State Budget Submission

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Public Libraries Victoria

Libraries Change Lives

Summary

Public libraries in Victoria are vital community assets that deliver far-reaching benefits across health, education, social inclusion, and economic wellbeing. They are more than places to borrow books—they are safe, welcoming hubs that foster connection, literacy, creativity, and lifelong learning.

Yet state government funding for public libraries continues to fall in real terms, dropping by 4.6%, the eleventh consecutive year of real decline, and representing only 15% of public library sector funding in 2024-25.

Nearly one-third of all Victorians are library members, and growth in library membership continues to outstrip population growth. In addition, many non-members visit libraries and use library resources. In Melbourne's growth corridors, nearly half (46%) of library users are under 25.

Young children and their carers made up more than half of the 21.4 million participants in library programs in 2024-25, yet the current funding formula for public libraries does not factor in the proportion of the population aged 0-5 years. With Victorian data on early years development the worst it has been in 16 years, there is a significant opportunity to ensure that libraries are able to meet community demand for early years programming.

The ongoing digital migration of services by all levels of government and the private sector creates additional pressure, with people visiting libraries for the in-person service they no longer receive elsewhere. This commonly includes people experiencing homelessness and mental health issues, the digitally excluded, and older Victorians. One-to-one digital support has become core business for libraries, yet this work goes largely unrecognised and unfunded.

Critically, a 'freeze' on the use of the distribution formula means state grants to libraries have not reflected population growth since 2018. In that time, communities like Wyndham, Melton and Casey have grown significantly, with between 76,000 and 91,000 additional residents in each. **Libraries in some of Victoria's fastest growing and most disadvantaged communities are chronically underfunded.**

That is why Public Libraries Victoria is calling for reform of the Public Libraries Funding Program:

- A new needs-based formula to ensure funding is distributed to library services based on population size; factoring in equity indicators such as population dispersion, socio-economic disadvantage, English language proficiency, and the proportion of residents aged 0-5 and 60+.

- A 'no worse off' safeguard and top-up funding to ensure no individual library service faces a reduction in funding as a result of the introduction of the needs-based formula.

- An increase to the funding pool of $10 million in 2026/27 to achieve the new needs-based formula and 'no worse off' safeguard, ensuring a more equitable distribution of funding.

- Permanently index the funding pool to CPI.

A solution to the problem of early years development

The inclusion of the proportion of children aged 0-5 years in the **Public Libraries Funding Program** (PLFP) funding formula is particularly critical, given more than half of all participation in library programs comprises young children and their carers at early childhood programs. It is estimated that 3.4% of Victorian babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers (or 1 in 30) attend library programs each week in Victoria. The figure could be much higher if libraries were better resourced.

Library early literacy programs are a cost-effective way to deliver Education State and Early Years Reform objectives by improving language development, reducing Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) vulnerability, and supporting parents as first educators. Libraries leverage their collections by providing free access to early years programs (e.g. Baby Rhyme Time, Storytime) that promote language, literacy and brain development through reading, rhymes and songs; and model positive behaviours to parents and carers. Indeed, unlike childcare providers and kindergartens, public libraries work with the whole family, supporting parents and carers as their child's first educators in a free, welcoming and inclusive environment. Public libraries play a profound role in helping children reach school ready to learn.

The importance of early years language development has been highlighted by the recent release (August 2025) of the results of the 2024 AEDC. The 2024 census found that in terms of language and cognitive development 17.9% of Victorian children commencing prep in 2024 were assessed as either 'developmentally vulnerable' or 'at risk'. This is the highest (worst) figure recorded in Victoria since the three-yearly AEDC was first conducted in 2009.

In 2024-25, public libraries delivered 682 hours of early years programming each week, an increase of 5.6% over 2023-24. More than 15,700 children and more than 12,500 adults attended early years programs each week in public libraries, increases of 5.2% and 3.2% respectively.

However, public libraries struggle to meet this ongoing and increasing demand, particularly in Greater Melbourne's growth corridors where population explosions mean young families are being turned away. A Saturday Rhyme Time session at Wyndham's Point Cook Library with a capacity cap of 130, attracted 170 attendees, meaning many families missed out.

Case Study

Raising Readers at Brimbank Libraries

Victoria's Early Years Reform Blueprint emphasises that strong foundations in language and literacy during the first five years are critical for school readiness and lifelong learning, especially for children in vulnerable families. Public libraries play a unique role in delivering on these priorities by providing free, inclusive programs that engage parents as first educators and create language-rich environments outside formal childcare and kindergarten settings.

In 2025, Brimbank Libraries partnered with the Brimbank Council Learning Unit, Early Years Outreach, Best Start, and Smalltalk Playgroups to deliver the Raising Readers program, a series of library tours and early literacy sessions for families with children aged 0–6 years. The program was designed to welcome vulnerable families into the library for the first time and build their confidence to use library services and strengthen home-based learning practices. Each session included community language support, library tours showing patrons how to borrow books, new library card registration, and Storytime. Families left as new members, children enjoyed their first library experiences, and parents received resources to continue literacy and numeracy learning at home.

Better resourcing of public libraries would enable programs like Raising Readers to be replicated across vulnerable communities throughout Victoria, directly supporting the government's goals of reducing developmental vulnerability and improving school readiness.

Equity in access

Access to libraries is unequal and getting worse

Victoria's infrastructure strategy 2025-2055 states that access to libraries is unequal and getting worse. The report notes 'there is one library for every 62,000 residents in Melbourne's growth areas. In established suburbs, there is one library for every 30,000 people… This means growth area residents are at more risk of poorer health, wellbeing, social inclusion and learning outcomes.'

The report notes that growth area councils including Wyndham and Whittlesea, have created small library spaces to provide basic services, but these spaces cannot meet community demand. Capacity at Wyndham's Williams Landing library lounge, for example, is capped at 49, and library staff have stood outside during Storytime to make space for an extra child or two.

Infrastructure Victoria's analysis shows Melton, Casey, Wyndham and Cardinia 'urgently need a new or expanded library.' (Infrastructure Victoria, 2025).

Supporting people left behind by the digital divide

"[In] an increasingly digital world, [libraries] help me to connect when I don't think I can."
– Library user

The ongoing digital migration of services at all levels of government and the private sector creates significant pressure on library staff, as people go to libraries in search of the in-person service they no longer receive elsewhere. This commonly includes people experiencing homelessness and mental health issues, the digitally excluded, and older Victorians. At times, the frustration they would vent on other service providers gets re-directed to library staff. Critical incidents are on the rise, but libraries struggle to stretch the available resources to explore solutions like seconding social workers and/or upgrading security infrastructure.

Libraries are under constant pressure to 'pick up the slack' from service closures and the digital migration of services. Increasingly, services such as AusPost, Centrelink and VicPol are sending people to libraries for assistance with navigating apps, online forms, identity verification, and reporting. What results is not only a cost shift, but also a shift of labour, contributing significantly to staff workload. This work is neither recognised nor resourced.

Staffing is the largest cost driver for public libraries and the primary constraint on meeting community needs and growing demands. An increase in PLFP funding would give libraries an opportunity to strengthen workforce capacity and direct staff to where they are most needed.

Overcoming social isolation

"[Board and role-playing games at the library] have created a welcoming space for young people to find genuine connection and community…. your support has given my son, and many others, a place to feel valued."
– Library user, Whitehorse Manningham Libraries

Social connection is recognised as essential to both public health and a healthy democracy. Yet almost one in three Australians feels lonely and one in six experience severe loneliness, with loneliness being most pronounced in the 15-25 age group.

Public libraries are among Victoria's most powerful tools to address loneliness and isolation by building community connection and cohesion. Forthcoming research from Social Ventures Australia notes, 'libraries work at the intersection of people, purpose, and place. They are free, inclusive, and embedded in every community. This means they bring together diverse people and uses within the same shared infrastructure – supporting different needs, addressing inequality, and helping build trust across communities. Public libraries deliver measurable outcomes: they increase community participation and engagement, reduce loneliness and isolation, and improve wellbeing... They also connect people to local services and supports, build digital and health literacy, and strengthen inclusion by bringing diverse groups together.'

Embedded in local communities and linked to government through funding and partnerships, libraries are uniquely positioned to advance Victoria's Wellbeing Strategy and mental health priorities, particularly in terms of supporting people to feel connected to each other, to communities, to culture and to community spaces.

The Libraries After Dark (LAD) program – currently implemented in 27 branches across Victoria – aims to reduce loneliness and social isolation, recognised as key risk factors for harmful gambling, in areas with a high density of electronic gaming machines. Early feedback on the latest iteration of the program indicates that communities want greater access to libraries after hours, with higher staffing levels available to them.

As libraries take on greater roles in supporting mental health, digital inclusion, and civic engagement, they need sustained investment and recognition as essential social infrastructure embedded in Victoria's Wellbeing Strategy. Investment in libraries is investment in healthier, more resilient communities.

"As I have recently moved into town, [Libraries After Dark] has provided me with connections to meet people in my local area. It has been really helpful that the event is held at night as I work outside of the area and cannot get to daytime events."

"I see people of all ages using the library but especially for us older folks it is important. You can come to the library and feel part of the community, even if you're not engaging with anyone directly, you still feel connected."
– Libraries After Dark participants

Reducing the cost of living

Several factors point to libraries' roles in helping to offset cost of living pressures, including the expansion of Libraries of Things and increasing use of computers and wi-fi.

Libraries of Things extend the core library principle of cost-efficient sharing of items across the community to items beyond the realm of physical books and digital resources. Through a Library of Things, library members can borrow a wide range of household items, tools, equipment and appliances. This enables members to save money by borrowing rather than buying items. Furthermore, as resources designed to improve energy efficiency are significant among the offerings in Libraries of Things, members can also save money by making use of these items to reduce utilities costs.

Thirty-seven library services, or 74% (up from 60% in 2023-24), now offer a Library of Things to their community, comprising 4,301 items, the most common of which are:

- home energy saving kits
- thermal imaging cameras
- portable induction cooktops
- digital scanners for film, photos and slides
- board games, gaming equipment and sporting equipment.

With free access to climate-controlled spaces, wifi, computers and other devices, libraries also provide a place to 'just be' when patrons would otherwise be at home incurring utilities costs. The 2024-25 PLV survey found library visitations up 5.7% to 24.3 million, hours of wifi use up 13% to 5.74 million and hours of computer use up 7.3% to 1.55 million. It is expected that cost of living pressures will continue to contribute to demand for technology access at public libraries. An increase in funding will enable libraries to provide additional resources to meet growing demand.

Sustaining the benefits of public libraries

'Today's public libraries are dynamic, responsive and deeply embedded in their communities yet current resourcing is failing to reflect their value.' (McKell Institute, 2025)

Without reform, libraries in growth corridors and vulnerable communities will fall further behind. With investment, libraries can deliver measurable outcomes aligned with Education State, Early Years Reform, and Wellbeing Strategy priorities. Valued by Victorians as essential community infrastructure and essential to a healthy democracy, now is the time to strengthen investment in public libraries to ensure their vital work is sustainable well into the future.

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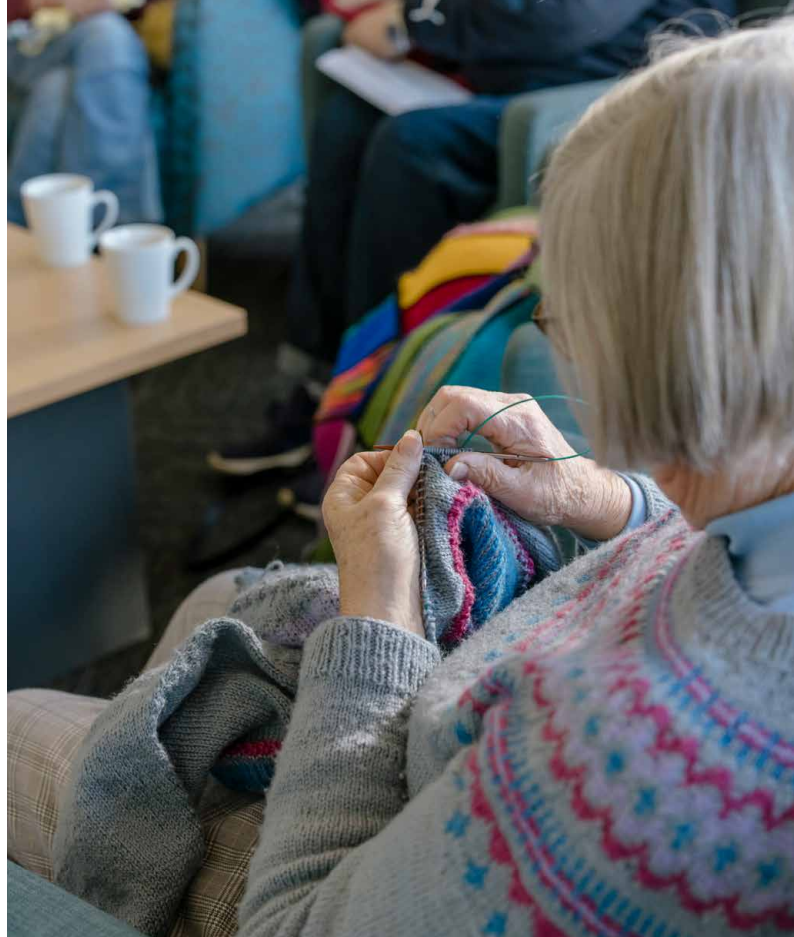
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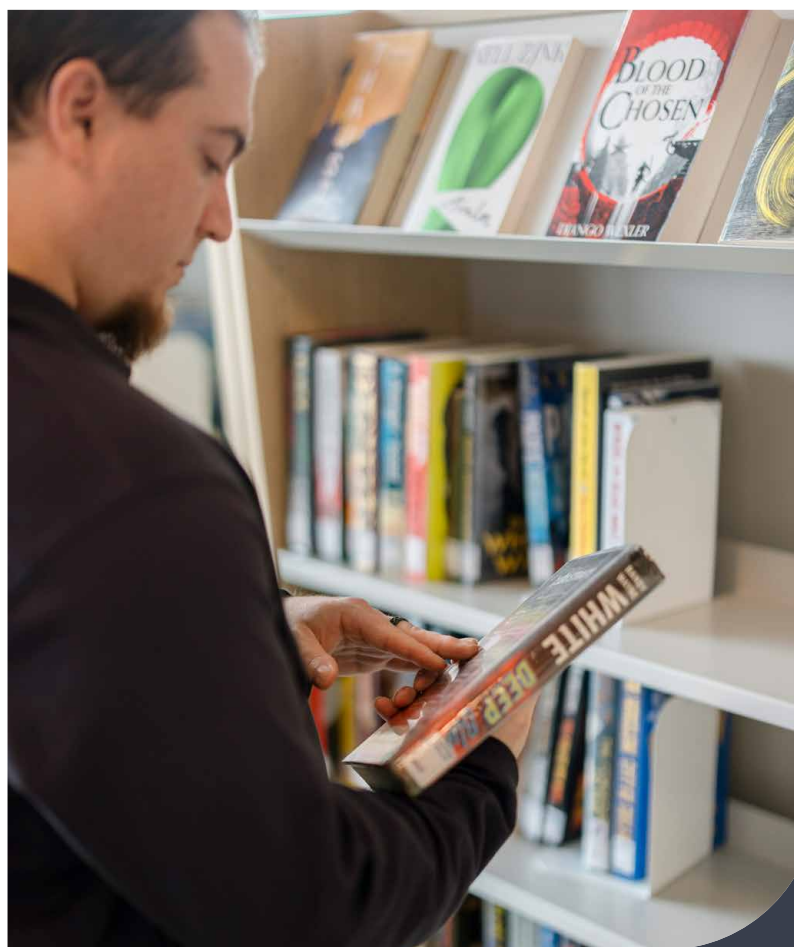
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