21, the Victorian public library sector calls on the Victorian Government to deliver the following priorities:

- 1. A \$20 million increase over two years in the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program, inclusive of dedicated investment for digital infrastructure. This will support the construction of world-leading educational assets, create local jobs, and ensure internet access is not determined by postcode.**
- 2. A \$15 million investment over two years to support extended hours of operation so public libraries can meet the needs of distressed communities, manage rising demand and accommodate social distancing.**
- 3. An additional \$10 million investment over the next two years to support libraries to drive education and wellbeing outcomes. Specifically, we ask that this includes funding for programs in the library setting to support jobseekers, disengaged young people, and people experiencing social isolation and mental ill health.**

Our COVID-19 recovery investment proposal

Priority 1: A \$20 million increase over two years in the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program, including funding for digital infrastructure.

Expanding the Victorian Government's highly successful Living Libraries Infrastructure Program would deliver a double benefit to Victorian communities, creating modern and accessible education assets that promote community engagement whilst contributing to Victoria's Education State priorities, as well as generating local construction jobs.

In line with the Victorian Government's economic response to COVID-19 to accelerate employment through infrastructure investment, the sector calls for an additional \$20 million in capital works funding for the program. A higher project cap and broadened eligibility are also proposed.

The COVID-19 State of Emergency highlighted entrenched inequality in relation to digital access and digital literacy, not only within the Victorian community but also across the public library network.

Libraries provide 15.5 million hours of free Wi-Fi per annum. The community's reliance on free library Wi-Fi was clearly demonstrated during lockdown, when some Wi-Fi signals had to be switched off to avoid the public health risks associated with people clustering around closed buildings to secure internet access.

Libraries with efficient and well-resourced IT systems were able to offer online programs and services to internet-enabled segments of the community through the crisis. Victorians downloaded more than 740,000 e-resources during April 2020 alone – a 51% increase compared with pre-COVID-19 figures.

However, many smaller and rural library services struggled to meet the needs of their communities because of outdated and underfunded systems.

Public Libraries Victoria therefore proposes that part of this investment is allocated to digital infrastructure, particularly the provision of free Wi-Fi for regional and rural library services. This would guarantee that every Victorian has fast, free, Wi-Fi access to government services, for job applications and undertaking study. It also means libraries across Victoria will be able to offer more online services to their communities.

Priority 2: A \$15 million investment over two years to support extended hours of operation in public libraries so we can better meet the needs of distressed communities, manage rising demand and accommodate social distancing.

Libraries with extended opening hours would be able to provide tailored services and programs that meet their communities' particular needs. This could mean more support for job seekers to develop resumés, prepare for interviews, develop new skills and find employment, or for young people to study or re-engage with education.

Extended opening hours might mean a later closing time for some libraries while for others, it may mean being able to open on the weekend.

A successful example of what libraries can achieve with extended opening hours is the Libraries After Dark program. This grant funding was provided to specific public libraries located near high loss gaming venues with the aim of providing an alternative outlet to gambling. Libraries with this funding are able to offer disconnected people an alternative source of entertainment to gaming venues, and a sense of community and connection.

Extended hours would also allow libraries to expand their capacity to manage larger numbers of library users over the course of a day or week, while accommodating social distancing and cleaning regimes during the recovery phase and any further waves of infection.

This investment would help provide **secure additional employment for casual and part-time staff**. According to SGS Economics and Planning, the economic activity generated by the employment of the 1800 full time equivalent staff in the library sector supports an additional 500 jobs in the Victorian economy, creating a total impact across the sector of 2300 jobs.

Priority 3: An additional \$10 million investment over the next two years to support libraries to drive education and wellbeing outcomes. Specifically, we ask that this includes funding for programs in the library setting to support jobseekers, disengaged youth and people experiencing mental health issues.

Communities rely on public libraries for free and universal access to education, resources and programs. One in every three Victorians is a library member, and 2.2 million Victorians took part in a library program in 2018/19.

Library staff already work closely with jobseekers, people experiencing homelessness, disengaged young people, people on low incomes and those experiencing mental health issues. The sector is calling for funding to provide specific programming, including through the provision of social workers based at libraries, to manage complex needs in a stigma-free environment.

With 47 library services and nearly 300 individual branches, every Victorian library is different. They are uniquely placed to respond to community need at a grassroots level.

For some libraries, additional program funding is required to meet growing demand for free English language classes, adult literacy support, or early literacy programs for preschool children.

In other locations, the focus would be support for people experiencing homelessness, mental illness or isolation – including many older Victorians. Libraries are a safe and welcoming place to go when people are displaced, disconnected or lonely, and a logical place to provide connections to support services. Social workers embedded in the library system would ensure community members receive appropriate support.

Funding for programs to support disadvantaged students with tutors and access to devices, and for young people who have disengaged from education and employment during COVID-19, could also be drawn from this investment pool.

With the Reserve Bank of Australia predicting that the economic impact of COVID-19 will drive unemployment to 10 per cent, many more jobseekers will turn to their local library for computer and Wi-Fi access, to get online to create a resumé, and to look for jobs. Libraries can offer complementary services to job agencies, wrapping everyday social support around unemployed Victorians, giving them a safe place to connect and belong as they search for work.



Libraries Change Lives: key reasons to keep investing in our public libraries

During the COVID-19 crisis, public libraries have proven their ability to innovate and evolve to meet the needs of their local communities.

As the Victorian economy moves into recession, libraries will be one of the few places where every Victorian can enjoy free and universal access to resources and programming. They will continue to give every Victorian a place to learn, create and belong.

The investment proposal set out in this document, and in Public Libraries Victoria’s original budget submission, will ensure our stretched library sector can support the Victorian Government to meet the extraordinary challenges ahead.

It will fund more than “business as usual” – the annual lending of 45 million books, ebooks, tablets, English as an Additional Language resources and language kits, and the provision of programs that engage more than 2.2 million Victorians each year.

It will also fund job-creating infrastructure projects across the state, creating world-leading local libraries built by local workers.

This investment will address the digital inequality that made isolation harder than it should have been in parts of the state by improving access to free Wi-Fi and devices.

Finally, it will provide dedicated programming and support – including through embedded social workers – to people experiencing isolation, unemployment, disengagement or mental ill health.

Public Libraries

Support a further
500
indirect jobs

Directly employ
1,800
FTE staff

Deliver
\$4.30
return on every
\$1 invested

60%
are part time or
casual workers

80%
of staff
are women

Create
\$328 million
in economic
activity per year

For further information related to Public Libraries
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