

Time to increase our investment in local libraries as cool, safe places for children and young people.

Commissioner's Position

I urge Commonwealth, State and Local authorities to invest in public libraries and the future of South Australian children.

Public libraries have unique value to children and young people, both to inspire them to read and to provide them with a safe and inclusive place to be at the heart of their community.

I also encourage local authorities to involve children and young people in the design of public libraries, and their services, thereby encouraging greater participation and engagement by children and young people in local library programs.

I call on those planning for and responding to emergency events and disasters to incorporate and support the critical role public libraries play as safe havens in climate events and emergencies, both during and in the aftermath of disasters. This includes accounting for the role librarians and other library staff are asked to play at these times.



What we know

Encouraging children and young people and their parents and families into libraries, provides a great opportunity to inspire more reading. From the early years, librarians help to engage parents in fostering a love of reading in their children by reading with and to them on a regular basis. Libraries also provide multiple opportunities to re-engage young people in the lifelong benefits of reading. This role should not be undervalued. It is providing vital support to improving the literacy of our community.

I have also heard from children and young people across South Australia how libraries are important safe places for them to go. They are somewhere they can catch up with friends, read, play games, listen to music, charge their phones, access free Wi-Fi, and generally know they will be comfortable whatever the weather outside.

In a survey specifically about library use, children and young people reported the following¹:

- Nearly 60 % said libraries are “kid friendly” and 37% said they are “a bit friendly”. (No child or young person who completed the survey thought libraries were not child friendly).
- Less than 35% said they attend their local library “a lot” or “a bit” compared to “never” or “hardly ever”.
- While most children and young people who visit libraries said they borrow books, they also go there to access the Internet, listen to music, attend activities, play games, and use the printers.
- Children and young people said that if there were more places to study and if libraries were made more cosy with colourful spaces to hang out, that this would make libraries more attractive to them. They also suggested having more kids’ books, games, and other resources like Lego available.

Libraries as community hubs for children and young people

Friends are extremely important to children and young people, so having safe places where they can catch up with their friends, and make new ones is vital to a child’s sense of wellbeing and quality of life.

There are few places in our communities where all ages, abilities and cultures are welcomed free, all year round. Libraries are one of these, and therefore vital in combating loneliness and isolation amongst all sections of the community.

Libraries are also one of the few places that sit at the centre of local communities where children and young people know they are welcomed free. They offer a safe space with clean toilet facilities and Wi-Fi access at no charge – all things that young people really value. There are often comfortable places inside and outside libraries where parents are happy for their older kids to ‘hang out’ without a lot of adult supervision too.

In addition, libraries offer a range of online services with access to technology and digital skills learning programs onsite that are either free or cost a small fee. Some libraries offer outdoor games to their members, enabling them to enjoy the outside spaces around their library, as well as the facilities inside.

A range of different education and recreation programs are made available to children and young people in most libraries. They include programs which are specifically aimed at younger children such as coming to the library to read or “bounce” with a parent. There are homework clubs and school-holiday programs offered to older students, and these often incorporate fun activities such as art, Lego, 3D printing and online gaming.

Having a safe place to “hang” is particularly important to teenagers, who may be nervous to meet friends in public places. The unobtrusive presence of library staff and other library users provides them with a reassuring safety net.



Libraries as climate refuges

Libraries tend to be situated in bushfire safe places. In hot weather they are cool, in cold weather they are warm, and many manage to keep the power on during local blackouts.

Disasters are becoming more frequent as temperatures rise and weather patterns change, producing more droughts, floods, and bushfires than in previous years. Typically, there are now more days of extreme weather occurring year-on-year than previously. Extreme heat poses a major health risk in South Australia, killing more people than all other natural disasters combined.

During heat waves, health and other authorities recommend people of all ages stay indoors and try to keep cool using fans and/or air conditioning where this is available. Unfortunately, many people are concerned about using their cooling devices due to the costs involved. Some households also don't have adequate cooling or heating equipment available in their homes.

Authorities recommend those in the community without adequate cooling at home seek out public air-conditioned

spaces in shopping malls, swimming pools and libraries. We know some shopping malls move young people on, particularly if they are hanging around as a group and not shopping. It costs money to gain entry to swimming pools, making libraries the best alternative. That's why libraries should be supported and encouraged to become a refuge for children and young people on very hot and very cold days.

In emergencies, some libraries provide a safe space where members of the community can gather and access information. For example, Renmark Paringa Public Library welcomed 365 children through its doors during the 2022–23 floods².

Berri Library Manager says the library has become an important place for people who are struggling with cost-of-living pressures, or who need to find a free place to get out of the severe summer heat.

“ You can come to a library and get away, feel safe, feel cool, sit back on a comfy chair and relax.”³



What needs to happen:

- Wherever possible, local councils should ensure that local libraries can be used as places of refuge during heatwaves, cold snaps, severe storms, and emergencies wherever practicable.
- Local councils should consult with children and young people in their communities to identify how they would recommend making the best use of their local library, including best use of the outdoor spaces around them. Local Youth Advisory Committees could review the “child friendliness” of local libraries and gather practical suggestions for ways to make them more attractive, safe, and interesting to children and young people.
- State and Commonwealth governments invest in local libraries as part of the nation’s disaster resilience, response, and recovery infrastructure.
- Local councils invest in their indoor and outdoor public library infrastructure to make it more attractive to children and young people, providing comfortable places for them to study and hang out inside and out.
- All libraries consider how they can enable children and young people of all ages to use their indoor and outdoor spaces more.
- All libraries provide free period products, disposal bins and hand-washing facilities as part of their toilet facilities.
- All libraries publicise what they offer children and young people in their local communities in places where they are likely to see this information, and actively encourage younger residents to visit the local library more frequently. Messaging should be aimed at children and young people, as well as at their parents and other family members who will take children and young people to their local library.
- Local councils collaborate with Libraries SA and the Department for Education to ensure children and young people in their community have the best possible access to school and community libraries throughout the year.



Endnotes

- 1 https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-INnLGg2BeL9vkEyRDn0KgQ_3D_3D/
- 2 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-01/library-become-safe-community-spaces-dv-emergencies/102014780>
- 3 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-01/library-become-safe-community-spaces-dv-emergencies/102014780>