



# FREMANTLE LIBRARY CONNECT PROJECT

AN EVALUATION OF THE FIRST TWO YEARS

*Donna Quinn, Shannen Vallesi, Lisa Wood, & Stephan Lund*



## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. We pay our respects to their culture and to their Elders.

We acknowledge with gratitude everyone involved in providing information, feedback, data, and support for this report. We especially thank the people who have been supported by Library Connect and who took the time to meet with us and share their experiences.

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# BACKGROUND

*“The idea is that public libraries are one of the only places in our modern world where you can just go and be, without the expectation that you have to pay for something. Having resources like this service, in a place where people are already looking for a place to be, is a good thing.” – Library staff member*

Internationally and across Australia, community need has changed significantly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In Western Australia, there have been impacts on employment, a lack of affordable and available housing, and an increase in people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and financial hardship. There has also been an emergence of people requiring support who previously might not have required access to or support from community services.<sup>1,2</sup>

Against this backdrop of changing and increasing community need, St Patrick’s Community Support Centre (St Pat’s) and the City of Fremantle **initiated the Library Connect project**. Library Connect **commenced in September 2020**, initially as a 12-month pilot project.

Library Connect was initially fully funded by St Pat’s, supported by a donation provided by the Dorothy and Bill Irwin Charitable Trust. The City of Fremantle also provided critical in-kind support for the service, including space in the City’s Library, administrative, communications, and strategic support, as well as the active participation of library staff.

Since late 2021, the City of Fremantle has committed a direct financial contribution towards the operational costs of the program. Combined with further support received from the Dorothy and Bill Irwin Charitable Trust, it is hoped that the program will continue to be financially viable until 2024. However, more sustainable funding is required to enable the service to continue.

## Project Aims

The **aim of Library Connect** is for a qualified and experienced community worker to be embedded within the accessible, safe, and welcoming space of a public library, to provide support for people who access the library and who might not engage with or be aware of other available community services support.

The Library Connect service is **available to anyone** in the community who presents to Fremantle Library needing support. This recognises that public libraries are accessed by a broad cross-section of people and ensures that Library Connect is both accessible and inclusive.

The Library Connect worker provides and supports **training and capacity building** for Fremantle Library staff in a range of areas, including understanding homelessness, working with people who have experienced trauma, and the importance of trauma informed practice.



## Project Concept and Development

Prior to the commencement of Library Connect, St Pat's engaged the Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) to facilitate a **collaborative design process**, to inform the development of the service. This process included workshops with St Pat's and City of Fremantle staff, as well as with other interested stakeholders and community members. These workshops generated a range of suggestions for the model, approach, activities, and outcomes for the proposed service. The name for the new service – Library Connect – was also recommended through these workshops.

When it began, Library Connect was only the **second library-based initiative** of its kind in Australia, with the first Australian library-based support service implemented in Melbourne in a partnership between Launch Housing and the City of Melbourne.<sup>3</sup>

Across North America by contrast, there are **over a hundred public libraries** which have library-based social workers or social work student placement programs, as well as library-based peer workers – people with a range of lived experience, who are based in libraries to provide support.<sup>3-7</sup>

## Project Evaluation

The Library Connect pilot project has been evaluated by the **Home2Health research team** at the University of Notre Dame.

The overall aims of the evaluation were to:

- 1** Describe the development, implementation, and evolution of Library Connect.
- 2** Document the demographic profile and support needs of people engaged through Library Connect.
- 3** Explore the benefits and challenges associated with the use of public libraries as a setting for identifying and supporting people experiencing hardship.

This evaluation has drawn on **multiple sources of data**, including interviews with people supported through Library Connect; interviews, focus groups, and surveys with key project stakeholders; and client data from St Pat's. An overview of the data collected and the purpose for collecting this data is outlined in **Table 1**.

Over the course of the Library Connect project, the **evaluation outputs** have included two snapshot reports and one article in Parity Magazine (Australia's leading national homelessness publication). This two-year evaluation report builds on and concludes the evaluation for the project.

The Library Connect evaluation has been supported by a Project Evaluation Reference Group, to ensure **good research governance**.

**Table 1: Overview of Data Collection**

Method	Purpose	Outcome
<b>Interviews with Staff and Service Users</b>	Explore benefits and challenges of the project	Interviews (n=6) in December 2020, August 2021, April 2022, and July 2022 with people who were supported through Library Connect. Interviews with library staff (n=2) completed in August 2022 and with Library Connect Worker (n=2) in May 2021 and April 2022.
<b>Focus Group with Staff and Stakeholders</b>	Explore project benefits, challenges, and learning	Focus group held in March 2021, attended by nine participants – five staff from the City of Fremantle and four external stakeholders.
<b>Online Qualtrics Staff Survey</b>	Measure changes in staff knowledge and their ability to respond to client needs	Baseline online survey completed in November 2020, with 16 responses received. Conclusion of ‘pilot funding’ online survey completed in October 2021, with 20 responses received.
<b>Administrative Project Records</b>	Detail engagement in the project	Participant data collected on an ongoing basis by St Pat’s. Includes demographics, presenting issues, and referrals.
<b>Triangulation of data via Case Studies</b>	Illustrate engagement with the project	Drawing on interviews with services users and staff, case studies (n=4) were developed for Evaluation Reports in February 2021 and November 2022.

## Project Recognition

Since it commenced, the Library Connect project has gained recognition and generated considerable interest across the library and local government sectors.

In May 2021, Library Connect won the **Library Board of WA Excellence Award for Innovation and Collaboration**. The Award recognised that the program is the first of its kind in Western Australian public libraries and that it benefits the community, library staff, and most importantly, some of the most vulnerable people in the community.



**Left to right:** Jenny Archibald (City of Fremantle), Michael Piu (St Pat’s), Steve McQuade (City of Fremantle), Michelle Brennand (City of Fremantle), Jay Ellis (City of Fremantle), Sonia Gonzalez Pascual (St Pat’s), Traci Cascioli (St Pat’s), Jayne Cleave (City of Fremantle).

In November 2021, Library Connect was nominated for Emerald Publishing’s **Real Impact Awards**, for commitment to uncovering real impact within a library setting. Library Connect was specifically noted as part of St Pat’s winning application in the **2022 HESTA Excellence Award** in the category of Outstanding Organisation.

## Place Based Context

Fremantle was chosen as the location for Library Connect due to a range of specific, place-based factors. The City of Fremantle is a **local government area with considerable diversity** in terms of demographics, housing (type and affordability), local industries and services, and income and economy.

Fremantle is a **central point for the south-west Metropolitan region of Perth**, with major health, transport, arts, culture, sport, recreation, and community services and facilities for the region all located there. Many of the facilities and services which are located in Fremantle may be accessed by people who live in other areas, due to the centrality and accessibility of Fremantle.

Of contextual relevance to Library Connect is the **greater comparative impact of COVID-19** on the Fremantle area. As noted in the City of Fremantle’s COVID-19 Community Recovery Plan 2020:

*“Compared to Western Australia, the Fremantle community has a higher proportion of lone person households and a higher proportion of the population aged over 65, with age one risk factor for severe illness from COVID19. The Fremantle community also has a lower median household weekly income, a higher proportion of household financial stress amongst renters and higher proportion of households without internet access. The Fremantle economy has also been significantly impacted due to the prevalence of tourism, hospitality and creative industries along with retail, recreation and tertiary education, all of which sectors have been significantly impacted.” – COVID-19 Community Recovery Plan<sup>8, p3</sup>*



**Left to right:** Michael Piu (St Pat’s) and Andrew Sullivan (City of Fremantle).

# WHO WAS SUPPORTED?

## PEOPLE SUPPORTED

Between 30 September 2020 to 30 June 2022, Library Connect supported **483 people**, across **924 episodes of support**. Data for the final quarter (July – September 2022) has been excluded from the below analysis, as and workforce shortages impacted on the availability of data.



Of the **483 people** supported by Library Connect, women were supported at a much higher rate than men (68% compared to 29%) – with women being 51% of the general Australian population.<sup>9</sup>

Aboriginal people represent 3% of the general population of Australia<sup>10</sup> however 18% of people supported by Library Connect **identified as Aboriginal**. Almost a quarter (25%) of people supported identified as **being from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) background**, similar to Census reporting with 23% of the Australian population speaking a language other than English at home and 28% born overseas.<sup>11</sup>



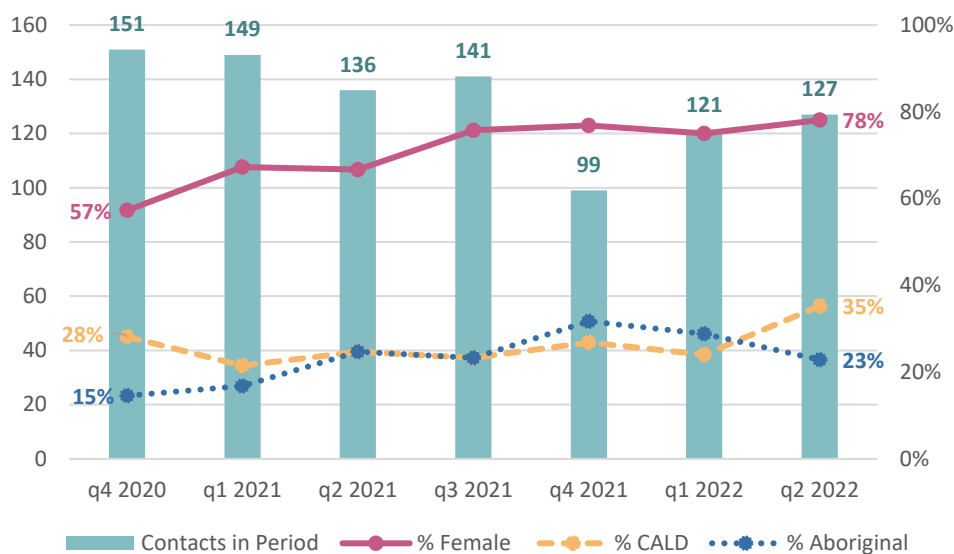
<sup>^</sup>Note: This definition includes people who were both (a) born overseas **and** (b) for whom English is their second or other language.

## Demographics of People Supported Over Time

While the **number of people** accessing Library Connect remained relatively constant, maintaining an average of 40-50 contacts per month (with the exception of a decrease in late 2021), there were changes in the **demographic profile** of people accessing the service over time (Figure 1).

The proportion of **women accessing the service** increased from 57% of people supported in October-December 2020, to 78% of people supported in April-June 2022. The proportion of **Aboriginal people** accessing the service also increased, from 15% of people supported in October-December 2020 to 23% of people supported in April-June 2022, peaking at 32% in October-December 2021.

The proportion of **CaLD people** accessing the service increased from 28% October-December 2020 to 35% of people supported in April-June 2022.



**Figure 1: Number of Contacts Per Month Overall, as well as by Aboriginality and Gender**

Note: Gender and ethnicity are presented per unique person supported per quarter (i.e. if one woman was supported on 5 occasions in the same period, her demographics are only measured once for that period).

## Changes in Engagement Over Time

There are a range of factors which contributed to these changes in engagement.

Most significantly, the number of people accessing the service decreased when **workforce shortages** impacted on service delivery (as can be observed in *Q4 2021, Figure 1*). This will be discussed further throughout this report.

Engagement data was reviewed for periods when Perth was **experiencing lockdowns**, but as these restrictions were generally for brief periods (i.e. 3-5 days) this did not have a noticeable impact on Library Connect engagement.

More specifically, the increasing proportion of women accessing the service may reflect the impact of current **economic and housing challenges** affecting an increasing number of families.

## 'New' to Accessing Community Services

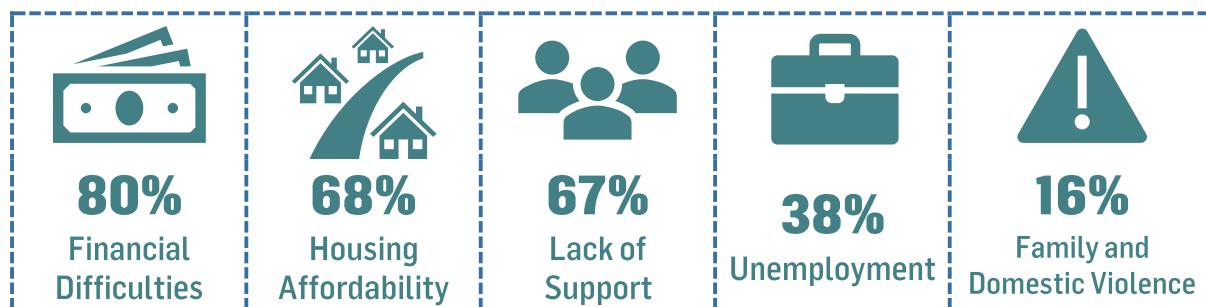
One of the aims of Library Connect has been to engage with people requiring support who **might not have previously needed support from community services**, as well as people who might not have engaged with or be aware of available support services in their area.

To determine how many people who were being supported by Library Connect were **'new' to accessing community services**, St Pat's conducted a snapshot review of their organisational and Emergency Relief databases. This review was completed in July 2021 – midway through the Library Connect evaluation process. As part of this review, the names of a total of 232 people who had accessed Library Connect were checked against the Emergency Relief database for the region. This review confirmed that for **two thirds (64%)** of this client group (n=149), this was the first time they had engaged with community support services in the local area.

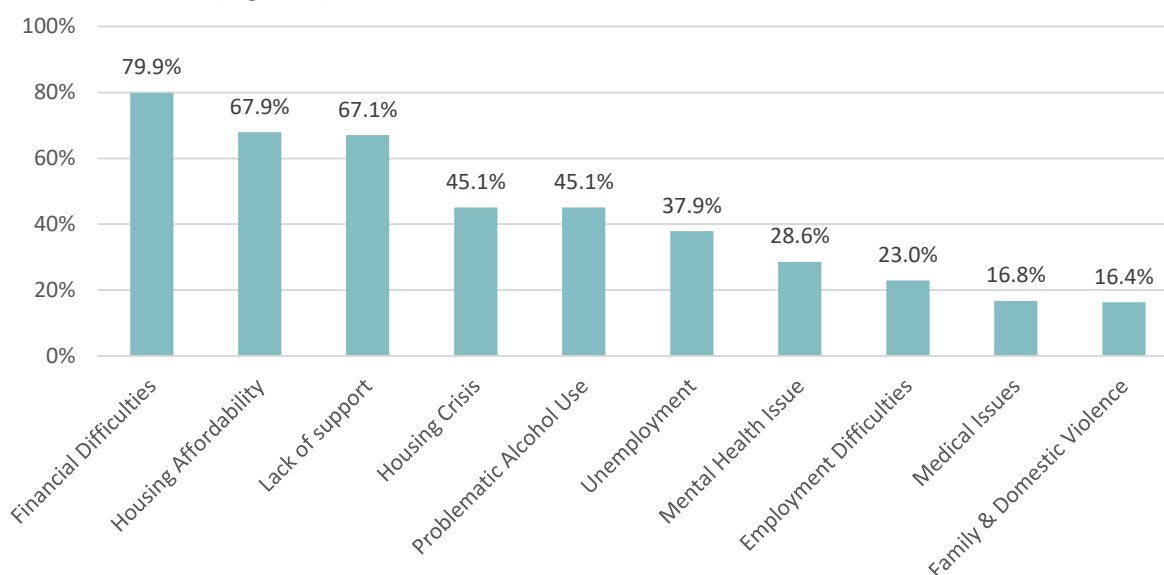
This demonstrates the critical role a service like Library Connect **provides in essential early intervention support** and potentially **preventing further hardship** for people who are not connected with other services.



## PRESENTING ISSUES



The most common presenting issues for people supported by Library Connect were **financial difficulties** and **housing affordability stress**. Other common presenting issues included **lack of support, employment difficulties** and **unemployment, health and addiction issues, and family and domestic violence** (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Main Presenting Issues of People Supported by Library Connect**

The presenting issues of people who have been supported through Library Connect often reflected emerging or increasing **wider social issues** that were happening locally and globally throughout this period, most notably issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Financial Difficulties

Significant Consumer Price Index (CPI) increases occurred across the period of this report. In September 2020, Perth's CPI had increased by 1.3% in annual average terms and by June 2022, Perth's annual CPI inflation rate was 7.4%; the highest of all state capitals at the time.<sup>12,13</sup> By September 2022, this rate had dropped slightly, however Perth's annual rate of inflation at this point was still 6%.<sup>14</sup>

**Financial difficulties** have been an increasing issue for people who have been supported through Library Connect. People presenting with financial difficulties increased from **52% of contacts** in October-December 2020 to **97% of contacts** by April-June 2022.

### Housing

The increasing **lack of affordable and appropriate housing options**, as well as **significant increases in housing costs** across WA contributed to the number of people accessing Library Connect due to

housing affordability. When Library Connect commenced (Sept 2020), the **median rent** in the Perth Metropolitan area for a unit was \$350 per week and for a house was \$390 per week. By November 2022, median rents in Perth had increased to \$450 per week for a unit and \$520 per week for a house.<sup>15</sup> People presenting to Library Connect who reported **housing affordability stress** increased from **35% of contacts** in October-December 2020 to **97% of contacts** by April-June 2022.

In March 2020, the WA State Government implemented a COVID-19 **rental evictions moratorium** in WA, which included a ban on rent increases and on residential evictions. This moratorium ended on 28 March 2021. The ending of the rental moratorium is reflected in the presenting needs data, with the number of people presenting with **housing crisis (e.g. eviction)** increasing from **17% of contacts** in January-March 2021 to **74% of contacts** by April-June 2022.

## Lack of Support

When 'lack of support' has been indicated as a presenting need, it usually meant that people being supported by Library Connect were **not able to get help** from any other services. This could include people not being aware of any available services, that available services do not meet their needs, and/or that relevant services do not currently have availability (e.g. due to waiting lists).

Lack of support was an ongoing issue for people supported through Library Connect, though this also increased from **57% of contacts** in October-December 2020 to **96% of contacts** by April-June 2022.

## Unemployment

People presenting to Library Connect who were experiencing issues relating to **unemployment** increased – from **9% of contacts** in October-December 2020 to **54% of contacts** by April-June 2022. However, unemployment rates across Greater Perth dropped from the commencement of Library Connect – from 6.7% in September 2020 to 4.2% in March 2022.<sup>16</sup>

This inverse trend in unemployment can largely be explained by the **complexity of issues** experienced by people who have been supported by Library Connect. In interviews for this evaluation, people supported by Library Connect described multiple, co-occurring issues that they were experiencing – significant health and mental health issues; caring responsibilities; insecure housing; regularly needing to access emergency relief for food and other essential items; lack of reliable transport; and lack of affordable, accessible childcare. For many of the people supported by Library Connect, these factors represented **significant barriers** in being able to secure and retain employment.

## Family & Domestic Violence (FDV)

Many people who have been supported by Library Connect had experienced FDV. While it was not necessarily the primary presenting need for support, nevertheless during interviews as part of the project evaluation, many people discussed their experiences and histories of family violence.

*“There is a lot of women and children who come here. A lot of young mothers and domestic violence victims. Some women, they’re very protective of their children. They don’t like men around. It’s safer to come here.” – Library Connect client*

## Other Needs

Health and mental health issues, alcohol and other drug issues, and relationship breakdowns have all been ongoing and co-occurring presenting issues for people who were supported by Library Connect.

*“The people that come into the library have become more disadvantaged and more vulnerable, and I think that we get a lot more people that come here seeking safety. The number of people that will have come in and they’ll be using the computers and they’ll just mention that they’re homeless or they’ll be in a phone call with Telstra or someone like that and they’ll mention the circumstances that they’re in, then that has dramatically increased.” – Library staff member*

# HOW WERE PEOPLE SUPPORTED?

*“Not only is the Library Connect program allowing us to connect with people who are not accustomed to using services, but it is also helping us to connect with them earlier; before the situation becomes chronic or too complex. One recent example was when we were able to help a young Aboriginal mother of two, fleeing domestic violence, into a private rental and to get her established with food, household goods and support moving forward. Prior to connecting with the program, she had been couch surfing with her kids in an unsuitable and unsafe environment.” – Library Connect worker*

The Library Connect service is **available to anyone** in the community who presents to Fremantle Library needing support. Library Connect has **no specific limits** to the number of sessions or length of support which can be offered. For some people, support will be brief and one-off, whereas other people might need longer-term or multiple contacts with the service.

## BRIEF INTERVENTION

One of the aims of Library Connect has been to engage with **people requiring support** who might not have previously needed to access community services, as well as people who might not have engaged with or be aware of other available community services support. The majority of people (67%) supported through Library Connect **only had one contact** and did not require further support (Figure 3). A further 25% of people had **between two and four contacts** with the service.

That **more than 90% of people supported only required brief intervention** reflects that the project has been effective in intervening early to support people at a critical point in time to prevent escalation of longer-term issues. Signposting and referring people to other available services and support is also an important aspect of Library Connect, and often this may only require brief episodes of support.

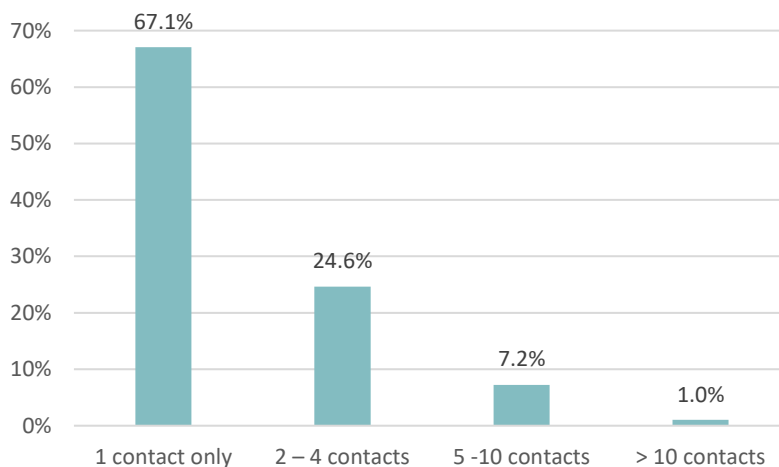


Figure 3: Episodes of Support per Person

## LONGER-TERM SUPPORT

While one of the aims of Library Connect was to provide **initial support** to people accessing the service, this proved challenging due to other services experiencing increased demand, as well as COVID-related impacts on services (e.g. staff illness, services operating at reduced capacity and remotely due to lockdowns). Some people therefore needed to engage with the service on a longer-term basis.

Overall, 7% of people had **5-10 contacts** with Library Connect, with 1% of people having **more than 10 contacts**. Two individuals had 19 episodes of support during the two-year evaluation period.

In some instances, Library Connect provided an ongoing, case management service for people who have had more **complex and enduring needs**. This provided stability and consistency for these clients but also contributed to the service having limited capacity in other areas.

While some people had multiple contacts with the service, this was often over a considerable time period. In these instances, people contacted Library Connect again when they experienced a crisis, knowing that the service does not have **complicated referral processes** or **restricted eligibility criteria** and that they will generally be able to access support relatively quickly.

### Examples of Longer-Term Support

The following case study illustrates an example of the impact that connecting people to other support and funding can have on their wellbeing.

#### SUPPORT & REFERRALS

**Background:** “Cheryl” is an Aboriginal woman in her fifties, who moved to Perth from regional WA due to experiencing family and domestic violence (FDV). She has significant health and mental health issues, some of which have been caused or exacerbated by her experiences of FDV. Cheryl has lived in a range of housing since coming to Perth, including staying with family and friends, in lodging houses and in temporary accommodation. She is currently renting but has recently had her rent increased by \$100 per week. Cheryl has been on the priority waiting list for public housing for three years.

**Library Connect Support:** Cheryl has been supported with her physical and mental health, financial-related issues (e.g. paying bills), emergency relief (for food and travel costs), help with government services (Centrelink and NDIS applications) as well referrals and applications for housing, and other support needs:

*“She helps me with paperwork, whatever I can’t understand I’ll bring back to her. She even helped me with my library card...this is the first library (I’ve joined).”*

Cheryl says she engages with the program because she finds it calmer and more accessible than other services:

*“Because I’ve got a head injury. There’s too much noise at (other services). When I need someone talk to, I’d rather come and talk to (the Library Connect worker) instead.”*

**Outcomes:** As a result of the support received through Library Connect, Cheryl is now receiving funding and support through the NDIS. Enabling her access to ongoing support with personal and household tasks, participation in community and social activities. Cheryl has noticed improvements in her social and emotional wellbeing through engaging with Library Connect.

*“I live by myself. I have no one to speak to where I live, so I come here speak to (Library Connect worker). I feel good when I speak to her. I feel comfortable with her and speaking to her. She has the time to listen. When I feel down and out, I just like to come and see her. After seeing her, I feel really good.”*

The following case study illustrates how Library Connect advocacy and support impacted on the housing and health of a whole family.

## ADVOCACY & SUPPORT

**Background:** “Sue” is an Aboriginal woman in her thirties, who has been engaged with Library Connect since March 2021. She was living in public housing at the time of engagement and her home had multiple ongoing maintenance issues including black mould. Sue advised that she had been unable to get confirm when the maintenance work would be completed. This has impacted the health and wellbeing of the whole family, including exacerbating her children’s asthma. Both of her children have multiple physical health issues:

*“I’m in a situation where I’ve had to get the kids out of the house because the Department want to do work on the property with black mould and my kids have asthma and other illnesses. We’ve also had a lot of middle-of-the-night hospital runs with my son’s illnesses. So we’ve had to pay for Ubers to get us there and home, which then has left the budget short for food and other stuff. But knowing that I can get my kids to hospital and not worry and be able to call (Library Connect) the next day and organise some food or other help, it’s just been amazing.”*

**Support from Library Connect:** Sue has been supported by Library Connect with her own physical and mental health, as well as the physical and mental health of her children. She has also had financial-related support (e.g. help with paying bills) and emergency relief (for food, prescriptions, and travel costs).

*“At (other services) it’s very crowded and you’re in and out. They don’t really have that much time to sit down and chat. We have been able to go to (other services) but we can’t open up and actually talk about all the trauma that’s going on. So having (Library Connect) in a peaceful quiet environment, I go in there and everything comes out.”*

The Library Connect worker has supported Sue in negotiating and liaising with the Department of Communities in relation to maintenance issues. This has included writing a letter of support for Sue, advocating directly with the Department, and referring her for legal advice and support.

**Outcomes:** After advocacy and support from Library Connect, the maintenance work on Sue’s home was completed within two weeks. Sue and her family were able to move back into their home and their living conditions significantly improved. As a result, Sue reports both her and her children’s health have improved.

*“I’ve been through a lot of emotional stuff with my children’s health. So things have been really tough and to know that (the Library Connect worker) is here to get help with at the library. It’s been a massive help for me and my family and the stress that’s taken off of us. It’s just taken a huge weight off my shoulders and it helps my mental health as well.”*

# CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

A range of **critical success factors** have emerged through the project evaluation to date – in interviews with people who have been supported through Library Connect, as well as through interviews, focus groups, and surveys with a range of key project stakeholders.

The following themes will be discussed in this chapter:

LIBRARIES  
ARE A SAFE  
SPACE

EARLY  
INTERVENTION &  
PREVENTION

COLLABORATIVE  
PARTNERSHIP  
MODEL

NO BARRIERS  
TO SUPPORT

SUPPORT &  
CAPACITY  
BUILDING FOR  
LIBRARY STAFF

## LIBRARIES ARE A SAFE SPACE

Throughout the project evaluation, people who have been supported through Library Connect have identified a range of factors which have supported their engagement with the project. The key factor which was repeatedly highlighted by people accessing the service was the importance of **being offered support in the safety and calm of a library**.

*“The number and diversity of people that come through here is astounding and the amount of people that are homeless or struggling is really quite high, and they’re using the library as a safe space, then I think (Library Connect) is absolutely essential here.” – Library staff member*

Libraries are a **safe, neutral, and familiar space** in which to seek help. This **increases accessibility** of the service and reduces stigma and anxiety about seeking support, especially for people who are accessing support for the first time. People who have engaged with Library Connect have frequently **experienced trauma**, including due to experiences of homelessness, FDV, and abuse. Library Connect intentionally offers support in the quiet, peaceful, and calm environment of a library and this has been emphasised by people accessing the project as a significant **point of difference** from other services.

*“I only went to (homelessness service) once because when I was there, everyone was there, so I got a bit nervous. But when I came here, it’s just me and (the Library Connect worker), so I felt comfortable.” – Library Connect client*

Libraries are also **welcoming and accessible location for families**, which can make engaging with support less daunting.

*“I brought my son, and he was playing there as I was just chatting with (the Library Connect worker) and we’re trying to look for accommodation.” – Library Connect client*

*“...the Library is a good place for me and the kids. When in the Library, they’re having toys there, they’re having books, they’re having storytime.” – Library Connect client*

## EARLY INTERVENTION & PREVENTION

The Library Connect service provides **early intervention** to address issues before they escalate, particularly for people who have not previously needed support or who may not be comfortable accessing traditional emergency relief or crisis services.

*“There’s different kind of families that are coming to us... they haven’t had to reach out to services before, because they go to the children’s groups in the morning or story time, the library is a really familiar place for them.” – Library Connect stakeholder*

Library Connect has provided **critical support for families** including through securing housing, ensuring safety, and supporting school attendance – which has prevented further crisis.

*“You don’t know what to do, you don’t know where to start (the Library Connect worker) really did help me. I have a job, I have my life set, and then something happened. Domestic violence was going on for a while. I just needed to get out. I made that decision to move. I left everything, I literally started from scratch.” – Library Connect client*

*“I had a few situations with my clients saying, “I didn't send my child to school, because I didn't have any food to give them for lunch,” and I said, “Call me straight away. I can give you an e-voucher.” It's very common. They're not homeless but I'm dealing with them to prevent them becoming homeless.” – Library Connect worker*

## COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

The **collaborative partnership** between a community sector organisation (St Pat's) and a local government authority (City of Fremantle) is considered by project partners to be critical to the model.

*“(The Library Connect worker’s) access to St Pat’s information is really valuable. She's got access to St Pat’s; from a therapeutic point of view ... she needs brainstorming and supervision from a therapeutic agency.” – Library Connect stakeholder*

*“It's much better having an agency that is well-known for the services that they provide. We are in the field, we know the updates, new programs, new funding. So it's better that someone is from a specialised agency, like St Pat’s as they are a specialist in community services, homelessness, and vulnerable people.” – Library Connect worker*

The Library Connect worker is **integrated within Fremantle Library**, having been trained and supported to understand the functions and activities of the library, as well as attending Library team meetings and professional development opportunities where possible. This means the Library Connect worker is well placed to better support Library staff and to access resources and facilities within the library. Being embedded within the library also supports the Library Connect worker in understanding who accesses the library and what their needs might potentially be.

*“The exact nature of the partnership might look different depending on the local needs, but these types of social work/library partnerships are essential to begin addressing the complex and varied needs of public library patrons.”<sup>6, p253-254</sup>*

## NO BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

Library Connect offers very flexible support, with **no specific limits** to the number of sessions or length of support which can be offered. Clients can get in contact directly when they need support, **without complicated referral processes** or having to tell their story to multiple people.

*“I know that I can contact (Library Connect worker) if I have any problem, I can email her, and she gets back to me and lets me know how I can go or what time I can come and see her about it.” – Library Connect client*

*“There are a lot of services but sometimes they can't receive as much help as they need. Maybe once every three months, they can see someone... whereas here, they can come any time. I always say “Make an appointment but feel free to drop in. If I'm free, I'm happy to have a chat”” – Library Connect worker*

Library Connect does not have **specific eligibility criteria** regarding age, gender, income, family and/or relationship status, and residency or visa status. Library Connect supports a **diverse range of clients** and many clients engaging with Library Connect have not been able to access other services due to those services’ eligibility criteria or availability.

*“Especially with people on temporary visas, there are lack of services. And international students, sponsor visas, temporary visas. People who are actually not receiving any help from Centrelink, people who are not on benefits is very, very difficult to connect with services because it's a requirement.” – Library Connect worker*

## **SUPPORT & CAPACITY BUILDING FOR STAFF**

One of the aims of Library Connect has been to provide **support and capacity building for library staff** – by having the Library Connect worker on site, with the time, skills, and training to support library staff with **managing and debriefing** on issues or incidents.

*“If there's an incident, or even if someone comes in intoxicated (the Library Connect worker) is fantastic – we just parlay about what happened ... what we did about it, what's the next step. We're working together, so it's real partnership and teamwork.” – Library staff member*

*“It takes the feeling of helplessness away from library staff. It is great having someone who knows how to facilitate help.” – Library staff member*

A specific area of focus was the development of **trauma informed practice** within Fremantle Library. The Library Connect worker has arranged trauma informed training for library staff and supports library staff in understanding the **link between trauma and client behaviour**.

*“Sometimes if they have more of an understanding of what someone was dealing with in their life, I don't think they would escalate things as quickly as they do. We've been trying to go out a lot more and talk to people instead of security intervening because we find that less things will escalate and result in “You're banned from the library.”” – Library staff member*

*“I find that Library Connect has shown to be an approachable and safe access point for vulnerable people to come seeking help. Overall, having Library Connect here shows that we care for the community and together we are providing an important service.” – Library staff member*



# RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

## CHALLENGES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the Library Connect evaluation, there have been a number of challenges which were identified, as well as potential opportunities and recommendations to address these challenges.

CAPACITY &  
SUSTAINABILITY  
OF PROGRAM

IMPACT OF COVID-  
19

THE LIBRARY  
ENVIRONMENT

LIBRARY  
PRACTICE &  
PARTNERSHIPS

### Capacity & Sustainability of Library Connect

One of the most significant challenges for Library Connect has been the **capacity of the service**. The funding for the project initially only allowed for the service to employ **one worker** and to operate on a **part-time basis**. This limited the capacity of Library Connect to offer support every day at the library or for a worker to be available when the Library Connect worker is on leave. This was not ideal for providing continuity of care or for the sustainability of the program if there were times when a **Library Connect worker was not available** for people at the library who needed support. This is reflected in the Library Connect engagement data, as the number of people accessing Library Connect decreased significantly when the Library Connect worker was on leave, as the service was unable to operate.

The limited capacity of Library Connect has also meant that **follow-up with people** who have been supported through the project has been affected. It has therefore been difficult to monitor or evaluate **longer-term outcomes** for Library Connect clients.

There are some elements of the original project aims which have not been able to be fully met. For example, the number of people needing to access support through Library Connect has remained high and the Library Connect worker has therefore had limited capacity to provide ongoing **training and capacity building for library staff** or to support library staff with debriefing on or managing issues or incidents. The commitment of more funding to this service would address this challenge. This would ensure that Library Connect can more **comprehensively support people** accessing the library, as well as provide support and training for support library staff with **debriefing on or managing** issues or incidents.

*"I would love it if there was always a Library Connect person here. That would be fantastic."* –  
**Library staff member**

In response to these challenges, the service is moving towards a **shared service delivery model** where multiple staff undertake the role, meaning that if one worker is on leave, there is someone to cover and keep the program running.

### Impact of COVID-19 on Services

Library Connect commenced in the midst of the **unfolding COVID-19 pandemic**, which presented a unique range of challenges for the ongoing development and delivery of the service. As has already been highlighted, many other services experienced increased demand while having reduced capacity due to COVID-related impacts on services (including staff illness and isolation and services operating at reduced capacity and remotely due to lockdowns).

The Library Connect service **continued to operate** through community lockdowns, library closures, mask and vaccination mandates, border closures, increasing COVID-19 community transmission, and staff illness.

The numbers of people that Library Connect continued to engage with on an ongoing basis throughout the pandemic demonstrates the **accessibility and flexibility of the service**.

As with so many services, Library Connect adapted – for example, by providing phone and online support to people who were unable to physically access the service. The Library Connect project evaluation also continued throughout the pandemic, with interviews and other data collection working around a range of ongoing closures and other limitations.

## Library Environment

When Library Connect commenced, Fremantle Library was located in temporary premises during the redevelopment of Walyalup Civic Centre – the new City of Fremantle civic building and library in Walyalup Koort (formerly known as Kings Square).

The **new Library building** has substantially more space and newer facilities than the previous library, as well as having a more central location than the temporary premises. However, as with many new buildings, Fremantle Library has experienced challenges since reopening.

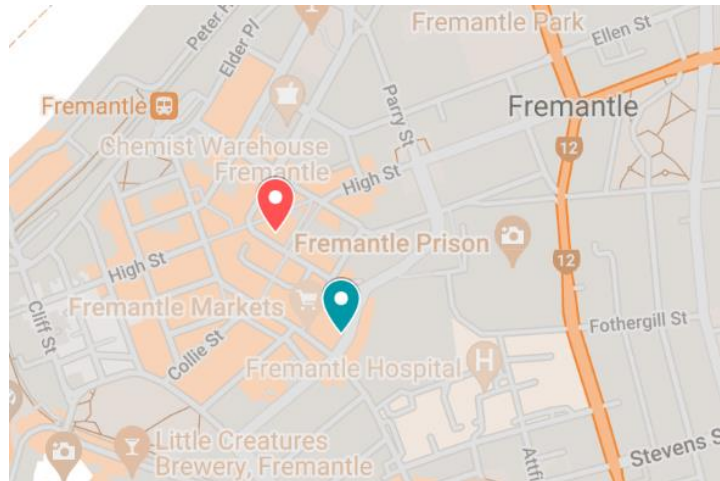


Figure 4: Location of Temporary Library Site (Green) and New Library Location (Red)

While progress has been made in addressing many of these issues, **security and safety** have remained ongoing issues. The central location of the new library has resulted in increased numbers of people in the area and accessing the building and there has been a corresponding rise in disruptive behaviour. Implementation of COVID-19 related mask mandates also resulted in an **increase in challenging behaviour and incidents**.

Security and safety are an **ongoing challenge for many public libraries**, which has been highlighted in research from similar library-based support programs, particularly in the United States.

*“As a free public space, the library is visited daily by people experiencing homelessness seeking daytime shelter, bathrooms, internet access, and safety from the streets. While certainly not all people experiencing homelessness suffer from mental illness or substance abuse disorders, some do, which complicates things further for library staff untrained to deal with these types of crises. Library and security staff sometimes encounter patrons having mental health crises or in the midst of a drug overdose and have to summon paramedics and/or the police.”<sup>6, p246</sup>*

Library services face a unique and complex challenge in **maintaining openness and accessibility** for all members of their community, while also needing to ensure that everyone who accesses their library **feels safe** to do so. Community sector organisations have **considerable experience** in developing and supporting trauma-informed practice, as well as in managing challenging behaviour. This expertise can be used to **work in partnership** with public libraries in their work with people who have experienced trauma or who are presenting with challenging or disruptive behaviour.

## Library Practice & Partnerships

While community need have been changing and increasing, the **landscape and context of public libraries** has also been changing. Public libraries are no longer seen solely as places to borrow books, but instead are needing to respond to technological, demographic, social, and community changes.

Libraries are increasingly needing to **adapt and respond** to these changes, for example by providing and supporting digital access to health services and government services, particularly for people with limited internet and computer access.

Library Connect represents a **model of practice** that can **support the capacity of libraries** in meeting and supporting the emerging and changing needs of people who access public libraries. In a survey conducted as part of the Library Connect evaluation, 100% of survey respondents considered that there was a role for Fremantle Library in **supporting people who are experiencing/at risk of hardship**.

*“At a minimum there is a role for any library in providing a safe, free space where (people) feel welcome and included. Libraries generally are well positioned to support vulnerable people by connecting them with services to support them in the community as at their core, libraries are about connecting people to information to support them to live better lives.” – Library Connect stakeholder*

There has been considerable interest in WA from other local governments and from other libraries regarding the possibility of the Library Connect model of support being offered in public libraries in other areas. A representative from the **State Library of Western Australia** attended the collaborative design workshops for the project and participated in a focus group for the evaluation. The **City of Bayswater** has recently launched the *Hub Connections* program at **Morley Library**, to provide practical advice and support to people at risk of experiencing homelessness. As part of this program, trained volunteers engage with people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and connect them with services and information.

Partnerships such as Library Connect, where a local government authority joins with a community service agency to deliver innovative and much needed services, is one that has proven successful in this instance. This collaboration has allowed the **strengths of both organisations** to influence the development of a service model informed by local knowledge and service expertise.

Opportunities for similar service development in other areas could look to this type of collaboration and the Library Connect model could be used to **guide good practice** in the future development of library-based support services.

## SUMMARY

One of the aims of the Library Connect evaluation was to explore the benefits and challenges associated with the use of public libraries as a setting for identifying and supporting people experiencing hardship. While this report has highlighted some challenges in the delivery of Library Connect, the **benefits of the program have been significant**, particularly in supporting people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and financial hardship, as well as people requiring community services support for the first time.

Funding for the Library Connect program is currently committed until 2024. The demonstrated role of Library Connect in providing early intervention and prevention, particularly for families and for people accessing support for the first time, shows that further funding would result in significant **value for money** and a substantial **return on any future investment** in the service.

Continuation of the Library Connect service would also add to the ongoing development of Australian library-based support services, which are still very limited compared to **library-based initiatives globally**, particularly in North America.

Library Connect demonstrates the **capacity for services to respond differently** to social, community, demographic, and technological changes. The **collaborative partnership** which underpins Library Connect represents a model of practice which can be applied in other settings, to make best use of resources and to serve communities more effectively.

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