

Public Libraries Victoria Submission to Victoria's 30-year Infrastructure Strategy

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 Victoria have welcomed the opportunity to engage in the development of Victoria's 30-Year Infrastructure Strategy. We have found the process inclusive and considered.

Public Libraries Victoria has long advocated for funding to address the digital divide between library services. While many public libraries were able to swiftly transition to online service delivery during the COVID19 lockdown, many smaller and rural library services struggled to meet community needs because of outdated IT systems.

Investment in digital infrastructure for libraries, particularly the provision of free Wi-Fi in regional and rural library services, supports all Victorians to access the digital world.

Public Libraries Victoria strongly endorses the recommendations made by Infrastructure Victoria in the report *Infrastructure Priorities for the Regions*, released in December 2020.

Specifically, we support **Recommendation 14: Fund regional libraries to provide better internet access**, which calls on the State Government to immediately provide funding for regional and rural libraries to improve community access to fast, free internet services, leveraging existing library infrastructure. As the report notes, this recommendation will enhance access to modern digital technology that meets local needs, delivering a higher standard of library facilities to more Victorian communities and helping reduce the digital divide for those who do not have access to the internet at home.

We also acknowledge that **Recommendation 19: Support regional councils to update, repurpose or retire outdated community infrastructure** is pertinent to rural and regional libraries and ask that Infrastructure Victoria note the important role that public libraries play encouraging visitation and engagement in successfully integrated community facilities.

While Public Libraries Victoria are delighted with the thought and consideration to helping bridge the digital divide in rural and regional Victoria, we are also painfully aware of the current shortfall in library infrastructure provision in Melbourne's growth areas.

Aside from the well documented work public libraries do addressing the digital divide, we play a critical role addressing social and economic disadvantage.

Public libraries offer one of the last free open doors in our community. We offer comprehensive service that addresses community need for safe, welcoming indoor public space. We are a universal service.

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.

Libraries offer access to critical skill and community-building services that make our society stronger, more engaged and more resilient.

Library programs build skills in early literacy, robotics and coding, adult literacy, English language classes, financial literacy, technology use (this was particularly important for older Victorians using computers and smart phones for the first time during the COVID19 Lockdowns).

In our recent submission to the Victorian Planning Authority's review of Precinct Structure Planning Guidelines for Growth Areas, we made the following observations and recommendations:

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.

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 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.

Specific recommendations:

- Public libraries are incorporated as a default investment in social infrastructure through Precinct Structure Plans (PSPs).
- The Victorian Planning Authority 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.

PLV are grateful for the opportunity to help inform Infrastructure Victoria's planning process, particularly as it relates to the role that public libraries can play addressing economic and social disadvantage. Please feel welcome to contact me directly if you require further information.

Yours sincerely

Chris Buckingham
President
Public Libraries Victoria

26 February, 2021