

# RenewOur Libraries

**R**OBERT KNIGHT shares how, after successive state governments spent decades underfunding New South Wales public libraries, the 2018–2019 *Renew Our Libraries* campaign successfully delivered the largest single increase in library funding since the introduction of the NSW Library Act in 1939.

In the almost 40 years since 1980, New South Wales (NSW) state contributions to funding public libraries had gradually dwindled from 23.6 percent of the total cost of operating state public libraries to just 7.8 percent. Fortunately for the people of NSW, councils across the state continued to pick up the funding shortfall while the state funding diminished, thereby ensuring the continuity of service provision through the network of 368 libraries across NSW. By 2017, local government was contributing 13 times more to libraries than the state government (\$373,931,210 compared to \$28,322,000) and funding fatigue was setting in. There was a significant risk that if this over reliance on local government expenditure continued, it would seriously impact library opening hours, staffing, collections, programs, services, and infrastructure.

Despite a failed funding campaign in the lead up to the 2015 NSW state election, the NSW Public Libraries Association (NSWPLA) was determined to draw attention to the worsening plight of NSW libraries and the potential demise of library services to the people of NSW – and it did so to magnificent effect with the *Renew Our Libraries* campaign.

So, what made *Renew Our Libraries* so successful?

It could be said that the stars aligned for NSWPLA as planning discussions progressed. But developing a process and working through the following seven points were critical success factors for *Renew Our Libraries*:

## **The timing was right**

The 2018 political environment in NSW was significantly different from the climate in 2015, when the pre-election Library Lovers Vote Too campaign was rolled out. In the lead up to the 2019 election, the incumbent government had suffered a number of political setbacks during the last term (2015–2019), associated with compulsory council amalgamations, the controversial demolition and rebuild of the Allianz Stadium at Olympic Park in Sydney, and a long overdue and over budget Sydney light rail project. This meant that there was much more at stake for the government in the leadup to the 2019 election. In addition, NSW Labor (the Opposition) released a new Library Funding Policy at its election campaign launch in March 2018 (a full 12 months before the state election) which included a \$50 million boost to library funding. The political climate provided a perfect backdrop for a successful library funding campaign.

## **We developed a strategic partnership with an allied and influential organisation**

NSWPLA established a powerful partnership with Local Government NSW (LGNSW) the NSW local government association that supports councils across the state. The relationship between NSWPLA and LGNSW was both timely and successful. Each partner brought different skills, contacts and influences to the table, and between them achieved incredible reach into the NSW local government sector, public library sector, and local communities across the state. The two associations formed a campaign committee and got to work.

## **We brought in professionals**

Skilled and experienced consultants from Essential Media were engaged to develop and administer the *Renew Our Libraries* campaign. With their combined knowledge of politics, media and community engagement, as demonstrated through the administration of such high profile campaigns as *Every Australian Counts*; *Everybody's*



*ALIA President Robert Knight working to promote the Renew Our Libraries campaign. Photograph by Peter Casey*

Home; and The Luke Batty Foundation, Essential Media brought skills and experience in rolling out a community campaign that we simply didn't have. The consultants based the collaborative development of the campaign strategy on quality assured research and methodology, providing a strong foundation for engagement and success.

### **We created clear campaign objectives**

The campaign objectives were clearly articulated from the outset – Double the Funding – Index the Funding – Protect the Funding. So, everyone could see straight away what NSW libraries were asking for: more money; a sustainable funding model indexed to CPI to ensure that future economic value would be maintained; and the protection of the revised funding model through the NSW Library Act.

### **We put social media to work**

Renew Our Libraries was rolled out almost exclusively via social media. A strong working knowledge of social media aggregation and optimisation was key to promoting the campaign message and maximising community engagement.

### **We involved the community**

People from communities across the state joined the campaign with alacrity. The incremental build of campaign followers throughout the campaign, accompanied by their political activism at the local and state levels, left politicians in no doubt that voters valued their libraries and didn't want to see any reduction in services.

### **We gained the support and endorsement of key stakeholders**

The collaboration of NSWPLA and LGNSW saw over 80 percent of NSW councils provide their official endorsement of the Renew Our Libraries campaign. From a political perspective, this achievement sent a strong message from local government to state government.



*Cr Linda Scott (City of Sydney Council and Local Government NSW President) and Cr Dallas Tout (Deputy Mayor of Wagga Wagga City Council and NSW Public Libraries Association President)*

Renew Our Libraries was launched by the NSWPLA President, Councillor Dallas Tout and the LGNSW President, Councillor Linda Scott, on 1 August 2018 at the Waverly Library in Sydney. On Friday 24 August 2018, the Hon Don Harwin, Minister for the Arts, announced an additional \$60 million in public library funding for the quadrennial period 2019–2020 to 2022–2023.

After 40 years of ongoing state funding reductions, NSW libraries had finally achieved recognition by the state government through a massive injection of funding. The campaign continues, with the next phase of Renew Our Libraries focusing on the future sustainability of the funding model through indexation and legislation. In the meantime, our councils and libraries look forward to the benefits that additional funding will bring to the people of NSW through the creation of even better library services. 

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