Submission to the Victorian Planning Authority on the Precinct Structure Planning Guidelines

This submission has been prepared by Public Libraries Victoria (PLV) in response to the Victorian Planning Authority's call for input on the Guidelines for Precinct Structure Planning in Melbourne's Greenfields. This is a critical document that guides development of the estates and suburbs in the growth areas of Melbourne.

Public Libraries Victoria is the peak body for Victoria's public libraries. We play an active role communicating the value of libraries to the community and advocating on behalf of the sector with key decision makers.

Public libraries are one of the last free open doors in our society. We attract more than 30 million visits a year across Victoria because we are seen as safe and welcoming spaces where people have free access to information.

Libraries partner well with many different types of social infrastructure including community hubs, cultural precincts, health services and adult education providers.

Increasingly smart developers are recognising the role libraries can play attracting people to a destination. They can act as an 'anchor tenant' in Central Activity Districts.

Libraries Work! The socio-economic value of public libraries to Victorians written by *SGS Economics* found that:

1. Every dollar invested in Victorian public libraries generates $4.30 of benefits to the local community, a high return on investment.
2. Economic activity generated by public libraries equates to $328 million per year across Victoria.
3. Public libraries currently employ over 1,800 full time equivalent staff. The additional spending and economic activity resulting from this employment means that public libraries support a further 500 jobs in the Victorian economy.
4. Public libraries in Victoria welcome over 30 million visitors annually; equivalent to 5 visits for each and every Victorian, and visitation growth continues to outpace population growth.
5. Victorian public libraries have something for everyone. They contribute to meaningful activities such as supporting creativity and lifelong learning. People can access collections, technology and Wi-Fi, find information and access free or low-cost programs and training. They are able to do this in a space that is safe, welcoming and non-judgemental.

Each year communities rely on public libraries for free and universal access to education, resources and programs.

One in seven Victorian households do not have access to the internet; this number increases in lower socioeconomic areas in Melbourne and Rural and Regional Victoria.

The Digital Inclusion Index Report highlights how important digital accessibility, affordability and ability are to ensuring all Victorians can achieve equitable socioeconomic outcomes. Libraries play a critical role in levelling the playing field.

People need libraries for computer and Wi-Fi access, to get online to create a resumé, to look for jobs and to search for information.

Australia's public libraries have been active supporters of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals since conception. ALIA, the peak body for Australian Libraries, made the following submission to the Federal Government in 2018 – Australian Libraries Support the Sustainable Development Goals

In summary, public libraries have a clearly articulated role supporting the following SDGs

Goal 1: No poverty – universal literacy to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage

Goal 3: Good health and well-being – providing people with the information they need to stay healthy

Goal 4: Quality education – quality education through formal and informal learning

Goal 5: Gender equality – safe meeting places and programs for women and girls

Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth – help for job seekers and business start-ups

Goal 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure – digital inclusion activities supporting the Smart Cities agenda

Goal 10: Reduced inequalities – outreach services that make learning possible for everyone

Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities – preserving the nation's cultural heritage

Goal 16: Peace and justice - strong institutions public access to information and cybersafety initiatives

Goal 17: Partnerships for the goals – national and international partnerships to achieve a better future
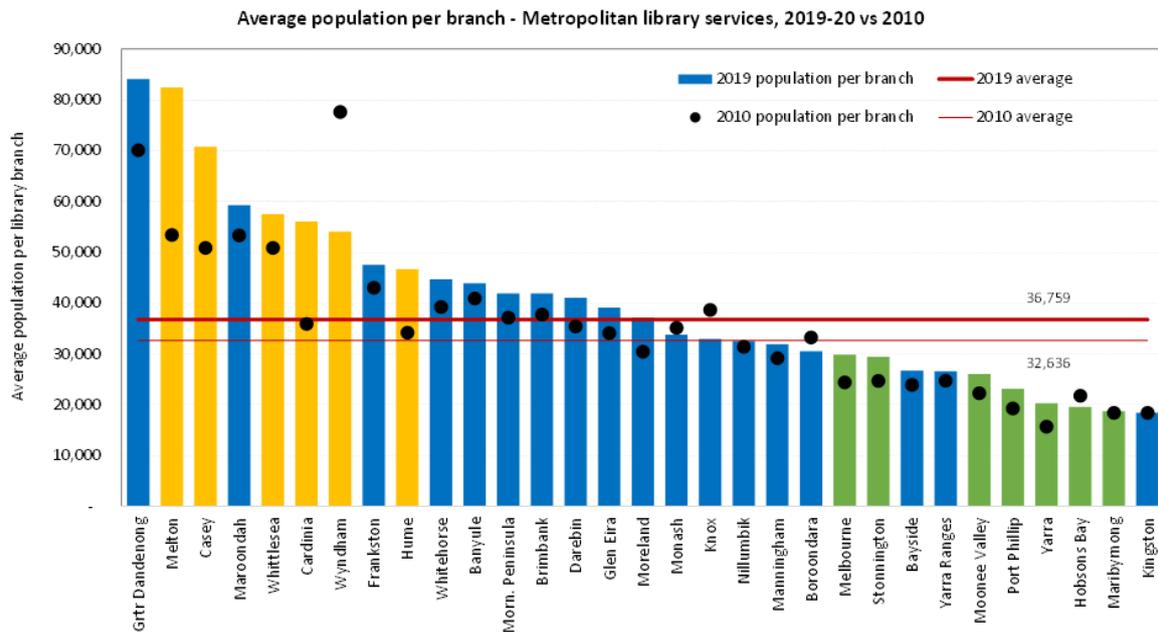
Victoria's public libraries contribute to healthy communities by providing education, combatting feelings of isolation, and supporting the wellbeing of Victorians at every stage of their life. Libraries change lives.

Public Libraries Victoria publishes the PLV Annual Statistical Report which includes performance data from every library service in Victoria. The information is collated and compiled by I&J Phillips.

Over the past five years, Victoria's population has increased by 700,000 people. While visits to libraries are increasing, the construction of public libraries particularly in Melbourne's growth areas is not keeping up with population growth.

It has become apparent that there has been a serious lag of investment in public library infrastructure throughout the growth areas of Melbourne over the last decade (see fig 1).

Fig 1

Average population per branch - Metropolitan library services, 2019-20 vs 2010

(Source: I&J Phillips)

The primary responsibility for construction and refurbishment of public libraries sits with Local Government, but there are no formal triggers for investment in the construction and development of public libraries within the planning scheme.

It does not appear that there are any consistent policy standards that mandate the establishment of new libraries in Victoria. The VPA and Interface Councils use the Guide to Social Infrastructure Planning 2009 as a key reference. The guide indicates that public libraries should be considered in population centres of 30–60,000 peoples (p.10) There is no consideration of how lower order library services might be delivered in integrated settings in smaller populations centres (level 2).

The Australian Standards and Guidelines for Public Libraries are currently being revised and are due for publication in 2021. In the interim People Places - A Guide for Public Library Buildings in New South Wales Third Edition is widely recognised nationally as the benchmark guide.

There are some standards for what size and form a library should take, but nothing that argues for construction in the first place. This means that new communities in Melbourne are more likely to see gaming venues open in their local area before a public library is built.

Specific Recommendations:

- Public libraries are incorporated as a default investment in social infrastructure through PSPs.

- The VPA mandates construction of libraries in population centres of more than 30,000 people in greenfield suburbs.

- Population and accessibility are recognised as the two key drivers for the development of library services in new communities.

- No Melburnian should have to travel for more than 20 minutes to be able to access basic library services (book borrowing, free access to PCs and WiFi etc) and a place that they can gather freely indoors.

- Library services are integrated into existing community infrastructure in locations that have already been developed but lack easy access to libraries.