



Charles Sturt  
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# The response of public libraries in Australia to the COVID-19 pandemic

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SCHOOL OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION STUDIES



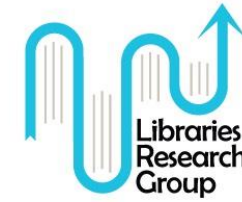
*'Yindyamarra Winhanganha' - The wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in.*

*We pay our respect to all First Nations elders and community members past and present.*

*In particular, we acknowledge the Wiradjuri, Ngunawal, Gundungarra and Biripai peoples of Australia, who are the traditional custodians of the land where Charles Sturt University campuses are located.*



# Overview



- Project funded by a CSU COVID-19 Research Grant
- Supported by ALIA and APLA
- Project team consisting of members of the Library Research Group (LRG)
  - Jane Garner, Simon Wakeling, Philip Hider, Hamid Jamali, Mary Anne Kennan, Jessie Lymn, Yazdan Mansourian, Holly Randell-Moon
- Project objectives
  - To identify **how public libraries responded** to the recent COVID-19 pandemic in terms of services and resources offered
  - To understand **how staff saw their role** in serving their communities during a community crisis
  - To analyse **how users**, including disadvantaged groups, **interacted with the online services** and resources provided by public libraries during the crisis
  - To identify **gaps in services and resources** provided by public libraries as experienced by their users
  - To identify the **key challenges experienced** by public libraries as they have adapted to operating during the crisis
  - To understand how **changes to services and resources** offered to users as a result of the crisis may influence **future practices beyond** the current crisis.

# Research Design

- **Phase 1 - National survey of public library managers**
  - Online survey distributed to all public library managers in Australia
  - 213 responses (45% response rate)
  - Closed and open questions covering building closures, management of staff, new or adapted services and programs, and crisis management.
- **Phase 2 – Multiple case study**
  - Three participating libraries (one metropolitan, one regional, one remote)
  - Three forms of data collection at each site
    - Interviews with library staff (15 interviews)
    - Survey of library users (550 respondents)
    - Analysis of library usage data

## Context – theory and practice

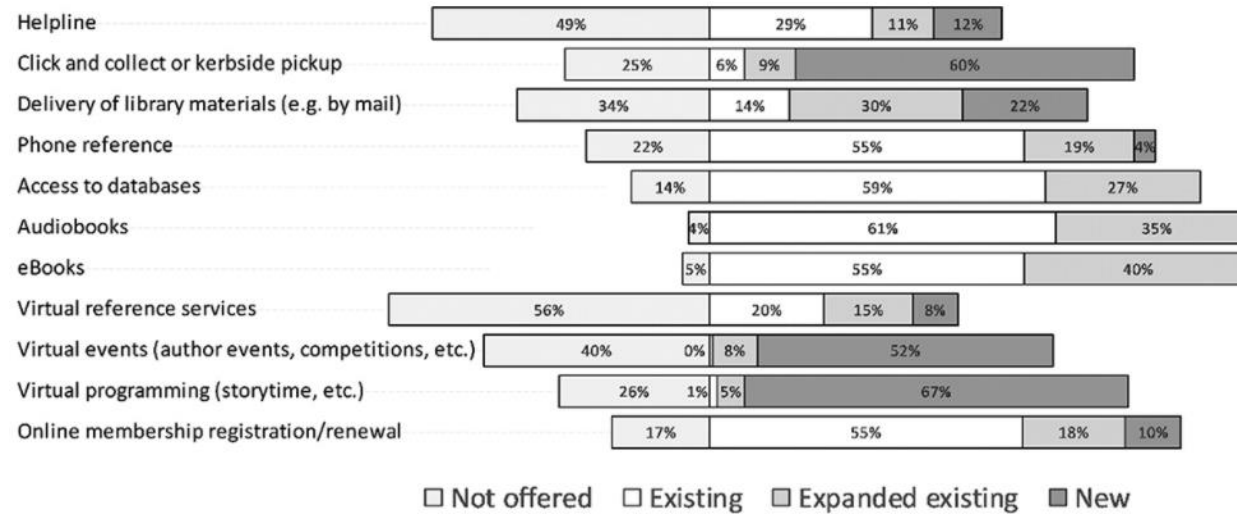
*Theory is grey, but the tree of life is green.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1828)

- We are aware of our status as researchers, not practitioners
- You all have direct lived experience of COVID and libraries
- We think our research can add value in terms of understanding public libraries' role during the crisis in a broad sense, and interpreting findings through some relevant theoretical and conceptual lenses

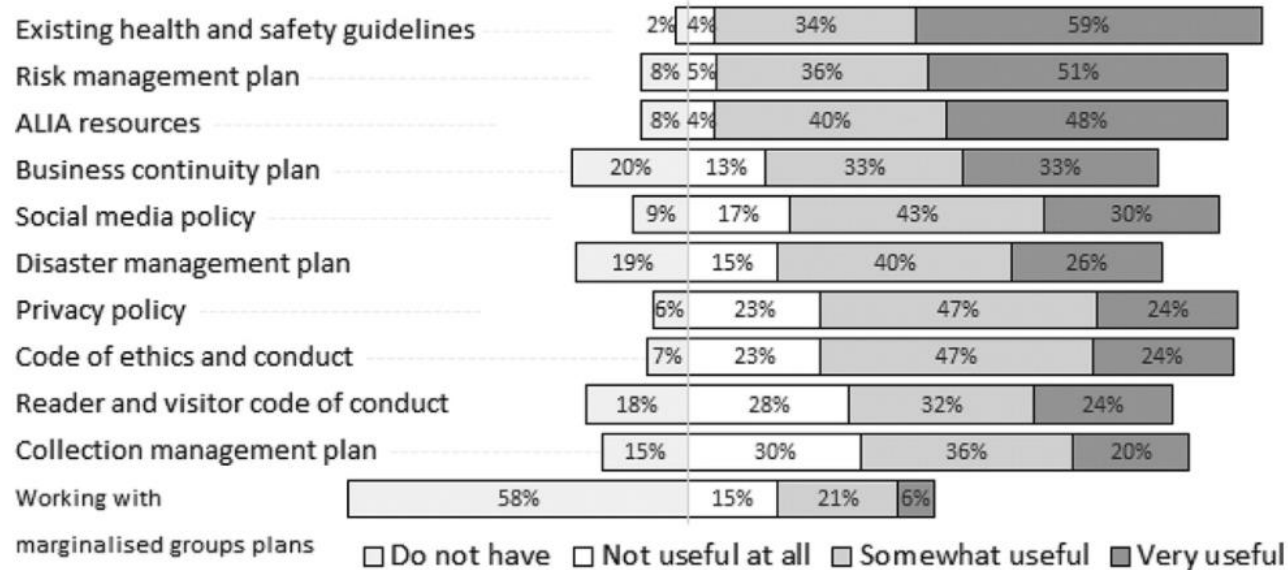


## Findings



- Significant numbers of libraries expanded online access to resources (ebooks, databases and audiobooks)
- Data from our case studies suggest that this led to increased rates of online access and borrowing. After reopening these numbers fell, but remained higher than pre-crisis
- New services tended to be related to facilitating access to physical resources during closures (click and collect and home delivery), and the virtual delivery of events and programming
- Case study user surveys found Click and Collect and increased ebook access to be the most highly valued responses

# Planning and resources



"Just over half of library services surveyed (55.7%) reported having a business continuity plan ... Over 70% of libraries with a business continuity plan rated them as effective, with 6.6% rating their plan as highly effective. At the other end of the scale, 4.9% of libraries rated their plan as not at all effective"

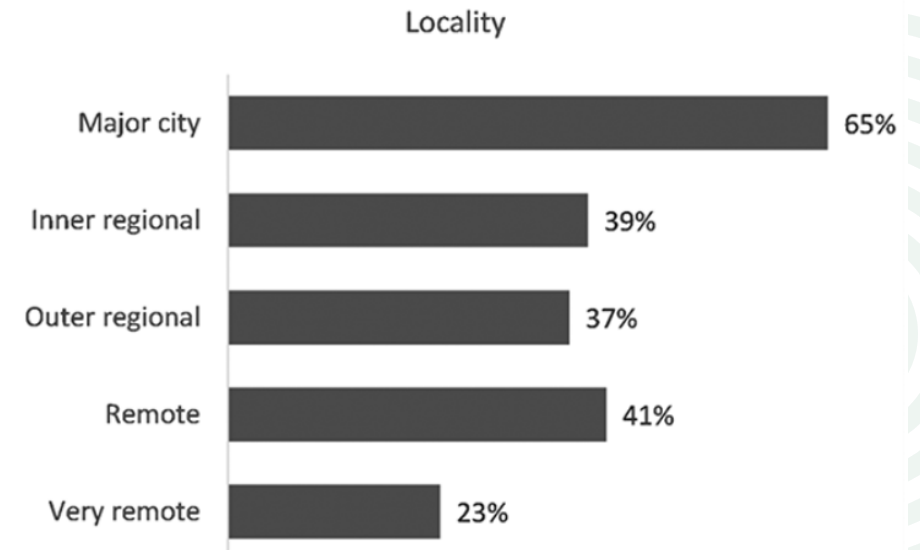
*Impact of the 2021 COVID-19 lockdown on NSW public libraries, State Library of NSW, 2021*

- H&S guidelines, risk management plans and ALIA resources were most likely to be identified as very useful to libraries
- Some respondents also noted that their experiences with bushfire emergencies meant their plans were up to date and that consequently they felt well prepared.

## Variation by locality

	Locality				
	Major city	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote	Very remote
Online membership registration/renewal	100%	83%	77%	75%	62%
Virtual programming (storytime, etc.)	98%	83%	68%	46%	23%
Virtual events (author events, competitions, etc.)	91%	74%	48%	25%	31%
Virtual reference services	60%	39%	39%	32%	31%
eBooks	100%	100%	93%	89%	92%
Audiobooks	100%	94%	95%	96%	92%
Access to databases	100%	89%	80%	77%	69%
Phone reference	86%	72%	77%	75%	69%
Delivery of library materials (e.g. by mail)	59%	69%	58%	71%	62%
Click and collect or kerbside pickup	81%	75%	69%	79%	77%
Helpline	59%	56%	53%	32%	23%

Proportion of library authorities offering each program/service during the crisis.



Proportion of library authorities that introduced public health awareness/support activities in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

- Significant differences in the range of services offered by libraries in different localities.
- Also differences in staff arrangements (e.g. WFH, secondment to other council operations)
- Case studies revealed clear resourcing issues
- Many of the most inspiring stories we heard were from regional and remote libraries, who were able to connect with their communities in extraordinary ways



# Relationships with parent bodies

**Respondent perceptions of their council/parent body's relationship with the library (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Mean value**

The council/parent body has understood the operational needs of the library during the crisis	3.5
The council/parent body has been committed to the delivery of library services	4.0
The council/parent body has communicated clearly to the library	3.7

- Overall, survey results suggested parent bodies had generally supported the library effectively
- However, free-text comments revealed a more complex picture
- Some managers described significant issues with communication, unfair demands being placed on the library (e.g. over-scrutiny), and the secondment of staff

## Positive outcomes

- Libraries were agile and adaptable, and quickly developed innovative solutions
- Numerous examples of extraordinary commitment to serving communities
- Experience of closure reinforced value of library as public space
- Most libraries were able to maintain permanent staff
- Managers of libraries with a strong central governance available to them felt more supported than libraries who operate more independently
- Opportunity to demonstrate value to parent bodies (and other advocacy)
- Chance to build partnerships with other organisations and agencies

# Challenges

- Staff working arrangements
  - Loss of volunteers and casual staff hours, relocation of some staff, working remotely
- Wellbeing and mental health (of staff and users)
- Staff technical skills
- Supporting users without access to online services
  - Some users come to library for internet access
- Communicating/demonstrating value to parent bodies
- Lack of consistency in public library authority responses
  - a unified approach throughout the nation or state-wide agreement?
- Other broader challenges
  - levels of digital literacy within communities, the capacity of technical infrastructure, staff skills, and issues associated with an urban/rural divide

# COVID closures as 'stress-test'

- A real-life test of library resilience and value

*"Libraries will be needed more than ever to rebuild the community fabric, community connections and early literacy foundations in the recovery phase and this is a great opportunity for advocacy for public libraries, which are essential in maintaining information and services for all socio-demographics, regardless of what the crisis is."*

*"Many of our residents found they had lost important community connections which, combined with being confined at home without the social contact of library visits and easy access to library collections severely impacted their quality of life."*

- Our study suggests that for all the innovations and developments undertaken by public libraries during the crisis, in the future libraries must balance their increasing online presence with the continued need for meaningful physical space.

# Maintenance and repair

COVID allowed us to see what happens when public libraries are disrupted

We can frame around the work of Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift:

- The role of infrastructure and systems in the process of 'maintenance and repair' in societies
- Systems and processes that we notice most when they are stopped or disrupted
- Public libraries can be considered as systems of maintenance and repair:
  - Providing internet and devices
  - Providing space for community connection
  - Providing access to information

Graham, S. & Thrift, N. (2007) Out of order: Understanding repair and maintenance, *Theory, Culture & Society*, V.24(3), p.1-25



## Recommendations

- 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
- 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.

## Recommendations – 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
- **Establish networks with other libraries** to share ideas, information and projects
- Work closely with neighboring authorities to ensure wherever possible that a **consistent approach** is taken
- 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.

## Recommendations – Staffing and users

- Ensure that **technical hardware resources are audited**, and a plan developed to guide the allocation of those resources to staff in time of crisis.
- Formally **monitor and support staff's mental health and wellbeing** as a standard practice during and after a crisis.
- Ensure that library staff have the required **technical skills to deliver programs and services** in the ways outlined in the Disaster Management plan.
- **Ensure users without internet access and/or devices are considered** when designing services and practices provided during closures and normal operation.
- 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.
- Strengthen public libraries' **role as providers of health-related information**.

# Thank you & questions

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Final report: <https://read.alia.org.au/understanding-australian-public-library-responses-covid-19-crisis>