

A new National Cultural Policy: Submission from Public Libraries Victoria (PLV)

Who we are

[Public Libraries Victoria](#) (PLV), the peak body for the state's 50 public library services, is a progressive alliance that supports public libraries to build stronger communities through advocacy, profile raising, information sharing, skills development and collaborative statewide projects. For the purposes of this consultation, PLV can be classified as Arts Peak Body.

First Nations

Public libraries play an important role in championing First Nations authors and illustrators in their communities, providing access to resources that value and promote a greater understanding of First Nations ways of knowing and being. First Nations stories are introduced to communities by public libraries through books bags for new parents, baby rhyme time and story times, making libraries often the first place of engagement with First Nations stories for many members of the community.

A growing number of public libraries actively promote First Nations writing through curated reading lists and displays, whether as part of national events (such as NAIDOC week) or as permanent features of their collections. Several employ First Nations educators or librarians to curate their First Nations collection.

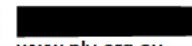
It is critical for children and adults to see First Nations authors on the shelves of their local public library. To this end, there are opportunities for government to expand small grants schemes for First Nations creators working with libraries. Public libraries in Maribyrnong Council in Melbourne's inner west, for example, worked with [Yarn Strong Sista Aboriginal Education Consultancy](#) on 'Bookstart: Books for Bubup', a project that provided a book bag for every baby born in the municipality, delivered by the Maternal Child Health nurse, and designed to encourage reading from birth and to increase library engagement. The project embedded First Nations culture, language and perspectives into the board book, *Our Bush Animals*, and accompanying 'Tummy Time Cards'. With government support, the project could be expanded to support councils without the means to develop their own resources in partnership with local First Nations organisations.

As a member of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), PLV is committed to working with libraries to improve First Nations representation, leadership and networking opportunities, promote cultural training for all library staff, and work on identification and correction of historical injustices in collections and metadata. Government could make a huge impact, in areas such as:

- Support, including scholarships, for First Nations people to undertake education and training to equip them with the skills to enter and progress in the library and information sector, and other related cultural jobs.
- Leadership programs to connect First Nations people working within the cultural sector and support them into leadership roles.
- Resourcing for cultural institutions to undertake the work necessary to redress past injustices in collections.

Public Libraries Victoria Inc.
ABN 62 734 551 228 Reg. No. A0023190G

Level 12/60 Collins Street
GPO Box 4326, Melbourne VIC 3001


www.plv.org.au

- Ongoing financial support for libraries with historically significant collections of First Nations material to ensure its safekeeping and preservation, where culturally appropriate, its sharing through national infrastructure such as Trove.
- Progression of work on the protection of Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property.

A place for every story

Victoria's public libraries are committed to reflecting the diversity of Australian literature in our collections and in public programming. Libraries play an active role in amplifying diverse voices and stories through initiatives such as inclusive/bilingual story time and Queer Book Clubs, and by actively programming diverse writers and artists in programs, events and reading challenges. Library staff build displays and curate recommended reading lists around events in the cultural calendar that showcase diversity (e.g. Harmony Week, IDAHOBIT Day, International Day of Disabled Persons, etc); and many library collections also include materials in Languages Other Than English.

Libraries make diverse Australian stories available by eliminating the cost barrier and ensuring accessible formats such as audio and large print, or translation, are available. Just as there is a place for every story, libraries make sure there is a story for everyone, no matter their circumstances.

Libraries connect communities with specifically Australian stories. In an era where overseas-based multinational firms are taking an ever-larger share of marketing and sales of books in all formats, libraries are a space where Australian writers and illustrators will always have prominence.

As part of the ecosystem that actively supports diverse Australian authors, PLV supports the Australian Society of Authors' call for the introduction of a minimum threshold of Australian-authored content on the school curriculum.

PLV also supports ALIA's call for every child to have access to a school library with qualified school library staff to ensure that all children can explore the work of Australian writers and illustrators and develop lifelong reading habits, which in turn will lead to a happier, healthier and more literate nation.¹

The Centrality of the Artist

Authors and illustrators, and the book industry, have sometimes struggled to secure funding and support compared to other art forms. PLV supports the call from Books Create Australia for a National Strategy or Framework providing a cohesive policy approach to secure ongoing funding for books and reading.

Artists rely on libraries for income, from book purchases through to fellowships, author talks, workshops and festivals. Australian authors and illustrators also receive payments under the lending rights scheme when their books are in library collections being borrowed and enjoyed – often long after royalty payments have ceased. Authors and illustrators rely on these relatively stable payments to invest in new creation. However, the scheme is badly in need of a funding boost and update as it does not cover ebooks or audiobooks, despite these formats making up an increasing percentage of library collections². A funded

¹ [Reading is Good for You: Literature Review](#), Australian Publishers Association, 2017.

² [The 2020-21 PLV Annual Statistical Survey](#) shows downloads of ebooks and digital resources in Victoria's public libraries increased by 27% in 2020-21, while the proportion of the total collection in Victoria that is digital items increased by 9.8% for the same period.

extension to and modernisation of lending rights is supported by PLV.

Library jobs are arts sector jobs. Like many arts sector jobs, they are often financially undervalued, creating barriers for the employment of First Nations and culturally diverse groups in particular. The university and VET courses for library and information services have come under pressures in recent years, with many courses closing. The substantial price increase at university level under the previous government's job ready graduates program put library and information services out of reach for many potential students. Moving library courses to a lower fee band would support a more diverse library workforce and the library courses at university level.

Strong Institutions

Public libraries offer communities free and inclusive places to learn, create, connect and belong. Libraries provide multiple opportunities for the expression of creativity and cultural identity, including:

- quiet spaces to write/create
- opportunities to learn and share skills
- free studio space and makerspaces
- programs to support and promote writers and other artists
- access to collections
- statewide campaigns to promote reading and literacy.

As such, public libraries are a unique and essential element of Australia's literary ecosystem and the arts ecosystem more broadly.

As noted in the ALIA submission, libraries are a trusted part of cultural infrastructure. Library collections hold the stories of the country, and are an important resource for everyone, particularly researchers and artists. Technological advances and the collaboration of Australia's libraries have brought significant opportunities in resource sharing and discovery, leading to world leading digital and physical infrastructure. Trove, hosted by the National Library of Australia, allows Australians to access everything from rare special collections in university libraries, to local history collections in remote public libraries, or local newspapers digitized by state libraries. With more than 50,000 visits every day, Trove is a popular and trusted piece of national infrastructure. However, the cost of utilising Trove Collaborative Services is becoming prohibitive for public libraries, resulting in some cases in their withdrawal from the scheme. Funding to subsidise the cost of Trove Collaborative Services would help ensure the scheme is affordable to all libraries and can thus fulfil its potential as a national repository that genuinely reflects Australia's literary history and culture.

Many public libraries struggle for resources for digital infrastructure, conservation, description, digital preservation and safe storage of the collections shared via Trove. The recent floods have highlighted the precarity of some collections and the need for more support for disaster preparedness and recovery, and the inclusion of cultural institutions such as libraries, in disaster and recovery plans – noting that public libraries provide a key refuge and place to access information in times of natural disasters.

Reaching the audience

Public libraries are key venues for Australian authors, poets, illustrators, historians, visual artists and writers, providing collections, resources, and spaces for artists both to work and to showcase their work. In

a non-COVID year, Victoria's 281 public library branches host some 30 million visits. More than 1.15 million different people – or one in every six Victorian – visit public libraries in person each year.³

Data from ALIA shows that in 2019-2020, despite COVID impact, 6.3 million people attended a program or event at their local public library, with more than 84 million physical visits, and 140 million loans.

Libraries are one of the few physical public spaces that are open and accessible to all for free. They are a safe place to connect with the arts, they embrace diverse voices, are accessible online for people who cannot be there in person and play an essential role in the national cultural ecosystem.

While more than 90% of Australians read a book last year, there is still work to be done to support Australian authors, publishers, booksellers and librarians to introduce people to the many benefits to be realised by developing a lifelong habit of reading. National reading campaigns are key to unlocking those benefits for all to make Australians happier, smarter and healthier, while building demand for literary products and work for literary creatives.

Public Libraries Victoria has developed several statewide campaigns that could be scaled up nationally with appropriate resourcing:

- [Big Summer Read](#) is aimed at children and takes place from 1 December to 31 January. Big Summer Read is designed to arrest the 'summer slide', the loss of literacy skills over the summer holidays when children do not read, estimated on average as the equivalent of two to three months of reading proficiency.⁴ Loss of reading proficiency is most acute in children from economically disadvantaged communities due to lack of access to affordable summer learning opportunities.⁵ Studies have found that children who receive and read free books over the summer experience the equivalent of attending three years of summer school, with the most economically disadvantaged children gaining the most from such initiatives.⁶
- Warm Winter Read is aimed at adults and takes place from 1 June to 31 July. Warm Winter encourages adult readers to discover the joys of developing a daily reading habit over the months of June and July. The campaign promotes the documented benefits of reading in addition to enjoyment, including increased wellbeing, reduced stress and improved brain health.⁷ A diverse group of Victorian author ambassadors provide recommended reading lists, which are printed as bookmarks and used by the libraries to promote local writers.

Public libraries are in a unique position to deliver national reading campaigns that strengthen literacy and literary appreciation in Australians of all ages.

³ [Inside our public libraries](#): Findings of the Victorian Public Library Survey and Victorian Public Library Census, 2022. State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria.

⁴ Dynia, J, Piasta, S, Justice, L, & Library, C M (2015). Impact of Library Based Summer Reading Clubs on Primary-Grade Children's Literacy Activities and Achievement. *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 386-405.

⁵ <https://www.renaissance.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020-myON-Summer-Reading-Toolkit-English-Updated.pdf>

⁶ <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/face/pdf/research-compendium/access-to-books.pdf>

⁷ [Reading is Good for You: Literature Review](#), Australian Publishers Association, 2017.

Recommendations

1. Recognise and resource the public library sector as a unique and essential element of Australia's literary ecosystem and the arts ecosystem more broadly.
2. Expand small grants schemes for First Nations creators working with libraries.
3. Provide support, including scholarships, for First Nations people to undertake education and training to equip them with the skills to enter and progress in the library and information sector, and other related cultural jobs.
4. Deliver leadership programs to connect First Nations people working within the cultural sector and support them into leadership roles.
5. Resource cultural institutions to undertake the work necessary to redress past injustices in collections.
6. Provide ongoing financial support for libraries with historically significant collections of First Nations material to ensure its safekeeping and preservation, where culturally appropriate, its sharing through national infrastructure such as Trove.
7. Progress work on the protection of Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property.
8. Introduce a minimum threshold of Australian-authored content on the school curriculum.
9. Ensure every child has access to a school library with qualified school library staff so they can explore the work of Australian writers and illustrators and develop lifelong reading habits, leading to a happier, healthier and more literate nation.
10. Develop a National Strategy or Framework for Australia's literary industry, which provides a cohesive policy approach to secure ongoing funding for books and reading.
11. Extend and modernise the Australian lending rights scheme to include digital material.
12. Move university library courses to a lower fee band to support a more diverse library workforce.
13. Provide funding to subsidise Trove Collaborative Services in order to ensure the scheme is affordable to all public libraries and can thus fulfil its potential as a national repository that genuinely reflects Australia's literary history and culture.
14. Include public libraries and other cultural institutions in disaster preparedness and recovery plans.
15. Provide resources for national reading campaigns to promote the joy and benefits of reading, to strengthen literacy, and to build community demand for literary products and work for literary creatives.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. PLV is happy for this submission to be made public and any quotes to be attributed to Angela Savage (unless where another organisation's content is indicated), Chief Executive Officer, Public Libraries Victoria [REDACTED]