

It's time to RENEW OUR LIBRARIES

With public libraries in New South Wales facing a funding crisis, the NSW Public Library Association and Local Government NSW joined forces to campaign for a sustainable funding model for public libraries across the state.

In 2018, NSW public libraries face an urgent funding crisis despite the inherent value they provide to our communities. Between 2000 and 2018 visits to public libraries have increased by 8 million – to 35 million visits per year – however, the NSW state government contribution for libraries has been diminishing for almost 40 years. In 1980 the NSW state government funded 23.6% of the operating cost of the state's 368 public libraries. By 2018 that proportion had decreased to just 7.8% – the lowest level of state support for public libraries in Australia.

Local councils now bear 92.2% of the cost of operating the NSW public library network and the funding shortfall presents a significant problem that has to be confronted each year. Most NSW councils maintain a strong commitment to the provision

of high quality libraries, but many communities have still seen a gradual attrition of opening hours, staffing, collections, programs and services over the past 40 years.

In December 2017, the Local Government NSW (LGNSW) annual conference unanimously passed a resolution to work with the NSW Public Libraries Association (NSWPLA) to increase public awareness about the role of public libraries in local communities, and to advocate for improved NSW state government funding in the lead up to the 2019 state election.

As part of the planning process the campaign committee, comprised of representatives from both LGNSW and the NSWPLA, came together to participate in a workshop which comprehensively laid out objectives, key targets, audiences and messaging. The committee determined that the two primary objectives would be to 'double the NSW government contribution to public libraries', and to 'create a new funding model that is sustainable'. Robert Knight, ALIA Vice-President (President elect), is a NSWPLA representative on the Renew Our Libraries Committee and has acted as a campaign spokesperson since the initiative was launched.

The name 'Renew Our Libraries' was chosen, speaking both to the need to address the immediate funding crisis but also to the act of renewing and evolving these valued intuitions into the future. After a substantive creative process, the Renew Our Libraries logo, a small human figure standing outside a library building from which golden light (representing knowledge) emanates, sought to portray public libraries as institutions that were highly valued by the community and worthy of both community advocacy and government support.

The strategy to educate local councils about the issue and secure their formal support was developed by research into community attitudes toward public libraries. We engaged council assistance through public libraries to help in spreading the message to their communities and provided a website to inform and recruit supporters from both metropolitan and regional areas. We used social media to continue campaign momentum, informing and engaging new supporters. Finally, we utilised this broad base of council, library, and community support to call on all political parties to commit to the campaign's objective in the lead up to the 2019 NSW state election.

We launched on 1 August 2018, with a media conference at Waverley Library in Sydney's eastern suburbs and an [exclusive story](#) published by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The Renew Our Libraries campaign quickly gained steam. In quick succession, close to half the councils in NSW signed up to the campaign and it soon became clear that public libraries hold a very special place in the hearts of our communities. In just six weeks, over 7,500 supporters [signed up](#) to support the campaign and the Renew Our Libraries messages reached over 140,000 people on social media.



Cr Romola Hollywood (Blue Mountains City Council and NSW Public Libraries Association Vice President); Cr Marjorie O'Neill (Waverley Council and Local Government NSW Treasurer); Cr Linda Scott (City of Sydney Council and Local Government NSW President); Cr John Wakefield (Mayor of Waverley Council); Cr Dallas Tout (Deputy Mayor of Wagga Wagga City Council and NSW Public Libraries Association President)



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The campaign has inspired dozens of stories in local newspapers and additional online news stories with Fairfax, the ABC and SBS. Committee representatives have undertaken multiple radio interviews and participated in several regional TV news segments.

On 26 March 2018, well before Renew Our Libraries was announced, the NSW Labor Party had pledged that if they were elected to government in 2019 they would supply an additional \$50 million for NSW public libraries through 2019-20 to 2022-23. Inexplicably, on 19 June 2018 the current NSW government announced a 5% reduction in library funding direct to NSW councils as part of the state budget.

However, on 24 August 2018, a few weeks after the Renew Our Libraries campaign had commenced, the NSW government demonstrated that the voices of local councils and supporters were being heard by announcing a \$60 million funding injection to public libraries across NSW over four years. This would be the largest single NSW government cash injection into the public library network in 40 years. While a welcome first step, both commitments from the major parties only go part way to resolving the funding crisis faced by NSW public libraries after 40 years of underinvestment.

However, even with the NSW government and NSW Labor announcing their intended commitments of additional funding over four years of \$60 million and \$50 million respectively, the increase still falls considerably short of delivering on the Renew Our Libraries challenge to double the state funding of public libraries in NSW (which would need \$94 million over the four years).

At the time of writing (September), neither party has made a commitment to addressing the second objective of the Renew Our Libraries campaign of delivering a new, sustainable, funding model for public libraries. Without a sustainable funding model, including an indexed NSW

Government contribution, public library funding will soon fall behind again, creating another funding crisis in the near future.

It is for this reason that it is so important that the Renew Our Libraries campaign continues. While we welcome the initial commitments that the campaign has achieved, we will continue to call on all political parties to 'fill the shelves' by committing to properly funding NSW public libraries. We encourage councils and community supporters who have not yet joined the Renew Our Libraries effort to do so as soon as possible. The greater our unity, the greater our chances of success.

The politicians are listening, and while much has been achieved, much more remains to be done. Together we remain deeply committed to ensuring that this historical funding problem is finally addressed, so that once and for all, we may renew our libraries. 🌱

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