Community critical: Australian public libraries serving seniors

Dr Alan Bundy AM

Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) is a nonprofit association established in 1994 to foster and support Friends of Libraries (FOL) groups throughout Australia. FOL groups and FOLA are the voice of the 60% of Australians who use their public libraries, and the many other people who support them as unique 'cradle to grave' community agencies freely available to Australians of all ages, backgrounds and circumstances.

Consistent with this position, in 2004 FOLA initiated a five year program of annual reports to the nation on issues critical to the development of Australia's public libraries to meet the needs of all Australians. Its first report to the nation *Australian BookStart: a national issue, a compelling case* is available at www.fola.org.au. It focuses on the importance for early childhood literacy development of parents and caregivers reading aloud to their children 0-5 years, and support for this provided through public libraries.

This second FOLA report to the nation, *Community critical: Australian public libraries serving seniors,* was launched at FOLA's fifth biennial conference, in Adelaide on 14 Oct 2005.

The report is being communicated to Australian local councils, their state and national associations, their public libraries, appropriate federal and state ministers, and associations for older Australians. It is also available at www.fola.org.au.

Recipients of the report are encouraged to copy all, or parts of it, for further dissemination and discussion. FOLA welcomes feedback about it through its author Dr Alan Bundy alan.bundy@auslib.com.au, fax 08 82784000 or PO Box 622 Blackwood SA 5051.

The third FOLA report to the nation *Supporting students: the educational role of Australia's public libraries* will be available in late 2006.

Executive summary

In common with other developed countries Australia has an ageing population. Responding to the informational, learning, quality of life, wellbeing and independent living needs of that population will require increasing investment by all levels of government and agencies. This includes local government and particularly public libraries, local government's most heavily used and valued community provision.

A 2005 survey of Australian public libraries by Friends of Libraries Australia confirms that they receive high use from older adults, and that many libraries now provide more for them than their longstanding provision of large print and talking books. A few of those libraries are adequately funded to provide comprehensive and innovative responses to the varied needs of older adults. Most, however, are inadequately funded to provide such responses. Knowledge of what they currently provide, and have the potential to provide if properly funded, is considered to be not well recognised by the Australian, state/territory and local governments.

Public libraries play an important role in the lives of many older adults, particularly the lonely and isolated. However they often lack the accessibility, buildings, space, resources, professional staffing and funding to ensure that all older adults are able to take full advantage of what a modern public library can provide for them.

Their deficiencies include services for people who are homebound, services to institutional residents, services to older adults in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, physical accessibility, space and facilities appropriate for older adults, assisting older adults to bridge the digital divide, and marketing of services. Of particular concern is that many libraries do not strongly promote their home library services — an important contributor to independent living — because of fear of being unable to cope with the demand. Nor do any of them employ bibliotherapists to work with health professionals in identifying and recommending appropriate literature to help older adults and others cope with emotional issues, mental illness and life changes.

At present a minority of older Australians have access to the full benefits of what a public library should, and can cost effectively, provide for them. The majority, typically in lower socioeconomic urban areas, and in regional and rural Australia, do not have awareness of, or access to, those benefits. They are underserved.

Addressing this substantial inequity requires the interest and leadership of the Australian government and state/territory governments, and strategic planning by local government and public libraries.

From major recent Victorian research, public libraries need to be better funded to meet their widening roles at the heart of their communities and the increasing demand on them as unique multidimensional 'cradle to grave' services available to all.

This requires a shared response by all levels of government to the pressing need to reconceptualise the funding of Australia's public libraries to a level significantly greater that their current funding of only 7c per Australian per day.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are complemented by suggestions in the report.

1 The Australian Department of Health and Ageing, in association with the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, the Department of Family and Community Services, the Australian Local Government Association, and Public Libraries Australia convene a national forum on how to improve the capacity of Australia's public libraries to meet the increasing needs of older adults.

2 State/territory governments review their policies and informational and promotional materials for older adults to ensure that they reflect the current, and potential, role of their public libraries.

3 Local government authorities with policies on support for older adults review them to ensure that they reflect the current, and potential, contribution of their public libraries.

4 Local government authorities still developing policies on support for older adults ensure that they reflect the current, and potential, contribution of their public libraries.

5 The Australian Library and Information Association and Public Libraries Australia jointly develop and promulgate *Guidelines for library and information services for older Australians*. (p10)

6 Public library services evaluate their services for older adults using the best practice checklist appended to this report. (pp15-16)

7 Public library services develop and promote a web accessible policy and practice statement on services to older adults, including home library service, and with links to other websites for older adults.

8 State/territory central public library agencies, in association with state public library associations, conduct in 2006 seminars for public libraries and agencies for older adults to promote understanding and partnership in identifying and meeting the library needs of older adults.

9 State/territory public library agencies audit federal and state seniors websites, seniors cards websites, and other print and digital informational resources for older adults, for inclusion of information on public library services.

10 The Australian Department of Health and Ageing commission a review of the practice of bibliotherapy in Australia. (p13)

Australia's 1560 local public libraries have a unique multidimensional 'cradle to grave' user range and educational, informational, cultural, recreational, technological, social capital and democratic impact.

They are the most heavily used public buildings in Australia and the most valued local and state government community service. They can never be overused, are currently funded at only 7¢ per Australian per day, are available to 99% of the population, and are used by about 12 million Australians, far more than any other community provision.

Consistent with international trends they are being recognised as an outstanding community investment. One indicator of this is that about 250 new or redeveloped libraries are being built between 2000-2007. However if public libraries are to achieve their full potential to build educational and social capital, stronger communities and life quality, many need better buildings, opening hours, resources, services, programs, professional and other staffing, websites, funding, and marketing.

This requires a greater awareness by national, state/territory and local government decision makers of how much people use and value public libraries and of the very high quantitative and qualitative return on investment they provide.

Community critical: Australian public libraries serving seniors aims to contribute to that awareness. It also aims to inform and encourage those numerous local councils and their public library services still without strategies and priorities for developing services for older adults, to develop them as soon as possible.

An ageing population

Like most developed countries, Australia's population is ageing. Since 1901 the proportion of people 65 years and over has tripled, and the fastest growing group is those aged 75 and over. By 2051 the former group is projected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to be 25% of the population and the number of people over 60 will exceed those under 15 for the first time. Older adults will attract increasing political and bureaucratic attention. Not only are they a growing proportion of the population, the percentage of them with high levels of education is rising, something of particular import to public libraries.

However their impact on local government and public libraries will not be even. As the 2005 *Ageing awareness and action survey* report of the Australian Local Government Association states

> There are wide variations in the rate of population ageing across and within Australia's states and territories. It is projected that older Australians will continue to be concentrated in local government areas that are located along the east coast of Australia, particularly in Queensland.
>
> By 2019, the local government area of the oldest population in Australia is expected to be Bribie Island, Queensland. Around 37% of its residents are expected to be aged 65 years and over. This is an increase of 9% from current levels, and almost 20% higher than the projected national average. Bilinga in Queensland will maintain its place as the nation's second oldest local government area with 35% of residents in this age cohort by 2019. Victor Harbor in South Australia will have 33% of its population aged 65 and above, making it the 3rd oldest local government area.[1]

Who is a senior?

In terms of chronological age, there are several answers to this question. The Australian government's seniors website www.seniors.gov.au specifies that it is a resource 'for all Australians over 50'. Most state seniors card entitlements start at age 60. Other sources and agencies use 65.

Chronological age alone is thus not a good definer of who is a senior. From older workers retiring in their 50s, to the elderly in their 80s and increasingly beyond, there is a wide range of physical capacity, experience, interests and mental alertness represented. No general definition of senior based on those individual aspects suffices either. Expectations, cultural background and economic life cycle add even more variables that separate seniors into several stages of ageing. As has been observed, the one thing that seniors have in common is that they are all different. In Australia, as in several other developed countries, the seniors population also comprises a diversity of races and cultures.

The first premise of planning services for seniors is therefore recognition of this diversity, and avoiding gerontological stereotyping. The second premise, however, is the need for the facets of the ageing process to be considered in developing services for them. A seminal 1989 paper by Herr and Bridgland *Serving our elderly users: the library perspective* [2] explores these, and other issues, well.

Some seniors dislike the term and categorisation. Others do not like elderly or ageing. 'Older adults' is becoming more common in the research and literature, but is sometimes an awkward usage.

Community critical therefore uses seniors inclusively, together with 'older adults'.

Australian local government and seniors

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) represents Australia's 673 local councils. In April 2005 it published its first *Ageing awareness and action survey report*[1] as an initiative of the *Australian local government population ageing action plan 2004-2008*.

This plan complements the Australian government's *National strategy for an ageing Australia*, and manifests the partnership entered into by the ALGA on behalf of local government in November 2003. Project timelines and implementation responsibilities are specified in an annual work program on the ALGA's Planning for an ageing community website www.alga.asn.au/ageing.

The ALGA survey received a response from 35% of Australia's councils, with 62% of those responses being from rural councils. Among the survey's findings are that

- the key council services currently provided to seniors are *libraries*(63.33%), *home and community care* (46.67%) and *volunteering services* (34%)

- 93% of councils believe that population ageing will impact on them, 28% severely

- 97% believe they must plan now for that impact

- only 31.43% rate it as a high priority

- only 25.24% have developed a strategy

- councils will need assistance in meeting needs, most importantly specialised staff and support systems and networks

- emerging initiatives include health and wellbeing, and continuing education.

Australian public libraries and seniors

In Australia and other developed countries, public libraries are recognising the challenge and opportunity of ageing populations, the special role they can play in lifelong learning and the quality of life of seniors and those with disabilities, in supporting independent living and fostering that mental activity which research indicates can reduce senility and Alzheimer's disease.[3]

However one of the fallacies about seniors is that most will become frail or ill. Any period of poor health prior to death is also decreasing. As Hugman points out

> …it will be less than one third of the population aged over 65 years who have a sufficient degree of frailty or ill-health so as to require either assistance or support from others in their daily lives or the intervention of professional services. [4]

Public libraries are already heavily used by seniors. They tend to be a large and dedicated cohort of users, beyond their representation in the local population. Yet there is evidence that some seniors, for example from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities who have not grown up accustomed to being able to access free public libraries, are not taking advantage of what they provide. Sometimes they are not aware that libraries are free to use, and will often contain resources in their first languages. On the other hand, baby boomers (1946-1961), having been more accustomed to being able to access public libraries, are often voracious about information, learning and technology. They have high expectations of their libraries, something which requires recognition by local and state governments in their funding of public libraries. Public libraries also 'have the attraction of being generally free, airconditioned and secure, important considerations for seniors with limited incomes'.[5]

For seniors, they are

- providers of information in all areas, and on health, retirement, ageing, grandparenting, legal and genealogical issues in particular

- facilitators of lifelong learning and of students of the University of the Third Age

- providers of print resources, large print books, talking books and other multimedia

- providers of internet access and internet training

- providers of assistive technology

- providers to the homebound, retirement and aged care centres and to nursing homes

- initiators and supporters of Friends of Libraries, their programs and activities

- providers of volunteering opportunities

- places of social contact and connection, the 'new village green' as described by the Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay.

Local councils sometimes provide, or contribute to, community buses which may transport seniors to their libraries. Most also provide at least some support through their libraries for the delivery of reading and other materials to the homebound and institutionalised..

The roles and valuation of public libraries is reflected well in major research in Victoria which was published in five parts in 2005 as *Libraries building communities*.[6] Through interviews with 10,000 people, this confirms international research about the very high *qualitative* contribution of public libraries to individual lives and the community. It also found that public libraries need to be better funded by local and state governments to meet their widening responsibilities and very high usage

> Public libraries have taken on new roles over the years without a proper re assessment of the appropriate resources, including skills, needed to support these. It was widely thought by all *Libraries building communities* participants that public library funding should be completely reviewed in the light of the information society and the demands this is placing on them.[7]

The Friends of Libraries Australia survey

A two page survey containing 40 questions was mailed in July 2005 to all Australian public library services, a total of 534 individual services with 1560 branches. The survey was based on a 56 question instrument used for a survey of public library services to seniors in Ontario, Canada.[8] The questions focused on identifying the extent to which local public libraries are able to be used readily by seniors, and their experience when they do so.

Not surveyed were the few specialist 'public' library services in Australia which provide valuable resources and support directly to individuals, including older adults, with vision, hearing or other impairment.

Responses were requested by 15 July 2005. No follow up was attempted of those library services failing to respond. The total responses were 171 or about 33%, of which 56% were from nonmetropolitan regional and rural library services. By comparison the 2004 FOLA survey received a 27% overall response. Although the survey required less than 15 minutes to complete, this response rate was not unexpected as a number of the 534 individual public library services in Australia are small rural single branch services with limited or no professional staffing, particularly in Queensland and Western Australia.

The response rate is comparable with that to the Australian Local Government Association's *Ageing awareness and action survey*. This elicited responses from just 35% of Australia's local councils, of which 62% were from rural councils.

All of the questions were answered by most of the library services. The following summarises the responses as percentages, complemented in some cases by examples and commentary.

1   ***Does your council/councils strategic planning specify seniors as a target group?***
Yes 58%   *No* 42%

2   ***Does your library's strategic planning specify seniors as a target group?***
Yes 60%   *No* 40%
Commentary Several libraries included documentation on their strategy. The *Aged service strategy* of the Yarra Plenty Regional Library, Victoria(a partnership between three councils) is a particularly good example www.yprl.vic.gov.au/

3   ***Your definition of seniors***
Over 55 35%   *Over 60* 34%   *Over 65* 27%
Other definitions over 50, over 70, anyone born 1930-1946, seniors cardholders
Commentary   Seniors cardholders in the different states and territories of Australia are normally eligible for a card at the age of 60 and if no longer employed full time. This age is a suggested compromise for library planning purposes.

4, 5 ***Questions 4 and 5 asked libraries to identify the percentage of seniors in the community, and the percentage who were library members***
Commentary Most responded to question 4 but the results depend on their definition of senior. Few were able to answer question 5 due to them not recording the age of their members. However in most responses which provided the two percentages requested, the percentage of senior library members exceeded that of their representation in the community. This is consistent with the two largest cohorts of public library users usually being children 5-14 and adults over 55.

6   ***Do you have a seniors advisory group which meets with library staff?***
Yes 8%   *No* 92%
Commentary Several respondents said this idea had never been considered by them, but would now be considered

7   ***Have you ever surveyed seniors about their library needs?***
Yes 43%   *No* 57%
Commentary A few respondents said they had done so as part of a survey of all users

8   ***Have you ever held a seniors focus group meeting to discuss library needs?***
Yes 16%   *No* 84%
Commentary Three libraries had done so as part of a public consultation on a new library building

9   ***Do you target seniors in marketing library programs and services?***
Yes 82%   *No* 18%

10   ***Do have a policy statement on services to seniors?***
Yes 2%   *No* 98%
Commentary Several respondents stated that they did not have a broad policy statement but had one for their home library service

11   ***Do you have service objectives and standards for services to seniors?***
Yes 16%   *No* 84%

12   ***Do you have a seniors membership with special privileges?***
Yes 23%   *No* 77%
Commentary Examples of privileges were VIP membership, borrowing history alerts, more loans, no fines, no or lower charges for reservations and interlibrary loans, no overdue notices. Some of these privileges only applied to users of the home library service

13   ***Do you have a professional staff member specifically responsible for developing seniors services?***
Yes 26%   *No* 74%
Commentary Titles included Adult, Community and Multicultural Services Librarian, Adult and Senior Services Librarian, Access and Equity Librarian, Adult Services Librarian, Aged Services Librarian, Community Services Librarian, Services to Seniors Librarian, Special Services Librarian. The large number of libraries without a specialised position of seniors services librarian is consistent with the

finding of the ALGA *Ageing awareness and action survey* of the need for local government as a whole to employ more specialised staff. An important leadership role for such a library position is development of all library staff to understand the purpose and need for developing services for seniors, and to combat biases and stereotyping. None of the survey responses indicated that a seniors services position was jointly funded with an adjacent library service/s. This would be worth considering between smaller services, and in regional and rural areas in particular

14   ***Do you have a specific budget allocation for seniors services?***
        Yes 17%   *No* 83%

15   ***Do you have a specific budget allocation for seniors collections?***
        Yes 38%   *No* 62%
        Commentary A number of respondents specified the allocation was still only for large print materials

16   ***Do you have a specific budget for seniors programs?***
        Yes 17%   *No* 83%

17   ***Does your collection development policy refer to seniors?***
        Yes 34%   *No* 66%

18   ***Do you intentionally include children's resources which counter negative stereotypes of ageing?***
        Yes 44%   *No* 56%

19   ***Is there a community bus which enables seniors to visit the library if they wish***
        Yes at all branches 17%   *Yes at some branches* 25%   *No* 58%
        Commentary In the light of the many negative responses to this question, it is suggested that councils review transportation barriers to members of their communities accessing their libraries. One commendable recent initiative by a rural library, which is part of a regional library system, is *Readers on wheels*, a project between the Gunnedah Shire Library NSW, Community Transport and Home and Community Care. This alternative to home library service transports the frail and those with disabilities, or their carers, to the library where they select their own materials and socialize over morning tea

20   ***Is adequate parking close to the library?***
        Yes at all branches 62%   *Yes at some branches* 18%   *No* 26%

21   ***Is your entrance easily accessible?***
        Yes at all branches 69%   *Yes at some branche*s 17%   *No* 14%

22   ***Do you have electronic doors?***
        Yes at all branches 49%   *Yes at some branches* 32%   *No* 19%

23   ***Do you have public toilets?***
        Yes 84%   *No* 16%
        Commentary A number of respondents stated that toilets were not available at all branches, a barrier to library use by some older adults

24   ***Are your library spaces and shelf heights readily accessible by someone with limited mobility?***
        Yes at all branches 45%   *Yes at some branches* 25%   *No* 30%

25   ***Do you have high quality lighting?***
        Yes at all branches 57%   *Yes at some branches* 19%   *No* 24%

26   ***Do you provide task lighting eg study table lamps?***
        Yes at all branches 8%   *Yes at some branches* 13%   *No* 79%

27   ***Do you provide very legible signage of high contrast colouring?***
        Yes at all branches 53%   *Yes at some branches* 20%   *No* 27%

28 ***Do you offer library programs specific to seniors?***
Yes 69%   *No* 31%
Commentary Examples included Seniors health@your library seminars, Silver surfers, Computer savvy seniors, Computer pals for seniors, short film about seniors' use of libraries (Southern Tablelands Library NSW), talks, discussion groups, new book sessions, gardening group, local history program, genealogy, book clubs, games group, financial literacy seniors, seniors section on library website, digital photography sessions, oral history mornings with tapes of local people telling their stories to seniors. Several respondents also referred to the importance of friendly and sensitive library staff able to interact with older users often living alone, and for whom the library and its staff are an important social contact

29 ***Examples of ways in which you have tried to make the library seniors friendly***
Commentary Examples included baskets, trolleys, ezy walkers/frames, wheelchairs, hearing loops, wide aisles, raised lower shelves, assistive technology, magnifying glasses, chairs with strong arms and easy to arise from, staff trained in sensitivity issues, seniors corner close to large print books, CCTV text magnifier, involving seniors in children's programs, supporting Friends of the Library, seniors display board and seating area, volunteering opportunities, free tea/coffee, free phone for taxis, wheelchair lift in mobile library

30 ***Do you provide assistive technologies eg Zoomtext?***
Yes at all branches 16%   *Yes at some branches* 19%   *No* 65%
Commentary Assistive (sometimes called adaptive) technologies are information technologies designed to assist people with a visual or other physical or mental impairment to use print and other resources. Examples given by respondents included touch screens, pcs with larger fonts, keyboards with large keys, Kurzweil 3000, Zoomtext, OCR scanning, Jaws, adjustable desks, rats (larger trackball mouses), CCTV text magnifier. It is suggested that libraries still using the term 'adaptive' consider changing to the more indicative 'assistive'. This is the term increasingly used internationally, and in Australia. The overall lack of assistive technology in Australian public libraries, compared with academic libraries, is noteworthy and a concern

31 ***Do you actively promote library services to other agencies serving seniors?***
Yes 66%   *No* 34%
Commentary Examples included Blue Care, adult daycare visits, community health nurses, Meals on Wheels, Centrelink, adult learners, nursing homes, retirement villages, community workers meetings, vision impaired groups, Probus, pensioners groups, community centres, involvement in seniors week, University of the Third Age (3UA)

32 ***Do you co-sponsor programs with other agencies serving seniors?***
Yes 33%   *No* 67%
Commentary Examples included staying on your feet campaign, centre link, seniors week events, explore with 3UA, home and community care

33 ***Does your state/territory seniors card service promote public libraries to seniors?***
Yes 15%   *No* 11%   *Do not know* 74%
Commentary The only service that appears to do so is NSW, although some libraries in other states, particularly in WA, provide application forms for seniors cards. Both provisions are worthy of national adoption. On the national and state seniors websites, and on the numerous other seniors websites such as *Greypath* www.greypath.com.au, libraries are generally not mentioned at all, except for occasional references to their internet provision

34 ***Do you offer home library service to people unable to visit the library?***
Yes 93%   *No* 7%
Is it is funded and staffed as an integral part of library service?
Yes 76%   *No* 24%
Commentary The 93% positive response suggests that home library service is now recognised as an essential core library service, although the reality is that the service is still often marginally funded by councils and libraries. In most of the larger libraries the management of the service, selection of materials, and training of volunteers is by professional staff, with delivery mostly by volunteers. In smaller libraries the service is often almost totally reliant on volunteers. Few libraries strongly promote their home library service because, as a number of respondents indicated, of a lack of resources to cope with more users. An unknown, but probably considerable, number of older adults are thus not benefiting

from a library service which supports wellbeing, mental processes, social contact and independent living. Some libraries do describe their service well, including on their websites. However many of the prospective users of a home library service will not have access to the internet at home, so other forms of service promotion must continue to be provided. One example of good website content is Maroochy Libraries, Qld http://www.maroochylibraries.qld.gov.au/servicesforseniors.htm. A best practice example, in terms of description and level of service provided, is that of the City of Boroondara, Victoria www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/libraries/libraries.asp?PageId=153w. More libraries now appear to be using 'home library service' or 'homebound service' in preference to 'housebound service'

35   ***Are you aware of the Australian Library and Information Association's 'Guidelines for Australian home library services'*** www.alia.org.au/policies/home.library.service.html
Yes 61%   *No* 39%
Commentary This quite high awareness indicates the value of national guidelines produced by ALIA as the national professional association. However across Australia possibly at least 40% of public libraries remain unaware of the home library service guidelines. ALIA should consider promoting them again, in association with Public Libraries Australia

36   ***Do you meet the guidelines?***
In full 15%   *In part* 43%   *Do not know* 42%
Commentary The ALIA guidelines were promulgated in 2002. They were possibly the first in the world to specify that public libraries now had a responsibility to assist the homebound in connecting with and using the internet, in part so that they can be more independent in accessing local and national library resources and services. However it seems unlikely that all of the 15% of respondents who indicated that they meet the guidelines in full, are yet assisting their homebound users in this way. One that does is Boroondara Libraries in Melbourne with its peer training program for seniors *Computer savvy seniors.* This program is available in a library, aged care facility or in the home of the senior.

37   ***Do you provide deposit collections for seniors in seniors centres, nursing homes etc***
Yes 61%   *No* 39%
Commentary Although this is a positive response rate, an issue which the literature suggests should be considered by public libraries is just where and how their collections are deposited, and whether access to them is dependent on the mobility of the individual because the collections are static in one location, rather than being on trolleys. Another important issue raised by one respondent is that public libraries provide 'inequitable service to seniors in residential institutions — there is no individual delivery service once you leave your own home'

38   ***Overall how would you rate your service to seniors?***
Very satisfactory 8%   *Satisfactory* 45%   *Unsatisfactory* 44%   *Very unsatisfactory* 3%

39   ***If you have rated your service as 'unsatisfactory or 'very unsatisfactory' what are the reasons?***
Lack of funds 23%   *Lack of professional staff* 22%   *Lack of staff overall* 22%
Poor buildings 13%   *Lack of space* 15%   *Lack of council interest* 5%
Commentary Most respondents provided more than one reason for their service being 'unsatisfactory' or 'very unsatisfactory'

40   ***List any resources you have found useful in developing services for seniors***
- Australian Library and Information Association's *Guidelines for Australian home library services* www.alia.org.au/policies/home.library.service.html

- Brennan, T *Disability awareness kit: a training resource for public library customer staff* Melbourne, Arts Victoria 1998

- Carnahan, R and Parker, S *Serving seniors: a resource manual for Missouri libraries* Missouri State Library 2002 www.sos.mo.gov/library/developmentservices/seniors/manual/resource_manual.pdf *This is an excellent free resource which includes a section on the myths and realities of ageing*

- Honnold, R and Mesaros, S *Serving seniors: a how to do it manual for librarians* NY, Neal-Schumann 2004

- *A longer-term strategy for older people's use of Canberra's library services and facilities* 2002 www.library.act.gov.au/actpl/highlightsfromthesurvey.html

- Metropolitan Public Libraries Association(MPLA)NSW home library service network and guidelines www.mplansw.asn.au/hlsn/guidelines/index.htm

- *People places: a guide for public library buildings in NSW* 2000(new edition in preparation) www.sl.nsw.gov.au/pls/publications/pdf/people_places.pdf

Three other useful resources not specified by respondents are

- American Library Association *Library services to older adults guidelines* www.ala.org/ala/rusa/ usaprotools/reference/libraryservices.htm

- Canadian Library Association *Canadian guidelines on library and information services for older adults* www.cla.ca/about/olderadults.htm

- Wenninger, R Creating a senior-friendly library, in McCabe, G and Kennedy, J *Planning the modern public library building* Westport, Libraries Unlimited 2003 pp171-174

The Canadian and US guidelines suggest the desirability of national guidelines for use by Australian public libraries in developing services for older adults. At present the only guidelines available are for home library service.

Observations by survey respondents

These included
- there is a need for closer cooperation between councils and their public libraries when developing strategies for services to seniors

- our services to seniors programs have been running very successfully for 15 years but we never have enough staff or funds to meet needs

- resourcing the home library service is a particular issue. If we promoted the service more widely we would be unable to cope

- there is inequitable service to seniors in residential institutions — there is no individual delivery service provided once you leave your own home

- there is no internet access to the library provided for homebound users

- the cost of providing materials in multiple experience format is a real problem

- as a small country library we do not have enough resources to provide specific services for seniors

- we just do not have enough space and meeting rooms for seniors programs and activities

- our staff are very helpful and understanding of seniors issues. This is an organisational 'culture' rather than a deliberate program

- attendance at our Friends of the Library events and activities is largely by seniors, although the topic/event is appropriate for all ages

- a challenge with targeting the seniors community is that not everyone identifies with it, even if they are of an appropriate age

- it is important to treat seniors as normal members of the community, but with some special needs which are often shared by people who are not seniors

- a survey of the users of our IT found that seniors were the most common users, often learning about the internet to keep in touch with the younger generation

- we are concerned about retiring baby boomers and our inability to provide services to meet their demands

- we are now reviewing the whole library service— a more formal approach to targeting seniors will flow as part of this process, given their representation in our population.

Public libraries, their funding and services for seniors

Public libraries are by far the most heavily used and valued local government community service, and in Australia as a whole. Their return on investment has been calculated to be between $2.50 and over $6.00 for every dollar invested in them.[9] However, at only about 7¢ per Australian per day, most remain significantly underfunded to meet the needs of the full range of their actual and potential users. They are generally endeavouring do too much with too little local government and state government funding. This is especially in regional and rural areas, and at the state level in NSW, Queensland and Victoria, with NSW by far the worst funding state.

In a 2004 survey of services to the over 65s in NSW public libraries Marianne Rajkovic identified what is needed for public libraries to identify and respond to the needs of the fastest growing cohort in the community. Her findings are consistent with the findings from the FOLA national survey. A major issue is that councils often still do not have a policy position on seniors, and if they do have one it rarely recognises overtly the major existing and potential contribution of their libraries.

Another issue for their libraries is how they should market what they provide to those older adults from a nonEnglish speaking overseas background who did not have access to public libraries in their earlier years — as indeed many older Australians did not — and who may be unaware of what they now provide in developed countries. One library service which has taken a commendably strong interest in this area is Fairfield in NSW. Assisted by a NSW State Library grant, it produced in 2005 the main report of user and nonuser surveys to help identify why older people in Fairfield use public library services less than in other local government areas. This is despite the fact that Fairfield Library is at the forefront in its multicultural initiatives, and has high usage among younger people. The research focus on the behaviour of three NESB communities is an Australian, and possibly, a world first. One of its conclusions is that 'Current nonusers of Fairfield Library Service will need strong persuasion, and information about the services, to come to the party… Illiteracy, lack of proficiency in English and social isolation are important factors….[10]

Rajkovic also concluded from her survey

> There was a general lack of awareness of some of services provided by the library despite… investing a great deal of effort in trying to make people aware of the services. Such services as the bus collection, ability to get community language material from the State Library and services to the disabled were generally not known about.[11]

Similarly, Chris Jones, the library manager of the Great Lakes Library Service NSW concludes from a review of the impact of an older community on his, and some other NSW library services, that coastal libraries in Australia face particular challenges because coastal communities are retirement destinations.

> These library services have the following features
> - stock is discarded at a higher rate, most likely due to heavy usage
> - more of the library budget is dedicated towards material for an ageing population, in particular in the area of large print material. This material is significantly more expensive than the standard print medium
> - staff at coastal libraries dedicate more of their time to basic circulation services
> The prediction is that as the population across Australia ages this will have an impact on public library services. They will have to dedicate more of their precious collection budgets towards replacing material

that is falling apart from usage. As well as this they will find themselves buying their material in more expensive formats such as large print and talking books. On top of pressure being placed on the collection the same libraries will have to provide more staff towards basic circulation services.

The ageing of the community is affecting public libraries. This problem is no longer a local issue, if it ever was. Australia is realising that ageing is a national issue. *When federal and state governments start formulating responses to the ageing population it is hoped that these levels of government appreciate, in a budgetary way, the important role public libraries play in the lives of senior citizens.*[12]

Strengths and limitations

The NSW survey by Rajkovic, the coastal libraries study by Jones, the Fairfield research and this Friends of Libraries Australia national survey on public libraries and seniors, indicate the strengths and limitations of current services to seniors by Australian public libraries.

A relatively few larger public libraries appear to have the funding and council support to approach their service delivery to seniors in a strategic and comprehensive way, and have sometimes been innovative in doing so. They are the exceptions.

The ACT Library and Information Service's researched approach is particularly good, and should be reviewed by all councils and their libraries which have yet to examine the issues in depth.[13]

However too many public libraries, especially in rural and regional areas and lower socioeconomic areas of the larger cities, appear to lack the local authority policy framework, funding, specialist staffing positions, library space and spaces, facilities and resources to provide, improve and market their resources, programs and services to all seniors in their communities.

Forty seven per cent of respondents to the FOLA survey, for example, rated their library service to seniors as 'unsatisfactory' or 'very unsatisfactory'. Few rated their service 'very satisfactory'. As another example, one important service provided by public libraries is their home service to individuals, and to those in aged care centres, nursing homes and retirement centres. Typically these services operate on a 'shoe string', are reliant on the good will of library staff and volunteers and are not promoted strongly for fear of demand which cannot be met. Few libraries in Australia yet appear to be able to meet in full the *Guidelines for Australian home library services* of the Australian Library and Information Association.[14]

As seniors live longer, there is a greater chance of them experiencing clinical depression. However, although not an issue just for older adults, there appears to be now little recognition in Australia of the well documented benefits of *bibliotherapy*[15] — the prescribed use of literature to help people to cope with emotional issues, mental illness, depression and life changes. This is despite the fact that research has demonstrated bibliotherapy outcomes comparable with drug therapy and psychotherapy.

In the last five years recognition of this cost effective therapy, first developed by librarians and health professionals in the 1930s, has led to the commencement of employment of bibliotherapists in UK public libraries to work closely with health professionals. At present, no bibliotherapist is employed by local authorities, their public libraries, or the state libraries, in the whole of Australia. Nor is there any evidence of the employment of bibliotherapists by hospitals and other healthcare providers. A review of this situation is needed.

Also from the UK, and a good precedent for the Australian government and state governments, is that one of the seven shared priorities between the national and local government is older people. The impact of public libraries on that shared priority has been shown, from a 2005 report[16] to be 'in a range of themes around quality of life and general well being, as well as national priorities on strengthening independent living'. This report, *Libraries impact project*, contains a survey template for libraries to collect qualitative data from older adults. The template could be adapted for Australia wide use by councils and their libraries[17] to collect qualitative data to strengthen knowledge and awareness of why public libraries are so important to so many people.

Opportunity and challenge

Improving services to seniors, and achieving better funding to do so, is at once an opportunity and challenge for Australia's public libraries. The opportunity is that seniors are becoming a larger, and politically potent, part of local and broader communities. They will increasingly press their claims for more and better services to meet their perceived needs. All levels of government, and public libraries, would be wise to give them a high priority.

A minority of public libraries already accord them that priority, and have capacity to do so. Others do not, and probably cannot. Nonetheless a public library properly resourced by local and state governments is the community resource best able, and most cost effectively, to contribute to the overall quality of life, wellbeing, social connection and independent living of older adults.

The challenge for public libraries is described by Kahlert in her research paper, *The impact of the baby boomers on public libraries: myth and reality,* as requiring

> Innovative and visionary leadership, continuous learning, and enthusiasm' to meet 'the needs of our future seniors who will be large in numbers and unique in their demands.[18]

For the Australian government, state/territory and local governments the challenge is to cooperate more effectively and do a better job of ensuring that Australia's public libraries are provided with the modest increased investment required to achieve their full potential for older adults, and indeed all other Australians.

It is also the opportunity for those governments to show over 12 million Australian public library users that they recognise the modern public library as community critical, not community optional.

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Appendix

LIBRARY SERVICES TO SENIORS – A BEST PRACTICE CHECKLIST

The following list derives from several sources, including a list developed by Saskatchewan Libraries, Canada www.lib.sk.ca/staff/bestpractices/seniors.html

It is suggested that library managers and Friends of Libraries audit what their library service provides, and identify major needs which should be drawn to the attention of the council/s, and lesser needs which could be targets for fund raising by the Friends.

Services to seniors is integrated into the overall library plan, budget and service program
Yes ❏ No ❏

The library is a community focal point for seniors information Yes ❏ No ❏

There is a regularly updated seniors part of the library's website, providing a portal to other websites and information for seniors Yes ❏ No ❏

A specialist librarian is employed to lead, coordinate and evaluate services to seniors, and to develop partnerships with other community agencies Yes ❏ No ❏

Sensitivity training sessions on ageing and environmental needs of older adults are part of staff development programs Yes ❏ No ❏

Membership application forms and other materials are printed in at least a 12 point font and with a nonglossy finish Yes ❏ No ❏

At least one clearly labelled computer terminal with a large font, or voice recognition, is provided in all branches Yes ❏ No ❏

Large grip pens and pencils are provided Yes ❏ No ❏

Guides to specifically assist seniors in using the library, its services and resources are available
Yes ❏ No ❏

Specific programs for seniors are provided Yes ❏ No ❏

If the library has fines and other charges, these are waived or reduced for seniors Yes ❏ No ❏

A home library service is provided Yes ❏ No ❏

The home library service meets the *Guidelines for Australian home library services* of the Australian Library and Information Association www.alia.org.au/policies/home.library.service.html
Yes ❏ No ❏

The home library service is strongly promoted to all potential users Yes ❏ No ❏

A seniors advisory group has been established and meets regularly Yes ❏ No ❏

Ongoing partnerships have been established with community groups that serve seniors Yes ❏ No ❏

Adequate short term and disabled parking is available very close to the library Yes ❏ No ❏

A community bus, or other transport, is available to take seniors to a library Yes ❏ No ❏

Free telephone calls for taxis are readily made Yes ❏ No ❏

All library entrances and walkways are safe to use and provide easy access through automatic doors Yes ❏ No ❏

Wheelchair lifts are provided in new mobile libraries Yes ❏ No ❏

Assistive technology is provided in all branches, with height adjustable desks and chairs, for use by seniors and others with learning and vision impairment Yes ❏ No ❏

Library flooring has good traction, and no carpet, cabling or other protrusions Yes ❏ No ❏

There are comfortable, sound absorptive, and well lit reading areas in all branches Yes ❏ No ❏

Lighting is even and nonglare, and there is task lighting in reading and study areas in all branches Yes ❏ No ❏

Easily accessible clean toilets with disability provision and with easy to use taps, handles and other mechanisms are available in all branches Yes ❏ No ❏

Staff communication practices, control of background noise and avoidance of sound reflective surfaces provides a good hearing environment Yes ❏ No ❏

Sturdy chairs with arms for people to push against when arising are provided Yes ❏ No ❏

Shelving is no higher than 1600mm., no lower than 300mm. and aisle widths are no less than 1500mm Yes ❏ No ❏

Large print books and other materials heavily used by seniors are shelved in ranges at middle heights from the floor Yes ❏ No ❏

Deposit collections in aged care centres and nursing homes are on trolleys for accessibility by all residents regardless of their mobility Yes ❏ No ❏

Staff assistance in carrying books etc to cars is available Yes ❏ No ❏

Baskets, trolleys, ezy walkers and wheelchairs are provided in all branches Yes ❏ No ❏

Magnifying glasses and spare spectacles are available in all branches Yes ❏ No ❏

Library programs, collections and services are publicised in those media and venues which are most popular with seniors Yes ❏ No ❏

Application forms and publicity for state/territory seniors cards are available in all branches Yes ❏ No ❏

Tea/coffee/water is available in all branches Yes ❏ No ❏

A Friends of the Library group has been established and is supported by the library Yes ❏ No ❏

Volunteer opportunities, and opportunities to work intergenerationally with other library users are available Yes ❏ No ❏

People places: a guide for public library buildings in New South Wales is consulted when planning library buildings www.sl.nsw.gov.au/pls/publications/pdf/people_places.pdf Yes ❏ No ❏