

Evaluation

# Now and for their futures: Libraries brain building in the early years

National forum



Hosted by State Library of Queensland and the Queensland Brain Institute, University of Queensland  
21 – 22 May 2025

## Context

From the very moment a life begins, a child's experiences and environments shape their learning, development and wellbeing now, and for their whole life.

While brain development continues through life, and positive changes can be made at any age, the early years give us the best opportunity to create healthy foundations for a baby's brain.

Libraries are vital community hubs in our early years ecosystem connecting parents, caregivers and children in welcoming, child-focused spaces. Libraries build belonging and social connections through their people, resources and place-based programs that support whole child development and wellbeing.

When we work together, we create strong, positive communities that empower families to provide the experiences their children need to thrive.

In May 2025, State Library of Queensland together with the Queensland Brain Institute at the University of Queensland hosted the *Now and for their futures: Libraries brain building in the early years* national forum to explore the impact public libraries can have in supporting strong foundations in the early years. Public libraries across Australia take place-based approaches in engaging with children and families, charged with making a difference to children's health and wellbeing.

The forum brought together 80 participants from across Australia connecting library and sector leaders, researchers, practitioners and philanthropic representatives in their shared commitment to prioritising the early years and committing to action to support children and families in the work they do. The forum created space to listen and explore ways to radically share our expertise, knowledge and resources to build a national approach to libraries supporting all children to thrive.

## Event committee

A national event committee convened to build the forum program drawing on the expertise and thought leadership underpinning state-led early years initiatives.

The committee comprised staff from State Library of Queensland, Queensland Brain Institute (UQ), Australian Libraries and Information Association, NSW Public Libraries Association, Public Libraries Victoria, Barossa Council and State Library of Western Australia.

The forum was made possible through partnerships with: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership, State Library of Queensland and the University of Queensland. The forum was endorsed by the Australian Library and Information Association, the Australian Public Library Alliance, and National and State Libraries Australasia.



## Day 1 overview

### Why libraries matter in the early years

Hosted by the University of Queensland, Customs House, Brisbane

The forum opened with a welcome event exploring the importance of libraries as connectors playing a critical role in the early years' ecosystem.

Opening keynotes foregrounded brain research and the role of libraries in providing the environments and experiences that help children to thrive in the first 5 years.

Professor Karen Thorpe, ARC Laureate Fellow and Group Leader, Queensland Brain Institute introduced the concept of 'serve, return, rally to learn' (an extension of the 'serve and return' concept by Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University) to reinforce the importance of sustained interactions between adult and child to shape brain structure and set up life chances. Experiences matter.

*"The story of a child's brain is remarkable – from birth to 5 years sees maximum activity in development of the brain. I want to acknowledge the amazing possibilities of libraries and local government in reaching not only inner cities but across regions and remote communities."*

**Professor Karen Thorpe**

Vicki McDonald AM FALIA State Librarian and CEO, State Library of Queensland spoke about public libraries as connectors within a 1,400 strong national network. Through their people, spaces and programs libraries provide the environments and experiences that support children to thrive. Every day libraries are helping to build and protect little brains by delivering evidenced based programming. We see the impact through initiatives such as First 5 Forever in Queensland, now celebrating its 10-year anniversary.

Libraries take deeply local, place-based approaches, but are united in a commitment to supporting children and families. Their safe, welcoming presence is more vital than ever with the Australian Bureau of Statistics reporting a rise in social isolation and loneliness, especially in our young people. Libraries provide important opportunities for social connection, referencing the Belong Trust Connect report (A New Approach) recommending democratic institutions urgently partner with cultural institutions to reverse declining trust in institutions through cultural and creative activities.

*"This forum will help identify opportunities for national, cross-sector collaboration and radical sharing to increase our impact."*

**Vicki McDonald AM FALIA**

### Panel

A moderated panel held space for robust dialogue between government, philanthropic and sector leaders addressing the strengths of libraries and the barriers preventing them from being recognised as key contributors to the early years ecosystem.

Tegan Taylor, Radio National ABC, moderated the panel with Kate Ellis CEO, Raising Literacy Australia, Darriea Turley AM Vice President Australian Local Government Association, and Michael Hogan, Executive Convenor, Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership.

The panel explored the notion of radical sharing to create a culture of collaboration and shared purpose, breaking down territorial attitudes and funding silos to achieve the best possible outcomes for early years development.



## Day 2 overview

### Libraries and ...

Hosted by State Library of Queensland,  
The Edge Auditorium, South Brisbane

Day 2 of the forum centred participants in a need for collective responsibility to support the early years. The Roundtable format created opportunities to share, learn and reflect on the spectrum of early years practice, resources, evidence and partnerships that create pathways for working together with a national approach to supporting children and families through libraries.

The Acknowledgement of Country by Auntie Sharron 'mirii' Bell set a spiritual yet playful tone honouring storytelling and song to place children and identity at the centre of the forum.

*"Yindyamarra — go softly, slowly with honour and respect."*

**Auntie Sharron 'mirii' Bell**

Vicki McDonald AM FALIA State Librarian and CEO, State Library of Queensland welcomed participants reflecting on the success of 10 years of First 5 Forever, and other major initiatives that bring families and children together in joyful play.

*"Central to the work we do is fully understanding the needs of children. And that means we must be active, careful listeners and provide creative opportunities for children to express their needs."*

**Vicki McDonald AM FALIA**

The forum aesthetic reflected this imperative with artwork from Dr Barbara Piscitelli AM Children's Art Archive, reinforcing State Library's commitment to collecting children's voices and elevating the value of child-centred learning and self-expression.

*"The people and organisations represented at this forum connect with and enrich the lives of children in many different and important ways. It is the diversity and depth of that thinking that allows us to collectively provide children and families the tools, skills and support needed in an ever-changing world."*

**Vicki McDonald AM FALIA**

Luke Twyford, Principal Commissioner, Queensland Family and Child Commission framed the important role libraries can play by redefining what frontline services mean for children and families. He urged the group to consider how libraries work for children and families to get in front of traditional police and justice intervention systems.

Louise Denoon, Executive Director Community Partnerships, State Library of Queensland spoke about the maturation of First 5 Forever, from early literacy to supporting the needs of the whole child.

*"First 5 Forever has been on an extraordinary journey, one founded in a vision to give every child in Queensland the best possible start in life."*

**Louise Denoon**

Participants were introduced to the First 5 Forever Early Years Story that embeds the 6 wellbeing domains ('buckets') children need to thrive through a shared language to advocate for the needs of children and families in a library context. Drawing from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth's (ARACY) *The Nest* — a nationally recognised framework that defines 6 interdependent domains of child and youth wellbeing — this became the 'bucket' metaphor framing discussions throughout the day. From feeling loved and safe to being materially secure, actively learning, healthy, participating, and having a positive sense of identity and culture — *The Nest* provides a shared language and vision for how libraries can support children's development holistically, in partnership with families and communities.

*"Libraries are dynamic, vibrant hubs of connection. Together, we create environments where children can grow, learn, and feel supported — not just as individuals but as part of a vibrant and inclusive community."*

*Together, we're working to ensure every child in every community has the strongest foundation to thrive — now and for their futures."*

**Louise Denoon**



## Stories of impact

Stories of impact from Better Beginnings (State Library of Western Australia); The Imagination Library (United Way) and Barossa Council showcased library-led state initiatives, their flexibility to scale, and the power of partnering for greater reach and impact.

## Poster session

A selection of libraries and their partners were invited to showcase their work and provide participants the opportunity to learn about their end-to-end journey, highlights, learnings and impacts for children and families in their community.

The poster session demonstrated the breadth of work happening nationally to champion children and families through shared language, inclusive spaces, online STEAM learning, peer mentoring, academic partnering, innovating play, culturally safe programming, and celebrating children's voices.

## Facilitated roundtables

### Roundtable 1

**When we work together to tell a compelling consistent story, we can achieve even more for Australia's children.**

The first roundtable captured the cross-sector expertise in the room as participants reflected on the work they do and how they contribute to filling the 'buckets' that support children to thrive. The activity demonstrated the depth and breadth of our impact through the lens of the Early Years Story.

### Roundtable 2

**What if libraries weren't just a player in the game of early childhood development, but the MVP — the Most Valuable Partner — in every child's journey?**

Participants explored the principles and practices that underpin libraries delivering world-class excellence for early years. Table hosts provoked thinking outside traditional models of space, collections and programs towards the values of equity, inclusion and uplift; the qualities of leadership, advocacy, evaluation and research, and the importance of learning from and embedding First Nations knowledge and perspectives. Five critical qualities of excellence emerged from this provocation providing a frame for deep dive in the sandpit sessions following.

### Roundtable 3

**What bold collective dream could we achieve together that would advance libraries alliance as the MVP?**

The final roundtable discussion captured the wealth of programs, resources, projects, and research represented at the forum that support children to thrive, and identified new opportunities made possible with a collective approach. This highlighted enablers and barriers for libraries and opportunities for uplift, innovation and collaboration that would be explored in sandpit sessions to follow. This would shift the momentum from insight to action.

## Sandpit sessions

Participants were invited to join one of 7 sandpit sessions that would shift the mindset from insight to action by identifying now and next actions that would build towards a national statement of commitment.

### Session 1: invited a bold approach to a shared vision and statement of alliance

**Outcome:** A commitment to a library for every child. No child left behind.

*Every child must have access to everything they need to thrive. We are a national movement, working together to champion children's healthy development. Libraries are an essential part of children's and families lives. Libraries, with our powerful partnerships, are critical connectors, drivers and spaces that drive prevention through Principles 1, 2 and 3 (Workforce Capability, Child-centred, Trusted Partnerships) to improve the lives of 6 million children living in Australia.*

**Actions:**

- Collective advocacy and radical collaboration: centralised and universal access to resources.
- Consultation and governance: a national shared language and best practice framework.
- Accountability and audit: develop a tool to learn, reflect and act for change.

### Sessions 2-4: unpacked the key qualities of excellence emerging from roundtables that enable transformative change and greater impact — people, partners and places

#### 1. Workforce capability

Qualities of library workforce excellence:

- a diverse, supported, skilled and valued workforce
- investment in training and professional development
- universal training on early years childhood development
- access for ALL library staff as connectors to children and families.

**Outcome:** a commitment to building and maintaining a capable workforce by providing evidence-based early years training for all library staff so welcoming spaces for children and families are a priority.

**Actions:**

- develop a national recruitment and training strategy, and requisite for staff retention
- mentoring and leadership programs to uplift other libraries
- a commitment to innovative and evidence informed practice
- shared knowledge (sector/partners) through quality industry standard training modules
- flexibility of programming to enable deeply local place based work to suit every community's needs.

#### 2. Trusted partnerships

Qualities of library partnerships:

- strengthen delivery in communities
- enhance quality through collaboration
- shared networks enable greater impact
- libraries as critical partners for other areas of government; a delivery point of information, support and research.

**Outcome:** a commitment to a national partnership agreement (national, state and local stakeholders).

**Actions:**

- leverage partnerships to advocate for libraries and what they offer
- impactful sharing through real life stories
- break down barriers and stigmas — libraries offer more than books
- seek co-location opportunities with other critical early years services
- consider future design opportunities — digital town hall/multi-generational and inclusive cultural spaces
- consider expanding outreach and pop up locations — shopping centres/airports.

#### 3. Deeply local connectors

Qualities of libraries reaching and reflecting local communities:

- place-based, locally determined approaches
- outreach — identifying opportunities to take the library to the people; meeting families and communities where they spend time
- inclusive, safe and welcoming spaces that foster belonging
- thoughtfully designed spaces that reflect individual, cultural and community identity
- flexible, adaptable and sustainable practice enabling innovative delivery models (outreach, partnerships, pop-ups and mobile)
- responsive to and acting for local community
- collecting and amplifying children and family voices in programming.

**Outcome:** a commitment to libraries as a living services embedded in community as trusted hubs and connectors — a library for every community and every child.

**Actions:**

- advocate for a universal approach to, and recognition of, libraries as critical hubs in the early years
- co-location within a hub of critical early years services
- embed libraries in public family focussed spaces.



## Sandpit sessions CONT'D

### Sessions 5-6: invited radical thinking for radical sharing, coalescing the wealth of our alliance and the opportunities for innovative collaboration that would inform 'now' and 'next' actions

Key library capabilities and opportunities — programs, projects and research:

- scalability and flexibility
- iterative approaches
- centralised sharing
- national shared early years language
- national 'library world' in all states
- rethinking traditional purchases with a child and families' frame
- libraries fully funded by federal government as social infrastructure
- alliances at high level so local partnerships can flourish
- tiered collaboration — operational/delivery (local), strategy (state), strategy/innovation (national)
- national early years newsletter sharing innovations, grants, spotlights on practice, research and partnerships
- library representation at every early year's discussion — local to national.

**Outcome:** *a commitment to resource and knowledge sharing across the national library alliance.*

**Now actions:**

- a national 'whole of library' approach to recording impact
- ensuring access and participation by removing barriers.

**Next actions:**

- form a working group to coalesce and centralise resources
- a national community of practice to convene for continuous improvement and knowledge sharing
- a national awareness campaign and engagement tool — libraries are champions of childhood.

### Session 7: invited bold thinking towards a national policy agenda that would shift the dialogue to place libraries at the frontline, as pillars of communities, for sustained investment

**Opportunities:**

- a whole-of-library approach to centring children and families in all decision making
- consistent national messaging on early childhood development and libraries roles
- keep the early years on the agendas of NSLA and other peak bodies
- identify the lobby groups we need onboard.

**Outcome:** *a commitment to advocating for recognition of, and sustained investment in, libraries as a foundation in place-based early years support.*

**Actions:**

- tackle the big issues
- advocate for funding
- build networks and partners
- access and use national data/AEDC
- ensure a 'wrap around' approach
- access and share evidence-based solutions.

## Statement of commitment

The forum delivered a legacy Statement of commitment through which the National Alliance for Libraries and the Early Years will work to ensure families across the 1,400 strong network of libraries have access to the support and services their children need to thrive, no matter where they live.

### 'A library for every child in every community'





## Findings

1. It became clear that there was a unanimous sense of 'collective' in a place-based world. While the conversations were held by representatives of multiple stakeholder groups there was strong understanding and agreement from participants that:
  - the remit for libraries is to be poised to act for their communities
  - libraries fulfil a role as community connectors for children, young people and families
  - 'the sphere of influence' for libraries is to act always for their communities.
2. The presentations were designed to meet the needs of the participants and had the following intentions:
  - to present a reflection on quality services for families
  - to get agreement about what commitment could be made nationally to ensure that every child is supported to thrive no matter where they live
  - to sense the level of readiness for radical sharing i.e. how to support and assist each other to enable uplift and leave no-one behind.
3. How the 'collective' is created was an important theme throughout the day. The notion of framing broadly to include the concept of wellbeing was important to the discussion. Most understood that the 'coalition' was being created by shared insights and understanding. There was also broad acceptance that framing was instrumental to growing an agreed definition and a broad umbrella, so that no matter where participants work all can join and contribute.

This means joining together to engage, communicate and adapt in ways that positively impact children and families, and contribute to stronger and more vibrant communities across Australia.

4. Radical sharing is the way that participants understood the 'how' of what they proposed. It came to mean:
  - sharing a national narrative and framing which would provide a sense of intersection and systems change in libraries and local government
  - sharing a statement of commitment and a national alliance for libraries and the early years that would enable working together to ensure families across the network have access to the support and services every child needs to thrive, no matter where they live
  - sharing the powerful question: "How can we foster a culture of collaboration and shared purpose, breaking down territorial attitudes and funding siloes to achieve the best possible outcomes for early years development?"
  - sharing a clear commitment to strengthen and transform libraries to truly 'shift the dial' for families.
5. Interagency partnerships is a different way of understanding 'radical sharing' and may progress the conversation to 'radical collaboration'. In deepening our understanding of how to move forward it became clear that interagency partnerships equal radical sharing, not duplication. This notion of sharing not duplicating contributes to the following:
  - a strong sense of 'uplift' — making alliances for us and with us
  - a strong acknowledgement of 'this is who we are'
  - shared insights about the possibilities of making many alliances for particular purposes, not just one
  - the strongest description of radical sharing in the context of interagency partnerships is 'investment in one is investment in all'. This amplified the understanding and agreement about what being a 'collective' may mean.





## Findings CONT'D

6. Partnering brings an enhanced perspective when combined with the notion of advocacy. In this context it means 'a never-ending story'. Advocacy nationally as 'Libraries for Families' shifts the focus and the outcome. It becomes 'improved investment in, for and with libraries — we are in every community'. This shift in framing creates movement for the 1,400 libraries to advocate for themselves and their work as 'community connectors' on behalf of a significantly networked capability.
7. It became clear that the participants had a strong sense of the leadership invitation implicit in the work. They were truly clear in their willingness to step forward; to co-create and to walk together. As a network they clearly understood their power to achieve collective purpose, and to make whole that which appears to have, or has, become fragmented. They were clear that a driver for this work is navigating always in the direction of our social change effort — a library for every child; no one is left behind. This idea became the overarching theme of the concept of 'radical sharing'.
8. The notion of now, next, and later was at the forefront of the group sessions in the group sessions held throughout the day. This formed the synthesis of what was agreed about a draft Statement of commitment, outcomes and actions, and ideas for next steps i.e. radical collaboration. This leads very clearly to a focus on an overarching 'call to action' to which all can understand and relate.
9. Ideas about next steps coalesced around the following, as it was agreed that the 'how' of the next steps matter. Participants agreed that important next steps were:
  - finding allies and creating unexpected alliances was essential. This included being brave, bringing in the disrupters as they would help drive change
  - playing our role as agreed together on the day. This pointed to the shared realisation that duplication, fragmentation and competition would dilute the impact
  - building collective power without pushing too hard as power is to be exercised with fairness and respect
  - working with our differences acknowledges that collaboration does not mean agreeing about everything. Not everything is negotiable, and pragmatism and honesty serve us well
  - discovering ways forward means keeping differences in full view, making sense of data and story together, agreeing what we can and should move forward. This builds relationships, trust and impact
  - sharing stories (which is our strong suit) and caring for ourselves as well. In this way we are building healthy movement towards healthy futures.
10. Our call to action: if we want to change the world to a certain image we must start with the world as it is. We must work in the system. The principles of how we work within the system as discussed in various sessions are detailed below:
  - adopt a pragmatic mindset. This is the natural state for people who participated in the day. They were not frustrated by limitations but constantly looked for starting points for change during their group sessions. They are naturally sensitive to 'what works' in terms of communication, timing and getting people moving
  - taking meaningful steps forward. This is a radical concept. Any work must lead somewhere. Once again, this is the natural state for this group of radical sharers. They are constantly describing how they make room for experiments, expand transition-oriented collaborations, which is a skill for these times, as well as look for new ways of working that will build efficiency and effectiveness
  - thinking of change as a social movement. This group understood that such processes are not linear or necessarily sequential. They understand that the way to unleash potential is through their statement of commitment, their agreed principles and their agreed outcome statements and actions.

The collective work to endlessly inflame each other with new ideas, views and opportunities to do things differently was clear and real in this group. It augurs well for next steps which will include radical collaboration on all that has been agreed.

## Recommendations

### Now

- A Statement of commitment to formalise the sentiment of commitment in the room and broaden beyond participants to form a national alliance.
- The Statement of commitment should be used to draw in broader perspectives to the alliance to enrich the across sector perspective.

### Next

- The alliance should convene library-led multi-agency working groups to form a *Working together agreement*.
- Create an advocacy tool/action plan that coalesces the Statement of commitment, principles and agreed outcomes and actions to underpin radical collaboration.
- Re-convene the planning group for this forum to agree on the next steps and advise on a planning process for library-led multi-agency working groups to form. This should be prioritised to build on the momentum generated at the forum.
- Shift the dialogue from literacy to wellbeing through a commitment to the Early Years Story as a fundamental national vision that unifies the group.
- Amplify the Early Years Story in advocating libraries as critical community connectors.
- Use the early years narrative as new members are drawn into the alliance.
- Continue to embed the early years narrative and framing as we shift the dialogue to better support the policy changes needed.

### Later

- The establishment of a national leadership approach to ensure that radical sharing becomes business as usual.
- Working groups to establish a reporting framework which regularly communicates successes, challenges and bottlenecks to the national alliance.
- Good working group practice will be to seek agreement about how to provide oversight, hindsight, insight and foresight about the work being carried out on behalf of others so that no one is left behind.

It starts to feel a little easier if we make it seem a little smaller. Or in the words of Princess Anna from *Frozen 2*:

*"Take a step, step again  
It is all that I can do  
The next right thing ..."*

## Conclusion

The early years forum of May 2025 worked with the Early Years Story, which forms a framework for a coalition of national libraries as community connectors working to ensure a library for every child in every community.

The outcomes from the collaborative sessions conducted during the forum represent a commitment from leaders to drive transformational change to ensure the Early Years Story is an enduring guideline for the future of libraries nationally.

It is critical that the recommendations coming from the forum are strategically implemented, monitored, measured and communicated so that ownership is taken by, and successes are shared amongst, libraries nationally. The practice of radical collaboration and radical sharing must become business as usual for the vision created at the forum to be realised.

Through both one-to-one partnerships and cross-sector collaborations, we are re-imagining the purpose of libraries in our society and economy. We are reshaping how libraries are part of the futures of communities, and we are doing it at scale and pace. We are developing shared commitment and strategies to move forward together so that 'no child is left behind'. We are supporting national movement towards just and sustainable futures for all.

We are ready. We have a strong vision for what is possible. We have clear next steps to take. Libraries have a 'can do' mindset and are poised always to act for their communities. We have a willingness to give. We are a movement that sustains and stretches. Libraries are superpower cultural institutions, and the Early Years Story leads the way.

On behalf of State Library of Queensland and the Queensland Brain Institute, we extend our thanks to Jan Archer of Archersfield Consulting for facilitating Day 2 of the forum and providing a comprehensive summary that will carry the alliance forward.

### Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their continuing connection to land and as custodians of stories for millennia. We are inspired by this tradition in our work to share and preserve Queensland's memory for future generations.

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Cover image: *Some children are at the computer and some are reading* by Jada McAvoy (no date). Dr Barbara Piscitelli AM Children's Art archive 1986-2016; 2020. (1986).