

Stronger together: Partnering for impact

A toolkit for Western Australian public libraries



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Introduction

"Libraries are where people go when they don't know where else to go. By partnering we can meet them...wherever they are in their journey."

Red Gum Justice

Across Western Australia (WA), public libraries are discovering that some of their most powerful community impact comes not from working alone, but from joining forces with unexpected partners. These aren't just traditional service arrangements, they're meaningful collaborations that address challenges many organisations would struggle to tackle on their own

This toolkit shares stories from six WA libraries that have built successful partnerships addressing everything from reconciliation and mental health to sustainability and social justice. You'll discover practical guidance, honest insights about what works (and what doesn't), and actionable steps to help your library create meaningful collaborations that truly serve your community's needs.



Why partnerships matter

Partnerships enable libraries to...



Respond to complex social needs

Communities face increasingly complex challenges, from youth mental health and social isolation to digital exclusion and food insecurity. While a single organisation might address some of these issues with sufficient resources, most would struggle to respond effectively on their own. Through partnerships, libraries can draw on diverse expertise and connections to tackle root causes to create lasting, meaningful change in their community.



Access new skills, funding, and audiences

Partnerships open doors by providing access to specialised expertise that libraries don't possess in-house. They create opportunities for shared funding that make bigger projects possible, and connect libraries with new audiences who might not have visited a physical branch. These collaborations also bring fresh perspectives and innovative approaches that can transform how libraries think about their role in the community.

Build community capacity

When organisations work together, they create outcomes greater than the sum of their parts.

Partnerships help build local knowledge, strengthen community connections, and create new opportunities for learning and growth. This collaborative approach develops long-term community resilience by fostering relationships between different groups, sharing resources more effectively, and ensuring solutions are sustainable.



Strengthen their position as vital social infrastructure

Partnerships expand the perceptions of libraries beyond book lending, positioning them as hubs that support many aspects of daily life. They help libraries evolve into community connectors, places where people can access health information, build cultural understanding, and develop practical life skills. This shift strengthens libraries position as vital social infrastructure and keeps them relevant in an increasingly complex world.

Partnership Case Studies from WA Public Libraries

Denmark Library & Southern Regional TAFE – A partnership for seeding sustainability

Denmark Library partnered with Southern Regional TAFE to create a community seed library that promotes sustainability and food security. The partnership began when a library staff member, who had studied organic horticulture at TAFE, identified a practical opportunity to connect TAFE's surplus seeds from gardening courses with the library's ability to distribute them to the community.



The seed library now operates as a community resource where residents can freely borrow seeds, grow them, and ideally return them from their harvest to keep the cycle going. TAFE provides locally-grown, adapted seeds from their organic horticulture program, while the library manages packaging, labelling, and distribution through a visible seed box at the front counter. The partnership also includes twice-yearly "Seedy sessions" where TAFE lecturers and guest speakers teach seed saving and gardening techniques to community members.

Seed library social media imagery. Images courtesy of Denmark Library.

The seed library became especially valuable during COVID-19 when supply chain issues limited access to seedlings. Since its launch in late 2020, it has been entirely self-sufficient, with seeds provided by TAFE and community gardeners.

"The main purpose of the partnership was to make a seed library available to the Denmark community. It's not a seed bank where things get stored for the future. It's designed to be used and grown." Denmark Library

What Denmark Library brought to the partnership

Denmark Library's community-embedded infrastructure provided a trusted foundation that made the seed library accessible and sustainable. The library's central location and welcoming environment is the perfect distribution point, with regular foot traffic visiting the space.

The library's existing gardening book collection created a natural synergy with the seed library, allowing people to borrow both seeds and the knowledge needed to grow them successfully. Staff also managed promotional activities through their website, social media, newsletters, and even community radio connections, ensuring broad community awareness of the program.



Seed library packets.

Practical support included counter space for the highly visible seed display box, storage facilities, and simple tracking systems that made borrowing seeds straightforward for users.

The library also coordinated a community volunteer who helped with the time-consuming work of packaging and labelling seeds, making the program more sustainable for staff.

This combination of community reach, practical resources, and promotional channels transformed TAFE's excess seeds into a thriving community resource.

Community impact

The seed library has operated successfully for five years, becoming a valued part of the community. Within two months of its launch, over 130 seed packets were borrowed by 60 library members. It has attracted new library users who specifically joined the library to access seeds.

The program also supports a circular approach to gardening, where participants can borrow seeds, grow plants, enjoy the harvest, save some of the seeds, and then return them to the library, making them available for others to use. The focus on heirloom varieties preserves biodiversity and promotes sustainability.

"I've planted quite a few seeds that I've got from the library... being able to share locally grown seeds is important. I hate what the big companies are doing."

Annie, Denmark Library Member



Seedy Session social media post. Guest speaker and TAFE representative (main) and program participants (side). Image courtesy of Denmark Library.

The initiative has also inspired related activities, including a seasonal Spice Club and seed-related STEM activities for children during school holidays. Additionally, the library has transformed what was once "a dead area" of rocks and weeds behind their building into a garden where they plant seeds from the collection, with some community members even stopping to water the garden when it looks dry.

Top 3 partnership lessons

1

Start small and keep it manageable for long-term success

The Denmark seed library succeeded because they kept it simple from the beginning - using a basic box at the checkout counter, an Excel spreadsheet for tracking, and focusing on one clear purpose. This practical approach made it sustainable over five years without overwhelming staff or requiring complex systems. As the library noted, "keeping it fairly small" was part of its success, and having volunteer help with packaging made the workload manageable.

2

Leverage existing relationships and local knowledge

The partnership worked because it built on an existing connection (a staff member who had studied at TAFE) and utilised local expertise. TAFE's seeds were particularly valuable because they had been "grown in Denmark for 10-15 years", making them locally adapted. This shows how partnerships can be most effective when they tap into existing networks and use resources specifically suited to the local community.

3

Remove barriers to encourage community participation

The relaxed approach of not requiring people to return seeds was crucial to the program's success. This "no pressure" model meant people felt comfortable participating without worrying about obligations they might not be able to meet. Combined with visible placement at the checkout counter and integration with existing library services, this approach created community ownership.



Karlee Bertola and Nicola Shaw with some of the seeds on offer.

TAFE and Denmark Library representatives with seed library in Denmark Bulletin Newspaper. Image courtesy of Denmark Library.



For more information contact:

library@denmark.wa.gov.au or call 9848 0306

Ballajura Library, City of Swan Youth Development & Art Jam WA – Youth wellbeing through creativity

Ballajura Library partnered with the City of Swan's Youth Development team to engage Art Jam WA, a local startup, to address significant behavioural issues from local teenagers. The partnership began when the library was experiencing considerable problems with anti-social behaviour from youth who would enter the library, vape inside, leave rubbish, and test boundaries with staff. With two schools nearby, afternoons became particularly stressful as groups of intimidating teens would gather in the library, creating an environment where staff felt anxious and unsafe.

The impact on staff was severe. Many library employees felt anxious about coming to work, especially in the afternoons when school finished. The library developed a reputation as an undesirable place to work, causing staffing challenges as employees would avoid shifts at the location. Some staff wouldn't want to work after certain hours, and the constant disruptions were causing significant staff turnover. Staff also felt frustrated when they were moved to other branches, as if they were being punished for not being equipped to handle the problem.



Art Jam program flyer at Ballajura Library.

The situation had become so concerning that the city temporarily placed a security guard in the library for a six-month trial. While this provided some comfort to staff, it wasn't an effective long-term solution as it intimidated other library patrons. Clearly, a different approach was needed – one that addressed the root causes rather than just managing the symptoms.

The **breakthrough** came when the city secured a two-year youth outreach project grant, and the library's programs team identified Art Jam as a potential service provider. This created an internal partnership between the library and the Youth Development team, who worked together to contract Art Jam's specialised services for engaging at-risk youth through creative activities.

The Youth Development team also conducts community outreach and school visits before the end of the school day to raise awareness about Art Jam, ensuring young people know about this safe, creative space for self-expression available at the library.

What Ballajura Library brought to the partnership

Ballajura Library provided the essential foundations for this success story. The library offered a safe, dedicated space where young people could feel comfortable expressing themselves, along with flexibility to adapt their layout as well as storage for Art Jam materials.

Library staff actively engaged in the program and team members built genuine relationships with participants, bringing diverse cultural perspectives that helped youth feel valued.

The library's institutional stability proved vital for building trust. Young people could depend on consistent weekly sessions and reliable scheduling, creating the routine many were missing.

Behind the scenes, staff provided administrative support including promotion, booking systems, and coordination. This combination of safe space, committed staff, and reliable infrastructure created the environment where Art Jam's expertise could flourish and make lasting impact.



Art Jam mural planning session. Image courtesy of Art Jam.

Community impact



Art Jam program participant. Image courtesy of Art Jam WA.

"Staff feel more comfortable and less anxious with the Art Jam program in place.

Ballajura Library

The Art Jam program has significantly improved the environment at the library by reducing disruptive behaviour and creating meaningful opportunities for young people to engage in positive activities. The program not only contributes to a more welcoming atmosphere for library staff and visitors but also serves as a valuable resource for youth who may otherwise lack access to supportive networks.

Many participants come from disadvantaged backgrounds, facing challenges like food insecurity, limited access to mental health support, and a lack of safe, inclusive spaces to connect with others. This program responds to those needs by providing snacks, encouraging open conversations about difficult topics, and maintaining a consistent, welcoming presence.

A 2024 evaluation also showed clear positive outcomes: 100% of surveyed participants reported stronger friendships, 67% developed a better understanding of their thoughts and feelings, and 67% felt more comfortable seeking support.

Top 3 partnership lessons

1

The importance of bringing the right expertise to complex problems

Libraries aren't equipped to handle all community challenges alone. This partnership succeeded because it brought together specialised youth engagement skills (Art Jam), community outreach expertise (Youth Development team), and the library's safe space and resources. As the case shows, having security guards or moving staff around wasn't an effective solution - what was needed was targeted expertise in engaging at-risk youth.

2

Relationships and "soft skills" are crucial for success

The partnership emphasised that having facilitators who could genuinely connect with young people was key to its success. The relatability of Art Jam staff, their ability to have difficult conversations, and their consistency in showing up built the trust that made real change possible. This highlights that successful youth programs depend heavily on the personal qualities of those delivering them.

3

Flexible, collaborative funding models can make programs sustainable

Rather than one organisation bearing the full cost, sharing expenses between the library and Youth Development teams made the Art Jam services financially viable. When budgets were reduced, the partnership adapted by moving from weekly to fortnightly sessions rather than cancelling the program entirely. This shows how internal collaboration and flexibility can help maintain essential community services even when resources are constrained.



Ellie (Art Jam WA) & Jasper (Ballajura Library staff member) in front of the program's mural display at Ballajura Library.



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Ballajura Library: nick.horsnell@swan.wa.gov.au

Art Jam WA: hello@artjamwa.com.au

City of Kwinana Public Library & Moorditj Kulungar Playgroup - Building reconciliation pathways through internal partnership

In March 2023, the City of Kwinana Public Library assumed responsibility for the Moorditj Kulungar Playgroup, an initiative supporting Aboriginal families with children aged 0 to 5 in the Kwinana/Rockingham region. When the day care department that previously managed the playgroup was closed, the City transitioned the program to the public library, recognising the library's natural alignment with early learning and community engagement. This internal partnership built on the existing collaborative relationship that had been developed through regular Better Beginnings visits and co-launch of *Maawit Mart*, a dual-language Noongar-English children's book.



Unlike traditional external partnerships, this collaboration exists within the same departmental structure, with the Library Programs Senior Team Leader overseeing the library programs and Moorditj Kulungar Playgroup. As the library representative noted, it's "like an odd mix of internal and external that is quite unique to our circumstances."

The partnership aims to develop meaningful relationships with local Aboriginal families while organically integrating library programs and services to enhance cultural awareness and respect. It represents a significant component of the library's reconciliation journey.

MKP Library at City of Kwinana Public Library. Image courtesy of City of Kwinana Public Library.

What Kwinana Public Library brought to the partnership

Kwinana Public Library's success with Moorditj Kulungar Playgroup stemmed from their willingness to adapt and learn. The library quickly shifted from their usual formal communication methods, replacing emails with phone calls and face-to-face conversations that better suited their Aboriginal community partners. As the team leader explained, "...things work best when they...align with the communication styles of the people involved."

The library's solid reputation in the local area helped build trust, while library staff showed commitment by visiting the playgroup every week and getting genuinely involved in activities. They also shared resources in practical ways, lending toy library items and other materials to make playgroup sessions better.

Most importantly, the library didn't come in thinking they had all the answers. They approached the partnership with "cultural humility," admitting they needed to learn from their partners rather than the other way around. This honest approach, combined with consistent effort and genuine respect, turned what could have been just another service arrangement into something much more meaningful for everyone involved.

Community impact

The partnership provides a valuable opportunity to connect with local Aboriginal families in a library context where some may have felt uncertain. By developing ongoing relationships through the playgroup, the library can identify barriers and address them authentically. The partnership has helped reduce hesitancy among playgroup families about using the library.

"We hope to develop relationships with local Aboriginal families, and make improvements to our space and services that make them more inviting to the Aboriginal community. By developing relationships, we can actually learn about barriers and address them in a meaningful way."

Kwinana Public Library



Playgroup staff member hosting NAIDOC Storytimes at the City of Kwinana Public Library. Image courtesy of City of Kwinana Public Library.

Kwinana Public Library emphasised this partnership's importance as "a significant role in our Reconciliation journey," demonstrating how organisational relationships can create meaningful pathways for cultural connection beyond simple service provision.

The collaboration has fostered joint programming initiatives, with library staff attending the Moorditj Kulungar Playgroup NAIDOC event, playgroup staff hosting NAIDOC Storytimes at the library, and playgroup excursions to the library during Children's Book Week.

Top 3 partnership lessons

1

Embrace unexpected opportunities, even when they don't fit traditional models

Sometimes the most meaningful partnerships come from unusual circumstances.

When the City placed the playgroup under Library Services, it created "an odd mix of internal and external." Rather than viewing this as a complication, the library embraced the opportunity, noting that, "part of what allows this partnership to grow organically is that it isn't a usual arrangement... a good lesson there is just to embrace any opportunity as it comes up!"



Welcome sign at City of Kwinana Public Library entrance. Image courtesy of City of Kwinana Public Library.

2


Cultural humility and genuine relationship-building comes first

The partnership succeeds because it acknowledges historical barriers and approaches the relationship with respect rather than assumptions. The library understands that "there are significant barriers that have and do exist that reasonably mean that Aboriginal people may not want to or not feel welcome to engage with institutions like public libraries." Their advice is clear, "don't go in...expecting that you know best, be open to different ways of thinking and engage in reflective practice regularly."

3

Adapt your approach to work with people's communication styles and needs

Traditional institutional approaches don't always work. The partnership found that "email was not an effective mode of communication in this context." They prioritised phone calls and in-person conversations, demonstrating that successful partnerships require flexibility in how organisations operate, not just what they deliver.

 For more information contact:
programs@kwinana.wa.gov.au

Melville Libraries & Westfield Booragoon - Meeting communities where they shop: Post-COVID retail outreach

Melville Libraries partnered with Westfield Booragoon to establish pop-up libraries within the shopping centre after experiencing decreased visitation post-COVID. Following a successful trial at Moreau Mews in Applecross in 2023, the library service expanded the initiative with Westfield for pop-ups in July 2024 and January 2025. The collaboration aimed to promote literacy and connect with community members who might not typically visit a library branch.

"We realised we needed to get out in the community and engage more. We couldn't just sit there and expect residents to come to the library."

Melville Libraries

What Melville Libraries brought to the partnership

Melville Libraries came to their partnership with Westfield Booragoon with solid programming expertise, the staff knew how to design and deliver activities that work for families. Their professional approach to event management meant they could handle the logistics, setup, and activity coordination.



Pop-up library children's session delivered by Melville Libraries staff member at Westfield Booragoon. Image courtesy of Melville Libraries.

One of the biggest assets of the library was their marketing reach. With over 32,000 people on their newsletters and social media channels, they could actually get families through the door. Their trusted reputation in the community helped too, giving families confidence to try something new at the shopping centre.

The library team also brought strong content creation skills, knowing how to put together engaging activities for children that helped display what library services could offer.

After each pop-up event, the library took stock of what went well and what could be better, then applied those lessons to make the next event even more successful. As the library noted "we realised what worked and what didn't. ... we really had a chance to improve on what we did in first one and learn."

Community impact

The pop-up libraries created meaningful connections both with existing users and new community members. The July 2024 pop-up attracted over 2,100 visitors, while the January 2025 event engaged more than 1,700 people. The initiative proved particularly effective at reaching families with young children.

"We reminded many people of what we do and encouraged them to come back to the branches again... it was the people who hadn't used us for a while that we were able to reconnect with."

Melville Libraries

The pop-ups also provided a platform to promote the future Library Cultural Centre, coinciding with the announcement of \$15 million in federal funding for the project.

Evolution and future vision

What began as a modest test evolved into a structured partnership with ongoing potential. Between pop-ups, the library team made significant adaptations, consolidating from two separate spaces to a single location, reducing operating hours, and more than halving operational costs from \$19,900 to \$8,800 while maintaining impact.

The team envisions an annual pop-up program and, more significantly, sees strategic potential during their upcoming renovation period.

"I'd love to see it as an ongoing thing we do. With Civic Square Library closing for the new Library Cultural Centre construction, I'd love to see the library move into one of the shops."

Melville Libraries

This approach would maintain community access during construction while strengthening the partnership. The team is also considering additional pop-ups in parks and other community locations.



Pop-up library banner. Image courtesy of Melville Libraries.

Top 3 partnership lessons

1

Meet people where they are

The pop-up approach succeeded because it recognised that post-COVID, libraries needed to actively reach out rather than wait for people to come back to them. As Melville Libraries noted, "we realised we needed to get out in the community and engage more. We couldn't just sit there and expect residents to come to the library." The high foot traffic location allowed them to reconnect with lapsed users and reach new audiences who might never visit a traditional branch.

2

Shared goals create natural collaboration opportunities

The partnership worked because both organisations had the same fundamental objective. "they wanted to attract new people. We wanted to attract new people," explained Melville Libraries. This alignment made negotiating responsibilities, sharing resources, and maintaining focus throughout the project easier.

3

Learn, adapt, and improve

Rather than simply repeating their first pop-up, the team used it as a learning opportunity. They consolidated from two spaces to one, reduced operating hours, and more than halving costs from \$19,900 to \$8,800 while maintaining impact. As they noted "the first pop-up was really big and a good learning curve for us... when we did the second one, we had a chance to improve." This shows how treating initial partnerships as pilots can lead to more effective and sustainable models over time.



Person reading at the pop up library. Image courtesy of Melville Libraries.



For more information contact:
Alison.Mudgway@melville.wa.gov.au

Gosnells Library & Redgum Justice - Creating legal access through trusted spaces

Gosnells Library partnered with Redgum Justice (formerly Gosnells Community Legal Centre) to provide free legal advice sessions to the community. The partnership began when a library staff member, whose husband had previously worked with the organisation, suggested offering sessions at the library. This proposal aligned with the library's broader efforts to collaborate with local organisations and enhance the delivery of valuable information services to the community.



Lawyer in the Library Facebook banner courtesy of Gosnells Library.

The initiative supports the library's core mission and complements the council's strategic goal of strengthening engagement with local organisations. Although attendance has varied since its launch around a year ago, the sessions have managed to reach community members who may not otherwise seek legal support.

"The collaboration aims to provide free legal information sessions for the community, with lawyers from Redgum Justice conducting weekly sessions."

Gosnells Library

What Gosnells Library brought to the partnership

Gosnells Library offered a trusted community space where people felt comfortable seeking help. As the Gosnells library representative explained, "people identify that as a safe place to come and get information from," and this is crucial for reaching people who might find traditional legal offices intimidating.

The library had solid promotional infrastructure through their marketing team, social media channels, and community notice boards that could get the word out about the legal advice sessions. They handled all the administrative side including bookings, room setup and event coordination, so Red Gum Justice could focus on delivering the legal advice rather than worry about logistics.

What really mattered was the library's existing relationships with local residents, including people who didn't even realise they had legal problems. The convenient location and familiar surroundings meant people could access legal help without having to navigate somewhere new or intimidating. The library also had backing from management and council leadership, which meant the program had the institutional support it needed to keep running long-term.

Community impact

The partnership provides a vital service in a traditionally lower socioeconomic area, where access to free legal advice is particularly valuable. The sessions have successfully reached both regular users of community services and those accessing support for the first time. Redgum Justice explained the unique value of the program:

"The library has (access to) that secret cohort of people that don't even know they have a problem. For example, pensioners who will just not turn the heater on because their electricity bills are unmanageable... they don't actually know they have a legal problem."

Redgum Justice

The referral pathway created by the program has proven particularly effective. As the Redgum Justice representative explained: "The library staff now know what we do a lot more robustly. When people go there and are having an issue, they're able to say, 'If you just pop next door, or do you want me to get them to ring you?' They can pass on the details to us."

The program has been particularly valuable for seniors, who may be reluctant to seek help. Redgum Justice noted, "Seniors are from that stiff upper lip generation, and they won't complain. They'll never be the squeaky wheel. So they just go without. They're forgotten."

The initiative has also inspired related activities. When Redgum Justice arranged for a Food Bank mobile truck to visit weekly, they coordinated with the library so that library patrons in need could also access the service, demonstrating how the partnership extends beyond legal advice to create a more comprehensive support network for the community.



Redgum Justice representative delivering a wills session to program participants at Gosnells Library.

Top 3 partnership lessons

1

Proximity can transform service delivery

The partnership succeeds largely because both organisations are in the same building, creating unique opportunities for an immediate, responsive service. As Redgum Justice explained, "the library branch manager has my mobile number, so she can text and say, 'We've got someone here who needs help.'" This physical proximity allows for seamless referrals that wouldn't be possible with distant partners, demonstrating how location can be a strategic advantage in partnerships.

2

Libraries can reach the "invisible" people who need help most

The partnership revealed that libraries have access to demographics that other services struggle to reach. Redgum Justice noted: "The library has (access to) that secret cohort of people that don't even know they have a problem." This shows how libraries' trusted, non-threatening environment makes them ideal partners for reaching vulnerable populations.

3

True partnerships go beyond referrals to create mutual benefit

Rather than just directing people elsewhere, this collaboration creates genuine two-way value. Library staff became more knowledgeable about legal services in the community, while Redgum Justice gained access to people who would never directly approach a legal centre. As Redgum Justice emphasised: "It's more than a referral pathway. It definitely is a partnership." This mutual enhancement of both organisations' capacity to serve their community shows how effective partnerships amplify everyone's impact.



Gosnells Library.



For more information contact: Gosnells Library (08) 9391 6000

City of Perth Library: Bringing medical experts to the community

The City of Perth Library's partnership with Royal Perth Hospital (RPH) Research Foundation shows how libraries can serve as hubs for community wellbeing by connecting people with the highest level of health expertise.

The relationship began informally when RPH hosted self-funded health talks at the library. As the collaboration deepened, both organisations saw value in formalising the partnership to benefit the broader community. The initiative aimed to make expert health knowledge accessible by delivering it in a non-clinical, community-based setting. By combining RPH's medical expertise with the library's role as a trusted public space, a unique platform for health education was created.

"The main purpose of the partnership is to provide diverse programming and resources to our community on key issues such as public health, wellbeing, and ageing."

City of Perth Library

What the City of Perth Library brought to the partnership

City of Perth Library provides the RPH Research Foundation with a professional venue, proper equipment and setup. The library team know how to handle event coordination, managing everything from logistics and registration to audience management so the health experts could focus on delivering their presentations and engage with the audience members.



An Evening with Professor Lyn Beazley AO at City of Perth Library. Image courtesy of RPH Research Foundation and City of Perth.

The library could tap into their existing membership and programming networks to reach a diverse audience, people who might never have come across this health information otherwise. Their professional marketing and communications capabilities meant the talks actually reached people instead of getting buried in all the other community information out there.

The library's institutional credibility also added significant value. As the City of Perth Library representative noted, the library's trusted reputation in the community enhanced the credibility of the health information provided. The library also provided administrative support including the annual MOU management, scheduling coordination, and follow-up communications ensuring the partnership runs smoothly year after year.

Community impact

The health talks have become a valued part of the library's regular programming, attracting both loyal patrons and newcomers who might not have otherwise engaged with library services.

Topics vary to reflect current health concerns and emerging research, keeping the content fresh and relevant to what's happening in people's lives.

The sessions empower community members to better understand and manage their wellbeing, with many attendees reporting they feel more confident making health decisions after hearing from credible experts



Food as Medicine session City of Perth Library. Image courtesy of RPH Research Foundation and City of Perth.

"It's by presenters that know what they're talking about, doctors and professors, so we act as a conduit to share the latest research."

City of Perth Library

Top 3 partnership lessons

1

Start informally, then formalise successful relationships

The partnership began naturally when RPH simply used the library as a venue, and both organisations gradually recognised the potential for deeper collaboration. This organic development allowed them to test compatibility and value before committing to formal structures.

2

Leverage each organisation's unique strengths for community benefit

The partnership succeeds because it combines RPH's credible medical expertise with the library's accessible, non-clinical environment. The library provides "a welcoming, stigma-free space where community members feel comfortable asking questions," while RPH brings "vetted experts, including doctors and professors." Neither organisation could achieve the same community impact alone.

3

Balance structure with flexibility through clear documentation

While the partnership maintains a relaxed, collaborative feel, it's supported by an annual Memorandum of Understanding that defines roles and responsibilities. This framework provides clarity while allowing adaptation to changing needs, enabling both organisations to deliver consistent value to the community.



*Blood pressure checks at City of Perth Library.
Image courtesy of RPH Research Foundation
and City of Perth.*



For more information contact:

library.events@cityofperth.wa.gov.au

What makes partnerships work?

The examples from WA public libraries demonstrate that successful partnerships share some common elements:



Shared goals are the foundation of successful partnerships

Melville Libraries and Westfield were both focused on attracting new audiences, Denmark Library and TAFE were united by a commitment to sustainability, and Gosnells Library and Redgum Justice shared a goal of improving access to legal support. Each collaboration worked because the partners had a clear, common purpose driving their efforts.



Starting small builds trust and long-term sustainability

Denmark Library began its seed collection with a simple, manageable approach. Melville Libraries trialled pop-up stalls to test interest. These low-risk beginnings gave partners space to build trust, assess fit, and gradually expand.



Community needs drive the partnership

Strong collaborations respond to local challenges. Ballajura tackled staff safety concerns, Denmark saw growing interest in food security, and Gosnells addressed legal access gaps in a community with high levels of social disadvantage. When partnerships are grounded in genuine community priorities, they're more likely to gain support and engagement.



Regular evaluation and adaptation keep partnerships relevant

Strong collaborations continuously refine their approach. Melville nearly halved pop-up costs while maintaining impact, City of Perth uses annual reviews to improve health programming, and Denmark tracks seed popularity with "a simple Excel spreadsheet" to guide collection development.



Flexibility allows partnerships to evolve and thrive

When facing budget constraints, Ballajura shifted from weekly to fortnightly Art Jam sessions. Kwinana embraced an "unusual arrangement" when the playgroup moved under library services. Denmark's seed library succeeded partly through "a relaxed approach to seed returns," removing participation barriers.

Partnership challenges - some examples



Even successful partnerships face challenges and setbacks. Learning from these experiences can help build stronger collaborations. The following examples from WA case studies illustrate common partnership obstacles and how libraries overcame them. In each case, the libraries demonstrated resilience by maintaining flexibility, communicating openly about problems, and focusing on shared goals rather than perfect execution.

Overcommitting resources

Melville Libraries learned this lesson when their first pop-up cost nearly \$20,000. "We employed our budget in the first one, so we had very little for the second one," they explained. The key learning: start with what you can sustain.

Relying on single relationships

Denmark Library discovered this vulnerability when their TAFE contact went on maternity leave. "That year there were no Seedy sessions because it was too hard to communicate with the other person... we could never catch each other on the phone, so it just didn't happen." Successful partnerships need multiple connection points to ensure continuity.

Assuming one approach fits all

Ballajura Library found that security guards actually made their situation worse by intimidating other library users, while moving staff to different branches felt like a punishment rather than a solution. This experience highlights how sometimes the obvious fix isn't the right fix for your specific context.

Promising more than you can deliver

Westfield Booragoon initially promised Melville Libraries two staff members for their second pop-up, then reduced it to one just months before the event. "So then we had to really rethink what we were going to do." This underscores why clear expectations and written agreements help prevent disappointments and allow for better planning.

Ignoring communication preferences

The Kwinana partnership nearly failed before it started because traditional institutional approaches weren't working. "Email is not an effective mode of communication in this context," they learned. Their experience demonstrates that sometimes you need to adapt how you work, not just what you deliver, to build successful relationships.

Overcoming partnership challenges

Even the strongest partnerships encounter obstacles along their journey. Here are some common challenges libraries face and practical strategies to address them:

Limited resources: budget, staffing, time etc.

- Share costs strategically – Leverage each partner's unique strengths and financial capacity to distribute expenses effectively.
- Be realistic upfront – Commit only to what your organisation can sustainably support throughout the partnership lifecycle.
- Start small and build momentum – Begin with manageable, well-scoped collaborations that allow for learning, adjustment, and demonstrated success before expanding into larger or more complex initiatives.
- Focus on depth, not breadth – Prioritise delivering high-quality outcomes in a few key areas rather than diluting impact by taking on too many partnerships at once.
- Apply for joint funding – Pursue grants and funding opportunities that require collaboration, opening doors neither organisation could access independently.

Communication breakdowns

- Establish clear channels early – Define specific communication protocols, including preferred methods and response timeframes.
- Document everything important – Maintain comprehensive records of agreements, decisions, and action items.
- Schedule regular check-ins – Implement consistent touchpoints to identify and resolve emerging issues proactively.
- Adapt communication styles – Recognise that different partners may respond better to varying approaches, from formal meetings to casual conversations.

Staff changes and turnover

- Create written partnership records – Develop documentation that preserves institutional knowledge beyond individual staff members.
- Involve multiple people – Cultivate team-based partnerships that remain resilient when key personnel depart.
- Plan for transitions – Develop onboarding processes that thoroughly introduce new staff to existing partnership frameworks and relationships.
- Build relationships at different levels – Foster connections across organisational hierarchies to ensure continuity despite staffing changes.

Overcoming partnership challenges cont'd

Differing expectations and priorities

- Set clear goals from the start - Establish shared objectives and success metrics that align with both organisations' missions.
- Be explicit about contributions - Create an outline detailing each partner's commitments and deadlines.
- Communicate limitations honestly - Transparently discuss constraints to avoid setting unrealistic expectations.
- Build in flexibility - Design partnerships with adaptability in mind, allowing for evolution as circumstances and priorities shift.
- Review regularly - Conduct periodic assessments to ensure the partnership continues to deliver value to everyone involved.

Measuring success

- Establish metrics early - Define specific, measurable indicators of success before launching initiatives.
- Collect both numbers and stories - Combine quantitative data with qualitative feedback to capture the full impact of your partnership.
- Document outcomes regularly - Maintain consistent records that demonstrate value and justify continued investment.
- Use data to improve - Apply evaluation findings to continuously refine and strengthen your collaborative efforts.



Starting a partnership - A step-by-step guide



Identify community needs

Responding to real needs builds genuine support and sustainability. Start by exploring community issues through:

- Surveys with library users and non-users.
- Focus groups and informal conversations.
- Analysis of program attendance and borrowing patterns.
- Consultation with community leaders and local organisations.



Plan and prepare internally

Before approaching partners, establish your foundation:

- Secure leadership support from your library manager and council.
- Clarify available resources (staff time, space, materials).
- Assess what your library can realistically sustain.
- Define specific outcomes you hope to achieve.



Map/vet potential partners

Identify organisations already working to address community needs:

- Community organisations
- Health and social services
- Educational institutions (schools, TAFE, universities).
- Local businesses
- Special interest groups (environmental, hobby groups, volunteer communities).
- Local government departments (internal/external)



Make contact & set-up a meeting

- Identify the best contact person by calling, emailing, or using the organisation's website form.
- Use a simple script to introduce yourself and explain your interest in collaborating.
- Ask a colleague or volunteer to connect you if they have an existing relationship.
- Before meeting, clarify the community need, what the library can offer, and potential ideas to explore together.



Propose/develop a small pilot project with shared goals

Start small and clarify:

- Each partner's specific contributions (resources, expertise, time).
- Decision-making processes and authority.
- Metrics for measuring success.
- Timelines and communication channels.
- Budget responsibilities and financial expectations.



Review regularly and scale thoughtfully

- Schedule check-ins to assess progress, identify strengths, and address challenges.
- Document achievements to build momentum and demonstrate value.
- As your partnership matures, explore opportunities to deepen engagement prioritising quality over quantity. Build upon successes before adding complexity.
- Move on if the partnership is not working.

Final note

Successful library partnerships don't happen overnight. They require thoughtful planning, clear communication, and ongoing commitment.

The case studies in this toolkit demonstrate that even though partnerships can take many forms, they all share a focus on genuine community needs and a willingness to work collaboratively to address them.

The most important lesson from these partnerships is simple: start where you are, with what you have, and focus on what your community needs most. Whether it's supporting at-risk youth, promoting food security, providing health information, or building cultural bridges, the right partnership can amplify your library's impact in ways you might never have imagined.



Additional partnership resources

Setting up referral pathways

A practical guide helping libraries establish connections with community services. Includes templates, workflows, and best practices for effective community referrals.

State Library Victoria, & Public Libraries Victoria. (2023). *Referral pathways: A toolkit for library staff.*
<https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Referral%20Pathways%20-%20A%20toolkit%20for%20Library%20Staff.pdf>

Setting up a health partnership

Comprehensive toolkit for developing health-focused library initiatives. Features case studies, partnership frameworks, and strategies for addressing community health needs.

State Library Victoria, & Public Libraries Victoria. (2022). *Libraries for health and wellbeing: A partnerships toolkit.*
<https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/LFHAWB-PT-FIN-web.pdf>

Setting up cross-sector partnerships

Resource for developing relationships with government and community organisations. Outlines benefits, challenges, and approaches to effective cross-sector collaboration.

State Library of New South Wales. (n.d.). *Library partnerships with outside agencies.* Public Library Services, State Library of NSW. <https://pls.sl.nsw.gov.au/managing-my-library/community-and-engagement/library-partnerships-outside-agencies>

General library partnership resources

Detailed kit for developing and sustaining successful library partnerships. Contains assessment tools, planning worksheets, and outreach strategies.

American Library Association. (2024). *Partnering for stronger programming: A toolkit for libraries* (IMLS Grant #LG-250153-OLS-21).
<https://www.ala.org/news/2024/06/ala-releases-free-partnering-stronger-programming-toolkit-libraries>

Guide for creating youth-focused partnerships. Provides practical advice for engaging teens and meeting their needs through collaborative programs.

Young Adult Library Services Association. (2017). *Partnering to increase your impact: A toolkit.*
<https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/yalsa/content/170508-yalsa-partnering-to-increase-your-impact-toolkit-print-0.pdf>