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NEW SOUTH WALES

NSW Public Library Local Studies Audit 2020

An introduction

Local studies audit 2020

Introduction

The State Library of NSW (The State Library) and the NSW public library network play a key role in developing, maintaining and providing access to collections that document the history and development of local communities across NSW.

In 2004 the State Library commissioned an audit of local history collections across the NSW public library network which led to the publication of the *Digital Practice Guidelines for public libraries* (guidelines updated in 2011). In late 2013 and early 2014 we undertook another detailed investigation of local studies collections and services. This led to a seminar, *Digital collecting for NSW public library staff*^d and some information sessions about local studies and digital collecting, including the *Portable collecting project*².

In 2020 the State Library decided to undertake a new local studies audit. Emails were sent inviting NSW public libraries to participate in March 2020. The deadline for responses was extended to October due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the 128 councils in NSW, 111 responses were received including data from an additional nine councils that are part of regional libraries. This provided a response from 120 councils overall.

By cohort

Cohort name	Number of libraries completing	Percentage of libraries completing
Rural regional library member	25	22.5%
Rural standalone	18	16%
Urban large	21	19%
Urban medium	25	22.5%
Urban small	22	20%
Total	111	

By location

Location	Number of libraries completing	Percentage of libraries completing
Rest of NSW	79	71%
Greater Sydney ³	32	29%
Total	111	

¹ *Digital collecting for NSW public library staff* blog post 17 June 2019 <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/blogs/digital-collecting-nsw-public-library-staff-resources-seminar> (accessed 28 September 2021)

² *Portable local studies project update for NSW public libraries* blog post 4 February 2020 <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/blogs/portable-local-studies-project-update-nsw-public-libraries>

³ For areas included in this definition see <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/public-library-services/content/digital-practice-guidelines-public-libraries-0>

Policies and strategies

Most NSW public libraries have a local studies collection. For more detail about this see the responses for question 2. Future references will show the question number in parentheses, for example (q2) to make it easy to find the information later in the report. For approximately 80% of libraries local studies is supported by a collection plan or is included in the overall collection plan (q3). 71% of the libraries do not have a preservation plan [for analogue, digital or both (q 5)]. This is concerning because preservation is key to the long-term survival of the items.

41% of respondents did not know if their council or library had a disaster plan or disaster recovery plan, 26% of respondents were *not sure* (q7). It is likely that some of these councils have disaster recovery plans, which needs to be communicated to library staff, so library activities may be integrated.

Acquisition

The acquisition methods demonstrate that a mix of proactive (creating content, actively seeking donations and new material to purchase) and reactive (accepting donations offered and buying suggested material) methods can be used to develop a local studies collection (q8). Content acquisition includes collecting fliers about local information, archiving websites, writing blog posts and stories for websites or exhibition panels, as well as providing research for local organisations giving talks.

Most libraries are undertaking reactive acquisition methods. 98.15% are accepting relevant donations, and 88.89% are buying suggested, relevant items. Smaller percentages of libraries actively seek and purchase local studies material (74%) and actively seek relevant donations (52.78%). There is a risk that community groups and individuals may not know to suggest their publications for purchase or may not offer material for donation. It highlights the importance of libraries being active in their acquisition, seeking information from a wider range of people in the community. This can be done to complement donations and suggestions.

It is encouraging to see that partnerships assist in some libraries (44.44%) acquiring material. It is also of note that about half the libraries (40.74%) are recording oral histories, half (50.93%) are taking photographs of local places and events, and that one fifth (21.3%) are creating other content.

Significance to the area (q9) is the top criteria for acquiring local studies material. This response was provided by all survey participants. This was followed by uniqueness, storage requirements and condition.

Survey respondents were asked how they used demographic data for their area as a factor in collecting (q10). 27% of the respondents said it had no influence, while 56% provided examples of how they are using demographic data to influence their collecting. For example:

It informs what CALD groups we should be approaching for material. We collaborate with the CALD team at the library to leverage contacts in the community.

We have a substantial [name of Aboriginal language] population and actively seek to compile their contributions and add to our Aboriginal collection with local focus.

Not considering demographic information may lead to biased local studies collections which only represents part of the community, but which people may think reflects the whole community. It could be as obvious as not collecting much information by or about women, but it can highlight the importance of considering a range of demographic data as part of planning local studies collecting.

Weeding or deaccessioning

Approximately 48% of respondents were weeding their collections while approximately 49% were not (q11). For those weeding their local studies collection, 37% had a weeding policy (q12). Items were often disposed via donation to other organisations, but some recycling of items was also evident (q13).

Changes to local studies

People were asked to reflect on changes to their local studies collecting practice over the last five years (q14). The equal top responses were that there had been no changes and that there had been an increase in digital collecting. Other changes included collecting different subject areas such as collecting information about local Aboriginal people, demographic change, bushfires, and COVID-19. For some there had been an increase in collecting oral histories.

Local studies budget and staff

41% of libraries have a local studies budget, for others indicated that funds are drawn from other library budgets (q18). Some libraries provided budget information (q19).

Questions about staffing were included in the survey. 37 respondents indicated that local studies is part of general duties with no specific allocated time. For the libraries with designated staff time, the amount ranged from 0.004 EFT to 5.5 EFT (q 21). The staff who work in local studies are predominately librarians, but there are also significant numbers of library technicians (q22). Other staff working in the area include archivists and those with history qualifications, with some having no relevant qualifications.

Even in libraries with allocated local studies time, less than 10% of staff spend most of their time on local studies work (q 23), and over 45% of staff who work in local studies spend 30% or less of their time in this area. The other work they do included desk shifts, cataloguing and a wide range of other library duties. There are a wide range of training needs for staff in local studies (q24) from general local studies training to digitisation, preservation, collection management and cataloguing.

Indigenous staff, collections, and protocols

No public library in NSW has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who work in local studies (q25). Around one quarter of the libraries actively seek information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to purchase for local studies or accept relevant donations on this topic. Around 18% of libraries collect little about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their area (q26). Some libraries mentioned working with local Aboriginal people which is important. Few libraries had awareness of protocols or workflows for collecting Indigenous material, but this is not surprising considering how little is being collected in this area (q28).

Local studies collections

Detailed information was collected about local studies items by format, including whether analogue or digital (q29). Responses indicated a total of 2.9 million items plus 11,900 linear metres and 7,600 gigabytes of content. Note that together these three numbers provide the approximate size of the local studies collection across NSW as information. These total figures are impressive for a state wide distributed collection, but the detail by format is even more interesting. Around 62% of these local studies collections are analogue items. Condition reports are available in appendix 1 (q31).

75% of libraries indicated that they are collecting analogue material from local community groups, with 72% collecting council publications, and 64% collecting items from local schools. The top seven collecting areas were in analogue format, with the top digital collecting being council publications and papers at 36% (q32).

Cataloguing and indexing

There was wide variation in the amount of local studies material being catalogued, with 16% of respondents cataloguing between 91% and 100% of the local studies collection, and 21% cataloguing 40% or less (q33). Staff time, budget and staff skills were the three highest factors in this (q34). A very small percentage of local studies cataloguing is outsourced (q35).

The library staff use a range of standards for cataloguing including Library of Congress Subject Headings, Resource Description and Access, Geographical Names Standards, and the Australian Pictorial Thesaurus (Q36).

23.47% (23) of respondents contribute all their local studies records to Trove, with a further 24.49% (24) of councils contributing some of their records. These low numbers lead to challenges in searching for local studies material (q37). Questions 38 and 39 asked the percentage of image and oral history collections on Trove. A small number of libraries index some of their local studies material, mainly newspapers (q40).

Almost half the libraries provide easy access to copyright information through their catalogues (q41), however almost 30% have the same message regardless of the copyright status, which is likely to be inaccurate and confusing for the community.

24% of libraries allow the community to provide comments on local studies collections through social media. 37% accept comments and information given to staff via email or in

person. A small number of libraries had library management systems (8%) or discovery platforms (6%) which allowed people in the community to directly provide information (q42).

Digitisation and digitised collections

41% of libraries have a current digitisation program with an additional 10% having had one in the past (q43). The types of items digitised varied between libraries (q44) as did the processes (q45). The top areas of information and practice which would assist in digitisation are detailed information about digitisation project management with examples of the full life cycle of a project, hands on technical training in digitisation, and detailed information about best practice digital preservation standards (q47).

The responses to question 50 demonstrate the range of cataloguing description, access and interaction provided by the libraries. Some, and often limited, access is provided offsite for digital content (q51) as not all digital content is online. Question 51 provides details of offsite access to local studies collections. This is limited because few libraries have digital files attached to their content management systems.

Local studies service and access

The space provided for the local studies collection varied from 1 metre to over 245 square metres (q55). Some libraries had additional local studies storage space (q56). Question 57 asked about special conditions for storing local studies collections, some libraries had areas with temperature and humidity controls. It was rare for clients to have complete access to the local studies collection (q58 and 59). Some libraries organised programs, exhibitions and displays to assist with the awareness of the collection (q62), as well as social media and newsletters (q63). There was limited evaluation of local studies collections and services (q66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71).