



Engagement Report in relation to transformation of Middle Park Library for City of Port Phillip Council



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Executive Summary

The Middle Park Library is the smallest and least frequented of the five City of Port Phillip Council libraries.

For some time investigations have been underway to transform Middle Park from a small traditional library to a new collaborative working space with improved access to digital resources, multi-media equipment and creative software packages. The view articulated by Council was that removal of hard copy books would be necessary to achieve the requisite space for improved computer and software access for those residents who lacked the financial capacity to purchase their own equipment.

Over a period of some weeks community opposition to the move, especially the removal of library books, began to mount amongst a significant minority of the population who utilised a number of tools to express their opposition and concern. A Council survey on Have Your Say garnered some 312 responses and just over a hundred submissions were received. Some of these respondents also attended Council meetings and expressed their dissent, while 123 people attended a public meeting on 13 February 2018 to discuss the issues further.

A decision was made by the City Of Port Phillip Council to utilise the services of an experienced independent consultant to provide certainty to the community that the extended part of the consultation would be done at hands length from Council to ensure its transparency and lack of bias.

The public meeting was held after Councillors directed that the meeting, and extended consultation, should occur. All Councillors bar one were in attendance and most elected not to speak as it was organised specifically as a community event.

The meeting was attendend by 123 people, in addition to Councillors and staff and ran smoothly. Most speakers from the audience were against the proposed change, especially the removal of the books. Concerns were particularly expressed about how the change would impact on the elderly, the fact that many family members had been unable to attend the public meeting because of its timing, and a potential loss to the whole area of an important community space at the Middle Park library.

While those who participated in the various consultation exercises were not happy with Council's direction in regard to the Middle Park Library, they were prepared to debate the issue further and were open to the provision of additional information which might help shape their opinion. Importantly, the anger many felt was ameliorated by the good will of the community generally.

1.0 Background

Libraries across Australia are evolving to keep pace with the ways in which people access information. There is a recognition that books are now only one facet of the pleasure, information and education that can be derived from the written word. Younger people are using kindles, iPads and computers as well as an ever changing mix of social media to access knowledge; slowly but surely older people want the opportunity to keep up with the changing technology (and the habits of their children and grandchildren) and are prepared to embrace new approaches as part of this.

There is an increasing recognition, fuelled by entities such as Universities of the Third Age, that access to, and understanding of, computers is an essential component of business and recreation. Of course many households already have their own computer equipment. There is, however, a significant proportion of the community who do not have the knowledge, access to, or financial capacity to purchase this equipment and software.

The City of Port Phillip (CoPP) has been exploring ways in which its libraries could be better harnessed by a broader cross section of the community. Emerging trends across public libraries in recent years include the need for continued service development and innovation, particularly opportunities around digital services and resources.

This acknowledges the key role libraries play in engaging effectively with the whole community from families and young people through to older adults who may need support or guidance with new technology platforms and devices for example.

The Middle Park Library is the smallest of five branch libraries across the municipality. To counter the falling attendance and revitalise it Council has been investigating the opportunity to transform Middle Park Library (MPL) from a small traditional library to a new collaborative working space with improved access to digital resources, multi-media equipment and creative software packages.

In November 2017 Council endorsed a recommendation to transform the Middle Park Library and simultaneously undertake consultation around ways in which the Middle Park Library space could be better tailored to the needs of the wider community.

Engagement and consultation activities have been listed in this report with detailed attention to the themes which emerged from the survey, submissions and public meeting. Most of the responses are qualitative although where quantitative data is available that has been included. Scepticism and cynicism were frequently expressed and to minimise those sentiments Council employed independent consultants in the last (and extended) phase of the engagement and consultation.(Section 3.0 refers).

2.0 Timeline

The following timeline is presented to put into perspective actions in relation to the proposed transformation of the Middle Park Library and ongoing deliberations by the Councillors:

- earlier in 2017 Council staff researched the possibility of developing a new service at the Middle Park Library (MPL)
- at an Ordinary meeting of Council on Wednesday 15 November 2017 Councillors endorsed a recommendation from staff to make the changes to the library and requested that engagement be conducted about the change
- from 17 November to 17 December 2017 there was an online and hardcopy survey conducted by CoPP to obtain feedback on how the community would like to utilise the transformed MPL space
- at an Ordinary meeting of Council on 13 December 2017 Councillors directed an extension of the engagement program to include
 - a public meeting before 16 February 2018 and
 - an engagement report to be presented to Council in March to provide background and guidance for the Councillors' decision on the next steps for the library
- receipt of public submissions remained open until 16 February 2018
- announcement from Council staff on 25 January 2018 that the public meeting was to be held on 13 February 2018 at Middle Park Library
- announcement on 5 February that due to the unexpectedly high number of meeting registrations there was to be a change of venue to Port Melbourne Town Hall
- 123 people attended the public meeting
- summary of the public meeting was distributed on Friday 16 February 2018
- information collated, analysed and synthesised by JTA on 26 February 2018, including all survey responses, submissions and questions and comments raised at the public meeting
- at an Ordinary meeting of Council on 21 February 2018 petition with 959 signatures received by the "Mayor and Councillors of the Port Phillip City Council" in relation to the transformation proposal.
- completion of Engagement Report by JTA on 10 March 2018
- on 21 March Council will meet to discuss proposed changes to the Middle Park Library, including the public feedback received throughout the process.

3.0 JTA Australia Role

At the end of 2017 Council decided to seek an external provider to undertake engagement and consultation services to ensure the independence of the amended process. A Request for Quote process was conducted for the following services around the potential transformation of Middle Park Library:

- analysis of consultation survey responses
- planning and facilitation of a public meeting
- preparation of a community engagement summary report.

The successful candidate was required to provide the following deliverables:

1. *Survey analysis:*

- collate, analyse, code and theme all engagement data from the survey responses
- collate, analyse and theme the comments/ideas (submissions) received via email, or in other format.

Outputs: detailed survey report including cross tabulations (provided as separate tables or spreadsheet)

2. Public meeting planning and facilitation:

- session plan design and development, informed by analysis of the survey report, and including:
 - clear structure and ground rules for the meeting
 - confirmation of negotiable and non-negotiable elements of the engagement with community
 - presentation of the preliminary survey findings to provide background and context at the meeting
 - opportunities for participants to seek clarification on information available at the meeting
 - agreed method for recording feedback from meeting to inform Community Engagement Summary Report
- preparation of agreed meeting materials
- opportunities for participants to discuss available options for the refocus of Middle Park Library.

Outputs: meeting materials, session plan, feedback notes

3. Community Engagement Summary Report:

- analyse, collate and theme all data and feedback from surveys and other feedback from phase 1 engagement, and feedback from the public meeting
- develop a Community Engagement Summary Report, ensuring this is in a well-structured, public facing, accessible, web-ready format.

Middle Park Library Engagement Report - JTA Australia

- Include:
 - summary of the data, trends and input from the survey, other feedback and public meeting
 - key emerging themes.

Outputs: Community Engagement Summary Report

The tender was awarded to JTA Australia (JTA) which provides such services in all Australian mainland States and Territories. It should be noted that JTA does not charge interstate airfares or accommodation when working in states such as Western Australia or Victoria.

Its Principal, Jan Taylor, has facilitated literally hundreds of meetings and brings an unusual style where her independence forms an integral part of the process. She manages meetings tightly but with a warmth that serves to encourage input from the audience and her staff ensure continued independence as they take notes of the meeting.

4.0 Surveys

4.1 Preamble

The survey ran from 17 November until 17 December 2017. It asked for feedback to help shape the Middle Park Library as a new focal point for the community. It was accessible online by the Have Your Say page on the CoPP website and also in hard copy at all library branches. The survey gave respondents the opportunity to provide additional feedback by uploading comments as a Word or PDF document. A contact email and phone number was also provided.

The full survey results from the 312 completed are available in Attachment B. The survey has been edited only to protect the privacy of those respondents who chose to supply their personal details (name, address etc.); the majority of participants chose to remain anonymous.

4.2 Survey Questions and Results

The survey consisted of two parts. Part One: Middle Park Library into the future (questions 1-6) and Part Two: About You (questions 7-11).

4.2.1 Part One: Middle Park Library into the future – thinking of the space at Middle Park Library into the future

Question 1 - What would encourage you to use the repurposed space? Choose all that apply.

Check box question with multiple responses allowed. More than 30 respondents did not check any box.

The most popular response was undoubtedly the ability to access free Wi-Fi (226). Ample power points (169), informed staff (160) and a mix of comfortable furniture (154) were next most popular and would seem related to people wanting to use Wi-Fi (and devices) in the space. With regard to using the space for communal and quiet areas there was considerably more support for a combination of the two and for quiet areas than there was for just communal areas. Respondents were keener to access digital creative software with bookings of over three hours than they were with no bookings. There was some support for additional multimedia services and facilities although the survey did not clearly identify what types.

Question 2 - How would you use the repurposed space? Choose all that apply.

Check box question with multiple responses allowed and “other (please specify)” option. Eighteen respondents did not check any box.

The two most popular responses were that people wanted to work on their own devices (173) and to participate in program and training organised by the library (150). There was relatively good support at similar levels for the other choices including working with others, relaxing, and accessing computers and multimedia. The “other (please specify)” option was chosen by 67 people and of these approximately 65% mentioned wanting to read books, the importance of libraries having books, retaining the library as it is and keeping and increasing the book collection. Other comments further elaborated on survey choices such as working with others (community organisations), multimedia access (webinars) and having a tea and escaping the weather (relaxing).

Question 3 - As part of the shift, the Middle Park library will be offering a training program. What format would suit you best? Choose all that apply.

Check box question with multiple responses allowed and “other (please specify)” option. Approximately 40 respondents did not check any box.

The top four choices each received support from more than 100 respondents. In order they were talks by expert speakers, workshops, demonstrations and small group training. There would appear to be slightly less support for online training (online tutorials and downloadable media/coursework) and less formal, structured options (collaborative co-working/informal sharing of ideas with peers and drop in sessions).

The “other” box was checked by 39 respondents and the majority of comments (other than one request for one on one training) did not relate to alternative formats for a training program. Seven respondents said none of the formats listed interested them. Other comments continued to support the existing traditional library with books (13), with requests for author talks (5) and children’s reading clubs and activities (4) . Some people questioned the size of training programs, the available space and what demographic the training programs were aimed at. There were also comments made regarding closing the library and not using the Middle Park Library at all.

Question 4 - What topics would interest you in a training program run at Middle Park library? Choose all that apply.

Check box question with multiple responses allowed and “other (please specify)” option. Approximately 50 respondents did not check any box.

There were 17 choices given (including “other”) and the number of responses for each choice ranged from 96 to 42. The top choices related to advanced computer skills, graphics, design, research skills, website /analytics, using technology and computer essentials. Comments made by the 42 respondents that checked the “other box” included options for training programs that were more “personal interest /development” and less technological such as health and well-being, gardening, birds, building, photo editing and creative writing. Other suggestions for training included a focus on Apple products/programs and workforce skills.

Other comments included the opinion that the space was too small for the training, that people should go to TAFE for such training programs, that CoPP didn’t have the skill set to deliver training programs and that the current library service be retained.

Question 5 - When would you ideally use the space? Choose all that apply.

Check box question with multiple responses allowed. Thirty-three respondents did not check any box. Most popular responses were weekday afternoons and mornings. The four weekday options were more popular than the four weekend options.

Question 6 - How would you consider using this space?

Two choices only – one off for events or projects and regularly. Results were that 172 respondents said regularly, 100 said one off usage and 40 did not respond.

4.2.2 Part Two: About You

Question 7 - In what capacity would you use this space? Choose all that apply.

Check box question with multiple responses allowed and “other (please specify)” option. 11 respondents did not check any box.

Most popular response was lifelong learner followed by parent, while least popular was local trader. The 45 “other” responses mentioned local residents, grandparents, retirees, library (with books) user, community members/groups, charities and volunteers, jobseekers and those pursuing creative side projects. There were also comments stating that the decision had been made, the respondent would not be using it and that the library should be retained and improved.

Question 8 - Into which age group do you fall?

Check box question with ordered data – one answer only. Twenty-one respondents chose “prefer not to say” and four did not respond.

Lowest two age ranges were 18-24 and 25-34. Of those who nominated an age range 87% were aged 35 years and over.

Question 9 - In which suburb do you live?

Check box question limited to one answer only. Ten respondents chose “prefer not to say” and four did not respond.

Approximately one third of those who nominated a suburb resided in Middle Park.

Question 10 - Are you a member of the Port Phillip Library Service?

Check box question – yes or no response. Yes 289, no 16 and 7 did not respond.

Question 11 - Which library branch do you use the most often?

Check box question – one answer only. Five people did not respond.

90% of respondents selected St Kilda, Albert Park or Middle Park as the library they used the most often. Seven people stated that they currently did not use the Port Phillip Library Service.

4.3 Summary

Response to questions in part one of the survey revealed support for people using the new space for a mixture of communal and individual pursuits and interest in a variety of training programs, formats and topics. People indicated that they would access the library weekdays and weekends so there is support for extended hours. Of the 312 total survey responses, there were more than 70 comments made in the "other (please specify)" sections of the survey protesting the removal of books from the library and supporting the retention of the existing service.

In part two of the survey the majority of respondents were aged over 35 years, identified “lifelong learners”, lived in Middle Park and were a member of the Port Phillip Library Service. Middle Park Library branch was not used as frequently as the St Kilda and Albert Park libraries.

5.0 Submissions

5.1 Preamble

The submission period ran from 17 November 2017 until 16 February 2018.

Over 100 submissions were received from the community through the Have Your Say page on the CoPP website or sent directly to council/councillors. There were also a small number of hard copy surveys which had comments outside the parameters of the survey responses so those comments were added to the submission spreadsheet.

5.2 Methodology

After a preliminary scanning of the majority of submissions a number of primary themes were identified. A spread sheet to best illustrate the qualitative nature of the data gathered was developed based on these themes/sub themes. Each submission was coded, then read (some several times) and issues raised were assigned against the relevant theme/sub-theme. Comments were also included where it was felt they give more detail and/or enrich the qualitative nature of the data. During the process a number of submissions were identified as having been lodged more than once and so the data was only assigned once. However if a person lodged more than one submission but it was distinct from those previously received the data was recorded. JTA has not attempted to verify the accuracy of statements or data provided, merely to collate and report it.

5.3 Themes identified

To keep this report as succinct as possible the spread sheet has been attached (Attachment C) and following is a qualitative summary of the themes/sub themes that were raised in the submissions. The qualitative summary aims to provide an indication of the strength of views held on issues raised by some parts of the community. Sub-themes are discussed in order of most frequently to least frequently raised.

5.3.1 Support for proposal

It has to be acknowledged that the majority of submissions received were a response to people feeling that the decision had already been made and that previous community consultation (the survey) had not given them the ability to disagree with the proposal or make further comment. Consequently there is not much support within the submission analysis for the proposal, but this should not be interpreted as there being no support for the proposal as evidenced by survey responses.

Support for the proposal but not at Middle Park

- the type of facility being discussed would most likely be excellent but it should not be at the expense of the existing Middle Park Library Service

Support for the proposal because current service is not financially sustainable

- the number of visitors per day is not cost effective
- ratepayers are interested in core functions such as garbage and roads
- should only have books in St Kilda, Albert Park and Port Melbourne

Support change and the promotion of culture, arts, creative expression

- CoPP should be congratulated on having the courage to make changes

Doesn't use MPL - other services sufficient

- therefore happy to see a change in use

5.3.2 Reasons against proposal

The most mentioned reason for not supporting the proposal was

Libraries need books

- respondents were passionate about books being the core of a 'real library', that people still prefer the traditional hard copy paper book and they are more likely to use a library which held books
- respondents felt that books will remain the surviving educational tool (in both formal and informal education) so it was important to keep Middle Park as a 'functioning' (traditional) library. It was stated that 'Non-Book Library' experiments (Victorian examples) in the past have failed
- borrowing books from a library was cost effective, environmentally sound and readers had the benefit of accessing older titles that were no longer published

There were also a lot of comments received from those who felt:

Middle Park is the wrong demographic for the proposal

- target market for the proposal was perceived by many to be the 18-25 age group which was a very small percentage of the Middle Park population and therefore represented a narrow range of interests. It was stated that Middle Park had a higher proportion of pre-schoolers and people at post retirement age than the city average, however, the proposal held no appeal for retired people or young families
- the centre as envisaged in the proposal would be a "waste of time" for the 18-25 age group who would likely already have access to computers and software through home, work or educational institutions. Those who may be interested would access such technology through one of the bigger library services

Difficulty in accessing other services which are crowded

- patrons said driving and parking was difficult and not an option for the elderly and those with limited mobility. Albert Park Library (the closest alternative service) was considered crowded and very noisy ("like a crèche") while the community bus service was not frequent enough to make it a viable option

Too expensive in terms of money and resources

- many felt that the \$47,000 allocated to the proposal was both expensive for ratepayers and at the same time not realistic as the real cost would be far greater. It was noted that it is very expensive to purchase, install, maintain and fix software programs. "Entrepreneurial" users would need more time than one or two hours leading to increased costs in areas such as staffing
- ratepayers were angry over the use of their rates and felt they were supporting commercial ventures. There was a call for an "expert analysis of budgetary considerations"

Other reasons given against the proposal included:

Physical space is too small for proposal

- people acknowledged the current space occupied by MPL is very small and were interested as to how (despite the removal of the small book collection and shelves) it was physically possible to fit in the required PCs, desks, couches, chairs, quiet areas/meeting spaces that the proposal requires
- many people also felt that the larger area upstairs is a precious community space and should be retained as such for the variety of community activities that it hosts

State Library soon to offer similar \$3 million service

- Vision 2020 includes innovative new spaces for children and teenagers, and the promotion of digital literacy and creativity

Two other sub-themes were mentioned without further explanation

- technology changes quickly and will be difficult to keep up to date
- lack of business case for the proposal

5.3.3 Alternative proposals

Not all submissions said “no” to the proposal or maintain the ‘status quo’. Many were keen to offer alternative ideas and suggestions.

Spend more money not less to improve the service

- the existing service needs facilities that are commensurate with those elsewhere. The available funds (and more needs to be allocated) should be used to refurbish with good computers, fast wi-fi, children’s section, more up to date books and comfortable seating.
- there should be longer, more appropriate opening hours, with dedicated staff who can build relationships with user groups
- Increase in current library utilisation by hosting author readings and discussions and by developing programs that promote reading, creativity and the arts (not technology)

Children's learning centre/library

- instead of repurposing the library as a technology driven ‘creative hub’ repurpose it as a specialist children’s learning centre/ library. The library service should be capitalising on MPL’s location near kindergarten, schools, infant welfare centres etc. The community centre could be used for a story time program

Move proposal to another location

- suggestions included using space in the Victorian Pride Centre as well as investigating the use of other community spaces, council spaces, schools etc
- it was considered that Port Melbourne Library was a better location for small group training and that CoPP should be putting PCs in there for young people as there is more space. Alternatively spend Community Chest grant money to send kids to RMIT, Swinburne or Melbourne Polytechnic
- If the proposal goes ahead then Albert Park Library should be expanded to accommodate the loss of the lending service at MPL

Combine existing usage with new proposal / trial

- Use one of the other spaces available in the building

Better promote existing service / act on feedback

- improved signage needed, leaflet dropping and user feedback program developed

Better research into what is needed

- need to show the costs and benefits of the proposal, including budgets and general logistics in order to implement said proposal
- the library service should establish an advisory group and work with those in the community who have experience and knowledge in the field

Install a pick up/drop off kiosk

- install kiosk if you can't retain pick up/drop off facility - there are various automated solutions being used in library services both in Australia and elsewhere

5.3.4 Support for existing service

Children/Young Families

- many of the submissions came from those who were part of this demographic or felt they needed to support a group which had been under-consulted
- it was considered the number of families in the area has grown substantially in recent years and mothers and grandparents used the library particularly for the children's book section and its proximity to the toy library
- it was stated that easily accessible public libraries facilitate young children who are well engaged, that children like hard copy books and young people need more access to books not less

Elderly

- The other demographic prominently represented in the submissions were elderly users
- The Middle Park Library was considered to be a vital centre for older community members to read newspapers and select books. This demographic also used the space to read and browse and appreciated the opportunity to sit quietly in the space and interact with other members of the community. Many of them also take their grandchildren to the library and attend the book club

Community hub/service

- "Library should not be judged by numbers but its place in community". MPL is a meeting place for local residents and there was a strong opinion that the new concept will destroy the village atmosphere and community of Middle Park

Other support given for the existing service included:

Pick up and drop off point

- the ability to pick up books that had been reserved through the greater CoPP library service and return them easily was appreciated

- this is also the case for the Home Library Service

Physical location/ease of access

- easy access important for both the young and the elderly. Many residents can access it on foot and parking is not an issue for those who drive

Ratepayers viewed it as value for money

- residents felt the library was good value for money compared to many other council services and that a local library in their own suburb should not be considered an excess. "The library is what I pay my rates for". Money spent on the library is saved through health and educational benefits to the community

5.3.5 What's wrong with the existing service?

Submissions acknowledged the problems with the existing service, and felt that the focus of the library service should have been on rectifying these issues rather than developing a proposal that removed the existing service.

Hours limited, erratic and the wrong times

- MPL is only open 24 hours per week compared to the 45-60 hours of other library services. It frequently shuts without notice and the opening hours need to be better coordinated with school and kindergarten hours

Not enough books

- more books (not less) should be stocked and titles need to be rotated and/or updated regularly

Service is badly run

- constant changes in all aspects of the service completely ruined MPL

Libraries offer a quiet place to read and to meet

- new proposal would see the need to sound proof areas to accommodate communal groups and individuals doing silent reading and research
- service is not being sufficiently funded
- people wanted more money spent on MPL to improve the service. (Refer to alternative proposals in section 5.3.3 on page 13)

Service has been repeatedly closed and it is difficult to tell when open

- library is uninviting, often appears closed, and the front entry on the street needs to be opened again

Continuity of library staff important

- service would benefit from dedicated staff who know the patrons and community and who can take pride in restoring the service to a professional level. "You never see the same librarian there twice."

5.3.6 The role of the public library

This theme generally supported the traditional view of libraries.

Fostering literacy / supporting the process of reading

- reference made to UNESCO's *Manifesto for Public Libraries*

Librarianship is primarily about education

- people felt that the current discussion was not paying enough attention to the importance of libraries in all forms of education, and that there was more to be considered than a physical space, furniture and statistics

Libraries are about books and associated services

- public libraries should not be used to replace courses at schools, colleges, universities etc. A Creative Hub is a completely different place to a library and the two are not interchangeable, "ability to read the newspapers is important for the computer illiterate"

Libraries are creative learning spaces

- some submissions supported creative learning spaces as distinct from creative technical spaces.

5.3.7 Consultation process

The consultation process (or perceived lack of) was the driver behind many people making a submission.

Lack of consultation; more consultation and information needed

- people expected a process that was widely advertised, gave detailed explanations and information regarding the proposal, and offered an opportunity to lodge objections. Consultation was seen as a "rubber stamp process" and the council should not consider the survey to be proper community consultation
- if surveys are to be used then they need to be more comprehensive. Submissions indicated a clear preference for paper surveys and written answers. More engagement was desired and people expressed a wish to participate in future consultation exercises including a public meeting.

Survey assumed the proposal was going ahead

- survey presents a "fait accompli" and the decision is "all done and dusted". Submissions referred to the survey being based on decisions already made and that it merely outlined options for the site after the books had been removed and the traditional library was closed
- the survey was structured to give the answers that the library service wants.

"Why" – reasons and research behind the proposal unclear and inadequate

- questions raised in the submissions included why the council was closing the library (or at least provision of books), what samples were used in research, had any feasibility studies been done and whether various media reports concerning the MPL were accurate. People also wanted to know if there was information available showing current and potential uses for all council owned buildings.

Survey did not allow for disagreement or further comment

- criticisms included that the survey did not offer any real choices and did not allow for the possibility of retaining the current library service including books.

Councillors should reflect the majority view

- there was disappointment that six councillors supported the proposal and that two of those were from Lake Ward
- people felt that "councillors should acquaint themselves with the views, interests and concerns of their constituents" and also that councillors expressing public opinions should be excluded from voting.

General criticism of CoPP Council

- submissions included comments that Council is aggressively moving to the future with little regard for the present but they need to be reminded that no longer providing traditional library services is not part of the council plan
- a general concern was also expressed re the diminishing number of facilities provided by council for older people.

Concerns were also raised re the following:

Consultation does not reach all community members

- many people felt not enough had been done to engage with those they considered to be the two most impacted groups i.e. children/young families and the elderly.

A number of submissions noted that they had responded to the survey as well.

5.4 Summary

The predominant themes identified were support for the existing service, reasons against the proposal and criticism of the consultation process. The Middle Park Library was identified as a community hub and of particular importance to children, young families and the elderly who valued its ease of access and pick up and drop off service. People overwhelmingly wanted books retained in the library and felt that Middle Park was the wrong demographic for the transformation proposal. There was also anger and frustration expressed regarding the consultation process. Many submissions stemmed from the fact that the survey was viewed as merely sanctioning the proposal and people wanted more information, the opportunity to disagree and to provide further comment as well as engage in more consultation.

6.0 Petition

The following petition with 959 signatories was received at the Ordinary meeting of Council 21 February 2018 for attention of the “Mayor and Councillors of the Port Phillip City Council” in which their attention is ‘drawn to the meeting of 15 November 2017 where a majority of Councillors approved a plan that states in para 3.12 *we plan to remove the physical collection of books from Middle Park...*

The petition goes on to say “over the years the number of books, hours of opening, numbers of staff and associated resources at Middle Park Library have been reduced to the detriment of the municipality as a whole, and the users of Middle Park Library in particular”. It should be noted that the petition was received after the consultation period for submissions closed on 16 February.

The following petitioners hereby request that Council:

1. Rescinds the decision to remove the books from Middle Park Library.
2. Restores Middle Park Library as a fully-operating library with the lending of books for children and adults as its core purpose.

7.0 Public meeting

At the direction of Council a public meeting was scheduled for 6pm on Tuesday 13 February at the Middle Park Library. The primary purpose of the meeting was to gather further community feedback and to supplement the survey engagement with additional in-depth consultation.

Council staff did an excellent job in ensuring the meeting was well-promoted although ironically this worked against them because registrations increased to such a level that the advice from Council's Occupational Health and Safety Division was that the booked room would be unable to accommodate the expected attendance safely.

An alternative venue then had to be found at short notice. Port Melbourne Town Hall was available and could accommodate the expected numbers. Council staff publicised the change of venue and ensured all registrants were advised of the change. To cover itself for the likelihood that some people would not receive notice of the change, staff organised for buses to collect anyone who mistakenly arrived at the Middle Park Library and transport them to the new venue. This also suited those people who could travel to MPL but considered Port Melbourne too far.

This offer was accepted by many community members; to ensure none of the attendees from MPL missed the start of the meeting, there was a delay of about ten minutes to the start of the meeting. Buses returned to Port Melbourne Town Hall at the close of the meeting to transport people back to the Library.

Some 123 people attended the meeting and eleven Council staff were in attendance to take registration details and facilitate use of the four microphones by audience members. The Mayor and all Councillors bar one (who had an alternative engagement that could not be changed) were in attendance. The Councillors were offered the opportunity to make short comments in the second half of the meeting. Four Councillors commented, before the meeting was once again focussed on offering the community a chance to comment.

Aside from one minor incident, the audience was at all times respectful and courteous albeit generally critical of the proposed transformation of the library.

Two short presentations were given at the commencement of the meeting; one by Ms Carol Jeffs, General Manager of Community and Economic Development (responsible for library operations) and Ms Barrie Spring of JTA Australia who provided an interim report on results from the surveys and submissions.

Issues that arose as part of the community discussion included:

Alternative proposals:

- establishment of a Children's Learning Centre
- better utilisation of the upstairs space at the centre so the Library can stay open
- five upstairs computers not being utilised; switch the space to the interactive aspect of the transformation proposal
- re-location of library entrance to the exterior of the building as it is impossible to see when the library is open
- non-existent signage needs to be remedied
- toy library should be moved upstairs to free up ground floor library space and expand existing ground floor library with more desk space
- organisation of a meeting that puts forward a serious case for a transformed library, including the proposal backed up by running costs and opening hours and statistics
- need for a pick up/drop off service at Middle Park.

18-25 year olds were nominated as a target group for the modified library; counter arguments included:

- Middle Park is the wrong demographic to try to appeal to 18-25 year olds
- they like science fiction books; Middle Park currently has only 18 titles on its shelves compared to 2,700 available across the library service.

Criticisms were made of Council's engagement process:

- initial survey on 17 November assumed the proposal was going to be implemented and its purpose was to obtain feedback on how the community would like to utilise the transformed MPL space
- the timing of the meeting excluded parents with young families
- engagement should not be limited to current library users
- public meeting should have occurred at the beginning of the engagement process
- belief the engagement process is 'fake' and the decision has already been made
- older generations have not been properly consulted
- criticism of how the proposal has been put to the community, rather than the overall purpose of the transformation
- young mothers are not represented
- difficulty in engaging the community if Council does not listen to it on this current matter.

Specific criticism of that part of the proposal relating to removal of books:

- libraries need books
- the library as a book source currently serves as a community hub, particularly for elderly residents and families with children
- support expressed for part of the proposal, the interactive facilities, although does not understand why it was at the cost of Middle Park Library books
- closing the book service is the real issue
- criticisms of existing library service (in context of why it doesn't have better patronage)
- the existing library service has limited and erratic hours, and is not adequately funded
- collection of patronage numbers by door entries is not a good barometer if library hours are limited
- book collection is woeful
- failure to consider collection of books at Middle Park Library
- current opening hours only match with the kindergarten service one hour per week
- the local primary school is only 400 metres away but library opening hours only coincide with two school afternoons
- In addition to a creative space there needs to be effort, knowledge and mentorship that only a library can provide.

Other issues:

- apparent lack of a business case for the transformation
- concerns as to whether Council has budgeted for increased ongoing IT costs
- failure to consider that the library as a book source is a place of 'connectedness, community and social interaction for many people'
- current hours are inadequate and need to be extended
- casual staff should be replaced with dedicated staff members.

While there was little support for the potential transformation, the point should be made that it was highly unlikely any supporters of the proposal would have been prepared to raise their voices when they were clearly in a minority. Additionally, the younger demographic which might be expected to be most supportive was noticeable by its absence. There are many reasons for this, none unique to the Middle Park community, although it does illustrate the weakness in the representativeness of any public meeting.

However, it is important to note that public meetings represent an opportunity for communities to come together to express their views, or indeed outrage, to project proponents. They provide an opportunity for project proponents (as elected representatives or as relevant staff) to listen to a mix of opinions and ensure that the community believes that it is being respectfully heeded.

From this meeting (and many others it has facilitated) JTA believes that an independent process has many advantages not least of which is less likelihood of the meeting being diverted to extraneous matters if the facilitator represents the proponent. Community members are also more likely to speak up without any acrimony (which often seems to accompany elected representatives having a pivotal role). An independent facilitator has the capacity to call on project proponents or detractors to behave appropriately and call them out if that does not happen. The major negative for the client is that a truly independent facilitator will result in it effectively losing control of the process. That requires confidence in the selected facilitators and their experience, and a willingness to provide all assistance required without having any capacity to influence the outcome or contents. It also shows the audience a willingness to be hands off with the process.

The aspect of the transformation proposal which undoubtedly attracted most criticism was the removal of the books from the library. There was certainly support for increased interactivity and creative opportunities at the library although there was both anger and confusion as to why the outcome had to be a choice between one or the other.

Finally, the discussion at the public meeting provided an opportunity for the Councillors and staff to discuss the challenges being faced by the current MPL service with the community, including discussion on the challenges of offering a generalist library service and collection within a small space.

This does indicate that the community is now ready for an informed discussion about the possibilities, and there are community members who have the capacity to take that discussion further.

8.0 Other consultation / engagement activities

Other parts of this report have provided detail on community input and interface with Council; sections 5.0, 6.0 and 7.0 refer.

Amongst other activities there has been community attendance and input at Council meetings, social media activity, stakeholder briefings and meetings, poster displays, letterbox drops, use of intermediaries, and tertiary student contact. There may also have been other consultation activities of which JTA was unaware.

8.1 Community input at Council meetings

Members of the community have attended Council meetings on several occasions since the potential transformation project at MPL became known. Community views expressed at the Council meetings were generally opposed to the proposed changes, especially the removal of the library books. While not detracting from the intensity of the views expressed by the community at these council meetings it can be noted that many (if not all) of those attendees were present at the public meeting and additionally made submissions. This duplication of some individuals' views is not unusual in projects like this and demonstrates both the emotional and intellectual involvement of the parties and their capacity to represent, or lead, others with similar opinions or concerns.

It also presents Council with a potential resource in terms of people in the community capable of taking an active role in future discussions.

8.2 Social media activity

Council staff utilised social media tools during the engagement and consultation period from September to December. Examples include the following.

- ongoing and pro-active social media posts
- initial notification circulated via the library's email list (approx. 5,500) to inform of online survey process for MPL
- e-newsletter emails were distributed to 7,700 people on 5 December (1143 recipients opened the email)
- second eblast at halfway point through consultation
- notification of changes to public meeting venue from MP to Port Melbourne on 6 February
- notification re community bus availability on 12 February.

8.3 Use of stakeholder intermediaries

Maternal and Child Health offices were emailed on 28 November 2017 and asked to forward information about the consultation to their clients and staff. Receipt of the email was confirmed.

Eblast was forwarded to 8,000 businesses on 10 February via Council's Economic Development Department in November.

8.4 Stakeholder meetings

Book Club

On 21 November 2017 there was a detailed conversation with two members of the Book Club regarding its continued use of MPL space. The Book Club was advised that the proposal was not intended to marginalise any groups and that the refocus was aimed at audiences from young to old/er, and existing groups like the Book Club would not be impacted in any way in its continued use of the library space. The Book Club appeared interested in the options around how the space might be refurbished, and that this could well prove to be more comfortable and usable for the Book Club than the current setup.

Kindergarten

Library staff met with a representative of the Civic Kindergarten (located in the Middle Park community centre) to provide background on the project. Contact was made again on 22 November asking that notice of the survey process was passed along to interested parents/families etc. She was to pass it onto the Committee.

Family Youth & Children team

The team was asked to circulate advice about the survey through their local contact points (i.e. community health centres), and through the Youth Advisory Committee list (around 15-20 participants of youth sector leaders).

Arts and Culture sector

Notification sent to local stakeholders in the Arts and Culture space including 64 arts and sector practitioners and leaders.

Individual community members

Numerous members of the community made contact with library and other Council staff. In some cases the contact was by telephone or email but in others face-to-face conversations were held.

Student contact

An RMIT class was told about the consultation around proposed changes to the MPL and were encouraged to become involved.

8.5 Miscellaneous

Posters displayed at all libraries, the kindergarten, and community noticeboard.

Letterbox drop in early February advised people of the change in venue.

9.0 Conclusion

This Engagement Report is an independent report on the engagement and consultation undertaken by Council around the potential transformation of the Middle Park Library and may inform the basis of the next steps in relation to Middle Park library.

The focus of attention for most criticism of the proposal centred around the removal of hard copy books from the library. This aroused the ire of young families, the elderly and book lovers of all ages. It should not be assumed because of the strident opposition that there was no support for other aspects of the transformation (e.g. new creative and interactive spaces) or indeed for the total project (including removal of the books).

As with any consultation or engagement exercise there are always significant sections of the community who remain unaware of the consultation or who elect not to become a part of it. It would be too easy to ignore this silent or disengaged sector in light of the passionately voiced opposition to all or parts of the transformation project.

At some stage there will need to be a focus on how better to engage those other segments of the Port Phillip community. It can be done but will not be easy and will require different strategies in the future.

At a rough estimate there were some 600 inputs from the City of Port Phillip (population approximately 108,000) by people who were overtly opposed to all or part of the plan for the potential transformation of the Middle Park Library. These people expressed their views at Council meetings, through submissions, surveys, interface with Council staff, or at the public meeting on 13 February. This is not a lot of people given the population within Port Phillip and the fact that a significant proportion of those 600 inputs were repeat exercises by one or more people (e.g. there were some residents who used all five methods). However, their views were expressed strongly, sometimes stridently, and usually with intelligence and passion. This indicates that the level of engagement with the project was not as high, or as in depth as as the community would have liked.

The data presented showed that the majority of participants were not supportive of the proposed change. However, there were a proportion that were interested in the proposal with some modifications.

Finally, it would be remiss of JTA Australia if we did not express our thanks to Council staff for their willingness to trust our advice and accept the independence of the task entrusted to the JTA team. We asked them for much assistance and they unhesitantly provided it. The Mayor and her team of Councillors were also helpful and provided support to JTA in ensuring that the public meeting asked for remained just that, an event for the public, rather than Council.