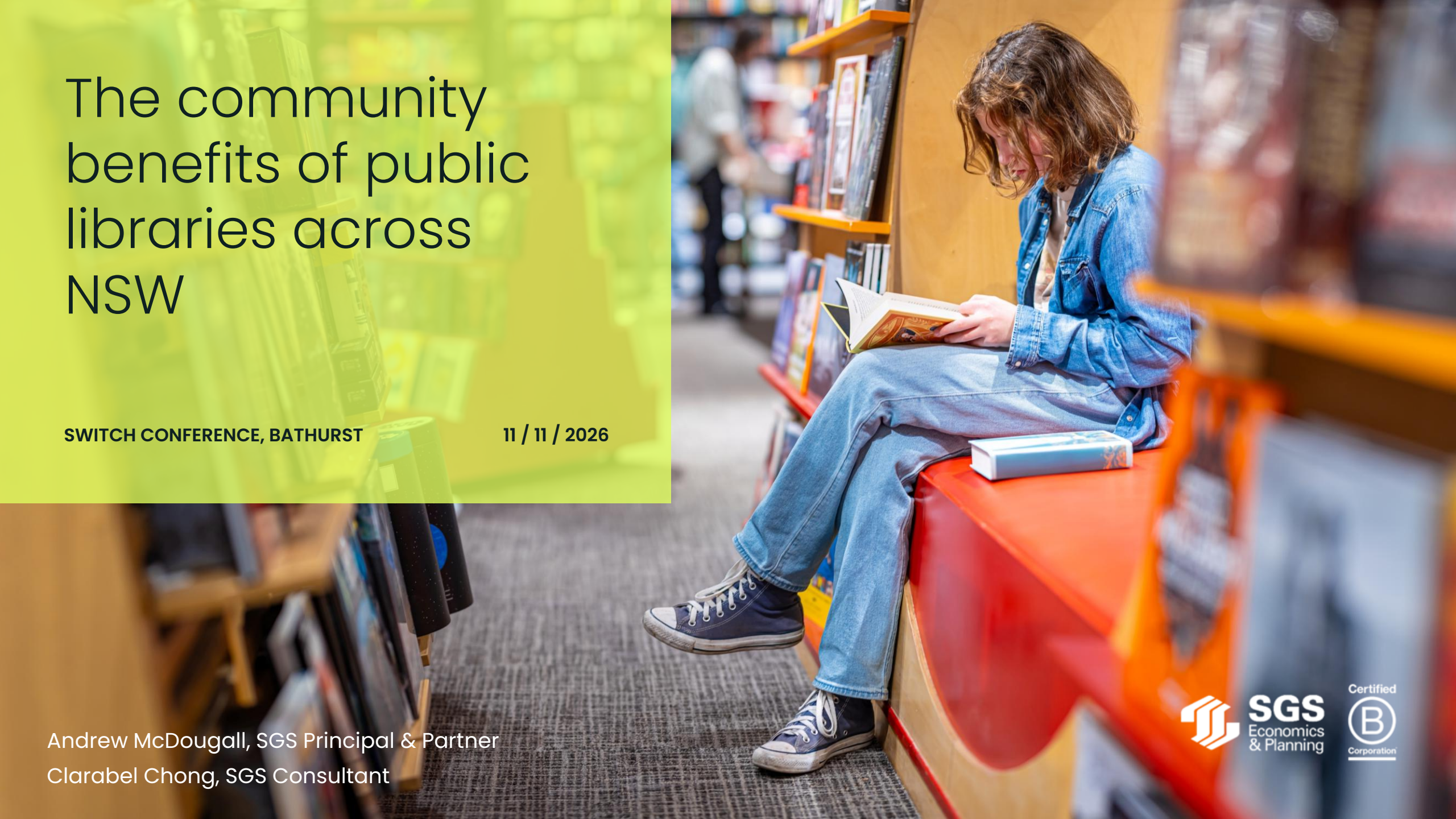
The community benefits of public libraries across NSW

SWITCH CONFERENCE, BATHURST **11 / 11 / 2026**



Andrew McDougall, SGS Principal & Partner
Clarabel Chong, SGS Consultant

SGS Economics & Planning

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SGS Economics and Planning acknowledges the First Nations Peoples of Australia and on whose Country we live and work.

SGS Economics and Planning acknowledges that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia are one of the oldest continuing living cultures on Earth, have one of the oldest continuing land tenure systems in the World, and have one of the oldest continuing land use planning and management systems in the World.

We pay our respects to the First Nations Peoples, past and present, and acknowledge their stewardship of Country over thousands of years.

Research questions

1. How do NSW residents engage with public libraries?
2. What benefits do residents gain from this engagement?
3. How does engaging with public libraries affect resident wellbeing?
4. What are the NSW residents Willingness-To-Pay for public libraries?
5. How do the monetised benefits of public libraries compare with their delivery costs?

Research method

RESEARCH TASK	RESEARCH PROCESS
Identify the services offered by public libraries	Workshop with SLNSW and Public Libraries Network
Appreciate the benefits of services for key user groups	Primary research (interviews, n=18)
Identify the community value of services	Primary research (online survey, n=1933)
Evaluate costs and benefits of public libraries	Cost benefit analysis

Public library services

- Physical collection
- Digital resources and experiences
- Library programs
- Technologies & internet
- Pleasant spaces to read, study or work
- Welcoming spaces to meet, socialise or engage in informal group activities
- Staff assistance and/or referral to available services
- Outreach library services



Online survey sampling

The online survey of a total of 1,933 NSW people 16+ years old:

- A **random sample of NSW people 16+ years old**, n= 750. Within this group there were two sub-groups:
  - (i) Public library visitors at least once in the past 12 months (n= 400)
  - (ii) People 16+ years old who had not visited a public library in the last 12 months (n=350).
- A **sample of library members**, n=1,183. Invited by NSW public library staff to bolster the overall survey sample by adding more frequent library users.

The combined survey sample was weighted to be representative of NSW people 16+ years old in terms of age, gender, regional location and library engagement rates.

Public library engagement

59%

Of NSW residents had personally engaged with a public library service in the last 12 months.

Of these residents:

- **54%** said they accessed physical collections
- **45%** has accessed a public library website or online resource
- **19%** had accessed an outreach library service
- **33%** were high frequency users (10+ times in the last 12 months)



Engagement of families with children

69%

Of households with children had engaged with a public library in the last 12 months.

Of these households:

- **66%** had visited a public library in the last 12 months
- **35%** had accessed a public library online resource
- **22%** had used an outreach service
- **31%** were high frequency users (10+ times in the last 12 months)



Reasons for visiting a library

The survey found a relationship between the age of library users and the reasons for visiting.

For example, “meeting friends” is significantly more important to children, and “to study” was most important to people aged 16-17 years of age.

- Suggests there are ages and stages when people are more likely to engage with their library service
- Aligns with what people told us in the interviews – that how they engage with their library has changed over time.

58% To borrow books/materials	47% To improve knowledge
47% To read	45% To be in a comfortable place
47% To be in safe and accepting place	



Contribution to wellbeing

We asked: How do public libraries make peoples' lives better?

"It's my contact with the outside world."

"It's like a second home."

"Books are important for my mental health. Having a mobile library is also extremely important so I don't have to drive the 1/2 hour to physical library."

"Free, accessible, helpful staff, safe and welcoming, it's good for my mental health."

"As I live alone, the resources public libraries offer me greatly assist my mental health and wellbeing."

"Being able to read books and borrow books and be in a quiet cool place to just de stress for a while."

Library staff told us about the role they play supporting their community: "We are here when people have no one else that can help them".

Contribution to wellbeing

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ABOUT PUBLIC LIBRARIES	MODERATELY AGREE & STRONGLY AGREE
The library is important for my literacy, creativity and knowledge	69%
The library is a place where I can feel safe or belong	64%
The library helps me carry out important life functions like studying and working	59%
The library is a place which is fun/enjoyable to visit	57%
The library helps me with my wellbeing	55%
The library helps me feel connected to my community	52%
The library helps me access government and business good and service	42%

Contribution to wellbeing

Of those surveyed the average subjective health and wellbeing score was 69.6 points out of 100.

The analysis showed that engagement with public libraries has a significant and positive association with subjective health and wellbeing.

Any engagement with a public library, other things being equal, is associated with a 3.2 point increase in subjective health and wellbeing.



Community value of public libraries

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Physical collections	✓	✗	✓
Digital resources & experiences	✗	✓	✗
Library programs	✓	✗	✓
Technologies & internet	✗	✓	✗
Spaces to read, study or work	✗	✓	✗
Staff assistance	✗	✓	✗
Funding on behalf of each adult in NSW	$15 per year	$20 per year	$5 per year
Your choice....	○	●	○



Overall public library willingness to pay (WTP) was $86.6 per year, per NSW adult.

Net community benefits of public libraries

The benefit to cost ratio of public libraries is calculated using the willingness to pay information and the annual costs for each library service.

Investment in public libraries yields a positive return for the NSW community - that is, for every dollar invested in public libraries, $1.73 in benefits is generated.

	VALUE ($M)
Annual benefits	735.1
Annual costs	425.5
Net annual benefits	309.6
Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR)	1.73

Community value of public libraries

Willingness to pay by library service shows a high willingness to pay for small urban and even more so for small rural councils.

This reflects the interview findings where we heard:

"The library is an essential part of the social structure of our town!"

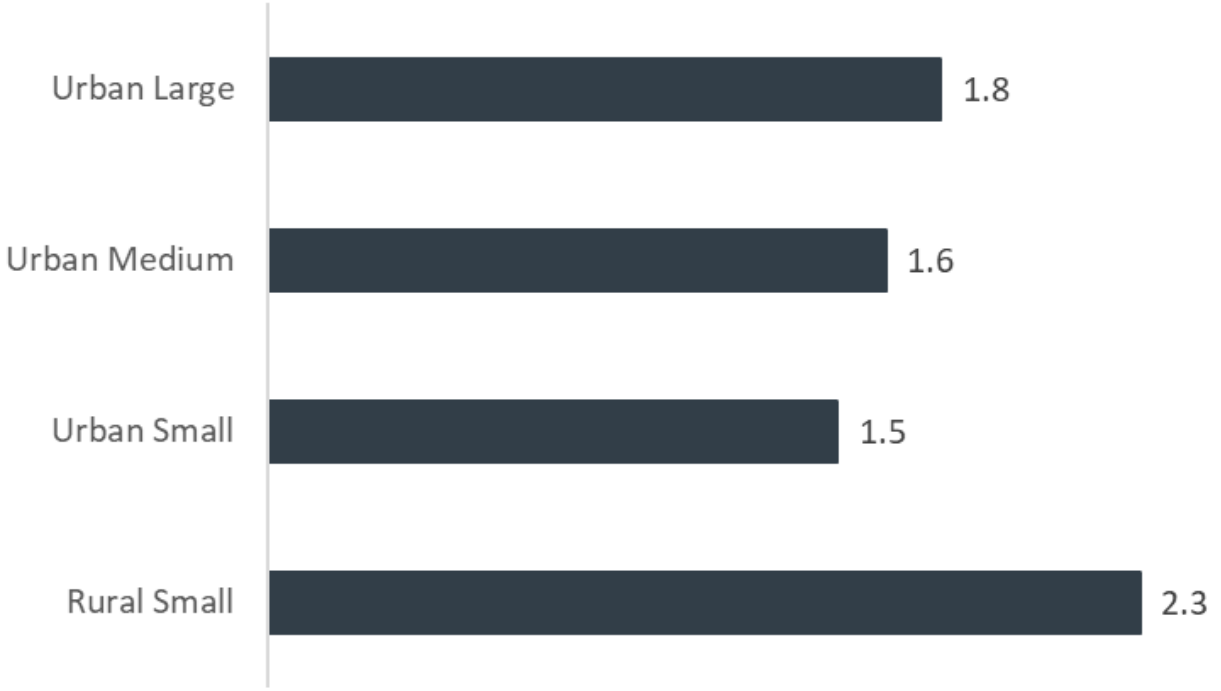
"We don't have much else.... For country people the library really is essential".

	Total	Rural Small	Urban Small	Urban Medium	Urban Large
Physical collections	**$23.54**	$33.26	$26.36	$25.58	$21.57
Digital resources	**$11.47**	$22.65	$11.91	$11.04	$11.32
Staff assistance	**$9.69**	$12.49	$8.86	$9.12	$8.73
Space reading	**$9.57**	$15.93	$10.22	$9.32	$9.16
Technology & internet	**$9.43**	$15.02	$10.03	$9.29	$9.49
Library programs	**$8.92**	$12.48	$7.50	$7.10	$7.47
Space meeting	**$7.44**	$16.13	$10.43	$10.06	$9.22
Outreach collections	**$6.59**	$9.72	$6.82	$6.77	$6.37
Total Willingness to Pay	**$86.64**	**$137.68**	**$92.14**	**$88.29**	**$83.33**



Net benefits by library services

Benefit cost ratios



Comparing costs & benefits: Vic & NSW

Similar work undertaken by SGS for Victoria's public libraries in 2023, shows the NSW public library service has:

Higher per capita costs

- Higher per capita benefits
- Equal net benefits per capita
- A slightly lower BCR

	NSW (2025)	VIC (2023)
Costs	$425.5m total ($50.5 per capita)	$240.6m total ($36.6 per capita)
Benefits	$735.1m total ($86.6 per capita)	$481.3m total ($73.2 per capita)
Net benefits	BCR of 1.7 ($36.5 per capita)	BCR 1.98 ($36.6 per capita)

Questions?

Andrew McDougall, amcdougall@sgsep.com.au
Clarabel Chong, SGS Consultant, cchong@sgsep.com.au