



DUBBO REGIONAL
COUNCIL

REPORT: Macquarie Regional Library Service Delivery Review

DIVISION: Community, Culture and Places
REPORT DATE: 12 June 2023
TRIM REFERENCE: ID23/1262

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose	Review of Macquarie Regional Library operational efficiency and opportunities for continuous improvement	
Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Dubbo Regional Council is the Executive Council of the Macquarie Regional Library	
Reasoning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>Local Government Act 1993, Local Government (General) Regulations 2021, Section 428A Audit, Risk and Improvement Committee.</i>Council obligation under Section 428A of the <i>Local Government Act 1993</i> to undertake service reviews. Provide a report to DRC Audit & Risk Committee.	
Financial Implications	Budget Area	Macquarie Regional Library
	Funding Source	Macquarie Regional Library Member Councils
	Cost	\$43,920 (ex. GST).
Policy Implications	Policy Title	Macquarie Regional Library Member Council Service Agreement (Dubbo Regional Council, Warrumbungle Shire Council and Narromine Shire Council)
	Impact on Policy	Policy Review

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The Towards 2040 Community Strategic Plan is a vision for the development of the region out to the year 2040. The Plan includes six principle themes and a number of objectives and strategies. This report is aligned to:

Theme:	5 Liveability
CSP Objective:	5.4 Our community has access to a full range of educational opportunities
Delivery Program Strategy:	5.4.3 Access to a high standard of library services and facilities is available
Theme:	5 Liveability
CSP Objective:	5.4 Our community has access to a full range of educational opportunities

Delivery Program Strategy: 5.4.1 Access to a variety of high quality education facilities, opportunities and choice is available

RECOMMENDATION

That the information contained within the report of the Manager Macquarie Regional Library, dated 12 June 2023, be noted.

Craig Arms
Director Community, Culture and Places

KM
Manager Macquarie
Regional Library

BACKGROUND

The Dubbo Regional Council Community Strategic Plan provides for obligations under the *Library Act 1939* and Library Regulation 2018 to provide public library services. The legislative requirement guides council strategy and plans and underpins an internal focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of service provision. In accordance with the *Local Government Act 1993* Section 428A, the service review ‘tests’ the library’s performance, provides an independent analysis of the service model. Additionally, future opportunities and a continuous improvement plan are proposed.

REPORT

The service review process provides an opportunity for a high-level review of the regional library service and applies a strategic lens to its operations. Significant factors for consideration include the service delivery model, e.g., regional service or a stand-alone model, cultural service objectives, Dubbo Library’s future location, and impacts of service delivery change in the library’s opening hours.

In December 2022, the council engaged The University of Newcastle to undertake a service review of the regional library service model, specifically focusing on Dubbo Regional Council’s role as the Macquarie Regional Library (MRL) Executive Council. Professor Roberta Ryan, Chair of Local Government and Director of the Institute for Regional Futures, led the review.

The service review focused on the following areas:

- Review the service delivery model, noting that a stand-alone model provides alternative opportunities
- Investigate opportunities for the future cultural precinct and library service to align with cultural development objectives
- State Library of NSW funding opportunities and service support
- Engage staff in the service review process, which provides operational insight into potential service improvements
- Build on existing strengths and drive a consistent approach that provides efficient and effective outcomes for the future

Consultation

The service review consultation included the following stakeholders with strategic and operational decision-making responsibilities:

- Dubbo Regional Council’s Mayor and Deputy Mayor
- Dubbo Regional Council’s CEO and executives
- DRC managers and library staff across the regional library service areas
- Narromine Shire Council (partner stakeholder)
- Warrumbungle Shire Council (partner stakeholder)
- State Library of New South Wales

The University of Newcastle interviewed representatives from Dubbo Regional Council, Warrumbungle Shire Council and Narromine Shire Council. A half-day workshop was held with key library staff across the region. The library staff also completed service function templates to gather vital information for analysis. Internal guidance was provided by the DRC's Director of Strategy, Partnership and Engagement to ensure a consistent approach to the process.

Resourcing Implications

There are no resourcing implications arising from this report. However, the consultant report includes recommendations that may have operational resource implications. Any proposal must be considered in the context of the council's plans for the library service based on priorities, financial sustainability and resource capacity. For example, additional dedicated resources are required for a more significant community engagement program.

Report Highlights

- Against the brief to assess the alternative cost-effectiveness of a stand-alone service, Dubbo's current operational cost (2021-2022) is significantly lower per resident (\$40.32) than the benchmark Urban councils' median (\$49.25).
- Current contributions from the regional partner councils are estimated to contribute significantly to the net savings to Dubbo Regional Council and provide value to the community through shared resourcing of operational costs. Warrumbungle (\$68.13) and Narromine (\$68.61) councils benefit from the regional partnership, paying significantly less than councils with small populations as a standalone library (\$102) or as part of a regional system (\$79).
- There is significant potential for the future role of library services in cultural development, service as a "community hub", and information technology entry points for communities while providing the facilities and programs that support cultural activities and opportunities. Significantly, educational and economic outcomes, currently a focus of the libraries, also need to be given high priority, given the literacy and educational needs of communities.
- Both DRC and MRL have clearly articulated Strategic, Delivery and Operational plans. These reflect a high-level strategic focus, recurrent accountability requirements and specific issue management priorities.
- The review identified strong evidence of Macquarie Regional Libraries' commitment to strategic development to address challenges with an emphasis on some important areas at the expense of others.
- MRL has forgone efforts to attract state and federal grants while operating in constrained library spaces and focusing efforts to think locally and act locally within a regional library context.

Areas for Consideration

- One of the recurring issues in the relationship between MRL and DRC is an acknowledged separation of identity and policies promoted by both parts of the organisation.
- The MRL Strategic Plan to incorporate cultural development objectives identified in the DRC SPARC Cultural Plan. The co-location of Dubbo Library and Cultural Centre may provide greater opportunities for joint programming and resources but isolates the library from the central gateway business hub and adjacent growth precincts, vital for ready customer access.
- From a council perspective, other than through limited reference in SPARC, there is a need for a library policy that identifies its aims and objectives in supporting library services, the aims and objectives of the regional partnership, and its role in administering service delivery.
- Options for DRC to improve the governance beyond the Library Service Agreement include developing protocols with Participating Councils to manage any identified conflicts. The Agreement would also benefit from a review and DRC Governance should draft, in consultation with stakeholders, proposed amendments to the MRL Service Agreement to address governance concerns.
- Council consideration of the future library location includes the current site and this is consistent with community views that access and location are critical to public libraries' growing role in supporting social needs and casual public access. This is supported by the NSW State Library advice (People Places, SLNSW website, 2023), which points to research that identifies 12 locational criteria for siting a public library.
- Dubbo central library operates 49 hours per week, slightly under the NSW public libraries benchmark for libraries servicing similar populations of 53 hours per week. Dubbo Regional Council utilise 15.79 staff (including an estimated 6.22 positions from the regional office) distributed on a 77.8% percentage across the region. This is significantly under the NSW public libraries benchmark baseline for the number of staff member per capita resident population of 18.06.
- The view that an attempt to withdraw services on Sunday is unlikely to have a major impact on users' needs to be tested against data on current utilisation and the role of libraries now and in future. This will require an understanding of future trends in library services and their changing role as "community hubs".
- The provision of I.T. support services at MRL through the library service program be supported, subject to compliance with DRC Information Technology policy. This policy and resourcing be reviewed to identify appropriate standards and procedures to effectively support the delivery of library services to the community through MRL.

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- A move to stand-alone library services would diminish the value to DRC in attracting and retaining staff, shared collections, grant opportunities, training and regional development.
- Resources to fund improvements need to be sourced through the judicious application of resources already provided to libraries as outlined in the report, as well as growth in capital and recurrent expenditure that is targeted and sustainable.

Next Steps

- Develop and implement an approved Library Service Improvement Plan
- Align plans with Council Strategic Plans and quarterly reporting

CONCLUSION

The review found that MRL is an effective and efficient provider of quality library services in Dubbo and partner councils that compares well with industry benchmarks and customer surveys.

Implementing a Library Services Improvement Plan will provide improved strategic alignment between MRL and DRC, planning and integrating cultural objectives, review of key library roles, and resulting accountabilities.

MRL's future Library Service Plan will be built on the strengths of key decision-making and a focus on continuous service improvement.