

## **Discovery of Communication Access at Victorian Library Services – Understanding facilitators, barriers and gaps through a staged approach**

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### **Short Abstract**

In October 2023, State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria partnered with Scope (Aust.) on a project to improve communication access in public libraries across the state. Public libraries aim to offer communities a place to learn, create and belong.

To commence the project, a discovery phase was completed with the aim of understanding communication access requirements for libraries across Victoria. The discovery phase consisted of needs mapping by a process of data gathering.

Discovery phase baseline data was obtained in two ways:

- A staff survey to determine staff attitudes towards communication access and staff knowledge and skills in providing communication accessible library services (distributed to approximately 2,000 employees).
- A consumer focus group to understand the customer experience of people with communication access requirements using public library services.

The findings from the staff survey and consumer focus group have provided valuable information and insights into both the staff and customer experience of accessing library services from a communication perspective.

The value of this project is applicable to many other community organisations and services, with similar approaches that can be taken to replicate the discovery phase. For large scale projects, completion of a discovery phase is essential to help businesses and organisations understand their strengths and challenges in providing services that are accessible to people with communication access requirements. From there, businesses can identify what steps they can take to improve communication access, ultimately improving inclusivity within our communities.

## Long Abstract

The Communication Access team within Scope's Communication Inclusion and Resource Centre (CIRC) aims to ensure businesses, services and community organisations are equipped with strategies to support effective interactions between staff at the business and their customers who have communication access requirements, including people who experience communication disability.

Public libraries aim to offer communities a place to learn, create and belong. They also aim to provide outstanding library services to all Victorians, ensuring that libraries are accessible and nurturing of their communities. As such, communication access is key to ensuring that the vital community services and resources provided by libraries are accessible to all members of the community. In October 2023, State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria partnered with Scope (Aust.) on a project to improve communication access in public libraries across the state. This partnership was made possible with funding from the Pierre Gorman Foundation, founded by Dr Gorman who was born profoundly deaf. The purpose of this funding was to improve relationships between people with disability and the wider community. The team at State Library Victoria chose to work with Scope for their focus on disability but also communication access more broadly, given that 1 in 7 Australians will experience a form of communication difficulty at some point in their life.

To commence the project, a discovery phase was completed with the aim of understanding communication access requirements for libraries across Victoria. The discovery phase consisted of needs mapping by a process of data gathering, as well as making recommendations and planning for intervention. Discovery phase baseline data was obtained in two ways:

- A staff survey to determine staff attitudes towards communication access and staff knowledge and skills in providing communication accessible library services. The survey was distributed online to all Victorian public library staff (approximately 2,000 employees) via internal communications and LinkedIn.
- A consumer focus group to understand the customer experience of people with communication access requirements using public library services. Scope recruited consumers from its internal network of communication access assessors and trainers via expressions of interest.

Findings of the staff survey demonstrated that library staff were highly motivated to improve accessibility and inclusivity in libraries and improve the customer experience for people with communication access requirements. The view that libraries should be accessible spaces that welcome all members of the community was a consistent theme within staff responses.

- 98% of staff agreed that being communication accessible is beneficial for public libraries and very strong negative emotions were expressed by staff when they were unable to adequately support a customer with communication access requirements.
- While some staff had completed training in disability awareness and/or communication access previously, only 50% felt confident speaking to customers with communication access requirements, and only 44% of staff reported having access to resources to support communication in the library setting.
- These figures are especially important considering the high frequency of interactions between library staff and customers with communication access requirements, with 44% of staff reporting *daily* or *weekly* interactions.
- Staff demonstrated some appropriate strategy use when reporting on their responses to customers with communication access requirements, but some strategies did not reflect best practice, and further highlighted the need for communication access training.
- Staff identified a number of resources that they felt would support them to provide more accessible library services. These resources included communication access training for all customer facing staff, development of customised communication boards, visual guides for common library processes, visual schedules for library events, Auslan and Key Word Sign training and development of other accessible items such as visual stories and video explainers for common library processes.

The consumer focus group also produced a number of recommendations for improving communication access in libraries based on the consumers' lived experience of accessing their services.

- Consumers recognised and praised the positive attitudes of library staff, but also emphasised the importance of training for all customer facing staff to increase skills in providing communication accessible services.
- Consumers also recommended the development of a range of customised communication tools, such as communication boards, introduction cards and communication tool request cards, and noted that it should be clearly indicated to library users when these tools are available.
- Consumers identified that the availability and accessibility of information relating to library services and processes, particularly on websites, should be considered and addressed. Some consumers reported that they were not aware of the range of resources and services offered by libraries, and were unsure how they would access this information.
- Consumers suggested that websites should use plain language, have better presentation for easier navigation, and be compatible with screen readers or use text-to-speech features, to support access for consumers with a range of communication access requirements.

The findings and recommendations from the staff survey and consumer focus group have provided valuable information and insights into both the staff and user experience of accessing

library services from a communication perspective. In particular, the findings showed unanimity between staff and consumers' views on staff training and resource development as key to improving communication access within libraries. The discovery phase was essential in defining the next steps of the project, which will focus on the development of the required skills and resources to ensure everyone can access and participate in library programming.

The value of this project is applicable to many other community organisations and services, with similar approaches that can be taken to replicate the discovery phase. Completion of a discovery phase can help businesses and organisations understand their strengths and challenges in providing services that are accessible to people with communication access requirements. From there, they can identify what steps they can take to improve communication access in their organisation and the services they provide. This approach ensures a custom, fit for purpose intervention to meet the diverse needs of each organisation and the staff and customers within. Ultimately, a tailored approach to communication access ensures we can continue to work towards creating accessible and inclusive communication environments for all individuals.