

SUBMISSION TO THE LIBRARIES BOARD OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA STRATEGIC PLAN 2027–2032

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Acknowledgement of Country

COTA SA acknowledges and respects Aboriginal people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of South Australia. We honour Aboriginal peoples' continuing connection to Country and recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal people.

INTRODUCTION

COTA SA is an older people's movement run by, for and with older people. We represent the rights, interests and futures of around 700,000 older South Australians. We engage widely with older South Australians across the state and the lived experiences of the diverse community of older South Australians shape and inform COTA SA's policy and advocacy work, including through our Policy Council, Regional Advisory Groups, LGBTI+ Rainbow Hub and Climate Change Group.

COTA SA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Libraries Board of South Australia's Strategic Plan 2027–2032. As the peak body for older South Australians, we recognise libraries as essential community infrastructure that supports learning, connection, independence and participation throughout life.

DISCUSSION

South Australia's ageing population makes planning for older library users increasingly important. Older people are already significant users of libraries, bringing diverse interests, skills and expectations. The Plan provides an opportunity to anticipate growing demand and strengthen libraries' contribution to ageing well.

Cost-of-living pressures, the withdrawal of face-to-face services and the shift towards digital delivery are also changing what communities need from libraries. These changes are particularly significant in regional areas, where alternative services and opportunities may be limited. We encourage the Board to respond through the following priorities.

Lifelong learning and digital confidence

Libraries enable older people to pursue interests, access news and information, develop skills and participate in a changing world. The Plan should strengthen accessible, affordable learning opportunities, including practical, patient assistance with technology.

As SACOSS has noted¹, digital inclusion depends on access, affordability and ability. People may lack reliable connectivity or a suitable device, struggle to afford telecommunications services, or need support to develop skills and confidence. Libraries can help address each of these barriers through free internet and computer access, individual assistance and small-group learning.

Digital safety should be a particular focus, helping people recognise scams, protect personal information and assess the reliability of online content. Support should enable people to use technology confidently and safely.

Alongside this work, libraries should preserve access for people who do not have a smartphone, internet connection or confidence using online systems. Participation in library activities and services should remain possible through face-to-face and other accessible channels.

Welcoming places for connection and wellbeing

Libraries are among the few public spaces where people can spend time, use resources and connect with others without an expectation to purchase anything. This is especially valuable for older people experiencing financial pressure, insecure housing or social isolation.

The Plan should support welcoming spaces and affordable activities that encourage participation across generations. Older people bring valuable skills and experience as mentors, volunteers, storytellers and program participants. Library and associated council spaces could also accommodate suitable wellbeing activities through community partnerships.

Programs, communications and imagery should reflect this diversity and avoid assumptions based on age. We note that older people are less visible in the discussion guide's images of users and encourage a more representative approach that recognises their contribution to, and use of, libraries.

¹ <https://sacoss.org.au/digital-inclusion/>

Safe havens during extreme weather – warm and cool refuges

Libraries can provide important relief during extreme heat and cold, particularly for people who cannot afford to adequately heat or cool their homes. We encourage the Board to recognise this role explicitly and work with councils and emergency management partners to strengthen it.

Practical priorities include clear public information, accessible drinking water, comfortable seating and consideration of opening hours during prolonged heat. Planning should also address how people can reach libraries safely, especially where transport is limited, and the facilities, staffing and funding needed to support this role.

Equitable access across South Australia

Regional equity should be a clear priority across the Plan. Shared collections and digital resources extend access, but their benefits also depend on local opening hours, reliable connectivity and staff availability.

The Plan should support locally appropriate outreach, mobile and home library services, alongside transport partnerships where feasible. Across the network, physical accessibility, readable signage, comfortable seating, accessible formats and dementia-inclusive environments should support people with diverse needs.

Trusted information, partnerships and staff support

As face-to-face services diminish, library staff are increasingly asked to help people navigate systems previously supported by government offices, bank branches and telecommunications shops. This contribution deserves recognition and appropriate investment.

Partnerships can bring specialist assistance into libraries, helping people find reliable information about concessions, services and community activities. COTA SA's own research² shows the value of navigation services, and we acknowledge the work that libraries do in this space.

The State Library and local libraries can also preserve and share older South Australians' diverse stories and knowledge, including regional experiences and voices that are less often represented.

CONCLUSION

COTA SA encourages the Board to involve diverse older people, including current non-users, in designing and reviewing services. Success should be assessed through improvements in access, confidence, connection and participation, alongside borrowing and attendance figures.

We commend the work of library staff in responding to changing community needs. Sustainable investment in their skills, facilities and partnerships will be essential to delivering the Plan and strengthening libraries' contribution to ageing well across South Australia.

² https://theplugin.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/The-Plug-in_Cost-of-living-Navigation-Program-and-Lived-Experience-Report_v1.0-PUBLIC-1.pdf