Libraries building communities

In May 2016, the NSW Government announced the formation of 19 new councils. It was a day of significance for me personally as I was an employee of Tumut Shire Council and without warning I became an employee of the newly formed Snowy Valleys Council. Suddenly I was faced with the very real task of needing to re-establish the relevance of our new Shire’s public libraries to a new Council. As a Librarian with almost 18 years’ experience I was disheartened by the lack of understanding and acknowledgement regarding the role of rural public libraries to the local government process and the overwhelming contribution that they make to the community and Council as a whole. The most alarming issue for me as a proactive Librarian in our community was the desire by some to pigeon-hole libraries as an old fashioned services and not recognise the core service role they play for local councils and the role they should be acknowledged as playing in community engagement and development for local councils.

Far too many people still hold the archaic view of libraries as Twentieth Century book depositories, rather than the Twenty-First Century conduits of culture, learning and social connection that they have become. Public libraries play an important role in their respective communities, and are fundamentally important informational, educational, cultural, and social institutions. “In an increasingly digital world, we see the role of libraries as community and cultural centres at times undervalued, and underestimated” (Edwards, Rauseo & Unger 2013). In a rural setting the library has an advantage over other communication channels such as media and print material: it can deliver highly personalised services to its community.

Those who would argue that libraries are becoming obsolete, or nothing more than a place for children's storytime and the elderly to access books, demonstrate a complete lack of understanding of the depth and breadth of services public libraries provide today. Former Chicago Mayor, Richard Daley, a strong supporter of libraries as community builders, addressed librarians saying, “Unless you are out there changing neighborhoods, you are not completing the work you are to do.” (Putnam, 2003) Strengthening and championing the cultural lives of communities is a core responsibility for public libraries in the twenty-first century.

Challenges to the Modern Public Library

One of the major challenges facing public libraries is how to convey to decision makers, and others, the potential impact of the twenty-first century public library on the community as a whole. According to Dr Alan Bundy, former President of the Australian Library and Information Association, the challenge “is just how to convey to decision makers the breadth, depth and potential impact on the whole community of the modern public library. It is a rare challenge because no other agency in society has the breadth of role, the user range and diversity and the potential impact. In an age of specialisation and community silos, public libraries are unique” (Bundy 2003 p.6).

David Morris (2011) argues the value that public libraries bring to their communities as being far more than just books and banks of computers, libraries are still places where individuals gather to explore, interact, and imagine and they are central to building community and supporting local culture.

The financial investment by local government in New South Wales to public libraries is 93% of total cost; they enjoy broad support within their communities and the scope of service continues to grow. Yet, they fail to emerge as a key player for local government in the role of community building and engagement. Despite the best efforts of numerous librarians and industry groups to promote the role of libraries in their communities, libraries still remain a misunderstood service by many executives and councillors in local government, and are thus not being identified as part of community engagement strategies.

Public libraries are one of the most successful information centres for increasing the quality of life and democratic chances for citizens by providing free and equal access to high-quality information. “Information is important to civic participation and its development, which become one of the basic functions of public libraries.” (Arko-Cobbah, 2005)
Public Libraries, in particular those in rural communities, receive a tremendous amount of community feedback regarding both Council and community business. Given the position that the libraries hold within their communities they often receive a great deal of verbal feedback in general dealings with the community. This feedback is on the spot real time feedback that can provide immense benefit to council.

Despite libraries being part of local governments core service delivery, they are not generally perceived by council executives and councillors as potential participants in local government and community initiatives, “their footprint on the documents, plans and policies … is minimal” (McCook, 2000, p.33)
Within the newly formed Snowy Valleys Council the public libraries in the townships of Adelong, Batlow & Talbingo represent the key access point for Council related services. These service points provide provisions for council payments, enquiries and access to documentation that would otherwise only be obtained via traveling to the larger townships of Tumut and Tumbarumba. The staff at these libraries must act as both Library and Council customer service staff on a daily basis. To view these small libraries as nothing more than a book depository is detrimental to those communities and limits the potential they present to Council is building public relations.

All the libraries of the Snowy Valleys Council provide their communities with educational programs and the necessary information to develop an informed electorate. The libraries have actively promoted and provided access to technology to assist the public with voter registration and have provided ongoing material related to elections, councillors and Council business freely to the community. These libraries act as compilers and drop off points for Council related documentation which is fed back into Council. Many in the community will avoid going to the Council building, but will come to the library.
To build a new council that is engaged with its community there is a fundamental need to re-establish a trusting relationship with constituents. If local government were to recognise the role of libraries in community building they would see that the public library already has a basis upon which to develop trust with the community. “Public libraries are safe and trusted public spaces where everyone is welcome” (State Library NSW, 2015, p.89), they are committed to the delivery of impartial service to community members and provide information equally, whilst assisting people to achieve their goals.

Libraries are an important community and cultural resource and contribute to the idea that this community is a good place to be.

“Libraries offer people a “third place”, separate from home or work, and are anchors of community life, facilitating creative interactions between people” (Oldenberg, 1991).

The growing social role of the Public Library

The 2008 State Library NSW “Enriching communities: The value of public libraries in New South Wales” report found that survey participants valued public libraries contribute to the community in a variety of ways, including:

- Being a safe and pleasant place to visit (98.3%).
- Facilitating lifelong learning (93.4%).
- Encouraging responsible social behaviour (88.7%).
- Improving the overall quality of life (85.2%).
- Providing information about community events (85.1%).
- Operating in a non-discriminatory manner (83%).
- Supporting local culture and the arts (78%).
- Providing access to Statewide legal and health information programs (75.9%).
- Providing important infrastructure to develop Australia as a knowledge economy (74%).
- Acting as a source of government information (64.7%).
- Providing and/or supporting outreach programs (62.2%). (Library Council of NSW, 2008, p.11)

The “Enriching communities” report also highlight the many ways in which public libraries contribute to cultural wellbeing, such as:

- Library staff playing an active role in local cultural coordinating committees.
- Writers in residence programs and participating in literary events such as poetry festivals, writing workshops and competitions and visiting author programs, all of which contribute to a deeper understanding of the writing process.
- Celebrating cultural diversity through events and festivals held at significant times and involving performances by musicians, dancers, poets and actors.
- Working with local theatres to promote their events.
- Utilising library space to exhibit work by local artists and travelling exhibitions. (Library Council of NSW, 2008)

If we equate this social value of public libraries with a generated economic benefit equivalent to $4.24 (Library Council of NSW, 2008) per dollar of public library expenditure, the question must be asked as to why the library services of local government are not being actively engaged in the community building and engagement of councils. Further investment in public libraries can be expected to generate economic as well as social, cultural and environmental benefits.

Aspects of community building are ingrained in all services provided by public libraries and this needs to be acknowledged by local government executives. Local government are at the forefront in the provision of affordable
community services via their strong, vibrant and sustainable library network. However, respect for the role and support that libraries provide to every council department is often not given. It is forgotten by many local government executives that public libraries service the ratepayers with ‘their’ information and can disseminate and resource ‘their’ department information appropriate to individual client’s needs.

The public library has a role in keeping residents informed and involved in community affairs. Libraries provide access to community information and links to other agencies and services like no other service provider. In the Snowy Valleys Council the Batlow Library provides the federal government services through its Rural Transaction Centre kiosk and more often libraries are providing ongoing support to other Federal and State government services, such as Roads and Maritime driver tests and Centrelink access, through the provision of internet services.

The public library is a source of information and services to community groups, local history clubs, sports and artists groups. In addition to being a source of information, libraries provide meeting rooms, equipment, assistance with programs, and publicity for programs. The perception that libraries services only individuals is false, when in fact support for groups, particularly non-profit and volunteer groups, is a significant part of the library’s service mandate to the community. The Tumut Library provides access to gallery equivalent hanging space for local artist, support for local research groups such as the Tumut Family History Group and sporting groups. The Batlow Library provides support for the Batlow Literary Group and a number of local festivals and the Tumbarumba Library provides archival storage services for historical information.
Members of the Bhutanese community at Albury Library
Many public libraries support local economic development by providing local tourism information and internet and wifi access to visitors. Any support for tourism offered by the library can be cited as a benefit. The library is a central meeting point for locals and visitors alike and acknowledgment needs to be given to the significant contribution provided to the community fabric of a local government area by their public library services.

It is incumbent on local government to understand, develop, and promote their “cultural capital,” and public libraries at the heart of this by providing use of facilities, community partnerships, support for local arts community and budding individuals, outreach activities, and specific cultural programs. The link between libraries and community engagement and culture needs to be acknowledged and developed within local government.

Libraries need a voice at the community table. Public libraries have the potential to assume a much greater role in community strengthening, but this potential must be acknowledged by local government executives. Libraries need to forge stronger partnerships with community groups, government and business. The public library needs to be promoted to non-users, so that they become aware of the many roles that libraries fill and the services they provide beyond book lending, and local councils needs to acknowledge the immense contribution and potential of this service in community building and place making. This has never been of greater importance than now when a new council is attempting to forge a new identity and regain community trust.

Public libraries are unique, open institutions, where people have access to information, technology and training on an as-needed basis making them a key contributor to the community development process for local government. With digital information and greater outreach, libraries are transforming the way they interact with the public at a much greater speed than is being acknowledged. They are becoming much more proactive and collaborative, contributing in a variety of ways to stronger local economic development conditions. Public libraries sustain the community in social, cultural and environmental terms and contribute positively in terms of economic value, benefit and activity.

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Public libraries are logical partners for community development initiatives as they provide a broad range of information services to diverse constituencies. Raising the library’s profile in the community through active participation and engagement with the community will ensure that the library’s value will be communicated to library users, stakeholders, and the community at large.

Amalgamated councils, such as Snowy Valleys Council, are at a cross roads with regards to their engagement with the community. The ability to provide strong support for a new Council’s strategic direction and development of place needs a collaborative approach from all Council’s major stakeholders, libraries included. As a ‘core’ business already actively involved in community development libraries have the ability to provide a key communication funnel between the newly developing Councils and communities that are still trying to come to terms with the significant changes that have resulted from the merger process.

As a ‘core’ service of Council, the libraries and their staff can focus on building community face-to-face relations, inspiring and educating patrons about art, literature, and music, and helping patrons engage in their council and develop its culture, but only if local government executives realises the potential within these dynamic institutions and their staff members.

This story was contributed by 2017 Jean Arnot Memorial Fellow, Kristin Twomey

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