

SMALL RURAL LIBRARIES ALTERNATIVE SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS

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INTRODUCTION

Public libraries in small and /or remote rural communities provide vital services in often difficult circumstances. A wide range of service delivery models are used around the world and in Australia. These are often tailored to the specific needs and make-up of each community but may also be dictated by available funding and support. The best approach to choosing a suitable model for rural library service provision is to carefully consider a range of service options, with a view to determining what suits the community best, given parameters of funding, population distribution and other demographic and social patterns.

Following is a brief description of a number of models which are used with varying degrees of success around the world for library services to rural communities. Advantages and disadvantages are included as well as examples of their application in practice, where relevant.

In considering alternative models, existing public library standards will also provide useful information and should be used as a planning guide. Of particular relevance to Queensland public libraries are the [Queensland Public Library Standards and Guidelines](#) (especially standards for Library Buildings, Staffing, Library Collections, Shared Facilities, Mobile Libraries and Operational services) and [Beyond a Quality Service: Standards and Guidelines for Australian Public Libraries](#).

BRANCH LIBRARY

Small static branches offer a central service in small rural towns. Buildings vary widely in size, design and condition, with some presenting cheerful, welcoming environments offering room for activities and others featuring small collections and a lack of other functionality. Branch libraries usually provide a vital community hub with library staff able to provide good hands-on assistance to clients.

Depending on budgetary resources, especially staffing costs, opening hours also vary widely. While many branch libraries, especially those located within a council precinct or co-located with other outlets, may be effectively open across usual business hours, others do not meet the recommended minimum standard of 6 hours per week (see Queensland Public Library Standards and Guidelines below).

Branch libraries have the potential to develop and promote a full range of services including those to all community sectors, students and businesses. They generally offer free or low cost internet services, an adequate range of resources in a variety of formats and a moderate program of activities.

Advantages:

- Central community presence usually in a convenient location
- Potential for library activities and promotions

- Staff provide direct assistance
- Full browsing capacity
- Access to the whole collection is available
- Long opening hours (if budgets allow)
- Potential to conduct other council business such as payment of rates and registrations and be a positive shopfront for council

Disadvantages:

- Lower capacity to reach outlying areas or dispersed populations
- Potentially high staffing costs when balanced against population served and hours of access
- Depending on purchase or lease arrangements, building and maintenance costs may be high
- Reduced capacity of small buildings to offer sufficient stock and space for a range of library functions
- Collections can be tied up in small branches with limited opening hours, reducing the cost-effectiveness of collection usage

SHARED FACILITIES MODEL

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of shared facilities planned and constructed in rural and regional areas throughout Queensland and more broadly. Public libraries are well suited to co-location with other council or community functions such as galleries, local museums, rural transaction centres, tourist information centres, and even post offices or government agencies such as Q-Gap.

Co-location often results in overall cost savings in planning and construction, but can also facilitate extended opening hours and savings in maintenance, security and so on. Provided the facilities are well planned and respective responsibilities are clearly articulated, this model can prove to be very cost-effective and can deliver excellent service. For more information on planning of shared facilities, see the Queensland Public Library Standards and Guidelines below.

Advantages:

- Potential savings in construction, maintenance, security and operating costs
- Scope for extended opening hours, if security issues are addressed.
- Potential for increasing client numbers through proximity to other functions.
- Capacity to present a strong community presence and shopfront for council
- More cost-effective use of whole collection if open longer hours
- Greater scope for activity and program spaces
- Full staff assistance provided

Disadvantages:

- Need for clear guidelines for management of facility and respective responsibilities, usually requiring formal agreements
- Need to clearly articulate who is in charge of multi-function facility
- Lower capacity to reach outlying areas or dispersed populations
- Extra security arrangements may be required to cover different opening hours of each facility
- Some compromise in library design may be necessary to accommodate overall space requirements

Applications in practice:

Co-located libraries are quite numerous and, as mentioned above, share facilities with a range of other community or council functions. In Queensland, they range from city branches including Council offices and customer service centres in Brisbane City to a small community centre in Moonie (Western Downs Regional Council) which incorporates a doctor's surgery and banking outlet. Some notable examples include the [Dogwood Crossing Centre](#) in Miles (also Western Downs), a library/gallery located in Munduberra ([North Burnett Regional Council](#)) and the new [Lockyer Valley Cultural Centre](#) at Gatton incorporating a library, visitor information centre, cafe and conference facility.

MAIL DELIVERY SERVICE

Mail library services feature regular deliveries of client requested or staff selected library materials to clients' homes via the usual local mail or freight service. Typically they are used in very remote areas or where clients are unable to regularly attend a branch or mobile library. If used in conjunction with an online catalogue, clients are able to request specific items from the entire library collection, or may set up a profile of preferred subjects or genres for staff to select regular batches of books for them. Return address labels are included in packages and are returned via the same method to the library. Loan periods are generous, to allow for delivery times. These services are typically offered to council residents free of charge if they live over a certain distance from the nearest library, though criteria for eligibility and fees do differ.

A variation of this model involves provision of a collection point for out of town clients during periodic visits outside library opening hours. As above, library materials could be chosen from an online catalogue by the clients or selected as a bulk loan by library staff. Collection points could be arranged at council offices, post offices or shops. If an after hours book return facility is provided at the library, handling of materials at the collection point can be minimised.

Advantages:

- minimal staffing costs
- door to door delivery
- excellent outreach for isolated residents
- access on request to whole collection if supported by web catalogue

Disadvantages:

- no opportunity for browsing collections (though good use of web technology and perhaps social media can assist with selection)
- dependent on mail or freight service (unless drop-off variation used)
- unable to participate in library based community activities

Applications in practice:[Broken Hill Outback Letterbox Library Service](#)

Operating since 1977, this service provides free resources by mail or freight to isolated residents in far western NSW on a fortnightly basis. The service is fully funded by the Library Council of NSW. Selection sheets and borrower profiles are used as well as client access to the online catalogue for specific requests. Loan periods are for 6 weeks with good renewal options.

[Alice Springs Library Country Borrowers](#)

The Country Borrowers Program is a free service offered to residents who live more than 100 km from Alice Springs and receive their mail via the Alice Springs mail plane. Again, selection sheets are provided and books are selected by library staff. This service is used by many people from remote Indigenous communities.

Mt Isa City Library Service

The Mt Isa City Library Service has a mail delivery service for members living on remote stations surrounding Mount Isa, from Boulia in the south, Julia Creek in the east and north-west to Doomadgee. The service uses whatever mail or freight services apply to the locations with Council paying the outward costs and the clients paying return. A combination of profile selection by staff and specific requests from the web catalogue is used. Contact: Mt Isa City Library Manager, Astrid Hancock. (Phone 0409310864).

MOBILE LIBRARY SERVICE

Mobile libraries offer an effective library service with the flexibility of multiple sites or “stops” and the ability to reach out into the community and serve outlying areas in ways not possible from a static branch. Modern mobile library vehicles are well equipped with air conditioning, sizeable collections and online access. Many have good disabled access and moveable pods that increase internal floor space when the vehicle is stationary. Collections provide good browsing capacity supported by access to entire library collections via reservations and stock is exchanged regularly, usually with a main branch. Mobiles vary in size and design to suit differing needs and terrains. They offer cost-effective services, particularly in regard to staffing, though establishment and maintenance costs can be considerable. There are a total of 17 mobile libraries in Queensland.

The [IFLA Mobile Library Guidelines](#) (see References below) offer useful information on the respective general costs and considerations of mobile libraries compared to static branches, mail services etc.

Advantages:

- Potential to reach larger percentage of population and choose stops to suit population distribution and convenience
- Potential to easily vary routes in response to changing demand and usage
- Generally larger collection capacity than small branches
- Good browsing capability and access to full collection
- Good usage potential of stock, available over an extended period, and regularly turned over
- Reduced staffing costs (if compared to multiple small branches covering the same area)
- Direct staff assistance provided
- Reasonable operating costs
- Potential to incorporate additional services such as housebound borrowers or visits to retirement villages or aged care facilities
- Potential to conduct other council business such as payment of rates and registrations on the mobile library

Disadvantages:

- Reduced opening hours at each location (offset by ability to reach more locations)
- Establishment costs may be high (offset by absence of building purchase, construction, lease or maintenance costs)

- Heavy vehicle license requirement for operator
- Reduced capacity to act as a “community hub” (compared to branch libraries)

Applications in practice:

For contact details for many Australian mobile libraries, see <http://www.mobilelibraries.com.au/uppermurray.htm> and <http://libraries.slq.qld.gov.au/>.

JOINT-USE LIBRARIES

A joint-use library is a library where services are provided from a single physical facility to two or more distinct groups of clients. Services are usually delivered under a cooperative arrangement and are jointly funded. In rural Australia, joint-use libraries are most typically developed between local governments and schools. Joint-use library arrangements occur infrequently in Queensland, usually only in very remote areas where it is not possible to support separate facilities.

The planning and good management of joint-use libraries is critical to their success, given the need to ensure that objectives for both client groups are met at all times. Given the importance of this, a [planning checklist for joint-use libraries](#) has been developed and is listed below.

Advantages:

- Potential for cost sharing and effective use of public resources
- A broader range of resources and formats may be available
- Potential for longer opening hours if security allows
- Scope for reaching a broader sector of community
- Potential for programs drawing on expertise from different staff

Disadvantages:

- Inherent difficulties in meeting library needs of different client groups
- Need to establish clear agreements and procedures for all management issues
- Ensuring equitable financial contributions by all parties may be problematic
- Possible issues around differing Library Management Systems, staff salary awards, working conditions and qualifications.
- Potential security and access issues after school hours
- Location within a school is often not attractive to adult library clients
- Difficulties in providing wide access to suitable resources for adults while ensuring resources are not inappropriate for young people
- School internet filtering practices may conflict with public library open access policies.

Application in practice:

Joint-use libraries in Queensland include those in Barcoo, Longreach and Western Downs Councils. They are more common in South Australia, with examples including Andamooka, Ceduna, Coober Pedy, Hawker, Streaky Bay and Yorketown libraries. A [directory](#) including the 47 school community libraries is listed below.

DEPOSIT COLLECTIONS

Occasionally, libraries may choose to place a small collection of books in an alternative location in the community, most often as a supplement to the stock available in a branch library. These may be in high traffic locations such as railway stations or shopping centres (sometimes used in Scandinavia and USA), or may be co-located with a community facility such as a school, sports or recreation centre. Generally, they are unstaffed or are tended by staff associated with the location itself. Some can provide a computer with catalogue access and generally there are arrangements for self-borrowing, while returns are left in receptacles such as book chutes. Stock is refreshed regularly from the wider collection and requested items may be picked up from these locations.

Advantages:

- Minimal staffing costs
- Access to whole collection where web catalogue used
- Convenient pick-up and drop-off point
- Potential for longer hours of access
- Minimal or no maintenance costs (for either building or vehicle)

Disadvantages:

- Considerably reduced browsing capacity
- Security of stock may often be problematic
- No library staff assistance provided
- Co-location may not be popular with clients, especially if with a school
- Staff training issues if tended by staff from e.g. shopping centres, schools.
- Issues of stock ownership and responsibility may arise
- Willingness of “partners” to establish an arrangement may be unlikely
- Minimal capacity for library-based activities

Application in practice:

The large Geelong Regional Libraries Service has a small collection in a school/community centre library called [Western Heights College Library](#). It was established when the state government planned a large community centre and was keen to establish joint services. The area had previously been served by one of the council’s mobile libraries.

The library is staffed by the school and the collection is almost entirely school owned and purchased. The council pays a small amount towards the staff costs and provides a small collection of adult and early childhood stock, some of which is interfiled with the main collection. It also provides a check-out terminal, as the school collection is on a different catalogue. Web access to the regional library’s catalogue is available and clients can request and return items from the larger Geelong collection.

LIBRARY KIOSKS

Mainly in a number of overseas locations, library services have used library vending machines to extend access to materials. They are most often used as a service additional to a library branch, either onsite to extend access for loans after hours, or as an alternative quick service point in another location such as a bus or train station. The concept has enjoyed some success, particularly in Europe, Canada and the U.S.

Physically similar to food and drink vending machines, library kiosks provide self-service for dispensing reserved titles and a small selection of displayed titles for loan. They can house a range of formats including books, CDs and DVDs. Usually dependent on RFID technology and operated by a library card, most models are effective for lending materials but cannot handle returns.

Advantages:

- Minimal staffing costs, although machines must be regularly restocked
- 24/7 access, depending on location
- Some flexibility in location
- Potential to reach new library clients, depending on location
- No construction or building maintenance costs

Disadvantages

- Generally require RFID technology and internet access
- No browsing capacity
- Usually limited to lending services only
- Costs can be prohibitive
- No staff assistance or added value
- No capacity for library based activities

SELF-SERVICE LIBRARY BRANCH

For a number of years, many public libraries have adopted various self-service functions, most commonly self-checkout of loans, but sometimes also online payment of fines or even member registration. Around the world, libraries utilise self-service to varying degrees, but the Singapore National Library Board operates a branch library which is effectively unstaffed and therefore “100% Do-it-yourself”.

Application in practice

The SengKang Community Library was established as a 100% self-service branch in 2002, initially staffed only by a security guard. The branch already operated with self-checkout terminals, members undertook their own library registration and fine payments, and an online enquiry service was available. Shelving of materials is done by volunteers. The service includes lending and returns, but reservations are not able to be collected. The move to 100% self-service was implemented both as a cost-cutting method and a way to reduce excessive queueing times.

While these objectives have both been achieved, the model has led to quality of service being compromised in several other areas, including, among others, security of stock and lack of expert assistance. Improvements have been made to address these issues. The library has now added a “Cybarian” kiosk, allowing clients to speak to librarians in other branches for assistance and interact via a PC. An occasional program of library activities has also been developed with visiting staff.

Advantages

- Reduction in staffing costs, with capacity for redeploying staff to other duties
- Reduction in queueing times, especially for borrowing
- Empowerment of library clients
- Potential for greater privacy for clients

Disadvantages

- Potential for high losses/theft of resources (even when security staff used)

- Absence of any direct assistance from trained staff
- Lack of any client supervision (SengKang reported many complaints of high noise levels and bad behaviour)
- Few or no library-based activities

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