

Public Libraries Victoria Submission to Victorian Government's 2020-2024 creative industries strategy

Public Libraries Stepping Beyond the Room of Requirement

Public libraries play a unique role as a creative space in the community. They provide an amazing range of opportunities for creative expression and cultural participation.

More people than ever are using Victoria public libraries:

- 30.5 million annual visits – the equivalent of five visits for every Victorian
- 5 million Wi-Fi sessions recorded annually
- 2.2 million library members
- Over a third of Victorians participate in a library program every year
- More than 15,000 Victorian pre-school children attend Storytime each week

The state-wide Libraries Change Lives (<https://librarieschangelives.org.au/>) campaign has revealed a deep appreciation of libraries within the community.

However, our raison d'être remains undefined in the minds of influencers and decision makers.

Public libraries are rapidly evolving to meet a very broad range of needs within our community and they will continue to do so with gusto long into the future

Books remain a hallmark of public libraries for the time-being, but our real business is the sharing of stories, supporting the pursuit of truth and the provision of safe, inclusive, welcoming spaces.

In our society, Libraries are a cornerstone of democracy. A refuge for the principles of a just and fair society in an age of 'fake news'.

Equality of Access

Public libraries are best-suited to meet the guiding principle of 'Whole of State', as public institutions that have broad reach across all local government areas in Victoria.

Libraries are the community living room of the 21st century. Every day people come to public libraries to study, seek information, gather and share knowledge.

Victorian public libraries attracted more than 30 million visits in 2017 – 18 and that number is growing.

Public Libraries provide a sense of connection and belonging.

Collectively we are the biggest membership-based organisation in Victoria – More than 2 million Victorians have a library card – that many people cannot be wrong.

Public Libraries have touchpoints across every community in Victoria:

- 272 individual branches
- 59 service points
- 47 public library entities
- 30 mobile libraries

While public libraries fully embrace the principles of a universal service, this should not be confused with a 'one size fits all' approach. It is evident that individual public libraries can and do evolve to meet the needs of their community.

Diversity at All Levels

“Bad libraries only build collections. Good libraries build services (and a collection is only one of many). Great libraries build communities.”

— R. David Lankes, [Expect More: Demanding Better Libraries For Today's Complex World](#)

Everyone is welcome at public libraries. We are the universal service that allows people to be themselves. The last revolving door in the community that does not charge a fee.

Public Libraries are welcome havens for creatives. We host poetry slams, deliver conversation clubs, facilitate writers workshops, provide ideas and inspiration for story tellers through our collection. Many libraries host community art exhibitions.

Time and again we hear stories from aspiring creatives that the library is a place where they feel welcome. A place where they can express themselves freely and gain recognition for their craft.

We act as an incubator for up and coming creatives , while providing employment for people already on their professional creative journey.

Building Sustainability

Public libraries provide income for hundreds of performers every year – clowns, comedians, musicians, authors and artists all benefit from the role libraries play inspiring creativity in the community through programs and performances.

SGS Economics and Planning was commissioned to produce the report Libraries Work! The socio-economic value of public libraries to Victorians. The research findings were compelling: for every \$1 of investment, libraries return \$4.30 of benefits to the community.

Public libraries generate \$328 million in economic activity every year and support 2300 jobs.

Technology and its Impacts

Public Libraries will always be responsible for the storage and distribution of information – whether it be in the form of books, free access to PCs or free fast wifi.

But well beyond this, our real business now is sharing wisdom and inspiring creativity. Helping people find their way through a proliferation of information rather than gain access in a time of scarcity.

The way our community use our libraries is changing. We need to think carefully about the way we use space within our libraries and embrace new technology.

While there are a number of services that provide free or low cost access to recording studios, green screens, podcast equipment and maker spaces to the community, there is opportunity for expansion of these services with additional funding.

Growing Audiences and Markets

Public Libraries are the open front door to the Arts. This is particularly pertinent for people in communities who do not see themselves as creative or part of the traditional arts scene.

Libraries are a place where people gather. They act as anchor tenants in creative precincts because they draw people in in large numbers.

In Bunjil Place, Narre Warren the theatre, gallery and library work together to cross promote programming and build audience engagement. The results have been stunning.

Safety and Wellbeing

Public libraries are place where people can express their creativity without fear of judgement.

A room of requirement for authors and poets. A place where creatives can thrive without even realising that they are creatives.

Community safety and well-being is core business for Victorian public libraries:

- They are places of safety and understanding for people with mental health issues who seek respite from the pressures of school, college, work and home.
- They encourage interaction through group activities and have quiet spaces for individual reflection.
- They provide information for people who are looking for information and answers about ways of managing mental health issues.
- They offer events and health promotion initiatives which raise awareness of mental health issues in the local community.
- They run programs and services to help improve people's quality of life.

Public libraries across Victoria provide and facilitate invaluable, community-focused workshops and programs for people with, or at risk of developing, mental ill-health. We provide information, raise awareness and aim to help remove any stigma from mental health issues.

Creative Spaces and Precincts

The good news is that Victoria has a number of outstanding libraries that are walking the talk.

Example 1

The Geelong Library is located in the heart of Geelong's creative precinct. It is an outstanding piece of architecture that captures the eye, but does not dominate its community.

It is a place brimming with the traditional elements – books and heritage, but is alive with the sounds of stories being shared and the imaginations of children being set free.

It is a place where people are free to express themselves without fear or favour.

It balances the traditional with the progressive and will stand as an example of how a contemporary public library can act as an inspiration for its community for many decades to come.

Example 2

Casey Cardinia Libraries newest library at Bunjil Place is part of a creative precinct that has set a new benchmark for local government investment.

It cost well \$125 million to build and at last count is attracting more than 2 million visits per annum

It draws inspiration from the Wedgetail eagle a totemic representation that acknowledges the traditional owners of the land and links our ancient past with big aspirations for the future.

With both case studies, decision makers recognised the importance of bringing 'the arts' together under one roof.

Public libraries are to borrow a phrase from Eric Klinenberg, '*palaces for the people*'.

The Next Generation

Vibrant public libraries promote literacy, provide free access to information, inspire creativity, encourage a culture of lifelong learning and actively contribute to healthy and resilient communities.

Our libraries host enormous reservoirs of potential in the people who visit our services. Our capacity to thrive depends on our ability to help people unlock their own potential.

By offering a diverse range of activities and highly inclusive forms of participation, our libraries are a vital node in a dynamic creative industries ecology.

Public libraries deliver thousands of creative programs across Victoria every year.

Public libraries are therefore very well placed to be key partners to enable greater community participation in the arts, through the 272 public libraries across Victoria.

Recommendations

That the Victorian Government creative industries strategy 2020-24:

- 1) acknowledges the role of public libraries as a cornerstone in the cultural development ecosystem across Victoria.
- 2) supports a program and corresponding funding for cultural development programs where libraries can be considered a lead agency to engage with communities and increase participation in the arts.
- 3) fund the acquisition of affordable specialist technology that will facilitate increased engagement with the creative economy in public libraries eg podcasting equipment, green screens etc

Key References

[Creative Communities: The Cultural Benefits of Public Libraries – Summary Report](#)

[Victorian Public Libraries 2030: Strategic Framework](#)