

Library Council of New South Wales

# **Enriching communities: The value of public libraries in New South Wales**

## **SUMMARY REPORT**

SOCI  
economic  
CULTURAL  
environmental

***Enriching communities: The value of public  
libraries in New South Wales  
Summary Report***

**Library Council of New South Wales  
March 2008**

*Prepared by  
J.L. Management Services Pty. Ltd.*

*for the  
Library Council of New South Wales*

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John Liddle  
Director  
J.L. Management Services Pty. Ltd.  
November 2007

## FOREWORD

While there is a general recognition of the vital contribution public libraries make towards the social capital, educational and recreational development of local communities, there is increasing pressure for libraries to clearly demonstrate their contribution in terms of value.

The NSW Public Library Network Research Committee recognised that measuring the value of NSW libraries in a holistic and meaningful way is important for maintaining and building support for public libraries with government and other stakeholders. The Committee resolved to commission research to measure the economic, social, cultural and environmental value of public libraries using a range of methodologies, including the measurement of direct and indirect, tangible and intangible impacts. JL Management Services Pty Ltd was contracted to conduct the study in 2006 and 2007.

This report, *Enriching Communities*, provides clear evidence of the contribution and value of NSW public libraries in terms of the *triple bottom line*, or economic, environmental and social impact.

The research explored the ways in which New South Wales public libraries sustain the community in social, cultural and environmental terms. The study also found that public libraries contribute positively in terms of economic value, benefit and activity. NSW public libraries generate at least \$4.24 of economic value for each dollar expended, and \$2.82 of economic activity for each dollar expended. The methodology employed by this research is well recognised and a respected approach to valuing non market goods. It is also worth noting that the methodology used did not consider intangible factors or indirect benefits, and is therefore conservative in estimating economic value of public libraries.

Aside from these triple bottom line factors, the report is rich in demographic data and provides an up to date profile of NSW public library users. This data further highlights the importance of public libraries to communities given that high proportions of public library users are either young or old, earn below the average income, speak languages other than English, and participate in some form of education. This provides clear evidence of the role of public libraries in promoting equity in our society.

The report also provides individual public libraries in New South Wales with a tool to measure the contribution and value of their own services. It is envisaged that regular measurement will promote better planning, management and support for public libraries.

*Enriching communities: the value of public libraries in NSW* was submitted to the 25 February 2008 meeting of the Library Council of New South Wales for consideration. Library Council commended and endorsed the report.

Kathleen Bresnahan

**Assistant State Librarian, Public Library Services**

February 2008



# CONTENTS

	<b>Page No.</b>
<b>Snapshot</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>How and why public libraries are used</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Outcomes from using public libraries</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Contributing to the community</b>	<b>11</b>
• Perceived Contribution to Social Wellbeing	
• Perceived Contribution to Cultural Wellbeing	
• Perceived Contribution to Economic Wellbeing	
• Perceived Contribution to Environmental Wellbeing	
<b>Economic Measures of Public Libraries</b>	<b>14</b>
• Estimated Economic Value	
• Estimated Economic Benefit	
• Estimated Economic Activity	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>22</b>



## SNAPSHOT

A snapshot of the principal findings from research into how NSW public libraries sustain their communities in social, cultural and environmental terms and their associated economic contribution follows:

- Library users visit for an average of 35 minutes, view the library more as a cost-saver than a time-saver and are attracted mainly by the fixed collections, the availability of professional support and the friendly atmosphere.
- The top five outcomes from public library use are enhanced quality of life; enhanced enjoyment from hobbies; ability to obtain information not available elsewhere; facilitation of lifelong learning; and support for children's education.
- The top five contributions to the community were seen as being a safe and pleasant place to visit; supporting educational facilities; facilitating lifelong learning; encouraging responsible social behaviour; and ensuring access to the Internet for all. The underlying themes are clearly those of safety, harmony, equity and education.
- Public libraries' principal contribution to community culture is through their lending, reference and local history collections. There is also an appreciative audience for cultural activities such as local art displays and talks by visiting authors.
- Economic value as measured by library users' willingness to pay averaged \$58.20 per annum, which valued public libraries statewide at \$392 million. This is 36.2% higher than 2004-2005 expenditure levels.
- Economic benefit, that is the financial amount saved relative to the cost of purchasing materials, was found to average \$325 per annum among surveyed library users. This aligned closely with a more structured estimate of a statewide benefit of \$1.216 billion, which equates to a benefit-cost ratio of 4.24 against the 2004-2005 investment of \$287 million. Thus for each dollar expended on public libraries, \$4.24 of economic benefit is generated.
- Economic activity measures the contribution of public libraries to the economy in real terms and was estimated at \$810.2 million. Thus for each dollar expended on public libraries, \$2.82 of real economic activity is generated.





## INTRODUCTION

This Executive Summary outlines the key findings from Phase 2 of the NSW Public Library Network Research Program's "Sustaining Communities: measuring the value of public libraries project". The project recognises that contemporary government practice expects publicly funded bodies to demonstrate their value to the community, hence the commissioning of this research to ascertain how NSW public libraries sustain their communities in social, cultural and environmental terms and to estimate the associated economic contribution.

A variety of methodologies were utilised to adequately explore the subject and included:

- An Industry Survey inviting input from the library managers of all public library services.
- An in-depth evaluation of stakeholders' views across ten case study library services selected as representative of the NSW public library sector. For each of the ten case studies service, this involved:
  - a) An In-Library User Survey of 200 adults (ie total of 2000 surveys across the ten case studies)
  - b) A Mailed Survey of 200 randomly selected individuals. (ie total of 2000 surveys across the ten case studies)
  - c) Visits to and in-depth interviews with library managers and representatives from the elected councillors and council management.
- Interviews with representatives from nine external organisations to better understand how public libraries benefit other institutions.

By inviting input from both the supply and demand sides of the equation, bias was minimised and the participation of key stakeholder groups ensured.

### HOW & WHY PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE USED:

It was found that library users visit for an average of 35 minutes; view the library more as a cost-saver than a time-saver; and are attracted predominantly by the fixed collections, the availability of professional support and the friendly atmosphere.

In terms of how public libraries sustain their communities, it was found that they:

- Are flexible, accommodating and impose no time limits, apart from opening and closing hours, on how individuals choose to structure their visits.
- Have remained true to their core business in order to address the strong demand for extensive multimedia collections whilst accommodating new technologies such as the Internet and meeting niche demands through customised programs.
- Offer a time- and cost-effective means to access a wide range of informational and recreational services.
- Offer services not available elsewhere. Although one could purchase virtually any title held in a public library, the need for commercial booksellers to prioritise current and fast moving goods limits their ability to compete with public libraries' ease of access.

- Offer the convenience and privacy of self-service concurrent with the availability of professional staff to assist users at any time.
- Provide a genuine public space and a safe and welcoming atmosphere, thus creating the potential for individuals and the general community to mould the library environment in accordance with the history, values and characteristics of the local area.

Each of the above are supply-side characteristics which, individually and collectively, create the potential for library users to benefit from public libraries and by so doing, create a cumulative benefit at the community level.

### **OUTCOMES FROM USING PUBLIC LIBRARIES:**

All actions serve a purpose and whilst individuals may describe the purpose of a library visit to be, for example, to borrow a book, that is only the visible and easily measured component of their action. It does not tell why they wish to borrow a particular book, which is simply a means to an end; the means to achieving an outcome by which individuals are sustained and it is those outcomes that are summarised in the following table.

#### **Outcomes from Library Use (% of respondents).**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Total</b>
Generally enhanced my quality of life	64.5%
Enhanced my enjoyment from hobbies	47.8%
Helped me obtain information not available elsewhere	45.6%
Facilitated my pursuit of (informal) lifelong learning	41.9%
Supported my children's education	32.0%
Helped me accomplish tasks &/or achieve goals	30.9%
Fostered my sense of community or belonging	26.2%
Exposed me to a wider range of cultural activities	24.4%
Supported my children's early (0 to 5 years) development	24.4%
Supported my involvement in educational courses	23.5%
Supported my involvement in community activities	21.7%
Enabled me to gain or improve my computer skills	16.2%
Made me more productive in my job	14.0%
Clarified my understanding of critical health information	12.9%
Assisted me to develop English language skills	8.9%
Helped me obtain a new job or promotion	8.1%
Encouraged me to get my own Internet account	6.8%
Clarified my understanding of critical legal information	5.3%
Helped me improve or start a business	5.1%
Helped me develop improved financial management skills	4.9%

The research found that outcomes are not mutually exclusive, with approximately 82% of respondents reporting multiple outcomes from their usage of public library services. Furthermore, one would anticipate outcomes to vary over time in accordance with individuals' circumstances, thus through their ability to meet multiple and changing needs, public libraries contribute to the wellbeing of their individual users and general communities.

## **CONTRIBUTING TO THE COMMUNITY:**

As well as commenting from a personal perspective, survey participants were asked to consider twenty-one statements (hypotheses if you like) from the broader community perspective and register their opinion on a scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The findings firmly established that public libraries contribute to the community in a variety of ways, with particularly strong support for the following hypotheses where the combined ratings for “strongly agree” and “agree” exceeded 80%:

- Being a safe and pleasant place to visit (98.3%).
- Supporting educational facilities (95.3%).
- Facilitating lifelong learning (93.4%).
- Encouraging responsible social behaviour (88.7%).
- Ensuring access to the Internet for all (85.9%).
- Promoting and encouraging (language and computer) literacy (85.9%)
- Improving the overall quality of life (85.2%).
- Providing information about community events (85.1%).
- Operating in a non-discriminatory manner (83%).

As can be seen, the underlying themes of the top tier contributions relate to safety, harmony, equity and education.

Second tier contributions with a combined rating within the 60% to 80% range were:

- 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%).
- Providing public meeting spaces (72.1%).
- Supporting the development of English as a second language (71.6%).
- Recognising the demand for non-English materials (68.1%).
- Acting as a source of government information (64.7%).
- Providing and/or supporting outreach programs (62.2%).
- Facilitating job or career planning (60.9%).

Only three hypotheses attracted combined ratings below 50%. These were:

- Acting as a provider of other government services [for example, RTA and ATO] (48.8%).
- Attracting new businesses to the community (39%).
- Increasing local property values (38.8%).

Although their contribution is less significant, one should not ignore that they were seen as contributing by a significant minority of survey respondents.

Also notable was the extremely low incidence of “disagree” responses. In fact, ten of the twenty-one hypotheses registered “disagree” ratings of one percent or less and only three registered above 5%, the highest being 8.1%.

Triple bottom line approaches provide a more balanced and expansive measure of whether organisations are performing favourably or unfavourably. By addressing how public libraries are perceived to contribute financially, socially/culturally and environmentally, the following snapshots of current perceptions emerged.

### **Perceived Contribution to Social Wellbeing:**

Following is an outline of the most frequently recurring contributions.

- The library's value as a place that is a safe, harmonious, welcoming and inclusive environment was the most oft quoted contribution. Among the supporting comments was that libraries promote acceptance and understanding of others by acting as neutral meeting places accessible to the whole community.
- The availability of public library collections was seen to address disadvantage by ensuring free and equitable access to collections for all community members; address the needs of specific target groups; contribute to developing, maintaining and improving literacy levels; and preserve the past through extensive local and family history collections.
- Library programs and services were seen as complementing collections and enabling library services to specifically target and contribute to social wellbeing within niche groups. Examples included:
  - a) Contributing to positive community relationships and community harmony through multicultural Storytimes and by extending its reach through programs such as Storytime in the Park and Stories in the Street.
  - b) Supporting Book Clubs and Reading Groups, thereby creating social interaction among people with common interests who may never otherwise meet.
  - c) Assisting non-English speaking members of the community to develop language skills through English Literacy programs.
  - d) Encouraging parents to commit to early literacy development for their children.
  - e) Meeting the needs of aged and members with a disability, who are unable to visit the library, through Home Library or Housebound programs.

### **Perceived Contribution to Cultural Wellbeing:**

Ways in which public libraries contribute to cultural wellbeing included:

- 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.

- Working closely with other cultural institutions to explore the scope for cooperation and joint projects.

It was also evident that public libraries play an active role in keeping alive the names and work of significant Australians. For example, the Tenterfield Library manages the Sir Henry Parkes Memorial School of Arts and the Grenfell Library hosts the annual Henry Lawson Festival Art Exhibition. Of equivalent significance in keeping Australian culture alive is the close association between libraries and the traditional owners of local lands. One example is the annual Cameraygal Festival sponsored by the Lane Cove Council and named after the traditional owners of the Lower North Shore.

### **Perceived Contribution to Economic Wellbeing:**

The most frequently recurring contributions attributed to public libraries were as follows:

- Enables users to avoid or reduce expenditures, (estimated by adult library users to be \$325 per annum).
- Enables job-seekers to research the employment market, develop resumes, lodge on-line applications and communicate via e-mail with prospective employers.
- Public libraries are a significant employer and in 2004-2005 employed a total of 2,320 full-time equivalent employees earning in excess of \$130 million in wages and salaries.
- Support of local businesses.
- Building programs to establish new libraries or extend/refurbish existing libraries.
- Assists small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to maintain high professional standards and compete with larger organisations.
- Contribution to tourism through events such as Grenfell Library's hosting of the annual Henry Lawson Art Exhibition – a major income generator for the town.

Public libraries thus contribute to economic wellbeing in diverse ways and in so doing assist individuals to become more independent.

### **Perceived Contribution to Environmental Wellbeing:**

Ways in which public libraries contribute to environmental wellbeing included:

- Following a business model based on resource sharing. In other words, the practice of borrowing was seen as less demanding on scarce physical resources than if individuals purchased their own copies.
- Holding sub-collections of environmental titles across a range of formats.
- Raising awareness of the environment and promoting environmentally friendly practices through displays, exhibitions, information sessions and promotional literature.
- Serving as collection points for the recycling of products such as ink cartridges, mobile telephones and phone directories.
- Being seen to visibly practice recycling within the library by, for example, recycling paper and other items; "no plastic bags" policies and by promoting and selling re-usable library bags.

- Serving as high visibility demonstration projects for a range of environmentally efficient practices including recycling bins, rainwater tanks, water recycling, solar power and landscaping for scarce water environments.
- Auditing and/or monitoring energy usage in order to optimise energy efficiency.
- Incorporating ESD (environmental sustainable design) into new library buildings.
- Promoting recycling during children’s activities to build awareness and develop good habits and practices during their formative years.

It is interesting to note the diverse ways libraries contribute to their communities and to note how prominently library collections feature within each of the four elements, which reinforces the need to maintain a clear focus on the core business – a lesson many businesses have ignored to their detriment.

### **ECONOMIC MEASURES OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES:**

It is perhaps natural when considering economic measures to think in terms of economic value. However, the reality is that value is only one of three main measures. In addition to value, this research study also estimated the financial benefit to users of public libraries and the economic activity generated by public libraries. It is not uncommon for these measures to be grouped under the value umbrella in general discussion, but readers are urged to recognise the distinctions and to utilise the measures as complementary when viewing public libraries’ contribution from an economic perspective. One may distinguish the measures thus:

- The **economic value** of public libraries expresses, as a financial amount, the importance of library services to individuals within the community. It is an imputed amount and involves no exchange of goods and services, thus no economic activity is generated.
- The **economic benefit** derived from public libraries is the financial amount saved relative to the cost of obtaining services from alternate sources. This is also an imputed amount and involves no direct exchange of goods and services; hence no direct economic activity is generated. It does, however, free financial resources to be used for other purposes, which may translate to either a positive or negative impact on economic activity.
- The **economic activity** generated by public libraries involves real financial activity in the form of the various exchanges of goods and services and associated multiplier effects necessary to provide public library services.

The measures should enable stakeholders to advocate more effectively on behalf of public libraries by being able to adopt multiple measures rather than rely on contribution to economic activity alone, where public libraries are unlikely to have a major advantage over other public services.

### **Estimated Economic Value:**

Contingent valuation methodology (CVM) was adopted to estimate economic value based on responses to the following question: “Thinking from the



broader community perspective, if the public library was not funded by government, how much would you be willing to pay to maintain the community's access to the current services?" Provision was made to nominate a specific amount or to select from a range of nominated values.

It was found that library users were willing to pay (WTP) an average of \$58.20 per annum. Compared to the per capita expenditure on NSW public libraries in 2004-2005 of \$42.73, this is equivalent to a premium of 36.2% over current expenditure levels and an indication that a positive return on investment is being achieved. Extrapolating the average WTP of \$58.20 across the NSW population would, therefore, value public libraries statewide at \$392 million.

### **Estimated Economic Benefit:**

An economic benefit occurs when public library users utilise library services at a cost lower than the cost of equivalent commercially available services. The minimum economic benefit of NSW public libraries based on tangible benefits was found to approximate \$1.216 billion, which represented a benefit-cost ratio of 4.24 against the annual investment of \$287 million.

Whilst it was impractical to estimate intangible benefits with an acceptable degree of confidence, consideration of the following intangibles underlined their potential significance.

- In the event that public libraries did not exist, it was estimated that annual expenditure on government school libraries would increase by \$24.4 million.
- The Library User Survey found that 8.1% of respondents credited the public library as helping them obtain a new job or promotion and that 14% credited the public library as making them more productive in their jobs. The associated economic benefit was estimated at \$113 million per annum.
- Based on the Australian Federal Police Drug Harm Index estimates of the social cost of drug use, for every kilogram of opioid use avoided through information provided by public libraries, the community would benefit financially by in excess of \$1 million.

Notwithstanding the estimation complexities, the research found that public libraries generate at least \$4.24 of value for each dollar expended; an amount that would be significantly boosted by the inclusion of intangible benefits.

### **Estimated Economic Activity;**

Economic activity is differentiated from the other measures of economic value and economic benefit in that it is a real rather than imputed measure of public libraries' impact on the general economy. Economic activity reflects transactions involving economic exchanges associated with and necessary for the delivery of public library services. Examples of such exchanges include the payment of salaries in exchange for library employees' services and payments for a wide range of goods and services such as books and other collection materials.



Other areas of economic activity attributable to public libraries include the travelling costs incurred by library users visiting libraries; the costs of maintaining Internet accounts and related IT expenditures resulting from exposure to library provided services; and the change in economic activity resulting from the redistribution of funds saved by borrowing from the library in lieu of purchase. The resultant economic activity is estimated in the following table.

**Economic Activity Generated by NSW Public Libraries (\$ million)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Base level activity</b>	<b>Value added multiplier</b>	<b>Total economic activity</b>
Public libraries operating & capital expenditure	\$287.5	1.74	\$500.3
Travelling costs incurred by library visits	\$45.3	0.90	\$ 40.8
Internet accounts opened & related IT expenditure	\$101.2	1.41	\$142.4
Redistribution of financial savings by borrowing from the library	\$1,151.7	0.11	\$126.7
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$810.2</b>

It was estimated that NSW public libraries generated \$810.2 million of economic activity based on 2004-2005 conditions. This was equivalent to \$2.82 of economic activity for each dollar expended directly as operating or capital expenditure. Once again, the above estimate represents only tangible activities that could be estimated with an acceptable level of confidence and is, therefore, conservative. Including estimates for intangible factors such as the impact of language and computer literacy would further increase public libraries' contribution to economic activity.

**CONCLUSION:**

Public libraries mean different things to different people and a key finding from the research was public libraries' malleability in being able to satisfy the wide-ranging needs of a diverse community.

This was achieved primarily through library collections – still very much the mainstay and defining element of public library services. Supporting the highly visible and tangible collections was the library space and in particular, its description as a socially inclusive environment where people can pursue predominantly individual activities in a communal environment. A feeling of being safe in the library was a recurring theme, a theme that has been promoted by industry professionals for some years.

This feeling of community safety was accompanied by other forms of being sustained including, for example; career, family, financial, spiritual, parental and above all, sustaining people and communities by providing an accessible means to acquire the knowledge to cope with circumstances as they arise.

The research looked at three economic measures, each of which confirmed that public libraries are economically beneficial. It was found that respondents were willing to pay an average of \$58.20 per capita to retain existing services.

At the statewide level, this translated to an economic value of \$392 million, significantly above current spending of \$287 million.

It was further found that public libraries generated an economic benefit equivalent to \$4.24 per dollar of public library expenditure. In the hands of library users, this is equivalent to freeing funds for use elsewhere, which, at the statewide level equated to an estimated benefit of \$1.216 billion per annum.

Finally, on the key measure of economic activity, the research found that NSW public libraries generated \$810.2 million of economic activity annually, which is equivalent to \$2.82 of economic activity for each dollar expended on public libraries.

Further investment in public libraries can, therefore, be expected to generate economic as well as social, cultural and environmental benefits. It should also be remembered that the nominated estimates are conservative and make no allowance for the intangible contributions of public libraries.

To conclude, this project has demonstrated that public libraries sustain the community in social, cultural and environmental terms and contribute positively in terms of economic value, benefit and activity. Furthermore, it is proposed that the findings from this research demonstrate that NSW public libraries contribute to at least eight of the fourteen goals set out in the “State Plan: A New Direction for NSW”. These are:

- Keeping people safe.
- Building harmonious communities.
- Students fulfil their potential.
- Customer friendly services.
- Strengthening Aboriginal communities.
- Opportunity and support for the most vulnerable.
- Early intervention to tackle disadvantage.
- Improved urban environments.

When viewed in this context, a strong, healthy public library system has the potential to play a key role in pursuing a new direction for NSW.

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### **Library Services Interviewed:**

Bathurst Library Service  
Camden Library Service  
Canterbury Library Service  
Central West Libraries  
Great Lakes Library Service  
Lane Cove Library  
Liverpool City Library  
Newcastle Region Library  
Waverley Library  
Western Riverina Community Library

### **Non-Library Organisations Interviewed:**

Community Relations Commission  
Hunter Business Chamber  
Law & Justice Foundation NSW  
Mission Australia  
NSW Board of Studies  
NSW Department of Corrective Services  
NSW Department of Education and Training  
NSW Health  
NSW Nurses Association