



Feature: Using Evidence in Practice

Conducting State-Wide Research to Inform Practice in New South Wales Public Libraries

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Setting

The State Library of New South Wales (NSW) is one of eight state and territory libraries within Australia. Each of these libraries plays an important role within its jurisdiction, enabling people to access rich collections and connecting them to information and to each other. The libraries are legislated to collect published materials and preserve cultural heritage, ensuring that both are available in the future. Additionally, the state libraries all

play key roles with the network of public libraries within their states.

The State Library of NSW provides specialist advice and support to local councils providing public library services to the people of NSW across 367 locations. A dedicated team within the State Library administers state government funding to councils, provides leadership on matters affecting public libraries, and identifies and researches industry-wide issues. Much of the relationship between NSW public

libraries and the State Library of NSW is governed by legislation, specifically the Library Act 1939 and the Library Regulation 2010. This paper focuses on the specific role of researching industry-wide issues.

Problem

The State Library of NSW established the Public Library Network Research Committee in 2002. The committee was established to oversee the research program, to ensure that the Public Library Network had input into identifying research projects, to recommend projects, and to ensure research implementation. The key factor addressed by the committee and used in identifying potential projects is the lack of research, in specific areas, about public libraries within NSW.

The following are examples of recent research projects:

- **NSW Public Libraries Local Studies Audit:** This project looks at local studies collections and services with an aim to develop best practice guidelines for collection development, managing collections, providing access and service delivery, and collaborating to develop a state-wide strategy for local history collections.
- **Mobile Library and Outreach Service Models:** The goal of this project is to identify the current range and scope of NSW public library mobile and outreach service models and to explore the strengths, weaknesses, benefits, and opportunities of different outreach models used within NSW public libraries with the aim of developing good practice guidelines.
- **Regional Library Models Project:** This project aims to ascertain the types of arrangements that are currently in place between councils for regional or cooperative library services across NSW and to explore other possibilities for management models.

- **Guidelines for E-Collections in NSW Public Libraries:** The focus for this project is to identify e-collection usage patterns by format (e-books, e-audio, e-magazines), identify factors that affect usage of e-collections, and identify current e-reader or tablet usage patterns across NSW public libraries. The project outcomes include good practice guidelines for e-collection development, display, access, and collection evaluation.

Evidence

Each project in the program has its own set of requirements. The methods for managing and delivering on the project were designed to be specific to each project. This may be a partnership with another organization, use of an external contractor, in-house research, or a combination of these methods. The research committee identified evidence for each project through stakeholder knowledge of issues of importance to the NSW public library network where information was lacking, out of date, or not specific to the NSW public library network.

Prior to the start of the Mobile Library and Outreach Services project, State Library staff had identified a lack of comprehensive relevant literature on mobile and outreach services for Australian and specifically NSW public libraries. There were few relevant documents available and none that comprehensively covered both mobile and outreach services. The project group undertook a literature review to assess the information available and gather relevant information to inform the project outcomes. It became clear that a NSW specific publication, looking more broadly at outreach services as well as mobile library services, was required. The group collected evidence from public library stakeholders through an online survey to all library managers with visits and interviews to provide detailed information for 10 case study libraries on their range of outreach services.

The Regional Library Models project looks at council agreements and arrangements in the delivery of library services. The need for this project arose after a 2011 change to Section 12 of the Library Act enabled councils to propose alternate models for regional library management, and the change failed to lead to any applications from councils. The premise was that councils may be unsure of the type of arrangements they could enter into. The project group needed evidence to prove or disprove this premise and research to present possibilities for future management models.

The State Library engaged the Centre for Local Government (CLG) at the University of Technology Sydney to undertake research to explore and recommend regional management models for NSW public libraries. A literature review was undertaken to look at current arrangements in NSW public libraries and explore models throughout Australia and internationally.

CLG conducted in-depth interviews (11 in total) with a representative selection of staff from the State Library and relevant staff associated with regional and cooperative library models from across NSW. CLG distributed an online survey to all library managers across NSW. The survey received 58 responses from 45 libraries, including 24 from stand-alone libraries, 31 from libraries involved in some form of sharing arrangement, 14 based on a regional library model, 13 based on a cooperative library model, and four based on other types of models.

Evidence collected in the Local Studies Audit showed that the combined collection of local studies material across the state is at least 2.9 million items and over 21,329 metres. For the libraries that hold these materials, almost 50% have no records on Trove (a national database of digitized library material), with less than 16% of local studies collections being fully searchable on Trove. Over 40% of the councils surveyed have no digitization program, and there is very limited born digital content being collected.

The audit identified the following issues:

- Some local studies collection material is digitized but not always online with clear and accurate rights statements.
- Little born digital content is added to local studies collections, meaning limited recent material is collected.
- Few collections have had significance assessments.
- Inadequate collecting occurs for languages other than English and about multicultural and Indigenous communities.
- In a small number of areas, there is no local studies collecting taking place.
- Some collections have many boxes or shelves of material stored with no detailed descriptions of content and in some instances little knowledge of content, which may mean that some of the uncatalogued material does not deserve the storage space it is using.

The E-collections Project focused on 13 NSW public libraries with high use of e-resources by clients. Library staff were interviewed about the performance of their e-collections. These libraries all had turnover rates above the state-wide median of 3.46 loans per annum for these collections based on the 2012–13 data.

For the libraries with higher turnover rates:

- collections are actively developed and tailored,
- e-collections are visible on the library website homepage,
- the titles are accessible in the catalogue (except in two instances),
- staff are trained in how to use and download e-books and e-audio,
- staff actively promote e-books in the library, and in many there are signs to highlight the availability of e-books, and
- training is provided to clients in how to use and download e-books and e-audio.

Key factors emerged as a result of the project. Compulsory training for staff and optional training for the public appears to have a positive effect on use. This ensures that all staff realize that assisting the public with e-resources is part of their responsibility. Providing library clients with introductory sessions on e-readers and tablets that includes assistance with the use of their own devices appears to encourage use of library e-collections.

In all of these situations, the evidence was compelling because it came directly from those providing the services the research committee was exploring. The beauty of the research program is that the State Library has ease of access to the public library stakeholders.

Implementation

The Local Studies Audit has resulted in the State Library facilitating a course for NSW public library staff in digital repository management and in an increased focus on advocating the importance of standards and policy at the local level. The Mobile Library and Outreach Service project has delivered a report with case studies and guidelines for mobile and outreach services. As of September 2015, the Regional Library Models project is entering its final phase, which will see the development of recommended regional and cooperative models. The E-Collections Project has identified key practices that libraries can implement to increase the use of these collections.

Outcome

With many of these projects, the outcomes are far reaching and may not be able to be implemented immediately due to external factors. However, the reports and recommendations are made available for NSW Councils via the State Library of NSW website so that the information is easily accessible when required.

Reflection

The approach of using evidence to inform practice delivers long-term benefits to NSW public libraries and provides access to research that no individual library could otherwise afford. There is no shortage of research needs, and because the projects provide practical outcomes, the State Library has access to a large pool of willing participants from public libraries. There is a tension between this enthusiasm and receiving sufficient responses from the subjects. The projects require a diverse state-wide view to develop evidence based models of relevance to all public libraries. Another challenge for the State Library is encouraging uniform take-up of project recommendations by councils.

These projects deliver a state-wide overview that enables big picture planning. The research projects and groups provide a valuable community of interest, delivering positive and usable outcomes, and will be a key factor in a successful future for NSW public libraries.

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