



# Libraries and wellbeing in post-earthquake Christchurch

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The effects of the Christchurch earthquake sequence are wide-ranging and have been devastating to communities. The temporary loss of public facilities, such as libraries, has been felt strongly. Libraries fulfil an important place in society for a wide range of people. They provide a place for the community to meet, for "literacy, learning and leisure" (Robertson, 2011). Temporary libraries, mobile libraries, roving librarians and community book exchanges evolved to meet the needs of Christchurch's communities. Evidence from reports, studies, comments in social media and customer feedback demonstrate clearly that in post-earthquake Christchurch, access to libraries was, and continues to be, extremely important for the wellbeing of individuals. This is evident from increased usage of library websites when physical libraries were unavailable, delight, relief, and increased use when libraries re-opened, or when alternative options were made available.

## HOW LIBRARIES CONTRIBUTE TO WELLBEING

Libraries are essential services in our communities. They contribute to community wellbeing, and to the mental health of New Zealanders (Thomas, 2013). Libraries were acknowledged in the Christchurch City Health and Wellbeing Profile (2012) as having a positive affect on health and wellbeing in the community. Reduced access to libraries (and other services) has been shown to have an adverse effect on wellbeing and on the ability for people to interact socially (Thornley et al., 2013). Social isolation became an issue for older people due to lack of access to services like libraries (Roberts, 2013; Wylie, 2012). The CERA Wellbeing Report (2012) revealed 97% of respondents suffered stress at some point in the last year. The CERA Wellbeing Index (2013) reported that 69% of respondents noted the loss of community services with 34% experiencing either a moderate or major negative impact.

### Christchurch City Libraries (CCL)

Post-earthquakes, the Christchurch public missed their local libraries and appreciated CCL efforts to reopen and provide alternatives - this is evident from comments in social media, newspaper articles and customer feedback.

**"The incredible value that individuals and communities place on our library services was constantly re-iterated, hugs and tears from customers overjoyed when their library re-opened ..."** (Prout, 2012)

Comments from various sources indicated that some people found they were unable to concentrate enough to read for pleasure because of the stress they were under. The CCL addressed this specifically in a blog post (March 2011) and suggested alternatives including crosswords and magazines. When libraries reopened, staff saw magazine issues increased by over 30% (Howard, 2013). Some of the services CCL offered to address post-earthquake needs included:

- Mini, temporary and mobile libraries
- Free audio and ebooks
- Roving Librarians at ECE and Homework Centres
- CCL website and social media channels took on a very important role; saw a 240% increase in access to CCL blog (Robertson, 2011)
- Involvement in MHF All Right? Wellbeing Campaign [www.allright.org.nz](http://www.allright.org.nz)



Image used with permission. Christchurch City Council. "Mobile 'Library to Go' vans hit the streets." [ccc.govt.nz/the-council/news-media/mediareleases/2012/201211261.aspx](http://ccc.govt.nz/the-council/news-media/mediareleases/2012/201211261.aspx)

### University of Otago, Christchurch - Canterbury Medical Library

A recent user survey of the Christchurch Medical Library (Fisher & Elliot, 2013) found that the Library, its resources and services were sorely missed after the earthquakes caused the Library to close. Staff continued offering services remotely until reopening in mid 2013.

**"... I think that my ability to study and learn in my fourth and fifth years has been badly affected by not having an appropriate study place. Having the computer lab at 35 Cambridge Terrace is better than nothing but a library is far far better."** (Fisher & Elliot, 2013, p9)

**"Overall, the survey responses suggest that quick and easy access to both electronic and print resources, ready access to assistance (as required) and a quiet, well-resourced area which is in close proximity to the hospital for study, are all felt to be essential."** (Fisher & Elliot, 2013, p4).

**"When the earthquakes tip our lives upside down it is the closure of the library I miss more than my power, water or sewage!!"** (CCL Customer Feedback, 28 Jun 2011)

**"The library is of fundamental importance to this community, not just books, also wireless access, pay rates at service centre, info gathering books, course/research."** (Healthy Christchurch, 2012, p30)

**"It's a month now and we are all missing South [Library] so much, we don't want to go into the city for books, nor ... travel too far to pay our rates, we are grateful for Spreydon Library, but you cannot sit and relax there, it's too small. Thank you for your help, you are doing your best ..."** (CCL Blog comment, 19 Aug 2012)

**"The most important thing is to have a new library built. It was a big focus in our community, especially with a lot of elderly in Sumner."** (Daly, 2013)

**"Customers are so pleased when we were open again after Feb 22. Customers from all over the city are coming in to get more books/talking books/cds."** (CCL Customer Feedback, 4 Mar 2011)

**"Customer was very grateful for the opportunity to borrow books from the extra Mobile Library service ... She appreciated having new books to read at a stressful time."** (CCL Customer Feedback, 28 Sep 2010)

**"I miss a place to go and seek help face to face. As an old doctor I fear that the ability for humans (especially doctors) to interact directly may begin to decrease."** (Fisher & Elliot, 2013, p17)

**"Thanks to all the library staff who are always so very helpful and you can still get a live person on the phone if you need help with anything."** (Anonymous, Quakestories)

## GAP FILLER THINK DIFFERENTLY BOOK EXCHANGE

Gap Filler is a community arts organisation that provides solutions to gaps in the landscape created by the earthquake. The "Think Differently Book Exchange" created a playful place for people to meet, share and access to books. [www.gapfiller.org.nz](http://www.gapfiller.org.nz)

A social impact survey found that people visited the Book Exchange "because they did not have access to a library." (Day 2012, 11).

**"... there was quite a crowd ... waiting to donate books, while others were selecting books from the fridge, sitting in the sun reading, talking books, and generally enjoying the day. It felt like being in an open-air library, and a great sense of community."** (Jennifer, Quakestories)



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Gap Filler's contribution has had a positive affect on the wellbeing of participants, volunteers and passers-by. (Thornley et al., 2013, 100; Gallagher 2013; Day 2012, 10-12). The Book Exchange continues to be used, even with a new temporary library established on nearby Peterborough Street.

**"Like our libraries, (the Book Exchange) is a place of a community, a place of relaxation, and recreation - a space to meet and to share."** (Gallagher, 2013).

## REFERENCES

[hdl.handle.net/10523/4387](http://hdl.handle.net/10523/4387)



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