



A Public Position on the VAGO Report for PLV

The Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) recently tabled a report to State Parliament into the efficiency of Council Libraries in Victoria.

VAGO assessed how well selected library services plan, monitor and review their services to find service efficiencies and meet community needs. They also examined whether funding and investments into state-wide library initiatives are helping councils improve their library services.

While we recognised the limitations of the scope for the VAGO Review, Public Libraries Victoria actively supported the VAGO's work as we saw opportunity to gain an impartial view on how the sector was travelling.

One of the core challenges VAGO faced, was devising a way to compare the effective performance of public libraries across the State. Despite all the goodwill and positive intent, the relative performance of the Sector ended up being presented in a league table which focussed on the comparative cost of services. There was no consideration given for the number of visits received by each service, nor the value of the services provided.

While Victoria's public libraries have a proud tradition of working together to deliver services across the State, no two public libraries are the same. We serve inner urban communities, sprawling suburbs in the growth corridors, regional cities and rural towns.

There were no direct recommendations for Public Libraries Victoria in the VAGO Report, however the sector has actively reviewed the report with a view to identifying opportunities for improvement.

We recognise that there is a need to ensure that:

- The performance of the sector is measured and monitored in a consistent way that supports quality outcomes for the community, good strategy and planning for a sustainable future.
- We embrace new opportunities for sharing resources that meet the needs of our communities.
- Every Victorian should be able to easily access a local library that delivers core services to a defined quality standard.

Victoria's Public libraries are popular. We are visited more than 30.5 million times each year. One in three Victorians has participated in our programs, from early years' Storytime sessions to Seniors technology classes. We lend more than 45 million books, ebooks, language kits, devices and more each year, and in 2018-19 public libraries logged 15.5 million hours of Wi-Fi use across the state.

Public Libraries are one of the last free open doors in our community. We contribute to strong and healthy communities by providing education, combatting feelings of isolation, and supporting the wellbeing of Victorians at every stage of their life.

There is a pressing need for a defined State Government policy which provides a trigger for the construction of new libraries in new and expanding communities in the same way that there are policy provisions for schools and hospitals.

While funding has increased in absolute terms each year, per capita funding (adjusted for inflation) from the State Government has continued to decrease each year, from \$6.74 in 2013-14 to \$6.04 in 2018-19.



In a nutshell, Victoria's public libraries are doing more with less and there are a growing number of Victorian communities that do not have equitable access to public library services. It would have been wonderful if VAGO had been able to acknowledge this in their report.

Now is not the time for defensiveness. Libraries change lives. We need to be positive and courageous. It is going to take a concerted effort from library leaders, State and Local Government to ensure the ongoing viability of public library services in Victoria.

The Top 5 reasons for increasing investment in Public Libraries:

- **Reason 1:** Public libraries in Victoria welcome more than 30.5 million visitors. Visitation growth continues to outpace population growth.
- **Reason 2:** Every dollar invested in Victorian public libraries generates \$4.30 of benefits to the local community — a high return on investment (SGS Economics: Libraries Work!).
- **Reason 3:** One in four Australians is lonely. Public libraries reduce social isolation by providing a safe, welcoming and inclusive space that supports vulnerable Victorians.
- **Reason 4:** Public libraries currently employ more than 1,800 full-time-equivalent staff. The additional spending and economic activity resulting from this employment means public libraries support a further 500 jobs in the Victorian economy.
- **Reason 5:** Public libraries are unique. With a state-wide network of nearly 300 branches, no other institution offers the same help and information, equal and free access to services, social engagement, and sense of safety and belonging.