

# ADVOCATING AUSTRALIAN LIBRARIES ACROSS THE UNITED KINGDOM



**A**sked to speak at international conferences, JANE COWELL felt it was an important opportunity to promote what is happening across Australia in the library and information sector.

Recently I was honoured to be invited to be a keynote speaker at the CILIP Scotland National Conference in Dundee Scotland on the theme of innovation ([bit.ly/30U9EII](http://bit.ly/30U9EII)). While in the United Kingdom (UK) I was also asked to present a paper at the Libraries Connect Symposium in Coventry, England on the topic of partnerships ([bit.ly/2JVte00](http://bit.ly/2JVte00)).

For both these presentations I thought it was very important to promote where my thoughts and examples came from – that of the Australian library industry context. This meant showing how the UK and Australia differ and what we might do better. The first key difference is size. Australia is approximately 32 times bigger than the UK, yet the UK has over 2.7 times our population. Distance is a ‘thing’ in Australia and the UK has a higher population density to address. Australians are happier than the British,

appearing as 11th on the *World Happiness Index* while the UK is 15th.

Our public libraries are also in a very different situation than those in the UK. A great way that I was able to highlight this was by using figures our industry gathers for reporting on our usage and funding. From the 2016–2017 national figures collected by the National and State Libraries Australia ([bit.ly/30Yxzqh](http://bit.ly/30Yxzqh)), we know that expenditure on public libraries is increasing in Australia. Total expenditure on public libraries increased from \$1.03 billion in 2012–2013 to over \$1.23 billion in 2016–2017, representing a 19.5 percent increase. This is partly due to operational costs going up but also because in Australia library advocacy has resulted in some significant capital expenditure on new award-winning public library buildings in the past few years and this is continuing. The City of Perth Library, Sydney city’s new Green Square Library, Casey Cardinia’s Bunjil Place Library and the new Geelong City Library are just some that immediately come to mind as amazing new public libraries provided through Local Government and State Government investment. This is a very different fiscal environment to that of the UK public library sector which is seeing a significant decrease in investment in libraries. So much so that more than 7,000 jobs have been lost since 2008, with a significant number of library branches closing or being handed over to local volunteers to run.

In Australia our 1,666 public library service points and outlets host over 114 million customer visits annually, or if we think of this monthly, more than 9.5 million per month and this is increasing. The trend anecdotally is that it appears library visitors are staying longer with a significant



Liz McGettigan and Jane Cowell in Scotland.  
Photo by Charlie Sherry



Jane Cowell presenting in Scotland.  
Photo by Charlie Sherry

proportion coming to the library to borrow an item. Customer surveys are a great way to obtain information as to how we are serving our users and in the recent 2019 Customer Survey at Yarra Plenty Regional Library the top reason for library members using the library was to learn something and the reason for accessing library resources was to increase skills. So, public libraries are still the go-to place for self-improvement, access to self-directed learning and personal development.

Over 36.3 million items (1.4 items per person) were made available for the use of the community in Australia in 2016–2017, representing an investment of more than \$126 million to ensure these collections remain up to date and relevant. Over 161.4 million loans were made to the 9.3 million members of Australia’s public libraries and this is a slight decline. Some library services are seeing increases in digital collection lending but overall the lending of collections is plateauing with less per capita borrowing nationwide. Library programming is continuing to increase, both in the number of events and programs offered and in attendance figures. In 2016–2017, attendance at library programs totalled more than 6.5 million, which represented an annual increase of 6.7 percent.

You can see why having access to this information is important. Australian public libraries, while conscious and responsive to local fiscal pressures, are ideating, evolving and adapting from an optimistic point of view. The recent Victorian Public Libraries campaign, Libraries Change Lives ([librarieschangelives.org.au](http://librarieschangelives.org.au)), is about building local

and political advocacy for increased public funding in libraries from a positive statistical base. Detailing both the state-wide impact through individual stories and our increasing use statistics is timely with public libraries still able to strongly demonstrate impact across the whole community in the areas of early literacy, job skills, digital inclusion, social isolation, reading, and access – to place, learning, technology and the internet. In a decreasing funding environment, UK libraries are struggling to provide daily services, current collections and skilled staff. They recognise the challenge and CILIP recently announced their Libraries Deliver UK advocacy campaign ([librariesdeliver.uk](http://librariesdeliver.uk)). Partnering with the EveryLibrary Institute the Libraries Deliver UK campaign connects people from across England in support of their libraries with funding from Arts Council England.

What my trip reinforced for me was how passionate librarians exist everywhere, sharing values, ideas and energy. It was a privilege to meet so many committed to professional development to improve their library services for their communities and share the Australian experience with them. 🌟

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Australian Library and  
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19 Sept 2019



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