

**State Library of New South Wales
Public Library Network Research Program**

**Research Project
Public Libraries and Sustainable Communities**

Discussion Paper

Background

The research priority for the Public Library Network (PLN) Research Program is a project that measures the value of public libraries. This discussion paper outlines a proposed project that will achieve this result within the current context of NSW government policy and future directions.

Introduction

The grounds for supporting arts institutions in general has changed dramatically over the past 25 years as the historic basis for public funding does not support an increasingly output oriented and quantitative approach to public sector management.¹

Generally, the current arguments to support libraries are in the main based on value judgements and not on testable and importantly tested hypotheses that can be used to develop robust policy. This issue is becoming increasingly apparent and is likely to result in critical reviews of both the level and pattern of current funding.²

It is suggested that a project that measures public libraries value in a way that is meaningful to government, public libraries and the community be investigated.

Sustainability and triple bottom line reporting are possible frameworks by which a project can explore and measure public libraries value within a context that is very relevant to current government policy. The NSW Government is considering a whole of government approach to sustainability, with a particular focus on the impacts on the local community. The NSW Government is undertaking research into the current policies and practices of NSW Government agencies in the area of sustainability. The NSW Government has recently appointed Professor Peter Newman as the Sustainability Commissioner.

Sustainability can be defined as:

‘Meeting the needs of current and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity’.³

¹ Ellis, A 2003 *Valuing Culture* paper commissioned for a conference organized by Demos in association with AEA Consulting, London

² *ibid*

³ Western Australian Government, Sustainability in Western Australia, www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au, accessed 25 August 2004

Triple bottom line reporting provides a way of measuring sustainability. It can be defined as:

'...the mechanism by which an organisation conveys its values or principles and its performance in matching them'.⁴

Generally, public libraries are well placed to support sustainable communities. For instance the National Council for Science and the Environment (USA) outlines ten 'keys' to sustainable communities. Libraries directly support six of these 'keys'.⁵ However, the contribution that public libraries make to sustainability has not been clearly defined, explored or measured. The State Library of Victoria is currently completing a major study that does explore the contribution public libraries play in building their community. This will be a valuable piece of research. This proposed project intends to build on such work by ensuring that not only the social capital aspect of public libraries is quantified but the economic and environmental are also measured.

This discussion paper proposes a project that highlights the contribution public libraries make to a sustainable NSW community and a means of quantifying that contribution. The aim, objectives and desired outcomes are outlined below.

Research Aim

- Highlight the contribution public libraries make to a sustainable NSW community.

Research Objectives

Accordingly, this research will:

- Explore the role of public libraries in achieving a sustainable community
- Establish a framework for evaluating and communicating sustainability initiatives and outcomes in NSW public libraries
- Measure the economic, social and environmental value of public libraries to their local community

Research Results

This research will result in information that will assist:

- Public libraries and their councils in planning, development and support of library services
- Provide a framework to measure the economic, social and environmental value of public libraries
- The NSW Government in its development of a whole of government sustainability approach.

⁴ Christchurch City Council, Financial Plan and Programme, Triple Bottom Line Measures, www.ccc.govt.nz/TripleBottomLine, viewed at 25 August 2004

⁵ National Council for Science and the Environment (USA), Report from the second national conference on science, policy and the environment, www.ncseonline.org/NCSEconference/2001Conference/report/page.cf, viewed 25 August 2004

Consultation and reporting

A suitably qualified consultant/consultancy will be contracted to conduct this research project. The PLN Research Committee will communicate the project's progress and key findings through its various representative bodies. Up to date Information regarding the project will be located at www.sl.nsw.gov.au/pln

Timeframe

This project will commence in early 2005 and will be completed in 2006.

Kerrie Burgess

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PLN Research Committee

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