

More Than Books: Libraries on the Frontline

The Case for Greater Investment
in Libraries and Their Staff



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About this report

This report has been prepared by the McKell Institute with the support of Australian Services Union SA/NT Branch

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Acknowledgement of country

This report was written on the lands of the Kaurna, Darug, and Eora Nations. The McKell Institute acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to both their land and seas.

This report is intended to focus on local government funded public libraries in South Australia, however some statistics may include the State Library of South Australia.

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Executive Summary

Public libraries have long stood as cornerstones of community life, fostering learning, connection, and cultural enrichment across South Australia (SA). Yet, the role of libraries has undergone a seismic shift.

Public libraries were once primarily a quiet sanctuary for reading and study, defined by their collections of books and periodicals. They are now being called upon to play an expanded, critical role as digital gateways, community support hubs, a shelter against extreme weather conditions, and, for some, a last line of defence against exclusion and isolation.

The statistics tell a compelling story. SA has over 140 public libraries spanning the state, 9.7 million annual visitors—averaging six visits per resident, the highest physical and online visits per capita, the highest loans per capita (including both physical and eBooks) (SGS Economics and Planning, 2020) and surging program attendance with participation in library events and workshops nearly doubling in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic (ABC News, 2025a).

This surge in use is driven by both necessity and opportunity. As the cost-of-living crisis deepens, more SA residents are turning to

libraries for free access to computers, Wi-Fi, printing, and digital support. At the same time, libraries are proactively reaching out to new audiences, designing programs for all ages and backgrounds, and making their spaces welcoming and inclusive.

SA's public libraries have responded to the change with remarkable adaptability and innovation. Library leaders and staff have recognised the changing needs of their communities and have proactively expanded services to fill gaps left by other institutions. The result is a network of libraries that are more vital, inclusive, and attuned to community needs than ever before. They now offer support for online services, digital literacy workshops, job-seeking assistance, children's story times, social groups, health and wellbeing programs, toy and equipment borrowing services, device charging stations and beverages during bad weather and power outages, and much more—all free or at minimal cost (SGS Economics and Planning, 2020; ABC News, 2025a).

As the role of libraries evolves, so too do the responsibilities of librarians and library staff and library workers are increasingly finding themselves on the frontlines. Their roles have expanded far beyond traditional librarianship to include social work-like assistance, digital navigation, and crisis response, often without adequate training or support. Many express a deep love for their job but highlight how the past decade has made their work increasingly challenging, leading to stress and burnout.

This report celebrates libraries' dynamic growth while advocating for equitable funding models and workforce strategies to match their broadened scope. It includes data from surveys conducted by the Australian Services Union SA/NT Branch (ASU). **Part 1** outlines the transformation of SA public libraries into multifaceted community hubs, highlighting their adaptability in addressing digital access, climate resilience, and economic pressures, while noting the evolving roles of library

workers. **Part 2** explores how libraries serve as inclusive spaces for connection, offering free programs for families, safe havens for vulnerable groups, and resources for those facing cost-of-living challenges, fostering community engagement and equity. **Part 3** details libraries' growing role as designated refuges during climate-driven crises, providing temperature-regulated spaces and essential services for those unable to afford heating or cooling at home. **Part 4** examines libraries' critical role in bridging the digital divide, offering free internet, computer access, and personalised support for navigating online services, empowering residents in an increasingly digital world.

Finally, this report offers **recommendations** that will ensure the sustainability of our libraries. By investing in libraries, SA can ensure these vital community hubs continue to empower families, bridge the digital divide, and support vulnerable populations, fostering a stronger, more connected state.

Key Findings

1

Libraries are thriving community hubs

SA libraries welcome nearly 10 million visitors annually, averaging six visits per resident—outpacing national benchmarks. Libraries are vibrant centres of connection, with loans and program participation soaring post-COVID (Government of South Australia, 2024, 2025; SGS Economics and Planning, 2020).

2

These hubs are empowering families

As costs rise—\$1,300+ yearly for children’s sports—78 per cent of library workers see growing patronage as families embrace free programs, Wi-Fi, and safe spaces. Libraries offer homework clubs and holiday activities, helping families thrive despite economic pressures (ASU, 2024; Charles Sturt University, 2024).

3

Libraries help to bridge the digital divide

Libraries are digital lifelines, with 100 per cent of staff reporting increased demand for help with online tasks such as MyGov and job applications. Serving the 10 per cent of SA residents without reliable internet, libraries empower communities with free access and support, ready to grow with more training (SACOSS, 2023a; ASU, 2024).

4

Libraries are safe havens in crises

Over 60 per cent of library workers note libraries’ role as welcoming refuges during extreme weather, like the November 2023 storm, offering power and comfort to those without. As climate challenges grow, library staff stand ready to expand this vital role (SA Health, 2024; ASU, 2024).

5

There is a dedicated workforce ready to grow

Library staff are adapting to expanded roles, with 88 per cent noting significant changes over the past decade. With targeted training and support, like social worker programs, this passionate workforce can continue to shine, meeting diverse community needs with confidence (ASU, 2024).



Part One: Libraries as Community Support Hubs and Third Spaces

Libraries across SA are increasingly being recognised as vital community support hubs and inclusive third spaces, a place separate from home and work, where people can gather, connect, and build community in an informal and inclusive setting. This growing role is shaped by both pressing social needs and strategic opportunity.

In response to the escalating cost-of-living crisis, more SA residents are relying on libraries for essential services such as free access to computers, internet, printing, and digital assistance. Families are turning to libraries for free or low-cost programs, and older students are using libraries after school instead of expensive after-hours school care.

Simultaneously, libraries are expanding their reach by engaging new audiences, offering programs tailored to diverse age groups and cultural backgrounds, and creating welcoming, accessible environments that foster connection and support. Finally, for vulnerable community members—including those who are homeless or precariously housed—libraries offer a rare no cost climate-controlled, safe, and welcoming space to rest, connect with others, and experience a sense of dignity and inclusion.

LIBRARIES ARE A SUPPORT HUB FOR FAMILIES

The cost of extracurricular activities such as sports, music lessons and art classes has risen sharply, with the average annual cost of a child's sport participation in Australia now exceeding \$1,300 and some families paying up to \$1,500 per season (Charles Sturt University, 2024). These rising expenses have made it difficult for many families to provide their children with paid enrichment opportunities.

As a result, families are increasingly turning to public libraries for free resources, safe spaces for children, and digital access. Libraries are

recognised as one of the few free, welcoming community spaces where children and young people can gather, access Wi-Fi and technology, and participate in programs and activities at no charge (CCYP SA, 2023). Public libraries across SA offer a range of digital services, homework clubs, sessions for babies, toddlers and preschoolers, and school holiday programs that provide recreational and educational opportunities for children and young people, helping families cope with the rising costs of paid activities (CCYP SA, 2023).

Libraries are also increasingly being used by students after school as an alternative to paid after-hours school care, with students playing, reading, or doing their homework at the library until their parents collect them at closing time.

LIBRARIES SERVE AS VITAL SUPPORT HUBS FOR VULNERABLE AND PRECARIOUSLY HOUSED PEOPLE

Public libraries play a vital role in the community sector, acting as a key 'protective factor' in the lives of those who rely on them (Lloyd, 2020). As one of the last remaining 'third spaces'—free, welcoming environments where people can access resources and spend time without obligation—they are particularly valuable to vulnerable groups such as new migrants, First Nations people, the unhoused, single parents, young people, the elderly, and those facing unemployment or insecure work (Aabø, 2010; Oldenburg, 1999).

Library workers are on the frontline of these changes, but preliminary surveys conducted by the ASU reveal they are inadequately resourced, trained, and supported. This increased demand puts pressure on individuals and can lead to stress and—in some cases—creates serious work health and safety risks for the library workers and for the public.

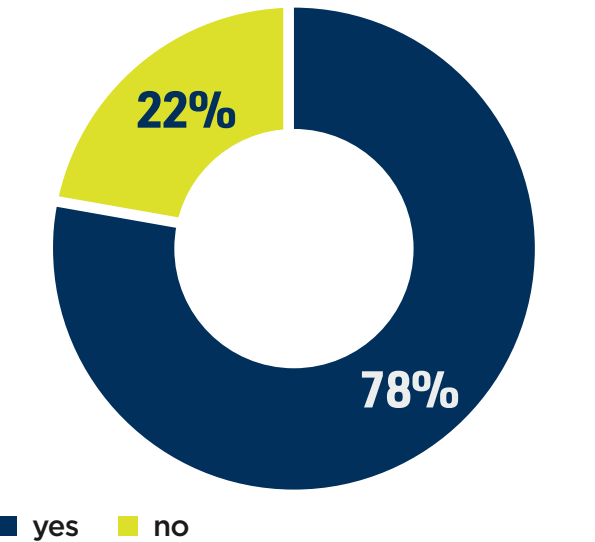
A PLACE FOR THOSE STRUGGLING WITH COST OF LIVING

SA, like much of the nation, is experiencing a period of acute economic and social strain. The cost-of-living crisis is not a distant policy debate but a daily reality for hundreds of thousands of SA residents. Rising prices for housing, utilities, groceries, and essential services are squeezing household budgets, forcing families and individuals to make difficult choices, and fundamentally reshaping the social fabric of the State (SGS Economics and Planning, 2020).

The intersection of these factors has increased the demand on library services and library workers in several ways including, but not limited to:

- an increased reliance on borrowing (books, entertainment, toys, tools, even household items as libraries begin to introduce a ‘Library of Things’);
- an increased demand for free access to Wi-Fi and computers;
- an increased need for library workers to help bridge the digital divide as both public and private services are moved online, including welfare, banking, and paying bills. This is especially true in economically disadvantaged and regional areas; and
- an increased need for a temperature regulated space to spend time for individuals and families struggling with their electricity and gas bills.

FIGURE 1 SURVEY RESPONSE
- HAVE YOU SEEN AN INCREASE IN PATRONAGE DUE TO THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS?



An indicative 78 per cent of respondents said that had seen an increase in patronage due to the cost-of-living crisis.

When asked to describe what that looked like library workers said:

- Increased borrowing of books, audio equipment, DVDs, and toys.
- Increased number of residents unable to afford heating and cooling using the library as a place to spend extended periods of time
- Increased amount of school children who would normally go to OHSC now using the library to wait for parents after school
- Increase in unsupervised teenagers - kids would usually be with friends who have a parent at home or a grandparent now on their own.
- Increase in customers facing domestic violence
- Toy library membership has gone up
- Plenty of residents use our public PCs daily.
- An increase in people with mental health issues and homelessness has created issues around safety of staff.

The cost-of-living crisis in South Australia is the result of multiple, overlapping pressures. Housing affordability remains a major concern, with rents and mortgage repayments rising faster than wages over many years. SGS Economics and Planning (2020) reports that a growing number of low- and middle-income households are experiencing “housing stress,” spending more than 30 per cent of their income on shelter. Renters, single-parent families, and older adults on fixed incomes are especially vulnerable, with little financial flexibility to absorb further cost increases.

At the same time, essential expenses—including electricity, gas, food, childcare, healthcare, and transport—have surged, while wages have remained largely stagnant (InDaily, 2023). These economic pressures have eroded household resilience, leaving many families with no buffer for unexpected costs and significantly reducing their discretionary spending.

The impact on daily life is stark. Families are cancelling extracurricular activities, skipping social outings, and forgoing health and wellbeing programs. Beyond financial strain, this has led to a reduction in social connection, community engagement, and personal development opportunities.

These effects are most visible among vulnerable groups—such as older people, people with disabilities, young families, and those living in regional or remote communities—who are often first to feel the impact of rising costs and reduced services. For many, participation in community life increasingly relies on the availability of free or affordable alternatives. In this context, public libraries have become a vital safety net, offering inclusive access to information, programs, and support services that meet both practical and social needs (ABC News, 2025a).

LIBRARIES ARE USED AS A SAFE HAVEN BY THOSE FLEEING DOMESTIC, FAMILY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The Final Report of the South Australian Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence recognised libraries as one of the places where people seek informal support. It noted that people should be able to access information and support in places they already visit and that are nearby, such as libraries, and that staff should be know how to connect these people into the central entry-point service (Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Report, South Australia, August 2025).

The use of public libraries as a community hub and third space is a critical part of South Australia’s social infrastructure—meeting practical needs, offering support, and providing safe, inclusive spaces when few others are available. Their role is essential, not optional.

Part Two: Libraries Provide Shelter from Extreme Weather

Libraries are taking on increasing formal and informal roles as part of crisis responses and extreme weather events brought on by climate change. Community members who cannot afford to heat or cool their homes are directed— by government—to visit libraries. Likewise, unhoused and precariously housed people seek out shelter during heatwaves and storms.

Some SA libraries are being formally promoted and resourced as refuges during extreme weather events, especially heatwaves, at the local government level (SA Health, 2024; YPC, 2025; SAFESC, 2024; SA Government, 2022), a role for which they lack adequate resources (ABC News, 2025; SACOSS, 2024; SA Health, 2024).

Libraries have not been intended as functioning as a shelter however the lack of alternatives has forced this use. Without public libraries, government and healthcare agencies would have few free options to suggest for people needing somewhere to go during extreme weather.

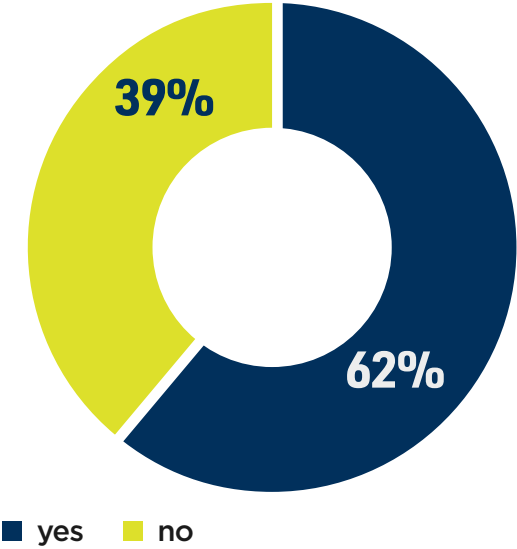
As stated in the cost of living section above, there is also an increased need for temperature regulated spaces for people who are struggling with their household bills or during extreme weather events.

The survey results show that the usage of libraries as extreme weather shelters has already dramatically changed the quantity and type of support delivered by librarians, which is likely to increase as extreme weather events become more common.

More than 60 per cent reported an increase in patronage due to climate change and extreme weather events.

On this basis, it is recommended that the SA Government formalise the role of libraries in emergency weather events and fund them accordingly.

FIGURE 2 SURVEY RESPONSE
HAVE YOU SEEN AN INCREASE IN PATRONAGE
DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE OR EXTREME
WEATHER EVENTS?



- When asked to describe how that increase manifested library workers said:**
- Extreme weather conditions bring in higher attendance of the homeless.
 - Extreme storm surges have left large areas of our suburbs without power for extended periods, and large numbers of the public had to come into the library to charge and use their electronic devices.
 - People sleeping rough looking for a place of refuge.
 - The elderly try to save on power and come into the library when it is very hot, free coffee helps
 - More people inside studying.
 - In November 2023 there was a huge storm that left a huge portion of our city without power. We had power boards in every outlet, and people spent the better part of three days sitting in any space available while they waited for power to be gradually restored across the city.



Part Three: Libraries are Bridging the Digital Divide

In this age of digital reliance, libraries now fill the gap as a hub where people can access a computer with internet, Wi-Fi for their own device, and related services such as printing. Further, staff are also available to provide support for most things digital related.

One of the most profound impacts of the cost-of-living crisis is the deepening digital divide. Digital access has become a basic requirement for participation in modern life. Yet, for many SA residents—especially those on low incomes or living in regional areas—reliable internet and digital devices are out of reach (SACOSS, 2023a).

THE SCOPE OF DIGITAL SUPPORT IS EVER GROWING

The scope of digital support provided by libraries is vast. Staff assist with everything from setting up email accounts and accessing MyGov or Centrelink, to printing boarding passes, scanning documents, and troubleshooting devices. Many libraries now run regular digital literacy workshops, one-on-one tech help sessions, and outreach programs to aged care facilities and community centres (SACOSS, 2023a).

In regional areas, libraries are often the only place where people can access reliable internet and digital support. The “Keys to the Digital World” project by South Australian Council of Social Service (SACOSS) and the LGA SA found that regional libraries and community centres are critical for digital inclusion yet are themselves under-resourced and facing rising demand (SACOSS, 2023a; LGA SA, 2022).

CLOSURE OF SERVICES AND SERVICES MOVING ONLINE CREATE INCREASED DEMAND

There has been a documented uptick in the closure of critical community services—regional bank branches closing, post offices shutting down, and the loss of smaller services like passport photo booths at Australia Post or pharmacies. As services have moved online, libraries and their staff have been left to shoulder the growing responsibility of helping the public navigate digital systems. Library workers are increasingly supporting people with essential tasks like accessing welfare, banking, and paying bills—particularly in economically disadvantaged and regional communities.

PASSPORT PHOTOS, PRINTING, AND EVERYDAY NEEDS ARE SERVICED AT THE LIBRARY

One clear example of this service shift is the growing demand for passport and ID photo assistance. While providers like Australia Post and specialist retailers such as PhotoCo Camera House in Adelaide still offer these services, they are often limited by location, hours, and cost—making them less accessible for many, especially in low-income or regional communities (Australia Post, 2024; PhotoCo, 2024). In areas where post offices or camera shops have closed, libraries are increasingly



the only accessible public space where people can seek help with digital forms, printing, and even ID photo preparation for official documents.

Library staff now routinely assist patrons with printing and scanning paperwork for passports, visas, and other formal applications. In some instances, they have even improvised photo solutions—using library equipment or personal devices to meet government requirements. While far beyond traditional library functions, these tasks have become an everyday part of frontline service delivery.

THE RETREAT OF GOVERNMENT AND WELFARE SERVICES IS A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Government and welfare agencies have also shifted more services online or centralised them in fewer locations, increasing the burden on libraries to provide digital access and support. For example, the closure of regional Centrelink offices and the reduction of face-to-face service points has left many people reliant on libraries to access welfare, Medicare, and tax services (ABC News, 2024b).

This shift has increased both the complexity and volume of support that library staff are expected to provide. Staff are now routinely called upon to help patrons navigate online government portals, fill out complex forms, and troubleshoot technical issues. For many vulnerable SA residents, libraries are the only place where they can receive this kind of help in person.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA HAS WIDE RANGING RAMIFICATIONS

SACOSS reports that around 10 per cent of SA residents do not have reliable internet at home, with the figure rising much higher in some regional and remote communities (SACOSS, 2023a; SACOSS, 2023b). Affordability is a major barrier, but so too is digital literacy: many people lack the skills or confidence to navigate online forms, government portals, or even basic email and social media.

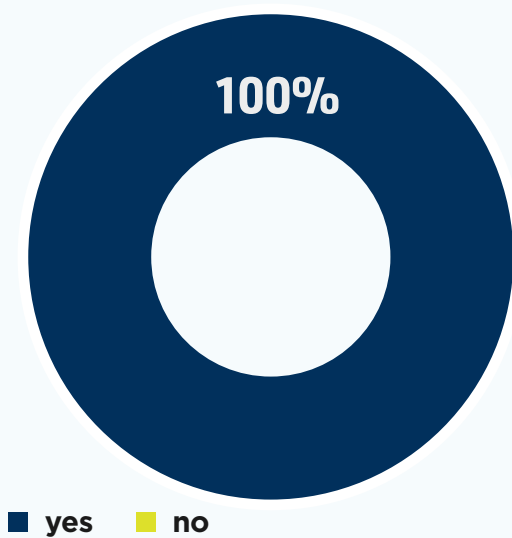
This digital exclusion has far-reaching consequences. Without internet access, people cannot apply for jobs, access government benefits, book medical appointments, or participate in online education. The move to “digital by default” for many services risks leaving the most vulnerable even further behind.

LIBRARIES ARE NOW THE FRONTLINE OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

Libraries have become the frontline of digital inclusion. They provide free Wi-Fi, public computers, device loans, and, crucially, face-to-face support from staff and volunteers (SACOSS, 2023a; LGA SA, 2022). For many, especially older adults, people with disabilities, and those with limited English, library staff are their only source of patient, trusted help with digital tasks.

Personal accounts from library users vividly illustrate the value of this support. In Peterborough, a pensioner shared how staff patiently helped him set up a new phone that came without instructions. In Mount Gambier, another user praised a library worker who never made her “feel like a dill,” instead encouraging her to build confidence and learn at her own pace (SACOSS, 2023a). These stories, echoed in communities across South Australia, reflect libraries’ dual role as trusted digital guides and compassionate, inclusive community spaces.

FIGURE 3 SURVEY RESPONSE
IN THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE YOU FOUND YOURSELF NEEDING TO PROVIDE MORE ASSISTANCE WITH ONLINE SERVICES?

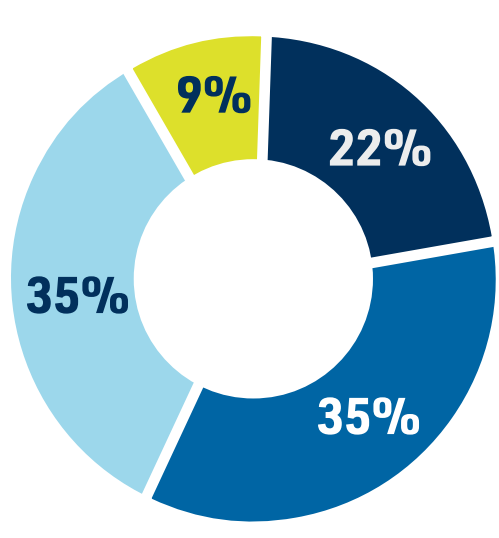


Every respondent reported that they were provide more assistance with online services. Including:

- Setting up and accessing MyGov accounts.
- Navigating all sorts of online processes either government departments or banking.
- First time online use of government, banking and other critical services as these services switch to exclusively or near exclusively online only methods.
- Everything! Banking, government, bills, communication and general tech help.
- Housing applications, passports, setting up mobile phones, using email
- Welfare, NDIS
- Legal and medical communication
- Accessing and sending emails passport applications
- Cyber security, my health records
- Employment seeking, police checks, rental seeking

Despite this significant increase and change in workload, only 22 per cent had received formal training from their employer to provide support for online services.

FIGURE 4 SURVEY RESPONSE
HAVE YOU BEEN PROVIDED WITH ADDITIONAL TRAINING AND RESOURCES FOR ONE-ON-ONE DIGITAL SUPPORT?



- yes - formal courses have been provided by my employer
- yes - colleagues have shown me the basics
- I have taught myself in my own time
- I have enrolled in my own training at my own expense

This is a significant omission, and more needs to be done. Library workers are at the forefront of these changes and these survey results reveal they are inadequately resourced, trained, and supported. This increased demand puts pressure on individuals leads to stress and burn-out and, in some cases, creates serious work health and safety risks for the library workers and for the public.



Part Four: The Economic Case for Greater Investment

Parts 1 to 3 of this report have outlined the evolving role of libraries in our society, highlighting the critical services they provide which are often the only option available to many individuals, and the frontline role played by library staff. This section details the current funding arrangements for public libraries, demonstrates their economic value, underscores their crucial need, and makes the case for investing in a secure, well-paid and professional workforce.

LIBRARIES ARE UNDER FINANCIAL PRESSURE

Despite their growing importance, SA's public libraries are under increasing financial strain. Most library funding—approximately 75-84 per cent—comes from local government, with the State Government providing a smaller share and federal support almost non-existent (SGS Economics and Planning, 2020; LGA SA, 2022). Recent years have seen mounting pressure on council budgets, driven by rising operational costs, energy bills, and the need to maintain modern facilities and technology.

Meanwhile, SA Government funding has failed to keep pace with rising costs. The primary library funding agreement has remained fixed at \$20.7 million annually for five consecutive years, despite inflation and growing service demands (InDaily, 2023). This funding shortfall has placed significant pressure on libraries, forcing many to contemplate reducing opening hours, cutting programs, or scaling back essential digital services like free Wi-Fi and public computer access—resources now central to digital inclusion and community engagement.

Both the Local Government Association and the ASU have raised concerns that, without increased investment, either critical programs and services may be lost permanently, with little prospect of reinstatement (ASU, 2024; LGA SA, 2022) or the rising costs of sustaining libraries may fall to local councils, potentially resulting in rate increases of up to \$500 per household—an untenable burden for SA families already under significant financial pressure (ASU, 2023; SACOSS, 2024).

LIBRARIES ARE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ENGINES

The economic contribution of SA's public libraries is substantial. According to a major 2020 study, libraries generate \$253 million in annual benefits for the state, with a net community benefit of \$164 million after operational costs are considered (SGS Economics and Planning, 2020). For every dollar invested in public libraries, \$2.80 in benefits are returned to the community. These benefits are not limited to library users; even non-users value libraries for the option to use them in the future or for the knowledge that these resources are available to others in their community.

Libraries also stimulate local economies through their operations and the spending of library users. Their activities support over 680 full-time equivalent jobs directly, with additional employment generated through user spending and local economic activity. In Greater Adelaide alone, libraries contribute more than \$70 million annually to the region's gross product (SGS Economics and Planning, 2020).

LIBRARIES ARE ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN A TIME OF CRISIS

In this challenging environment, libraries have proven themselves to be indispensable infrastructure for SA communities. They provide not only access to books and information but also a safe, welcoming environment for work, study, and social connection. Libraries offer air-conditioned spaces in summer and heated refuges in winter, which is particularly important as energy costs rise, and more people struggle to afford adequate heating and cooling at home.

Crucially, libraries remain free at the point of use, preserving the principle of universal access and advancing social equity. They offer vital support for those most affected by the digital divide, the withdrawal of other community services, and the intensifying pressures of the cost-of-living crisis. As SA faces ongoing economic uncertainty and rapid social change, public libraries stand out more than ever—as drivers of local economic participation, hubs of lifelong learning, and trusted spaces for connection and care (ABC News, 2025a; SACOSS, 2023a).

THE LIBRARY WORKFORCE IS BEING DEPROFESSIONALISED AND UNDERVALUED

The ASU-conducted survey revealed an older, long-term, and feminised workforce. Most respondents had been working in the library for well over five years and a significant number are approaching two decades of service. This

long-term tenure brings with it a wealth of institutional knowledge, an invaluable asset that underpins the effective functioning and continuity of library services. The overwhelming majority of surveyed members—96 per cent—indicated they have seen a significant change in the role of libraries in the last five-10 years, yet their classification and pay had not undergone the same change to better reflect their new role.

The survey revealed a workforce under immense strain: 88 per cent reported significant changes in their responsibilities over the past decade, 64 per cent felt chronically undervalued, and 60 per cent have faced safety concerns due to managing complex patron needs. Despite 100 per cent reporting a surge in demand for digital support, only 22 per cent have received relevant training, and half report mental health impacts from workplace stress.

Most respondents were classified at Level 2 or 3, and about 40 per cent believed they were under-classified, suggesting a potential gap between their responsibilities and their formal classification and earnings. As they do not handle money or manage staff, they are stuck at these low classifications despite providing essential and frontline services.

Most respondents were working full-time hours, though many were employed on fixed-term and insecure contract types. The survey also revealed that libraries rely on volunteers for supplementary work, including program support, shelving, home library service delivery, and digital literacy assistance, and an increasing cohort of casual workers and labour hire workers.

This overuse of volunteers and labour hire leads to instability, skill gaps, and inconsistent service delivery, as they may lack the training, availability, or accountability of permanent staff. This approach risks deskilling of the profession, exploitation, and underinvestment in secure jobs.

To achieve the greatest return on investment, there must be a commitment to employing permanent, secure, well-paid, and professionally trained staff in libraries.



Recommendations for a sustainable future

This report proposes six recommendations to ensure sustainable support for SA public libraries, recognising that library workers embrace increased demand and take pride in busy, engaged libraries.

These recommendations include an independent review into equitable funding models, a social responsibility levy on institutions exiting regional markets, needs-based funding allocations, increased State contributions, innovative revenue streams, and the expansion of social worker programs. These solutions aim to address the changing scope and volume of library work, supporting workers and ensuring libraries remain vital community hubs for working families and vulnerable populations.

It should be made clear that library workers were not complaining about this increased demand. Many explicitly stated that they are pleased to see a busy library, but this increased and changing demand is changing the shape and amount of their work and that should be recognised and supported.



RECOMMENDATION 1

The SA Government should establish an independent formal review into equitable funding models for libraries

The SA Government should initiate a formal, independent review by an external body into creating sustainable, long-term funding models for public libraries. The current funding model, reliant on council rates for approximately 75-84 per cent of library budgets, is unsustainable given the increased demands for digital access, safe spaces, and emergency support. The review should engage diverse stakeholders, including the ASU, library workers, councils, and community groups, to ensure solutions reflect community needs. The review must prioritise sustainability to prevent rate hikes that burden low-income households.

The review should consider recommending a mandated minimum percentage of council budgets be allocated to libraries, to ensure local governments maintain or improve their funding responsibilities irrespective of any increased investment from the SA Government.

The review should consider a needs-based funding model, with the distribution of funding based on disadvantage and population growth to better support rural and regional areas. A formula-based model would help resource libraries in high-need communities like Port Augusta and Whyalla, improving equity and access to services.

The review's remit should include library staff security of employment, classification and pay.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The SA Government should immediately deliver a one-off increase of its contribution to library budgets

While the review is underway, the SA Government should increase its contribution to library budgets through the OneCard System from 15 per cent to 20 per cent. This would enable councils to invest in staff, training, and infrastructure while reducing overreliance on local rates.

Funding should be conditional on councils ensuring classifications that recognise library workers' specialised skills and transitioning labour hire and fixed-term staff, as seen in councils like the City of Tea Tree Gully, to permanent roles to stabilise the predominantly female, long-tenured workforce, with priority allocations for libraries serving vulnerable populations.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The SA Government should introduce a Social Responsibility Levy on institutions exiting regional markets

The SA Government should introduce a social responsibility levy on institutions that withdraw from regional communities such as banks, Australia Post, and agencies like Centrelink. The funds collected would be directed into a community services fund to support libraries. The closure of bank branches, Australia Post offices, and services such as passport photo booths has increased pressure on libraries, where staff are often required to provide assistance outside their training. This levy would help resource libraries with digital literacy trainers, extended opening hours, and additional support for working families, while ensuring that organisations exiting regional areas contribute to mitigating the impact on local communities.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Local councils must set up comprehensive professional development and training programs for library staff immediately after the increase of funds by the SA Government

There needs to be an immediate, one-off, targeted investment in a statewide professional development training program tied to the increase in state government funding to equip library staff to meet growing demands in digital services, crisis response, and social support. This training would reduce stress, enhance service quality, and ensure regional staff are not left behind.

The ASU survey indicates that only 22 per cent of library staff have received formal training to support online services, despite 100 per cent reporting increased demand. Staff are often left to self-teach technical skills at home, particularly for integrating new technologies, and lack training in critical areas such as handling disclosures of family and domestic violence and providing mental health first aid. A state-wide training initiative, modelled on successful programs like Victoria's library staff development modules, could provide targeted training in digital literacy, crisis response, and social support skills. This program should include workshops, online modules, and partnerships with training providers to ensure accessibility for regional staff. Funding, potentially drawn from increased state contributions or innovative revenue streams, should cover at least \$2 million annually to support these efforts, reducing stress, enhancing staff confidence, and improving service delivery for vulnerable communities and working families.

The ongoing provision of regular professional development and training then needs to be undertaken within the library budgets of each council.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The SA Government must fund libraries to respond to extreme weather events

During times of emergency, local government are often the first and last responders. It is common practice for SA Government to direct people to a library during a wild weather event such as a heat wave or storm. If public libraries are to continue to be used as evacuation or refuge hubs during an extreme weather event, the SA Government needs to fund this provision which would enable libraries to increase staffing and hours during these events. This of course does not mandate the opening of a library where it is unsafe to do so.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The SA Government should expand the Social Worker Program across SA

Embedding social workers in libraries would provide crucial support to patrons with complex needs and reduce pressure on staff.

A pilot social worker programs at Salisbury Library is providing a promising new model for supporting both library staff and patrons, especially working families and vulnerable groups affected by the cost-of-living crisis. The initiative embeds professional social workers within libraries to assist with complex needs such as homelessness, mental health challenges, and digital access barriers. Social workers also offer mentoring and training to library staff, helping them better respond to challenging situations. Early feedback suggests the program has made libraries safer and more welcoming for all patrons, while also relieving staff of some of the stress associated with handling complex social issues.

However, the pilot is currently limited, meaning most library staff still lack access to this kind of specialist support and continue to manage social work-like tasks without formal training. Expanding the pilot program would improve library safety, patron outcomes, and workforce resilience, with measurable community-wide benefits. The Adelaide City Library also has undertaken a social worker pilot program, however this program has engaged student social workers in libraries, where they do not receive the oversight and support necessary for students. This report strongly advocates that social workers in libraries must be fully qualified and not students.

The pilot social worker programs in SA have been informed by a similar program in Victoria, which was informed by common practice in America and Canada (Lloyd, 2020).



CASE STUDY

Melbourne City Libraries

In 2019 the City of Melbourne established its social worker program in response to a major piece of work conducted by Leah Esguerra from San Francisco Public Libraries.

Leah's work was, in part, informed by similar programs being run in America and Canada (Garner, 2020).

In recognition of the large homeless population using Library services the first phase of the program involved a 12-month contract for an outreach worker from the city's homelessness outreach team. A key focus of this phase was on mentoring and skill development for library staff.

The second phase saw the recruitment of an in-house 'Library Social Worker'. In addition to assisting the public, this role also began co-designing and co-delivering staff training to improve capacity and resilience in the rest of the staff team. The initial evaluation of the project was positive (Garner, 2020).

Three quarters of staff believed the presence of a social worker helped them to better respond to people with complex needs because the social worker provided reassurance that they were able to defer complex issues onto someone with the qualifications and experience.

Staff also said the social worker took pressure off staff and reduced stress. It increased staff confidence and created a more positive environment in the library with patrons.

It is our recommendation that this social work program is rolled out across South Australia.

The expansion of the social worker program would have a ripple effect, benefiting both staff and patrons. For working families, the program would ensure libraries remain safe, welcoming spaces where children can access free programs and parents can rely on digital support without the chaos of unmanaged crises. Vulnerable patrons, such as the unhoused or those with mental health challenges, would receive specialised assistance. This would reduce disruptions and foster a more inclusive environment.

The program would also address the digital divide, equipping staff to support low-income families with online tasks critical to their financial stability. By standardising training and mentoring, the program would create a more resilient workforce, capable of meeting the diverse needs of communities hit hard by service closures and economic pressures.

The program should include a robust evaluation framework to measure its impact, building on the Adelaide pilot's success. Key metrics could include

reductions in staff stress (targeting a 75 per cent decrease), improvements in patron outcomes (e.g. 50 per cent increase in successful digital task completion), and enhanced library safety (e.g. 60 per cent reduction in reported incidents). Annual reports, shared with councils and the public, would ensure transparency and accountability, demonstrating the program's value to working families and policymakers.

The program could also partner with universities and social work organisations to recruit and train professionals, creating a pipeline of skilled workers tailored to library needs. By embedding social workers in every library, SA can set a national standard for community support, addressing the cost-of-living crisis and service closures while empowering librarians to thrive in their roles.

Library workers provide vital and invaluable support to some of the most vulnerable and isolated people in our communities. It is vital that they are, in turn, well-supported.

Conclusion

Public libraries in SA are no longer quiet havens of books and periodicals. They have essential community infrastructure, with their staff operating on the frontline often without adequate support, valuation and recognition of their work.

This report demonstrates that libraries are not simply surviving in this environment, they are adapting, expanding, and stepping up to fill the critical service gaps created by rising inequality, climate stress, and digital exclusion. Today's public libraries are dynamic, responsive and deeply embedded in their communities yet current resourcing is failing to reflect their value.

The demands on library staff are increasing in scope, urgency, and complexity. Without policy reform and adequate investment, the system risks being stretched beyond sustainability.

The recommendations in this report present a pragmatic path forward, acknowledging the role libraries and their workforce now play in our society, and the support they need to be sustainable into the future.



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