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Understanding Australian Public Library Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis

Report and Recommendations

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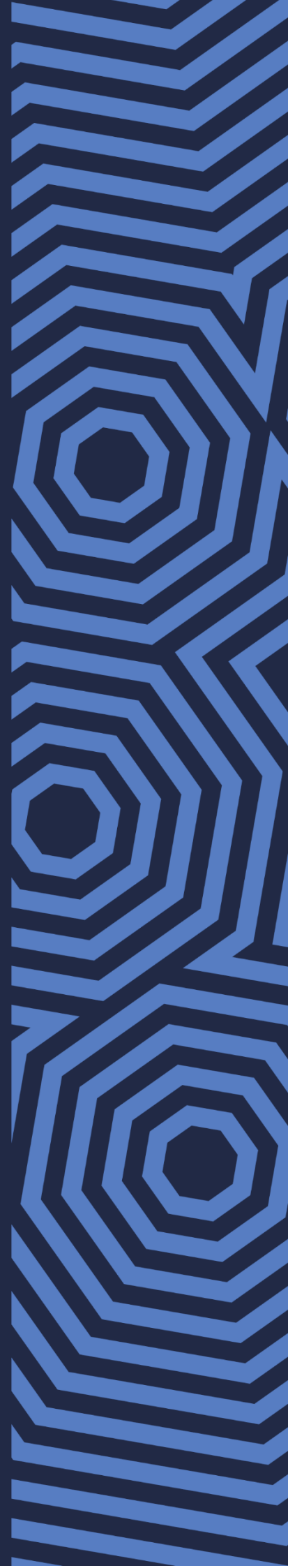
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Contents

Purpose of the study	1
Methodology	1
Phase 1	1
Phase 2	1
Results.....	2
Challenges experienced	2
Positive outcomes.....	2
Recommendations	3
Planning	3
Staffing.....	4
Users	4
Other	4
Conclusion	4
Published research.....	5

Purpose of the study

On 24th March 2020 the Prime Minister of Australia declared the immediate closure of libraries across the country as part of the national attempt to slow the rate of COVID-19 infections. This meant over 1,600 public library service points across the country in urban, regional and remote locations, were no longer able to offer services on their premises.

This research aimed to explore the response by public libraries across Australia to the COVID-19 crisis. Its findings will assist public libraries in understanding their own roles and performance in a community crisis and will enable them to better prepare for and react to similar crises in the future so that community needs are met as efficiently and effectively as possible. In addition, the research aims to identify possible trends in future service and resource provision resulting from measures put in place during the COVID-19 crisis.

It is important to note that the protracted nature of the pandemic has meant that many public libraries across Australia are still facing significant operational challenges. We therefore recognise that examples of innovation and best practice are still emerging, and that in many cases public library staff have yet to be afforded the space and time needed for effective reflection on their response to the crisis.

Methodology

The research team undertook a two-phase, sequential mixed methods design, with data collected between August 2020 and February 2021. The Australian Public Library Alliance (APLA) served as a reference group throughout the project, assisting with participant recruitment and the piloting of surveys.

Phase 1: A national survey of public library managers. A contact list for all public library networks across Australia was provided by APLA and was used for the distribution of an online survey investigating aspects of public libraries' responses to the crisis, including:

- Their role in supporting communities.
- How decisions regarding closures of library buildings were made.
- New and existing online resources and services made available to users.
- How libraries maintained service delivery to vulnerable communities.
- How prepared the libraries were for such a crisis.
- Challenges libraries faced in managing online-only delivery.
- How libraries have or will evaluate their responses to the crisis; and
- The likelihood of ongoing post-crisis changes to service and resource provision.

A total of 477 invitations to participate were sent directly to public library managers, and a total of 213 responses were received, representing a response rate of 45%.

Phase 2: Case studies of three public library networks: one remote, one regional and one metropolitan. Identification of participant libraries was informed by responses to the Phase 1 survey, and with guidance from APLA.

Three strands of data were collected:

- Interviews with library staff in a variety of roles (managerial, technical, customer-facing) to understand how their library responded to the crisis.
- Survey of library users to understand engagement with library services and resources during the crisis, and how public libraries can best support the community.
- Analysis of usage data relating to online resources and services.

Results

Challenges experienced

- The greatest challenge reported by libraries related to managing staff working arrangements.
- Many library staff, at all levels of their organisations, reported experiencing challenges to their wellbeing, including mental health, both during library closures and in periods of opening that followed closures.
- Outer regional and remote libraries were less able to adapt their services and programs to meet user needs during lockdowns than were major city and inner regional libraries.
- The technical capacity and skills of staff required to meet new online modes of resource and program delivery, the effectiveness of internal communication, and issues related to remote working were reported as moderate challenges.
- 58% of respondents reported that their authorities did not have plans or policies for working with marginalised groups.
- 58% of authorities completely cut all their casual staff hours. Volunteers in even more authorities (77%) saw their hours cut completely.
- In general libraries and parent bodies engaged positively with each other, however 27% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their parent body understood the operational needs of the library. Some libraries reported their parent body's lack of understanding of the importance of libraries in the community led to an initial lack of support.
- Users reported some confusion and frustration regarding differences in responses by neighbouring public library authorities.
- While responses to user survey indicated that library responses to the closures were generally received very positively, this was not the case for users without internet access or the IT equipment required to access online services and programs.

Positive outcomes

- Existing health and safety guidelines were considered very useful by the largest number of participants (59%), followed by risk management plans (51%).
- ALIA resources were considered somewhat or very useful by the vast majority (88%) of library managers.
- 80% of respondents kept all their permanent staff on full-time hours, with almost as many (71%) maintaining the hours for fixed-term staff.
- Business continuity plans and social media policies were very useful for around a third of respondents.
- Many libraries were able to develop their resources and services for their users to suit online delivery. Numerous examples of innovative and customer-focused solutions were revealed by the research, including click and collect solutions, home delivery, and the online provision of programmes and events.
- Managers of libraries with a strong central governance available to them felt more supported than libraries who operate more independently. This was particularly notable with South Australian libraries who found the support received from the State Library of South Australia highly valuable.
- Experiences of library managers and staff, and responses from library users, reinforced the value of public library spaces to their communities. The strongest themes here related to libraries as places for connection and social engagement, with significant attendant benefits to user wellbeing.

Recommendations

Reflecting on the overwhelmingly successful responses to the crisis by public libraries across Australia, we strongly suggest that public libraries should collect evidence related to the services and programs provided during the COVID-19 crisis, and the impact these had on their communities. This evidence should then be used to actively promote the value of the library to the relevant council or parent body to ensure a recognition of their unique and vital role in the community, and to lessen the likelihood of council reducing library support during a crisis.

Our primary recommendation for dealing with future pandemics is that public libraries should ensure that Disaster Management Plans are written, regularly reviewed, and include provisions for health-related disaster management.

A range of resources are already available to support this process, for example [ALIA Disaster Management for Libraries: Part One - Guide](#) (2nd Edition 2019) and [ALIA Disaster Management for Libraries: Part Two - Disaster Plan Template](#) (2nd Edition 2019)

In addition, we recommend that the following points be considered in the Disaster Management documentation and accompanying strategic planning.

Planning

- A Communication Strategy should be available to all staff so that they know who will be making decisions about their library and how these decisions are to be communicated to staff and library users. The Strategy should cover:
 - Role of social media
 - Lines of communication with parent bodies
 - Lines of communication with users
 - All stages of the event and the recovery period

An exemplar Communications Strategy that may serve as a model for public libraries can be found in the [IFLA Public Libraries Section Marketing Communications Plan, 2017 - 2019](#) and the [IFLA Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Marketing and Communications Plan, 2019 – 2021](#).

- Establish networks with other libraries to share ideas, information and projects, e.g., negotiations with vendors, useful video production technology, relevant training material etc. We recommend bodies, including APLA or ALIA, take an active role in establishing or strengthening these networks and act as a distributor of information, support and resources when required, particularly to regional and remote libraries whose isolation may lessen their ability to respond strongly in a crisis. Consideration could be given to promoting the ALIAPUBLIC elist as a communication channel for public libraries, although care should be taken that communication is streamlined and properly targeted.
- Work closely with neighbouring authorities to ensure wherever possible that a consistent approach is taken to closures, re-openings, and service provision.
- Establish clear guidelines regarding the needs of disadvantaged communities, and how to evaluate if they are being met, or are likely to be met in a crisis. Existing resources can be leveraged to support this work: for example, the State Library of New South Wales has [published guidance on understanding community needs](#), and many Aboriginal Land Councils have material relating to understanding the needs of First Nations communities.

Staffing

- Ensure that technical hardware resources are audited, and a plan developed to guide the allocation of those resources to staff in time of crisis. Contingency plans should be made to cover the possibility of resources being co-opted by other parts of the council, and to ensure that safe and effective working arrangements are possible for staff without access to the equipment needed to support working from home.
- Formally monitor and support staff's mental health and wellbeing as a standard practice during and after a crisis. Consider convening all-staff debriefing sessions to monitor wellbeing if appropriate. While some resources are available to support this work (e.g., <https://ala-apa.org/wellness/>) there is a need for more specific guidance on monitoring and supporting staff wellbeing, and recommend that ALIA consider undertaking work in this area.
- Ensure that library staff have the required technical skills to deliver programs and services in the ways outlined in the Disaster Management plan. Where necessary ongoing technical training should be provided to staff. Examples of areas to consider here include video and audio production/editing; skills needed for provision and support of e-books and audiobook services; ability to work with virtual reference technologies; working with social media (effective use of Facebook, Twitter etc.)

Users

- Ensure users without internet access and/or devices are considered when designing services and practices provided during closures and normal operation. For example, schemes to loan wifi-dongles and / or laptops should be considered.
- Disaster plans should seek to prioritise the re-opening of library buildings as soon as possible, even if in a limited capacity, in recognition of the value of library spaces to many users.

Other

- Strengthen public libraries' role as providers of health-related information. Resources available to support this role include the Health West Partnership document: [Make it Easy: A Handbook for Becoming a Health Literate Organisation.](#)

Conclusion

From March 2020, Australian public libraries have faced periods of closures, reduced openings, and changed methods of operation. The way public libraries interact with their parent bodies, staff and users has changed and continues to change as the COVID situation evolves in our country. Public libraries are faced with an ongoing crisis that requires them to continually evaluate their operations, and it is hoped that this report and its recommendations are viewed with this in mind. Our research has found that while public libraries are responding to the COVID crisis with agility, creativity and a strong commitment to customer service, this has sometimes come at a cost to staff wellbeing and may have been hampered by restrictive relationships with parent bodies.

Published research

- Garner, J., Hider, P., Jamali, H. R., Lymn, J., Mansourian, Y., Randell-Moon, H., & Wakeling, S. (2021). 'Steady ships' in the COVID-19 crisis: Australian public library responses to the pandemic. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 70(2), 102-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2021.1901329>
- Wakeling, S., Garner, J., Hider, P., Jamali, H. R., Lymn, J., Mansourian, Y., & Randell-Moon, H. (2021). 'The challenge now is for us to remain relevant': Australian public libraries and the COVID-19 crisis. *IFLA Journal*, early view. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03400352211054115>
- The dataset from Phase 1 is publicly available at: https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Australian_Public_Library_COVID_Survey/14183060