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# Me & My Library

Ottawa Public Library's Public Engagement Campaign  
prepared by Hill & Knowlton

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# Executive Summary

Ottawa Public Library (OPL) partnered with Hill & Knowlton, a strategic communications consultancy, to develop and deliver a public engagement campaign to gather insights on how library clients value libraries and library services. The campaign's core purpose was to obtain client perceptions to support the development and strategic improvements to OPL's Service Delivery Framework. The engagement sought to understand how OPL helps clients make the most of their time at the library and to identify highly valued service elements.

The insights collected will assist OPL as it develops strategies for *collections*, *expertise*, *programs*, *spaces* and *tools*, as well as virtual, facility and mobile service channels.

Client knowledge, feedback and ideas were collected through various qualitative consultation methods between September and December 2024. These included an Engage Ottawa webpage that gathered 150 written submissions, 100 in-branch and phone interviews, eight focus groups and two beading workshops providing the opportunity for Indigenous community members to share their stories.

This report presents key themes emerging from the analysis of the information clients shared, providing insights into client experiences and priorities by the five services areas.

## Collections

OPL's diverse collection of physical and digital resources is highly valued. Collections are seen as accessible and supportive of lifelong learning, language acquisition and cultural exploration. OPL collections provide equitable access to information and resources, with a convenient hold system and user-friendly digital platforms, offering clients access to materials outside of what might be found at their local branch.

## Expertise

Library staff are universally praised for their knowledge, kindness and dedication. They provide essential guidance and cater to diverse needs. Their support empowers clients to navigate information effectively and participate in community initiatives.

## Programs

Existing programs, especially children's *storytime*, are highly valued for positive impact and community building. Demand is high among those aware of programming, and the opportunity exists to build higher program awareness through broader communication.

## Spaces

OPL branches are essential community hubs, providing comfortable and welcoming environments for all. Branches offer connection, resources and refuge. Meeting rooms are valuable but seen by some clients as costly and difficult to reserve. Expanding quiet areas and optimizing what are viewed as underutilized spaces were suggested opportunities.

## Tools

While there is awareness of OPL's many tools and those who use them highly value the access, many clients were unaware of their existence and excited to learn about them. Printers, computers and Wi-Fi are the most widely recognized tools, helping to bridge digital divides and providing access to technology unaffordable for some.



# Project Overview & Methodology

This report summarizes the findings the OPL public engagement campaign, conducted by the strategic communications consultancy Hill & Knowlton (H&K), to inform the development of OPL's Service Delivery Framework. The framework provides guidance for the development of five service-specific strategies (collections, expertise, programs, spaces and tools) and three channel frameworks (virtual, facility and mobile).

The public engagement campaign sought to gather stories of how OPL has helped clients achieve their goals, while also identifying the most valued elements of OPL services. The following methods were used to achieve these objectives:

## Engage Ottawa Page

Between September 26 and November 4, 2024, the [Me & My Library](#) Engage Ottawa webpage collected 150 written submissions (and images) from library clients, in both English and French, sharing what the library means to them. Submissions are referred to as “stories” through the analysis.

## Client Interviews

From September 27 until November 21, 2024, 100 interviews were conducted (75 in-branch, 18 at bookmobile stops and seven (7) with homebound clients). Interviews facilitated open conversations exploring clients’ motivations for visiting the library, its overall value, and OPL's role in advancing Truth and Reconciliation (see Appendix A for interview questions). Specific insights on the homebound and bookmobile services will be reflected in OPL's Mobile Framework.

## Focus Groups

Eight (8) focus groups, with a total of 45 participants, were hosted with

the support of community groups between November 11 and December 12, 2024. Focus groups allowed library clients and community members to delve deeper into key themes and ideas highlighted during one-on-one client interviews and in [Me & My Library](#) story submissions.

## Beading Our Library Stories Workshop

With leadership from OPL's Indigenous Services Library Planning Consultant, H&K supported two beading workshops on November 21 and November 22, 2024, for Indigenous community members to share their stories through the practice of beading. While the findings from these workshops will also inform the Indigenous Service Recommendations for the central branch at Ādisōke, key themes relevant to the Service Delivery Framework are included in this report.

This research was conducted in a qualitative manner with the the following terms used to reflect and emphasize what we heard through the engagement, to indicate the level of client support for a given theme or idea:

- *most* (near unanimity)
- *several* (frequent but not predominant)
- *many* (predominant or large number of responses)
- *some* (notable minority)
- *a few* (a small minority)

All data collected were qualitatively analysed by service category. This report identifies key themes and findings that emerged from this analysis.

The following sections explore client experiences and identify the most valued elements of OPL's services, both now and for the future. It is important to note, while these findings provide valuable insights, they are not fully representative of the entire OPL client base due to the voluntary nature of participation and the specific methods employed.



# Engagement Findings

## Collections

**Definition** Items in OPL's catalogue, including books, musical instruments, experience passes, DVDs, Chromebooks and streaming services.

**OPL's diverse collection enables lifelong learning and language acquisition and provides equitable access to information and resources for all.**

Most clients point to OPL's collection of resources as the primary reason for visiting the library and/or its online services.

OPL has an extensive catalogue of English-language and French-language books, supporting bilingualism. Some stories shared by parents give OPL credit for supporting their efforts in creating *bilingual environment* for their children.

The diverse collection offers clients a gateway to various genres, authors, movies and cultures, creating opportunities for learning and self-discovery. One client shared a touching story of reading picture books to a close friend battling lung cancer. The library's broad range of picture books allowed this client to help their friend find moments of peace and comfort.

*Sharing stories when a friend is facing the end of their days is a gift that creates beautiful memories.*

- Participant story submission

In an increasingly expensive world, the library is an essential resource. It provides free access to materials, *levelling the playing field for everyone*. Some interviewees referenced the library's central role in the sharing economy.

*Borrowing new books feels like going shopping, except the price is always the same.*

- Participant story submission

Students at all levels, many of whom were interviewed in branches and at bookmobile stops, use the collections for their studies, *supporting learning at every stage of life* and equipping clients with the knowledge and skills to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

*I didn't attend university, but the library offered me a place to learn, giving me the chance at a post-grad without having an undergraduate degree.*

- Carlingwood branch client

Some beading workshop participants suggested OPL expand its collection to include books for all age groups on Indigenous histories, cultures and languages to *support learning for Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients*. The materials should be written by Indigenous authors, with the intention of telling the truth about the past.

*[Ottawa Public Library is] incorporating more Indigenous stories now, so there's been some progression.*

- Beading workshop participant

OPL collections include resources with practical applications. During an interview, one client shared her experience of analysing a scholarship reference book with her daughter, who then applied for and won several scholarships – she emphasized how much their access to this book saved her family money. Similarly, another focus group participant proudly shared how OPL had saved him from buying a new refrigerator when he was able to borrow the *Kill A Watt Electricity Usage Monitor* to determine the efficiency of his existing fridge was as good as a new one. Other focus group clients asked how and where they could access this tool – a reaction observed at many points during focus groups when something was shared about the library of which others were unaware. Many clients noted their appreciation for OPL's broad range of collections, beyond books, to *meet their everyday needs*.

E-books and audiobooks were identified as useful to those who cannot easily visit a branch due to travel distance or health conditions, creating *more equitable access to literature*. Emphasis was also placed on these digital materials during interviews and focus groups, as several identified a reliance that grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, and which has continued post-pandemic. Clients who can no longer read due to health reasons and some homebound clients stressed the importance of





audiobooks for their *mental well-being*. Homebound clients also highlighted their appreciation for large-print books and media items such as movies due to vision impairments, chronic illnesses or other disabilities. The opportunity to borrow DVDs and access movies and series was emphasized by many during interviews, mainly because access is limited to libraries, but many also said they did not want to pay for streaming services.

OPL's hold system was praised by some clients, particularly those taking part in focus groups or interviewed at bookmobile stops. They highlighted its convenience for those who live far from a branch or prefer browsing and selecting books online for quick pickup. Through the hold system, bookmobile clients have access OPL's entire catalogue.

*I'm doing my MBA, so holding books and having them sent to the bookmobile near my house is very convenient.*

*- Bayshore bookmobile client*

Many clients interviewed at smaller branches would like to see more books available. Some identified specific genres or types of books to be added, although all recognized space limitations. Some clients recommended OPL consider investing in additional passes to a greater variety of services available in Ottawa.

## Expertise

**Definition** *Staff who support literacy and information needs.*

**OPL's knowledgeable and dedicated librarians and staff are the heart of the library experience.**

They provide expert guidance, connect clients to crucial resources and create a welcoming and inclusive environment, ensuring clients can access the information they need and fostering a love of reading.



A consistent theme emerged across interviews, online stories and focus groups: clients unanimously appreciated the knowledge, kindness and dedication of library staff. One story thanked the staff of a particular branch for always being amiable and willing to help, regardless of how busy the branch may be.

Throughout the engagement, clients pointed to librarians and staff providing *invaluable guidance*, navigating clients through library services, recommending books and highlighting the numerous benefits of library membership, including specialized services.

*Librarians are the protectors of books, providing access to history.*

- Carlingwood branch client

Library staff are applauded for going above and beyond, *actively collaborating on community initiatives*, clubs and individual learning journeys. Examples offered through interviews include providing suggestions for reading lists, assisting client access to desired resources, supporting book clubs, and helping with specific asks.

*I asked for a physical copy of a national newspaper (The Globe & Mail) be delivered daily to the branch. It took a year and many conversations but those in the library helped, and now I'm able to visit the library and read the paper daily.*

- Carlingwood branch client

Overall, OPL staff are recognized as essential community figures, fostering literacy, providing access to information and creating a welcoming environment for all. Their commitment extends to

diverse needs, from genealogical research and French-language assistance to business resources and homebound delivery services. During interviews and focus groups, some clients pointed to librarians who offered these specific skills as essential but recognized each librarian brings their own knowledge and interests to the role. They emphasized how valuable librarians with specializations had been to them and other clients and sought more of these learning and support opportunities.

*At the main branch, one of the librarians was a former president of the genealogical society. She'd help you find everything about your family if you'd like.*

- Canterbury Community Association focus group participant

A recurring theme throughout the engagement was the desire for continued investment in these invaluable resources, creating space and opportunity for staff to further offer their expertise and support. An opportunity to broaden expertise, mentioned by several clients, was to consider including those with outside experience in library learning and education.

Some beading workshop participants recommended OPL consider hiring more Indigenous staff, especially as the library considers its role in advancing Truth and Reconciliation. Clients, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, agreed any guidance on the library's role should come from Indigenous people.

Additionally, while the move to self-checkout was appreciated by some interviewees and focus group participants, a few clients expressed a desire for more face-to-face interaction with OPL librarians and staff.

## Programs

**Definition** *Intentionally designed activities or events, including babytime, art exhibitions and book clubs.*

**OPL's programs nurture a love of reading in clients, provide opportunities for skill development and foster community connections.**

For clients who know about and have taken advantage of OPL programs, feedback was resoundingly positive (many, especially interviewees, indicated a lack of program awareness but were interested when made aware).

A wide range of OPL programs – particularly those engaging the youngest clients – were well-recognized, highly valued service offerings. *Storytime* was the most-often mentioned drop-in program, with several parents, grandparents and caretakers referring to the *positive, beneficial and engaging environment* *storytime* offers during what can be an isolating time for some.

A few clients emphasized that attending *storytime* or *toddertime* *sparks a love of reading in children*, laying the foundation for lifelong literacy, while also reintroducing adults to the library.

*The library is a place where children can be free and discover their love of reading.*

- Manotick and Area Centre for Arts & Wellness focus group participant

Many clients noted a desire for more free programming of this nature, and programming for a broader array of audiences. Many also emphasized they want to see more program information communicated

in a wider range of ways (email, messaging, social media, etc.), as they want to learn more about library programs.

There is a keen interest in adult programs or events, but some clients noted the opportunities they are interested in fill up quickly. Some clients interviewed at rural branches noted limited program availability at their nearest branches.

Some of the clients interviewed, as well as focus group participants, shared examples of existing programs that have added value to their lives. The programs offer a range of benefits, including:

- **Social connection and community building:** Knitting circles, crafting sessions and movie nights address clients' social needs by providing opportunities to connect with one another and build relationships within their community.
- **Skills Development:** French conversation groups support language learning goals while connecting clients with fellow language learners. Cooking classes offered via Zoom provide a convenient way for clients to learn new skills from home.
- **Youth Engagement:** The Teen Advisory Group encourages teenagers to use library services and connect with their community while fulfilling their volunteer hour requirements for secondary school graduation.

Focus group discussions offered a place for OPL clients to recommend options for future programming that would meet community needs, such as:

- **Life Skills and Job Readiness:** Low-cost courses such as CPR, first aid, food handling and other job seeker essentials. Additionally, a few clients shared interest in adult-focused computer/technology skills building.
- **Community Connection:** More drop-in and informal programming for older youth (18-29-year-olds) and evening programming for adults.
- **Rural Access:** More program options across rural branches.

While no one identified having participated in the Human Library initiative, many had heard about the movement (CBC was mentioned as a source of information by some), and there was a lot of interest in taking part. Some focus group participants noted the opportunity for OPL to consider organizing a Human Library series focused on Truth and Reconciliation.

*I'm Métis, and I think it would be nice to have the Human Library - where a small group or a person could move from chair to chair and [where] there's a question already presented that can be asked.*

- City For All Women Initiative focus group participant

Several clients conveyed how the value of OPL programs such as the Human Library lies in an opportunity to *promote and foster inclusion and understanding through education and the creation of welcoming*

*spaces for diverse communities.* Clients who participated in the beading workshops suggested OPL's programs present a great opportunity for the library to practice its role in educating non-Indigenous people on Indigenous cultures. OPL could leverage displays and events to raise important topics throughout the year, especially with a focus on children's education. The goal of these activities would be to build and strengthen relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members in Ottawa.



## Spaces

**Definition** *Defined areas for client use, such as Teen Zones, meeting rooms, computer lab and comments section of the catalogue.*

**OPL spaces are needed community hubs, offering a comfortable environment for connection, learning and respite, combating loneliness and supporting client wellbeing.**

OPL branches across the city serve as invaluable and essential *community spaces, a free "third space" offering refuge, connection and resources*. Clients consistently describe library branches as a comfortable space, a second home and welcoming to all ages and genders. Clients across the engagement campaign emphasized in a range of ways how the library is where they go to feel better, connect with others and combat loneliness. The library functions as a vital and *essential community hub*, especially across the city where such spaces are limited for a variety of reasons. In rural areas, several interviewees emphasized the library as a central community hub, and a few noted their library branch – in Constance Bay most notably – as a sole connection to the City of Ottawa.

*It's a great third space, where you don't have to spend any money.*

- Carlingwood branch client

OPL provides a *welcoming, calm* and *quiet environment* for after-school activities, tutoring and studying. Some families interviewed highlighted their appreciation for accessible and inviting children's areas. During inclement weather, the library offers shelter and warmth for those awaiting transit, as mentioned by a few clients at the Stittsville and Main branches.

Across branches, interviewees mentioned the library as a location for quiet reflection and/or study. At Stittsville, Carlingwood and Main branches, several clients identified themselves as students, indicating their primary reason for visiting the library was for quiet study (in some cases, it was the only reason they had ever visited). Online stories also emphasized the importance of the library to students needing a quiet place to study: one client describing how the library's calming space allowed for deep focus, enabling homework completion.

*[I] went to the library to study and do my work [...], that day where [I] did all my work convinced me I could learn anything literally had my potential up to Maximum capacity.*

- Participant story submission

Many job seekers and newcomers rely on OPL branches as valuable resources for accessing information about community services through pamphlets and posters available onsite. The library is seen as a space offering *an essential service* and *respite within its walls*, something required by those navigating housing precarity and homelessness. While interviews did not include anyone who referenced being currently unhoused, a few clients mentioned previously having navigated housing precarity, and many pointed to the library offering services to all.

*The library doesn't make you feel like a burden, it makes you feel like a human.*

- Spectrum LGBTQ+ Community Youth Group representative

Beyond books, OPL branches offer meeting rooms for community organizations, as well as those looking for a place to collaborate. A few clients referenced meeting space rental as cost-inhibitive (a few of the

representatives from organizations participating in focus groups wondered if these costs could be waived), and some mentioned the challenge of the meeting room reservation process.

To better support Indigenous clients, a few beading workshop participants suggested *physical spaces be created for Indigenous youth* to connect with their histories and cultures. The focus of these spaces should be on connection and healing, addressing both the legacies of trauma and stories of resilience. Ultimately, the spaces should cater to the needs of Indigenous youth, whether that involves sitting in silence or offering space for programs around medicine or genealogy.

*It's beautiful to be [surrounded by] your culture.*

- Beading workshop participant

While the library offers a welcoming atmosphere, a few clients noted *opportunities to enhance accessibility* for clients with limited mobility and to *optimize underused spaces*. Expanding access to quiet conversation areas and providing specialized study rooms were additional suggestions.

Access to food and drink was discussed as an option to draw more clients into libraries, while proximity to coffee shops and the option to bring in a beverage while studying was a bonus for library use mentioned by two students interviewed at the Main branch. Access to water fountains was referenced by an interviewee in Carp and a focus group participant downtown.

*The library is proof of civilization, I have lived in a place without a library and I don't recommend it.*

- Hunt Club bookmobile client

The library's role as *a free, accessible space with no financial expectations* is deeply appreciated by many, making it a truly essential community asset.

## Tools

**Definition** *Equipment or technology that is not in the catalogue, including computers, printers, scanners and audio/visual editing software.*

**OPL's tools bridge digital divides and enable creativity, providing clients with access to technology and resources that allow clients to learn and create.**

While some clients were aware of OPL tools, the engagement process revealed that many were not; however, once made aware, those previously unfamiliar expressed immediate interest. Those already familiar with specific tools shared strong praise and appreciation, several expressed interest and a few asked how they might be able to access these tools for future projects.

Many clients referenced accessing printers, scanners, computers and Wi-Fi at their local branches. They were *appreciative of the printers and computers* being inexpensive, easy to use and an opening for them to access other services.

*I use the printers and computers.*

*The printer is a nice excuse to go to the library.*

- Canterbury Community Association representative

Comments about the ease of use of library printing services differed across branches. For example, the printer at the Carp branch was referenced by several as in need of replacement, while in Stittsville, a few clients applauded the library for inexpensive printing and thought a colour printer might be a good addition.

Other tools accessed by clients include:

- Puzzles, games and colouring sheets
- Online resources such as Hoopla, Kanopy and LinkedIn Learning
- *Makerspace* tools such as laser cutters and 3-D printers
- Tools responding to community needs, such as COVID-19 test kits and solar eclipse glasses

Regarding *makerspace* tools, a few clients indicated they were happy for the access to this new equipment to help *enable their creativity*. Several asked where they could access these tools. A few stories shared projects that clients would not have been able to work on without access to *makerspace* tools.

*The [m]akerspace in Nepean is amazing. [...] I tried it a couple of times. It's fun and a great thing to have available.*

- Canterbury Community Association focus group participant

Some clients discussed the value of having access to technological tools for more than inspiring creativity. They shared how they *rely on*

*OPL's tools when the costs are prohibitive, or they do not want to purchase tools themselves*. One client shared in their online story submission that they intentionally don't have a computer at home because they trust the library's computers to be there whenever they need one.

OPL's tools, particularly free access to Wi-Fi, provide *connectivity for individuals and families* without home access or quality access (poor home Wi-Fi was mentioned as the reason for consistent library use by an interviewee in Carp). A few clients described this benefit as *levelling the playing field* for those who require the internet to complete tasks for work, school or other personal needs.

*We use the library since our family does not have internet service. We need it for forms, documents, school, appointments, purchases, recipes, etc.*

- Participant story submission



# Me & My Library Submissions

The following stories, and image, represent just a small sample of the 150 submissions shared by clients on the Engage Ottawa page. Stories centered on both how the library had benefited client in the past and how OPL can enhance its services for the future.

## The Library Saved My Life

06 Oct 2024

I have used libraries for my entire life....I love books...I had some serious eye problems nearly 3 years ago at age 75 and I am not able to watch television, read books, perform computer duties or research or do any eye movement for more than 2-3 minutes at a time...I discovered audio books and thanks to the assistance I received from the Centerpointe library, I got set up and am rarely seen without my air buds! This wonderful option has saved me from mental boredom, allowed me to accept my limitations and made my housework very enjoyable.

I also used to take my grand daughter to the children's library for reading time and just perusing the books...The children's librarian...(glasses and big, dark hair), was so welcoming to everyone....she is always smiling and friendly.

Thank you, Ottawa Library.

## Self Empowerment

08 Oct 2024

The library has become not just my personal retreat for self-improvement, but also our family's cozy escape during cold winters. It's the perfect spot to satisfy my curiosity, dive into new things, and grow at my own pace. Plus, it's a great way to step away from the endless scroll of social media and really focus on myself. There's something peaceful about being surrounded by books—it's like a spa for the mind. And spending time there, both alone and with my family, has been so empowering and grounding for all of us.





# Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following questions guided conversations with clients at library branches including, Main, Orléans, Carlingwood, Greenboro, Vanier, Carp, Stittsville and Constance Bay. This bank of questions was also used to guide the conversation with bookmobile clients at Sarsfield, Bayshore and Hunt Club stops. Questions were edited slightly for phone conversations with clients utilizing the homebound service.

Conversations were organic, so interviewees were not necessarily asked all these questions, and not all follow-up questions are included below.

- What brings you to the library today?
- How do you use the library?
- Do you use the library's website? What do you use it for? If not, why not?
- Do you access the library's mobile channel? If so, why do you use it? If not, why not?
- What should be the role of the library in advancing Truth and Reconciliation?
- What does the library mean to you?
- What makes the library special?
- Have you been to a library that you really loved? What was special about it?
- How has the library helped you? Do you have a specific example you'd like to share?
- Why did you start coming to the library?
- What keeps you coming back to the library?
- How often do you use library services?
- What would you like to see the library offer?
- Is there anything missing from the library that you wish was available?
- Any final thoughts you would like to share?

# Appendices

## Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

The following questions belong to a detailed focus group guide. Eight focus groups were held across the city and virtually. The following organizations supported bringing members and library clients together: the Canterbury Community Centre; People, Words & Change; Orléans-Cumberland Community Resource Centre; Community Legal Services of Ottawa-South Ottawa; Manotick and Area Centre for Arts & Wellness; City for All Women Initiative; Association du patrimoine familial francophone de l'Ontario; and Spectrum LGBTQ Community Youth Group.

The questions were used to guide conversations, but client and community organization interests were key to the direction of focus group discussions.

- What are your top three reasons for visiting the library or using its resources?
  - What branch/bookmobile do you visit the most? Why?
  - What specific needs bring you to the library?
  - What are your favourite library resources or services?
  - Are there any services you were unaware of before today?
- Write down three to five words or phrases that come to mind when you think about the library.
  - How has the library helped you?
- How do you think the library helps the Ottawa community?
- What could the library do to better meet the needs of the Ottawa community?
- What is the role of the library in advancing Truth and Reconciliation ?

# Appendices

## Appendix C: Beading Workshop Questions

The following questions were developed by OPL's Indigenous Services Library Planning Consultant to inform the Service Delivery Framework and the development of the Indigenous Service Recommendations for the central branch at Ādisōke.

The two in-person beading workshops were held at Beandigen Café and facilitated by Kaytlyn Nadjiwon of Soft But Sturdy Beadwork.

Conversations were organic, so beading workshop participants were not necessarily asked all the questions outlined below.

What are your top three reasons for visiting the library or using its resources?

- What role, if any, have libraries played in your life or your community's life?
- Can you share any positive experiences you've had with libraries or library staff?
- Have there been any challenges or barriers that have kept you or your community members from using library services?
- What types of programs or events would encourage you to engage with the library?

- What kind of library services or resources would be most helpful/useful to you?
- Are there specific skills, information, tools, or resources you think the library should offer to support Indigenous communities?