

Fremantle Library Connect Project

An Evaluation of the First Year – September 2020 to September 2021

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The **Library Connect** project is a collaboration between St Patrick's Community Support Centre (St Pat's) and the City of Fremantle, which commenced in September 2020. The **Library Connect support worker** connects with people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship or homelessness to provide initial support, as well as **connection and referrals** to other services. The support worker also provides **training, support, and capacity building** for Fremantle Library staff in a range of areas, including working with people who have experienced trauma.

The Library Connect pilot project is being evaluated by the **Home2Health research team** at UWA. This evaluation draws on **multiple sources of data**, including St Pat's client data, interviews with people supported through Library Connect, and interviews, focus groups, and surveys with key project stakeholders.

WHO HAS BEEN SUPPORTED?

In the first twelve months of the project, there were **556 total recorded contacts**. Two thirds of the **requests for support** have been from **women**, and the service supported significant numbers of **Aboriginal people** and **people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds**.



556

TOTAL RECORDED CONTACTS



67% FEMALE
33% MALE



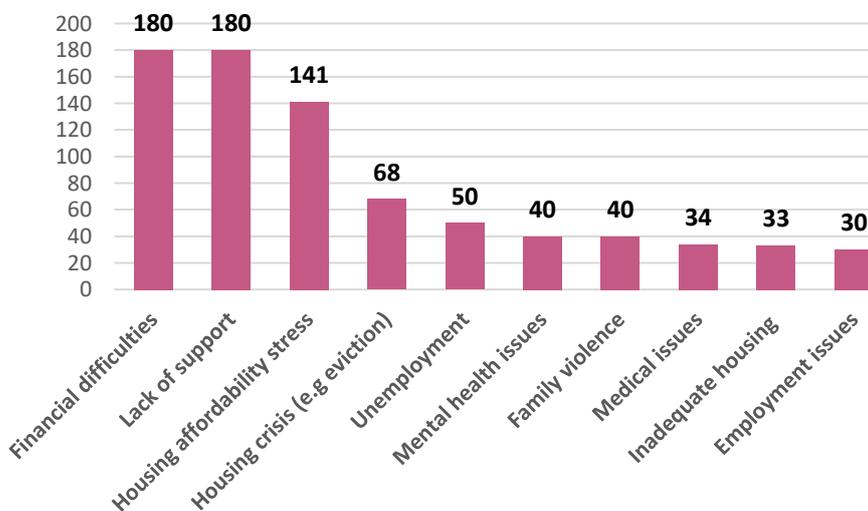
23%
ABORIGINAL & / OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER



19%
BORN OVERSEAS

MAIN PRESENTING ISSUES

The most common issues experienced by people supported by Library Connect have included **financial difficulties, housing affordability stress and crisis, and lack of support**. Issues relating to **mental health, family violence, and employment** were also common.



REFERRALS

Library Connect referrals are made to and from a range of services including financial, emergency relief, accommodation, health, mental health, legal, alcohol and other drugs, and migration.



46

REFERRAL PARTNERS



434

REFERRALS FROM LIBRARY CONNECT



102

REFERRALS TO LIBRARY CONNECT

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

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

LIBRARIES ARE A SAFE SPACE

EARLY INTERVENTION & PREVENTION

PARTNERSHIP MODEL

SUPPORT & CAPACITY BUILDING FOR LIBRARY STAFF

NO BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

“This program is amazing! We should have it in every Library” – Survey participant library staff

LIBRARIES ARE A SAFE SPACE

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.

“They feel it's a safe space for them to come – not judgemental, not dangerous, friendly, supportive. I think women can sometimes feel a bit overwhelmed by men's presence, so they prefer coming here because they feel safe here. They come to take some books and stuff, but also to receive some support” – Library Connect worker

“For many of our clients, it might be the first time they've had to ask for help and to go somewhere where there's a different community than they'd normally have to go to is quite difficult, so giving them the library option is brilliant” – Focus group participant

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

“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. 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

“And it's comfortable for the children as well, they're going somewhere that's a little strange but the library, they can come in and explore the books and mum can have a chat” – Focus group participant

“And the Library is a good place for me. And for kids, the Library is the best place. 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** before issues 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 a different kind of families that are coming to us ... that haven't had to reach out to services before. So libraries, because they go to the children's groups in the morning and the storytime, and things like that, that's a really familiar place for them” – Focus group participant

In many instances, Library Connect has provided **critical support for families** – 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 not become homeless” – Library Connect worker

PARTNERSHIP MODEL

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

"(The Library Connect worker's) access to St Pat's information is really valuable. The fact that she's got St Pat's because from a therapeutic point of view ... she needs brainstorming and supervision from a therapeutic agency"

– **Focus group participant**

"It's definitely much better having ... an agency that is really well-known for the services that they provide, and also is connected to another service is an advantage. And obviously, we are in the field, we know if something comes up from any other agency ... the updates, new programs, new funding. So it's much better that someone is from a specialised agency, because St Pat's is a specialist in community services, in homelessness and vulnerable people"

– **Library Connect worker**

SUPPORT & CAPACITY BUILDING FOR LIBRARY STAFF

Library Connect provides **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"

– **Focus group participant**

"(The Library Connect worker) has done work with some of the people who might be a little bit trickier than others. She has the time to sit with ... people sometimes and just go, "Look, if you want to be in the library space, you have to be more like this," and it helped them build those skills"

– **Focus group participant**

"Not everybody, even if they do training will still have that confidence and that comfort level. So that's why having (the Library Connect worker) around to be able to do those debrief discussions or give you feedback on, "Did I manage that in the right way?" is really valuable"

– **Focus group participant**

"(Library Connect worker) is able to help with more difficult or specific queries for vulnerable people ... as sometimes the library staff don't have access or knowledge of the resources available"

– **Survey participant**

A specific area of focus has been the development of **trauma informed practice** within the 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""

– **Focus group participant**

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**

"You don't want to be telling your story to so many different people. It's great to have one person to speak to. Once you connect with somebody and you trust them, you want to keep seeing that person not have to go through your story again"

– **Library Connect client**

Library Connect does not have **specific eligibility criteria** – for age, gender, income, family and/or relationship status, and residency or visa status. Library Connect supports a **very 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**

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

An online survey with staff and other key project stakeholders was undertaken at two time points – November 2020 and September 2021. The surveys were disseminated through the Project Evaluation Reference Group and through key project partners, with 16 responses to the first survey and 22 responses to the second survey.

Survey respondents identified a **range of benefits** of the project to date, including benefits for library staff, for other staff or organisations, and for library users. These benefits strongly correlated with the themes highlighted throughout this report – the **safety and accessibility** of the library as a place to access support; **providing support** for community members with issues that library staff aren't able to help with; and **debriefing** for library staff after difficult situations.

95%

felt confident to refer, recommend, or connect clients to Library Connect

94%

saw the Library Connect role to be about connecting people to the community

89%

saw the Library Connect role to be about offering information and support

50%

saw the Library Connect role as providing capacity building to staff

67%

saw the Library Connect role as providing brief interventions to people experiencing hardship

Between the first and second survey, there were observed increases in **knowledge and confidence** about some of the more **complex needs** that people who attend the library may be experiencing, including homelessness, alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues, and family and domestic violence (FDV).

11%

increase in knowledge about **MENTAL HEALTH**

25%

increase in confidence responding to **HOMELESSNESS**

200%

increase in knowledge about **FDV**

35%

increase in confidence responding to **AOD ISSUES**

7%

increase in confidence responding to **DISTRESSED BEHAVIOUR**

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Library Connect program was initially launched as a one-year pilot program in September 2020. The program was funded for this pilot period through St Pat's, supported by a philanthropic donation with significant in-kind support from the City of Fremantle.

The City of Fremantle and St Pat's have recently signed a co-funding agreement. As part of this agreement, the City of Fremantle will provide a financial contribution and ongoing in-kind support for the program for the next three years, with the remainder of the funding to be sourced by St Pat's.

This will allow the program to continue to provide support for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and other disadvantage. This will also allow the program to follow up with people who have been supported through Library Connect to date, to determine some of the **longer-term outcomes** of this support.

There has been significant interest from other local governments and other libraries regarding the possibility of this model of support being offered in libraries in other areas. The Library Connect model can therefore guide **good practice** in the **future development** of library-based support services.



From left to right: Jayne Cleave (City of Fremantle), Andrew Sullivan (City of Fremantle), Sonia Gonzalez (St Pat's), Michael Piu (St Pat's), Michelle Brennand (City of Fremantle)

Further information on the Library Connect project is available here:

