



ACT Council of Social Service Inc.  
1/6 Gritten Street, Weston ACT 2611  
ph. 02 6202 7200  
e. [actcoss@actcoss.org.au](mailto:actcoss@actcoss.org.au)  
w. [actcoss.org.au](http://actcoss.org.au)  
abn. 81 818 839 988

10 September 2021

Ms Vanessa Little  
Executive Branch Manager  
Libraries ACT  
GPO Box 158  
Canberra City ACT 2601

Via email: [library.customerinfo@act.gov.au](mailto:library.customerinfo@act.gov.au)

Dear Ms Little

### **Libraries ACT: Imagine 2030**

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the future of the ACT's public libraries as part of Libraries ACT's [Imagine 2030](#) process to co-design our future libraries with the community.

ACTCOSS advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations. We see public libraries as playing a vital social justice role in our community, and we see that this is enhanced through relationships between libraries and the community sector. ACTCOSS's vision for our future libraries is one in which their contribution to social justice in the ACT continues, grows, and is further strengthened through connections with the community sector.

We want to start by acknowledging the significant role that Libraries ACT – as a public institution and through its people – plays in supporting social justice in our community. Over the past two years this role has been especially apparent as our community experienced the 2019-20 summer bushfires closely followed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

ACTCOSS welcomes engagement with Canberra's community sector as part of Libraries ACT's further work to decide on priorities and to develop the draft *Imagine 2030* plan. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss how we might support this engagement through our membership and networks.

## Public libraries are vital community infrastructure

Literacy, in many guises, is supported by the library. From early years language and literacy programs such as Giggle and Wiggle through to our Volunteer Adult Literacy program, the library offers everyone in the community a chance to learn, grow and adapt to the changing world.

Libraries have also played a growing role in supporting Canberrans to access digital services through our free public computers and staff assistance. With an increasing focus on digital services around the world, it has never been more important for the community to know libraries can play a unique role in helping everyone be digitally included.

Social inclusion is an important aspect of what libraries do and libraries are considered as safe havens for vulnerable people, a place to reduce social isolation for all people and a comfortable place to be during extreme weather.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on the work of sociologist Eric Klinenberg, the Libraries ACT *Imagine 2030* conversation refers to the idea of public libraries as social infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> ACTCOSS shares this view of public libraries as a vital form of social (or community) infrastructure that helps fight inequality and enhance civic life.

ACTCOSS sees the ACT's public libraries as essential community infrastructure that can and do provide:

- free access to information and resources – including access to culture and knowledge from the local to the global
- support for lifelong learning and literacy for everyone – younger and older and from diverse backgrounds
- entertainment and education for children and support for parents and carers
- a welcoming, inclusive, and safe space for everyone – including for people with high and complex needs and/or for people who are more likely to experience discrimination in our community
- connections for and with Indigenous, multicultural, LGBTIQ+, early childhood and disability communities
- free or low-cost spaces for community groups to meet, provide support, and share information
- a means to digital inclusion through services and resources that address digital affordability, access, and ability

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<sup>1</sup> <https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/libraries-act-imagine-2030/life-changing-so-are-libraries>

<sup>2</sup> E Klinenberg, *Palaces for the people: how to build a more equal and united society* [eBook], Vintage, London, 2018.

- connection to government and community services, including those provided through the community sector
- a setting for social participation and connection to others – including peer support networks as well as facilitating connections across generations, cultures, and backgrounds
- a non-commercial social setting – or ‘third space’ – that provides affordable (free) access to recreation
- a place of respite
- protection from extreme weather
- accessible toilets.

## Investment in community infrastructure to meet community need

Increasingly our libraries are becoming community meeting places. From book clubs to dance classes through to places for work and study groups, we know the need for community spaces is growing.<sup>3</sup>

Public libraries must be included as part of a wider ACT Government social planning framework that supports the development of community infrastructure to meet community need in the ACT.

The ACT has a shortage of community facilities. We need to invest in community infrastructure to address this shortage while also developing community infrastructure to meet the needs of our growing population and its changing demographics. ACTCOSS has called on the ACT Government to develop a policy framework and investment model for the long-term provision of community facilities across the ACT.<sup>4</sup> We have advocated for funding for a community infrastructure needs analysis.<sup>5</sup> To inform the improvement and development of community infrastructure, ACTCOSS has called for the establishment and funding of a lived experience committee and support lived experience consultative forums focused on improving physical and sensory access for people with disabilities to transport, public space and infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

Many community sector organisations do not have and/or cannot afford to hire meeting spaces. Libraries ACT provide a range of free or low-cost space for community groups to meet and provide training. As one example, through our work

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<sup>3</sup> <https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/libraries-act-imagine-2030/life-changing-so-are-libraries>

<sup>4</sup> ACTCOSS, [Submission: ACTCOSS ACT Budget Priorities 2021-22](#), ACTCOSS, Canberra, 2021, accessed 10 September 2021.

<sup>5</sup> ACTCOSS, [Submission: ACTCOSS ACT Budget Priorities 2021-22](#), ACTCOSS, Canberra, 2021

<sup>6</sup> ACTCOSS, [Submission: ACTCOSS ACT Budget Priorities 2021-22](#), ACTCOSS, Canberra, 2021

on energy consumer advocacy ACTCOSS has participated in a *Bring Your Bills* event at Woden Library where people could bring in their energy bills to get advice from their retailer, government agencies, and community service providers on how to reduce their energy costs. This event in particular highlights the critical link between community infrastructure and community development.

## Community development connecting libraries and community sector

Various formats are used supporting learning outside formal education pathways [including] partnership with other organisations, including the *Smith Family Saver Plus* and *Department of Human Services* for the financial education program, the *Story Dogs* program for reluctant or struggling readers, *Leftlane Outreach Theatre* focusing on early childhood literacy performances, and *Nutrition Australia* for a series of healthy-eating story times with hands-on food activities.<sup>7</sup>

In his discussion of social infrastructure, Klinenberg refers to ‘infrastructure that is at once hard and soft, social and physical, meant to improve life for everyone, every day’.<sup>8</sup> Community infrastructure integrates physical and social amenity to create a space for personal and community development. ACTCOSS has advocated for investment in community development alongside and integrated with community infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> We see libraries as a key site where community infrastructure is integrated with community development in the ACT.

Public libraries have been described as ‘protective factors’ which ameliorate risk factors such as homelessness, mental health, and poverty.<sup>10</sup> Recent research exploring social work in Australian public libraries has observed that:

Public library staff are increasingly required to work with members of the public with high social needs. Public libraries are places of sanctuary and connection for people experiencing challenges such as homelessness, poverty, mental illness, domestic violence and substance abuses.<sup>11</sup>

This research evaluated a partnership between City of Melbourne Libraries and local community service organisation Launch Housing. This partnership involved the

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<sup>7</sup> Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate, [Annual Report 2019-20](#) [PDF], ACT Government, Canberra, 2020, p 42, accessed 10 September 2021.

<sup>8</sup> E Klinenberg, *Palaces for the people: how to build a more equal and united society* [eBook], Vintage, London, 2018, p 207.

<sup>9</sup> ACTCOSS, [2020 ACT Election Issue Brief: Community Infrastructure](#), ACTCOSS, Canberra, 2020, accessed 10 September 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd (2020) cited in J Garner, L Mitchell, K Bell, A Lockwood and S Wardle, [Social work in Australian public libraries: an interdisciplinary approach to social justice](#), *Public Library Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01616846.2020.1825917, October 2020, p 2, accessed 10 September 2021.

<sup>11</sup> J Garner, L Mitchell, K Bell, A Lockwood and S Wardle, *Social work in Australian public libraries: an interdisciplinary approach to social justice*, *Public Library Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01616846.2020.1825917, October 2020, p 1.

placement of a community service social worker within the City Library to engage with library patrons and provide training to library staff. The evaluation found that:

The City of Melbourne Library Social Worker program highlights the strengths of libraries as safe places and demonstrates many positive social work outcomes may be attributed to the setting and the relationships that library staff are able to build with their patrons. These outcomes point to the opportunity presented in integrating social work into library practice to establish rapport and link people with services, and a need to build the skills of library staff to respond to people with high social needs.<sup>12</sup>

The City of Melbourne case study highlights the potential for libraries to work in partnership with the community sector to support both library staff and library patrons in responding to high and complex needs utilising strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches. An important outcome of such a partnership is identifying people's needs and connecting them to services and supports.

## **Creating and keeping free, accessible, and safe spaces for all**

Public libraries play a critical social justice role in our community by ensuring that everyone – regardless of income, ability, or identity – has free and equal access to resources that support their wellbeing. Maintaining and developing free, accessible, and safe spaces for people to retreat, meet, learn, and access services is critical to fighting increasing inequality in our society. Canberra is sometimes referred to as being two cities – based on the averages we are an affluent city, but a closer look reveals that significant disadvantage and diversity exists in our community. Approximately 38,000 people in the ACT are living below the poverty line.<sup>13</sup> Canberra is the most expensive capital city to rent a home or unit in and we have the highest rate of rental stress among low-income private rental households. Low-income households have been hardest hit by increases in the prices of essential goods and services over the past five years – e.g., energy prices have increased by over 25% in this period.

Having free access to public library resources and services – books, newspapers, magazines, computers, literacy programs, legal advice, rooms, etc. – removes a significant barrier for low-income households. Ensuring that public libraries are physically and digitally accessible – including through mobile and online options – is critical to addressing equity for many, including older people and people with disability. Providing a space that is safe and inclusive is vital to enabling access for individuals and groups who experience significant discrimination in our society,

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<sup>12</sup> J Garner, L Mitchell, K Bell, A Lockwood and S Wardle, Social work in Australian public libraries: an interdisciplinary approach to social justice, *Public Library Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1080/01616846.2020.1825917, October 2020, p 13.

<sup>13</sup> ACTCOSS, [2021 ACT Cost of Living Report](#), ACTCOSS, Canberra, 2021, accessed 10 September 2021.

including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people with disability, and LGBTIQ+ people.

By providing a space for everyone, public libraries play an important role in supporting social inclusion and social cohesion in the ACT.

## Continued engagement

The ACT's public libraries are vital community infrastructure through which our community sector can and does undertake community development work. In imagining 2030, ACTCOSS is keen to explore the further potential for Canberra's community sector to work in public libraries and to work with library staff and patrons to support community development and the achievement of social justice. We are also keen to explore how our public libraries can further reduce barriers to make them inclusive for all.

ACTCOSS would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to Libraries ACT's co-design work on priorities and the development of the draft *Imagine 2030* plan. This includes supporting any further engagement with ACT community organisations.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this further, please don't hesitate to contact myself or Mr Geoff Buchanan, Senior Policy Officer, ACTCOSS on 0415 082 701 or [geoff.buchanan@actcoss.org.au](mailto:geoff.buchanan@actcoss.org.au).

Yours sincerely,



Dr Emma Campbell  
CEO

Email: [ceo@actcoss.org.au](mailto:ceo@actcoss.org.au)