Surf Coast Shire

Report - feasibility studies review and recommendations for a Surf Coast Shire Library of Things (LoT)

Table of Contents

Background

A Library of Things (LoT) is an initiative where people can borrow a range of items and also learn a range of new skills. It aims to reduce consumption, promote sustainability, and create a more equitable and resilient community. LoTs in Australia are influenced by similar initiatives overseas and have gained popularity and positive feedback from the community, with interest in volunteering and donating items.

One of the biggest challenges for LoT success is funding, especially funding to establish the LoT and also funding to run the LoT. This is followed by the challenge of having a dedicated and sufficient group of staffing and volunteers, with the right mix of skills and knowledge, to establish and manage the LoT.

Following the June 2022 Council meeting, a resolution was passed to allocate $20,000 from the 2021-22 Community Initiatives budget to conduct a regional feasibility study for the establishment and running of a Library of Things in Surf Coast Shire. However, after extensive research, it was apparent that there was already a wealth of freely available LoT feasibility studies online, which outline best practice in setting up and running a LoT. A further feasibility study is therefore not required.

This report summarises a range of feasibility studies, guides and business case studies for the establishment and operating of a LoT. It aims to review the challenges and opportunities of running a LoT in the Surf Coast Shire. This report also explores community interest, key stakeholders, financial details, and operation models.

It should also be noted that when this funding was initially allocated, that Geelong Regional Libraries Corporation or Geelong Sustainability were the groups interested in setting up and running the LoT. Unfortunately, this has since changed, and these groups no longer have capacity or interest to lead this project. There is currently no community group identified to run this project.

Therefore, it is recommended that the $20,000 allocated to the project be used to create a once-off grant to enable the identification and funding of a group to establish and operate a LoT, and to provide the funding to do this. This would be the most effective spend of this funding and would provide the best opportunity for success of the LoT.

Reference materials

This report is a summary of insights obtained from reviewing the following resources and from interviews with relevant stakeholders:

Resources:

- Library of Things Hurstbridge Feasibility Analysis
- Rosella St Business Handbook
- Feasibility Study for Maribyrnong Library of Things
- Point Cook Project Planning Document for Library of Things
- Moonee Valley Library of Things Issues and Opportunities Report
- Southside Tool Library - Start Up Guide
- The Sydney Library of Things - Set Up Guide
- Library of Things: a cornerstone of the real sharing economy – by Sharable
- Murwillumbah Library of Things - a discussion paper

Stakeholder interviews:

- Jo Murray, the initial Surf Coast Shire Library of Things project applicant - via the Community Project Development Program
- Dan Cowdell, CEO - Geelong Sustainability
- Radmila Sekulic, Manager Collection and Information Services - Geelong Regional Library Corporations (GRLC)
- Benish Chaudhry, Founder - Point Cook Library of Things
- Erin Krusic-Golub, Marketing Coordinator - Torquay Community House
- Abby Ellery, Coordinator Aged, Youth and Access - Surf Coast Shire Council
- Shannon Fielder, Coordinator Community Health & Development - Surf Coast Shire Council
- Jarrod Westwood, Coordinator Recreation Planning Community Projects and Partnerships - Surf Coast Shire Council

Summary of key findings

Setting up a LoT

Research has indicated that starting with a traditional feasibility study may not be the best first step to effectively determine the viability of a LoT. Instead, an initial community survey is recommended.

Initial community survey

Conducting an initial survey to assess community interest and in-demand items, and recruit a dedicated group of volunteers willing to contribute, including their skills and availability. Survey questions can include:

- Would you like to become a member and borrow an item from a Library of Things? (give examples of some of the items)
- What items would you be interested in potentially borrowing?
- What opening hours would work best for you to borrow/return items?
- Would you like to volunteer e.g. to help with loans or to help set-up?

- What are your skillsets e.g. grant writing, finance, social media, website development, tool repair and maintenance?
- What is your availability (days/hours)?
- Would you be happy to share your details and be contacted?

<u>Communications and engagement approaches to attract community interest</u>

The next step in establishing and running a successful LoT is to effectively is to attract community interest and build a strong user base. The following communications and engagement actions and approaches can be very effective:

- **Conduct community surveys**: Conduct regular surveys to gather feedback and suggestions from the community.

- **Communicate through local channels**: Engage with the local community through various channels such as community events, workshops, and meetings.

- **Form partnerships**: Collaborate with local organisations, businesses, local schools, other educational institutions, and community groups to promote the LoT.

- **Create an online presence**: Develop a user-friendly website and social media presence to provide information about the LoT.

- **Encourage promotion by users**: Encourage current users of the LoT to spread the word to their friends, family, and neighbours.

- **Engage with media**: Reach out to local newspapers, radio stations, and community newsletters to feature stories and articles about the LoT.

- **Create volunteer opportunities:** Offer volunteer opportunities at the LoT to engage community members. Volunteers often become users and bring others with them.

- **Organise community events**: Organise community events and workshops that align with the values and goals of the LoT. This may include guest speakers, workshops, demonstrations, and open days to showcase the range of items available for borrowing and the benefits of sharing.

Opportunities

There are many environmental, community and economic opportunities on offer through running a LoT. Key opportunities include:

- **Environmental sustainability**: a LoT supports a local circular economy – focussing on loaning, sharing, reuse and keeping valuable resources in use for as long as possible. A LoT enables the community to reduce consumption and resource use, increase waste avoidance, increase the diversion of unwanted or broken items from landfill, and reduces household clutter. A LoT also promotes sustainable living and helps normalise the positive behaviours of sharing and loaning, rather than buying.

- **Providing greater equity and more affordable living**: offering the whole of the community access to resources and support can lead to enhanced lifestyle despite household budget constraints. With increased pressures on household budgets, a LoT also offers a household potentially significant financial savings through loaning items, rather than purchasing them.

- **Building community capacity and resilience**: a LoT enables the building of community and community connections. Skills development and sharing is also an important feature of a LoT, which enhances resilience and increased self-sufficiency.

- **Health and recreation benefits**: the items in a LoT such as tools, sporting equipment, creative items, encourage active and creative behaviours, and encourage a continuous learning lifestyle through new skills and knowledge. This helps build a diverse, healthy and resilient community.

- **Supporting local businesses:** a LoT can help local businesses thrive through offering a 'try-before-you-buy' type service for costly items for households. This can help build connections with local businesses and help drive the local economy.

- **Scalability and potential for replication**: a LoT is a very flexible and adaptable model which can start with basic items and grow over time as items become available and as community demand grows. Various LoTs have models that have added offerings which can bring in an additional income stream such as makers spaces to rent out, workshops, markets, a shop (with items created in the makers space to be sold), children's craft events, room hire etc.

Challenges

There are a range of challenges that should be considered and planned for in the set-up and running a LoT. These include:

Significant challenges

- **Funding:** Establishing and maintaining a LoT requires initial investment and ongoing financial resources. Long-term financial viability can be very challenging for LoTs. Local councils can often assist with supporting LoT's to apply and source grants and funding opportunities.

- **Staffing and volunteers**: Recruiting and retaining dedicated staff and volunteers is very important for the successful operation of a LoT. Having sufficient staffing and volunteers to manage the tasks, from inventory management through to maintenance and customer service, can be a challenge. These challenges can be addressed through obtaining funding for paid positions, sourcing mutual aid obligation (e.g. work for the dole) people, varying volunteer tasks to offer greater role satisfaction, and providing fun and engaging socialisation opportunities during work.

- **Venue**: Identifying an affordable and appropriate location for a LoT, that is easily accessible to the community can be a challenge. Some LoTs have arrangements with their local council to use a council-owned space for free, or their council may cover the rent for a set time period of a suitable non-council venue. Factors such as having access to enough storage and a customer service area, parking availability, and disabled access needs to be considered.

Additional challenges

- **Damage/loss/theft of items**: There is a risk of items being damaged, lost, or stolen when borrowed by community members. Implementing measures to ensure the proper care and return of items is necessary to address this challenge. This can be well managed via implementing a good inventory system, booking system, and having security checks and credit card details collected as part of the membership process supported by a clear membership agreement outlining the potential for fines following damage/loss/theft of items. A common approach includes pre and post booking items inspections, condition of the item noted in the inventory system, followed by fines if required.

- **Safety and insurance**: Ensuring the safety of users and the proper insurance coverage for the LoT and the inventory is important. This includes addressing liability concerns and implementing safety protocols. Insurance can be difficult to obtain and if often mor easily obtained through partnering with an existing enterprise such as a library.

- **Meeting demands for seasonal items**: Some items may be in high demand during specific seasons or times of the year. Managing the inventory to meet these demands can be a challenge, especially if there are limited resources or storage space. This is often managed via a one-week maximum booking allowance and sourcing additional popular items to have multiple on offer. Some LoTs offer an online waiting list for popular items too – managed via the booking system.

- **Waiting times leading to reduced membership**: If there are long waiting times for popular items, it may discourage potential members from joining the LoT or lead to membership cancellations. Implementing an efficient borrowing system, having a one-week maximum booking allowance and sourcing additional popular items to have multiple on offer. Some LoTs offer an online waiting list for popular items too – managed via the booking system.

- **Late returns**: Members returning items late can disrupt the borrowing system and inconvenience other members. Implementing policies and reminders to encourage timely returns is important to maintain the smooth operation of the LoT. Fines may be involved for late returns too – as outlined in the membership agreement.

- **Dealing with bureaucratic/administrative processes and regulations**: Dealing with administrative processes and regulations, such as permits and licenses, can be time-consuming and challenging. Navigating this is necessary to establish and maintain a LoT. Councils can often offer support and guidance on this.

Key success indicators

Based on the experiences of other LoTs researched, the following are potential key success indicators. It should be noted that these success indicators may vary depending on the specific goals and objectives of the LoT:

- **Dedicated volunteers' network**: Targeting local champions who are willing to run this initiative will generate a sense of ownership among the working group. Obtaining further support from the Australian LoT community network, through collaboration, ideas seeking, experience sharing can assist the volunteer leaders to run this initiative smoothly.

- **Strong community engagement and participation:** The level of community engagement and participation in the LoT can be measured by the number of members, utilisation level

(borrowing and lending), and the level of involvement in volunteering and skill-sharing activities.

- **Positive community feedback**: Feedback from the community about their experience with the LoT is a valuable indicator of its success. Positive feedback regarding the ease of borrowing, the quality of items, and the overall impact on the community would demonstrate the effectiveness of the LoT.

- **Financial sustainability**: The long-term sustainability of the LoT is an important success indicator. This can be measured by the ability to secure funding and resources, maintain a diverse inventory of items, and sustain community engagement over time.

- **Reduced waste to landfill:** The extent to which the LoT contributes to waste reduction in the community can be measured by tracking the number of items rescued and being borrowed instead of being purchased, leading to an overall reduction in waste generated by the community.

- **Collaboration with community organisations**: Collaboration and partnerships with community organisations and businesses is crucial to their success. This can be measured by the number of organisations involved, the variety of items and services offered through partnerships, and the level of engagement and support offered by these organisations.

Operating models

There are three main types of operating models including:

1. **Community run:** this is the most common approach for LoTs, enabling community to set up and run the venture. It should be noted that grants are often received e.g. from the local council. The community run models are often run as a co-op (with the community having a direct stake in the success of the LoT) or as a not-for-profit model.

2. **Community/Council partnership:** this model is less common as it involves a level of participation by councils e.g. this may involve providing staff time, free venue, grant writing support etc.

3. **Council run:** this is the most uncommon model, due to the resourcing challenge and lack of capacity to deeply embed in the community.

Staffing approaches

There are two key staffing models to run a LoT:

1. **Volunteer-led approach**: find a dedicated group of individuals within the community to initiate and manage the LoT. Requires a good mix in skill sets – from grant writing and project management through to repairs and maintenance of items.

2. **Staffed approach**: additional funding is required to hire staff, potentially engaging one or two part-time members (e.g., 10 hours a week for the first six months). These paid staff could then subsequently apply for grants and financial support to sustain their roles.

Venue approaches

There are several potential successful venue approaches for running a LoT, with some of the main approaches including:

- **Embedding the LoT into a pre-existing community enterprise or service**: such as a local library or neighbourhood house. This approach takes advantage of existing space, established inventory systems, a wide membership base, and a relationship of trust within the local community. It has minimal setup costs.

- **Partnering with a local sporting club or recreational facility**: a LoT could be set up by hiring a spare room or utilising a dual-purpose space. This offers low setup costs and allows for the addition of value to an existing community space.

- **Purchasing and fitting out a shipping container**: this involves additional costs for insurance, security, and rent for the location. This approach requires efforts to establish trust within the community and support through volunteers.

- **Using a van or a trailer as a mobile LoT**: this enables travel across the shire and services different locations. This can help service residents with limited mobility. This has the limitation of smaller capacity for inventory, also servicing members from the whole shire will be challenging.

- **Establishing a new standalone building or shopfront**: this has higher venue costs but offers the benefits of a prominent location, greater stability, and trust. It allows for full customisation of the space and greater flexibility in inventory, workshops, and hours of operation.

- **Running an online LoT:** similar to the Rosella Street LoT, this approach connects businesses with customers and allows businesses to create a business account and set up a shopfront to borrow/sell their products. The LoT charges transaction fees on every item rented or sold out through the platform.

It is important to note that these multiple approaches can be used by a single LoT e.g. online and shopfront. There is no single approach that would serve all communities and depends on factors such as available resources, partnerships and community preferences.

Key stakeholders

The key stakeholders in the LoT project are:

- **Staff/volunteers**: Individuals who are willing to contribute their time and skills to the LoT. They can help with various activities such as inventory management, repair, workshops, and administration.

- **Community members**: The residents of Surf Coast Shire that will benefit from the LoT. These users can have diverse motivations to participate and may include households that cannot afford the items; small homes/low storage; engage in sustainable living (reduced consumption); curious to try a new initiative; want to try out an item before they buy it; or may only have a single use need for an item.

- **Community groups**: Local community houses, non-for-profits and sustainability groups such as Torquay community house, Men's shed and Parents for Climate can play a significate role in supporting, promoting and also contributing to establishment and running the LoT in the Surf Coast.

- **Professional groups:** This may include groups such as existing libraries or library corporations. Research has shown these groups can be very beneficial to partner with due to having an existing venue, having a pre-existing loaning service set up, being embedded in the community and having extensive networks.

- **Australian Library of Things (ALoT) network:** This group comprises founders, presidents, and volunteers of LoTs across Australia. The website contains several valuable resources and templates. There is also a Facebook group comprising members who are at different stages of running their LoTs and willing to share stories, provide information and solve problems.

- **Local businesses and organisations:** These entities can support the LoT through partnerships, sponsorships, and donations. They can also benefit from the increased foot traffic and exposure that the LoT can bring to their businesses.

- **Educators and students:** Schools and universities can partner with the LoT to provide learning opportunities and skills developing or sharing, and engage students in community projects. They can also benefit from access to items and resources for educational purposes.

- **Government:** Local, State, and Federal Government entities such as Sustainability Victoria can support the LoT through grants, promotion. Local government can also provide regulatory guidance and assistance with marketing, recruiting volunteers and running workshops.

- **Lending institutions:** Public libraries, tool libraries, and toy libraries can partner with the LoT to provide additional resources and support. They can also share their expertise and knowledge in running lending programs.

- **Donors**: Individuals or organisations who donate items, funds, or other resources to the LoT. Their contributions are essential for the success and sustainability of the project.

Financial considerations

The specific financial considerations will vary depending on the model, venue, staffing, set-up, location, size and scope of the LoT. Based on research, general important financial key points to consider include:

- **Revenue streams**: The LoT can generate revenue through various streams, including annual membership fees, fees per person or item for borrowing, late fees, workshop fees, training materials, events hosting, and one-off joining fees. It can also receive in-kind and one-off donations, as well as cash donations. Crowdfunding and grants can also be potential sources of revenue.

- **Cost structure:** The LoT will have both fixed and variable costs. Fixed costs may include upfront expenses such as rental and fit-out of a venue, development of an online platform, licensing fees, and brand design. Ongoing costs may include staff salaries, inventory acquisition and maintenance/repair, learning opportunities, promotion and marketing, legal

and insurance expenses. The LoT can also benefit from in-kind contributions of time and skills, as well as donations of gently used items.

- **Economies of scale**: By partnering with other lending institutions, such as public libraries, tool and toy libraries, and community hubs, the LoT can achieve economies of scale. This can help reduce costs and increase efficiency in operations.

- **Financial support**: The LoT can seek financial support from various sources, including government grants, corporate sponsorships, and community fundraising campaigns. It can also explore opportunities for collaboration with local businesses and organisations for in-kind sponsorships or support.

- **Financial planning**: It is important for the LoT to have a clear financial plan in place, including budgeting (factoring in capital and operating costs), forecasting, and monitoring of expenses and revenues. This will help ensure the long-term financial sustainability and viability of the LoT.

Conclusion

This report looks at viability of establishment and running a LoT in the Surf Coast Shire drawing insight from similar studies and engagement with founders and managers of other LoTs. The identified challenges, ranging from financial considerations to logistical hurdles, highlight the importance of careful planning and proactive management strategies. This report demonstrates that developing a LoT in Surf Coast Shire relies on understanding the public interest, developing a team of staff/volunteers and finding a suitable space. The long-term sustainability of a LoT in the Surf Coast Shire will be dependant on effective community engagement, financial management, and strategic partnerships with local businesses, organisations, and government entities.

Based on research and stakeholder engagement, the most suitable model for a LoT in the Surf Coast would involve partnering with an existing professional or community enterprise such as Torquay Community House. This co-located approach can benefit LoTs through potential support from the enterprise, such as promotions and to assist with attracting volunteers. Men's Sheds can also be an excellent potential partner for a LoT for repair and maintenance support. It should be noted that this is one potential solution, which has not been endorsed by the above mentioned groups, and other alternatives should also be considered.

In conclusion, a LoT presents a promising opportunity to drive a local circular economy, build community resilience, and enable resource accessibility. Due to the abundance of existing online LoTs feasibility studies/guides/handbooks etc, and a large network of dedicated LoT staff/volunteers/supporters who are willing to help and support others, it is recommended to use the allocated project funding to create a once-off grant for the actual establishment and operation of the LoT. This will enable the best opportunity for success for a LoT in Surf Coast Shire.