

Planning and Environment



Project report:

# Using behavioural insights to increase access to public libraries

Public Spaces



April 2022



Published by NSW Department of Planning and Environment

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First published: April 2022

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# Acknowledgement

The Department of Planning and Environment acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and pays respect to Elders past, present and future. We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to place and rich contribution to society.

Aboriginal people take a holistic view of land, water and culture and see them as one, not in isolation from each other. Using behavioural insights to improve public library services is based on the premise upheld by Aboriginal people that if we care for Country, it will care for us.

Image on front cover: Darling Square Library children's area. Credit: City of Sydney.  
Image on this page: Kengal Aboriginal Place. Credit: Destination NSW.  
Artwork (right) by Nikita Ridgeway.





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## Resources



Learn more about libraries, galleries, community centres, showgrounds and museums on the Department's [Public Facilities web page](#)



Check out the [Behavioural Insights Unit library of resources](#)



For advice on public library services, visit [State Library of NSW](#)

# Introduction

## Why public facilities matter

Free and publicly accessible facilities, including libraries, galleries, community centres, showgrounds and museums, are key to our community's vitality and are of increasing importance as our cities grow. Through telling our diverse stories and being places for everyone, they contribute to our heritage, identity and local character.

## Public libraries are public spaces

Public spaces are all places that are publicly owned or for public use. They are accessible and enjoyable by all free of charge. They include public open space, public facilities and streets. Public libraries are an essential part of our network of public spaces. Within their buildings, grounds and virtual spaces, public libraries provide places for everybody to gather, share ideas, engage in cultural experiences and learn.

The NSW Government has highlighted the importance of creating more accessible, greener public spaces to improve the quality of life for NSW residents. The Premier's Priority for greener public spaces aims to increase the proportion of homes in urban areas within 10 minutes' walk of quality green, open and public space by 10% by 2023.

The NSW Public Spaces Charter has been developed to support the priority in the planning, design, management and activation of public spaces in NSW. It identifies ten principles for quality public space, developed through evidence-based research and discussions with public space experts and community members. The Charter is relevant for public open space, public facilities and streets.

Public libraries are a free resource for everyone.

## What is public space?

Public spaces are all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive. They include:



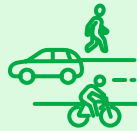
### Public Open Spaces

parks, gardens, playgrounds, public beaches, riverbanks and waterfronts, outdoor playing fields and courts, and bushland that is open for public access



### Public Facilities

public libraries, museums, galleries, civic/community centres, showgrounds and indoor public sports facilities



### Streets

streets, avenues and boulevards; squares and plazas; pavements; passages and lanes, and bicycle paths

The quality of public space is just as important as its accessibility, as quality makes people feel safe, welcome and included. The quality of a public space is reflected not only in its physical form — how it's designed, maintained and integrated with its environment — but also through the activities it supports and the meaning it holds. The public life of public space can be evaluated by asking:

- Am I able to get there?
- Am I able to play and participate?
- Am I able to stay?
- Am I able to connect?





# Innovative partnership

In 2021, the Department of Planning, and Environment partnered with the State Library of NSW, the NSW Department of Customer Service's Behavioural Insights Unit, the Australian Library Information Association and the NSW Public Libraries Association.

The partner group worked with 4 councils on a 12-month project aiming to increase access to their local libraries' services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The 4 participating councils were Bega Valley Shire Council, City of Sydney, Northern Beaches Council, and Wagga Wagga City Council.

The project was informed by over 5,500 library members who completed surveys across the 4 local government areas.

## Purpose of this report

The 'Using behavioural insights to increase access to public libraries' report presents the findings from the cross-government collaboration project conducted in 2021 by the Public Spaces team of the Department of Planning and Environment.

"Love libraries. They are an essential part of healthy communities."

**Survey respondent**



From top: Forestville Library. Credit: Northern Beaches Council  
Bega Valley Library. Credit: Bega Valley Shire Council  
Wagga Wagga City Library Stairwell Mural. Credit: Rob Lee  
City Library. Credit: City of Sydney





# Over 5,500

library members across 4 local government areas completed the surveys to inform the project

## Survey findings



### More books and programs

The top items that would encourage people to visit their library more are:

- availability of books and events
- flexibility of opening times
- awareness of services and increased access to spaces



### Why? To browse and borrow

The main reason selected by members to visit their local library (80%) is to browse and borrow collection items. Public libraries are also used as spaces for a person's individual activities, such as studying and researching.



### 70% visits every 6 months

More than 70% of members have visited their library – either in person or online – in the last 6 months. Most members visit their library at least once or twice per month.

Right: Green Square Library.





# Project aim and overview

The 4 participating councils – Bega Valley Shire Council, City of Sydney, Northern Beaches Council, and Wagga Wagga City Council – all applied a behavioural insight approach specific to their local circumstances.

The intervention tested effective ways of communicating with members and visitors with the aim of helping people be aware of and easily access library services.

Green Square Library. Credit: City of Sydney.



4 participating councils with



15 libraries across NSW servicing



230k members



# Project outcomes and results

## Capacity building

The majority of council interventions undertaken for the project resulted in successful outcomes. The participating councils now have a good understanding of how to apply the behavioural insight approach to meet policy, program and service goals for their libraries.

## Lessons learned

Despite external factors influencing the results, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, council feedback was that the project provided them with a repeatable and evidence-based approach that they can apply in the future to optimise library membership, visitation and satisfaction.

Councils identified the following as something they could apply in their day-to-day work to improve their library services:

- behavioural insight methods to define a problem
- surveys and interventions and analysing the results
- using the 'Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely' (EAST) framework to develop solutions
- using data to shape their library services.





## Place-based approach

The behavioural insight approach is flexible and data-driven. It can be applied to achieve specific goals and support the members and users of a particular library. It also helps raise the social, cultural and place qualities of these important public spaces.



## Project outcomes

Council	City of Sydney	Northern Beaches	Wagga Wagga City Council	Bega Valley
<b>Goal</b>	Increase click-throughs from monthly e-newsletter to the eBooks page	Increase visitation to Forestville Library and attract new members to the library service	Increase junior library memberships by targeting caregivers to create memberships for children in their care	Get 10% of targeted members to borrow one physical library item within 3 months of the intervention and re-engage lapsed members since bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic
<b>Intervention</b>	Newsletter (awareness of online resources and how to access them) in June, which ran for one month	Newsletter (refurbished library re-opening!) sent after refurbishment was completed in June and ran for one month	Newsletter (increase junior membership among children whose caregivers are already members), which ran for 2 weeks in September school holidays	Postcard (inviting people back to the library) sent as direct marketing communication in May and ran for two months
<b>Outcomes</b>	Unique eBook pageviews increased by 124% during the 2 weeks from when the email was sent compared to the 2 weeks immediately prior. Clicks to external links on the eBooks page increased by 102%.	Visitations increased during the campaign period to just over 307.54 visits per day, which was 21% more than the comparable period average. There were 90 respondents to the 'Welcome Back' survey giving an average score of 8.82/10 .	There were 57 new junior memberships in the period which represented 30.4% of total new memberships. This was 15% to 20% higher than the proportion of new memberships in comparable periods.	There was no statistically significant change in behaviour. The COVID-19 Delta variant outbreak triggered public health orders and restrictions during the trial, impacting the success of the intervention.



# A behavioural insight approach

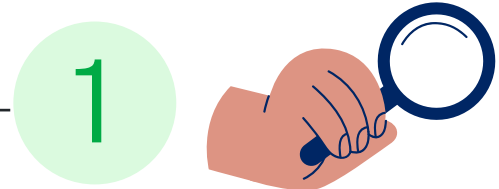
The behavioural insight approach used in this project was developed and supported by the Department of Customer Service's Behavioural Insights Unit.

The unit helps NSW Government agencies to achieve measurably better outcomes for the people of NSW by guiding them on how to develop and test behavioural science solutions to policies, programs and service goals.

The aim of a behavioural insight approach is to see behavioural insights applied in everyday policy and service design leading to measurably better outcomes for people in NSW. To achieve this, the work focuses on three areas; running trials, building capability across the sector and providing advice to apply behavioural insights. Behavioural insights draw on the behavioural sciences – including behavioural economics and psychology – to help us understand the social, cognitive and emotional drivers of human behaviour. By recognising the nuance of human decision making, the field puts the onus on policymakers to design environments that support good decisions.

The project team took a behavioural insight approach to raise awareness and encourage people to access library services during a time of uncertainty.

As outlined in following pages, the project adopted a 3-stage approach to achieving measurably better project outcomes: understand, build and test.



1

## Understand



How to gather insights?

- Survey
- Target behaviour



2

## Build



How to create a behavioural insight intervention?

- The COM-B model for behaviour change – where 'C' is for capability, 'O' is for opportunity, and 'M' is for motivation which are three key factors capable of changing behaviour (B).
- EAST framework



3

## Test



How to test an intervention?

- Randomised control trial
- Before and after study



# 1

## Understand

Understand through fieldwork the perspective of the person whose behaviour we want to change, and narrow down to a specific outcome we can measure.



### Surveys

In a series of surveys, we invited library members in participating councils to tell us about their experience with their local library.

The surveys highlighted the reasons members visit their library or use the library's online services, and also identified barriers to these behaviours.

The survey gave us insight into what barriers needed to be address or enablers that could be leveraged to encourage more people to use their library's services.

### Target behaviour

Using the survey findings, each library identified a specific target behaviour they wanted to address as part of the project.

The libraries defined their target behaviour using the SMART goal framework:

- S**pecific behaviour to change
- M**easurable behaviour outcome
- A**ssignable to person or group
- R**ealistic to achieve
- T**ime bound to a specific date

### How we did it

To initiate the project, there were 2 survey periods of 2 weeks each (between 22 February to 5 March and 25 June to 9 July 2021). The surveys were completed by over 5,500 library members who told us about their experience with their local library (across a total of 4 local government areas: Northern Beaches Council, City of Sydney and Bega Valley Shire Council, and Wagga Wagga City Council).

State Library of NSW. Credit: Bruce York

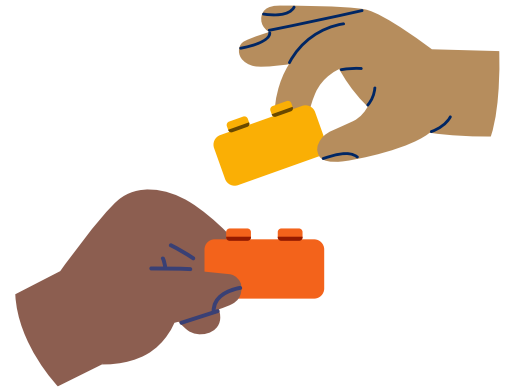




# 2

## Build

Build behaviour change interventions (ideally within existing systems) using insights about the user experience and non-conscious drivers of behaviour.



### COM-B model

The libraries used the COM-B model to identify and explore the barriers and enablers to their target behaviour:

**C**apability. Does the person have the psychological or physical ability to do it?

**O**pportunity. Does the physical or social environment enable the behaviour?

**M**otivation. Do they want to do the behaviour? Is the behaviour automatic or a habit?

### EAST framework

Using the insights from the COM-B model, the libraries used the EAST framework to develop solutions to enable their target behaviour:

**E**asy. Can you simplify how people do the behaviour? Or make it easier to understand?

**A**tttractive. Can you highlight the benefits of the behaviour?

**S**ocial. Can you show how many other people are doing it?

**T**imely. Can you remind people when and how to do it?

### How we did it

After the surveys were complete, the project team hosted a series of workshops to support the libraries' understanding of how to use the behavioural insights gained. By the end of the workshop series, each council had developed a communications intervention to test effective ways of helping people be aware of and easily access library services.

Manly Library. Credit: Northern Beaches Council





# 3 Test



Test these new ideas to determine ‘what works’ using rigorous evaluation methods such as randomised controlled trials.

## A/B testing (also known as split testing)

Some libraries used an A/B test to assess the effectiveness of their communication (email or letter).

As part of the A/B test, the libraries sent out 2 different versions of a communication to see which was the most effective in encouraging their identified target behaviour.

The libraries were able to use the A/B test functionality that comes with most online communication platforms, including MailChimp and Campaign Monitor.

## Before/After study

The libraries were also able to use a before and after study to assess the impact of their communications.

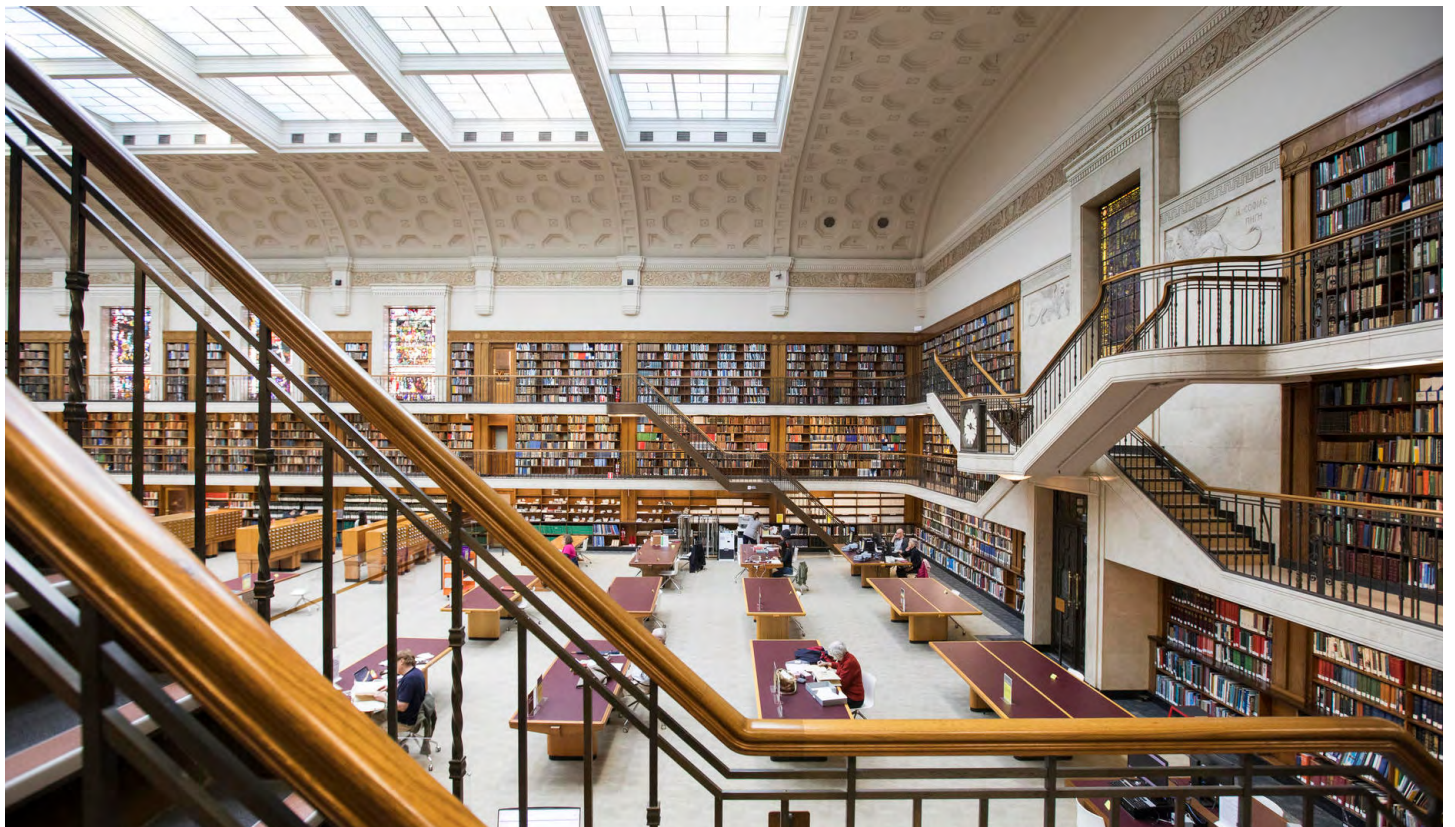
A before and after study measures a change in the behaviour before and after a single version of the communication is distributed.

This type of study does provide an indication of the communication’s effectiveness, but it does not control for other potential reasons for the change in the target behaviour.

## How we did it

After carrying out the interventions crafted in the ‘build’ phase, each council tested the results. This was done between May and September 2021. The project team and councils attended a workshop to present outcomes from the interventions and key lessons learned on applying a behavioural insight approach to support increased access to library services.

State Library of NSW. Credit: Bruce York





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# Planning & Environment

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