



Ottawa Bibliothèque  
Public publique  
Library d'Ottawa

# 10.6

**Report to / Rapport au:**

**Ottawa Public Library Board  
Conseil d'administration de la Bibliothèque publique d'Ottawa**

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**Submitted by / Soumis par:**

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**File Number/Numéro du dossier: OPLB-2026-0210-10.6**

**SUBJECT: Impact Study**

**OBJET: Étude d'impact**

## **REPORT RECOMMENDATION**

**That the Ottawa Public Library Board receive this report for information.**

## **RECOMMANDATION DU RAPPORT**

**Que le Conseil d'administration de la Bibliothèque publique d'Ottawa prenne connaissance de ce rapport à titre d'information.**

## **BACKGROUND**

In keeping with the *Public Libraries Act, RSO 1990, c.P.44* (the Act), other relevant statutes, laws, and good governance practices, the Ottawa Public Library (OPL) Board (the Board) holds accountability for the full range of decisions affecting the organization. The Board approaches its role using a policy or strategy model of governance that focuses on setting strategic directions and objectives, making decisions on major

projects, and monitoring performance. The Board's attention focuses primarily on the long-term needs and goals, rather than the administrative or operational details.

As per Board Policy 001 – Roles and Responsibilities of the Board and Trustees, Board members have a responsibility to define OPL's purpose and direction; review, and approve major strategies, plans, and decisions; and advocate on behalf of OPL. As such, the Board has approved Policy 002 – Delegation of Authority (“the DOA”). As part of that policy, the Board has maintained authority to approve key strategic components of the OPL Service Delivery Framework (SDF) and other frameworks and has delegated the implementation and management of strategic frameworks to the CEO.

Over the past five years, OPL has undertaken several activities intended to underpin service delivery and commitments to clients. Specifically, this included the development of a Service Delivery Framework, the associated Service Strategies, and a new Brand.

In May 2022, the Board approved a new Service Delivery Framework (Report #OPLB-2022-0503) and directed staff to develop Service Strategies for each service category (Collections, Expertise, Programs, Spaces, and Tools). Subsequently, in April 2025, the OPL Board approved the Service Strategies and outcome statements associated with the services (Report #OPLB-2025-0408-11.2).

In February 2025, the Board approved a new Brand Strategy (OPLB-2025-0211-10.1), based on extensive public research that identified client perceptions, awareness, and sentiment of OPL. This work led to the development of a new brand, intended to more effectively demonstrate the value of the library.

In 2025, inspired by work at Toronto Public Library, the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC) initiated a study to measure the impact of public libraries. Working with two Danish companies, “IS IT A BIRD” and “It depends”, CULC coordinated the participation of 26 member libraries, including most large urban systems.

OPL, seeking to establish a point-in-time measurement of service impact for the SDF and the Service Strategies, participated in the empirical assessment. The Impact Study is intended to complement OPL's economic value study (2016) by providing a method to understand the role the library plays in the community, and to assign value to the impact.

Funding for OPL's participation was generously provided by the Friends of the Ottawa Public Library Association (FOPLA).

The purpose of this report is to provide the Board with the results of the Impact Study, to provide analysis and assessment relative to the approved Service Strategy outcome statements, and to identify next steps.

## **DISCUSSION**

Public libraries are increasingly recognized in urban research as anchor institutions; public libraries play a vital role in supporting local economic development by strengthening community capacity, reducing barriers to opportunity, and connecting residents to resources needed to thrive. Libraries also serve as essential third spaces – welcoming, accessible environments where people can gather, connect, and engage outside of home and work. Through these functions, public libraries generate significant community benefits, foster social cohesion, enhance quality of life, and contribute to resilient, vibrant neighbourhoods. At the individual level, libraries offer essential supports such as access to information, literacy support including programming and digital literacy tools, and opportunities for lifelong learning.

OPL provides valuable benefits to individuals, families, and communities. As part of the research conducted for OPL's brand strategy, clients were asked about their perceptions of libraries in general and of OPL specifically. This research found that OPL's civic role, and the way OPL promotes and creates community, was an important shared perception among clients and non-clients alike. Whether people visit the library or not, OPL is perceived as a key component of Ottawa life. While public libraries are generally viewed as vital institutions and hubs for all, libraries including OPL face challenges in describing and quantifying the impact of their work beyond statistics.

The CULC Impact Study aimed to solve this challenge by providing a measurable framework for understanding and demonstrating impact. It placed the individual at the heart of the assessment to describe and quantify meaningful impact across four dimensions and twelve parameters, as experienced by the client, following their use of library services. The impact study moves beyond traditional reporting metrics such as the number of visits or books borrowed, focusing instead on capturing how public libraries provide emotional, intellectual, creative, and social value. Focusing on personal outcomes, the study translates public library services into real-world value for individuals and the Ottawa community.

The Impact Study was designed across four service pillars: Collections, Expertise, Programs, and Spaces. These align with four of OPL’s five service categories, noting that OPL’s “Tools” category contains components that are captured in some of the other categories (e.g., creative technology equipment in the Imagine Space, or programs that use STEM kits). Moreover, as this study was undertaken as part of a national initiative, the types of tools and ways of describing them varied across the library systems involved, and as such, the assessment tool had to best reflect the common elements of library service offerings.

Impact is measured along four (4) dimensions: Creative, Emotional, Intellectual, and Social, and each dimension has three (3) identified parameters designed to capture different aspects of the library experience. Table 1 below lists each dimension and corresponding parameter, along with a brief description.

Table 1: Impact Study Dimensions and Parameters

*Table 1 identifies each of the four Dimensions along with the associated Parameters and description.*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Parameters</b>
Creative	Inspiration – Inspires to try something new or make changes Skills – Strengthens existing skills or provides new skills Expression – Motivates new creative endeavours
Emotional	Well-being – Provides a sense of well-being, calm, comfort, or relaxation Immersion – Creates a feeling of immersion Emotional engagement – Creates sentiments (e.g., entertains, excites, moves, or provokes)
Intellectual	Knowledge – Provides new knowledge or new information Reflection – Supports reflection by providing food for thought Perspective – Offers new perspectives
Social	Community – Provides opportunity to meet new people Empathy – Inspires empathy through insight into the lives of others

	Relations – Creates opportunities for conversations
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For each area, an Impact Profile is produced that scores the impact of the library service on a scale of 0 to 5. These scores represent the presence, or absence, of positive impact. As such, a low score does not imply a negative impact; rather, it indicates that clients have not experienced that type of impact. In addition, it is important not to overinterpret small differences in impact scores. While two parameters being 0.1 points apart may be a statistically significant difference, it is not practically meaningful.

The Impact of Ottawa Public Library (Document 1) includes two data sets: the first are the OPL-specific responses presented in Impact Profiles as noted above. The second is a comparison of OPL results with the results of a national average for purposes of contextualization.

The national study is designed to illustrate the impact of public libraries across the country as a whole; it is not intended to facilitate comparisons between individual library systems. The final report for OPL includes national results to help contextualize the Impact Profile patterns. Participating library systems from across the country vary significantly in terms of governance, size, budget, organizational structure, staffing models, and associated collective agreements, etc.

## Methodology

The CULC Impact Study was undertaken using a large-scale mixed-method design; it included a quantitative study at both the national and local levels, as well as qualitative interviews. The quantitative component consisted of a questionnaire issued in the spring of 2025, as noted, comprised of both national and local elements. In total, more than 18,000 individuals participated in the study. Nationally, more than 8,500 participants responded via a general population questionnaire, distributed through two established research firms. The remaining 9,775 respondents were recruited through questionnaires distributed by the 26 participating library systems to their clients. Local library systems used a variety of methods to recruit participants.

In recruiting participants for the local portion of the study, OPL issued email invitations to 8,000 active clients. Clients were randomly selected from among the more than 200,000 active adult cardholders. Emails were issued in two segments of 4,000 clients each. Considering the timing of this study relative to engagement initiatives for both the

brand strategy and the service strategies, there was concern about the potential for participant fatigue. To mitigate this, the use of email as the recruitment method was intentional, participation was voluntary, and the promotion was limited. The randomised direct-to-user email approach was intended to help engagement and to mitigate various sampling biases. Clients received one invitation to participate, and no reminders were issued. Details of the public engagement opportunity were made available on OPL's website as a general notice to reassure clients of the legitimacy of the invitation. Local respondents represent 885 clients and 120 non-clients. Clients (referred to as "users" in the study) are those who have used at least one of the library's services in the previous 12-month period. Non-clients ("non-users") include individuals who either a) have never used OPL's services, or b) had not used OPL in the previous 12-month period.

The qualitative component consisted of interviews with individuals who were recruited through the quantitative study. Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2025, with six (6) individuals participating from the Ottawa area. The interviews were designed to deepen understanding of clients' experiences with the library and its services. Participants were selected to represent different groups in the Ottawa community, including both official languages. The report includes a brief introduction of each interviewee, noting that pseudonyms are used.

With respect to the average results used in the national component, it is calculated using nearly 13,500 responses collected from 53 CULC member library systems. Respondents were recruited both nationally and locally (through the 26 member library systems). Data from these sources have been weighted by the research agency to help mitigate potentially skewed self-collections. The researchers note that figures are generally quite stable whether weighted or unweighted.

## **OPL Results**

Of the more than 800 clients who responded to the survey, the frequency with which clients use OPL services varies across the different categories:

- 97% of clients have used OPL to borrow books or access online resources;
- 55% of clients have visited OPL spaces to read, study, work, social, entertain children, relax, or seek shelter;

- 19% of clients have attended a library program (e.g. class, event, workshop) in the past year; and,
- 69% of clients have received guidance from library employees (e.g. help with accessing material or information, technical support, etc.).

The Impact Study gathered client perception of OPL's services, with the findings aligned with the responses regarding frequency of use. For non-clients, OPL services are seen as something that would likely benefit them positively. Their reluctance to use the library is not because they are dissatisfied with it or its offerings: both clients and non-clients agree that the library is one of the most valuable resources a city can provide to its community. These findings are not surprising considering the generally accepted attitudes towards public libraries in Canada, and in Ottawa particularly these findings reinforce those from the Brand Strategy research.

In terms of the Impact Profile, OPL's overall average impact score is 3.1 reflecting a well-rounded profile with demonstrated emotional, intellectual, creative, and social impact. The highest impact scores are seen in the Intellectual and Emotional dimensions, particularly in the parameters of Knowledge and Well-being. The Social dimension generally scores lower. With respect to the Parameters for each Dimension, the majority measured at 3.0 or higher, averaged across all four library services. Only three Parameters (Relations, Community, and Expression) fall below 3.0 overall.

### Service-Specific Impact Profiles and Analysis

While the Impact Study considers each service pillar individually, it is important to recognize that the services are mutually reinforcing and in some cases more directly evident than others. For example, there is a strong correlation between program participation and collection use. While higher foot traffic leads to increased circulation, regular program participation also increases ongoing client engagement. Programs act as discovery tools, and exposure increases the likelihood that attendees will borrow items connected to program content particularly when collection displays are linked to programming. The correlation is equally strong for Programs and Expertise. Library programs are directly linked to the variety of skills of employees who plan, coordinate, and deliver the programs. This connection may not be overtly present to clients, as the expertise required to create and coordinate programs often remains behind the scenes.

The impact, however, is significant. Employee knowledge directly shapes program relevance, depth, and effectiveness.

The following provides the results of the Impact Profile for each service category as it relates to the Outcome statements in the Service Strategies. The complete Impact Profiles can be found in Document 1, pages 19 to 26.

Collections – The intended outcome of the Collections Service Strategy is that “OPL’s collection provides a foundation for language acquisition, and for cultivating the joys of reading, lifelong learning, and discovery.” With a profile average of 3.4, this service scores at the higher end of the range. Clients generally experience the greatest impact along the Emotional and Intellectual dimensions, with the “knowledge” parameter scoring the highest (3.9). It is worth noting that on the Social dimension, Collections stand out as inspiring Empathy (3.4) by offering insights into the lives of others.

The findings for Collections are not surprising, considering the library’s mandate and literacy focus. Results are consistent with the brand strategy which identifies books as the mainstay of library services. This was further reinforced in the public engagement undertaken for the service strategies; clients highly value OPL’s diverse collection of physical and digital resources and most clients pointed to OPL’s collection of resources as the primary reason for using the library.

Overall, these findings support continued investment in collections and validate the Board’s recent financial commitment as identified in both the Asset Management Plan (AMP) and the Content Services Framework.

Spaces – The Spaces Service Strategy aims to “... offer welcoming environments for learning, leisure, and connection.” With a profile average of 3.1, this services scores in the middle of the range. Much like collections, clients generally experience the greatest impact along the Emotional and Intellectual dimensions. In this case, however, Well-being is the parameter that scores the highest.

In terms of social impact, OPL spaces are perceived to have a relatively strong impact. Public libraries increasingly serve as essential “third places”, that is, welcoming environments that support social connection and personal well- being. OPL’s commitment to creating flexible, inclusive, and welcoming spaces positions it as a leader in supporting community wellness.

Within the Creative dimension, OPL spaces are perceived to inspire clients to try new things, which may be reflective of not only the design and layout of spaces, but the resources within. These can range from resources in defined spaces (e.g., the Imagine Space) to low-tech tools and equipment to collection displays.

Programs – The Program Service Strategy identifies the intended outcome of this service category as “OPL’s programs nurture a love of reading, and provide opportunities to exercise creativity, build skills, and foster social connections.” With a profile average of 3.5, this service scores at the higher end of the range, noting that this score is based on the lowest number of clients (170 respondents; 19%). While Programs are used by fewer clients than other services, those who do participate experience all-around higher levels of impact across all four dimensions. In fact, in all Parameters there were no scores lower than 3.4, making this the highest profile average overall.

Unlike the other services, Programs have high impact within the Social dimension. While some OPL programs offer interactivity and time to engage with others, they also create opportunities for social connection and discussion. In addition, it may reflect that simply being surrounded by others engaged in the same activity (e.g. listening to an author) enhances perceptions of social connection and drives impact.

With respect to the Creative dimension, it is Programs that have the most impact, underscoring the breadth of OPL’s offerings, many of which are experiential in design.

It is worth noting that while one-fifth of respondents indicated they participate in programs, more than one-third indicated that programs are relevant to the community being served. OPL is undertaking several actions to increase participation: simplify registration, improve program discoverability, and design and evaluate programs that foster connection. As participation grows, it will be important to maintain program quality and preserve the depth of experience that drives the strong impact scores.

Expertise – In the Expertise Service Strategy, the expected outcome is to ensure that “OPL expertise facilitates access to knowledge and connects clients to services in a welcoming and inclusive manner.” With a profile average of 2.7, this service scores at the lower end of the range, noting that this is based on three-quarters of total respondents (606 clients indicated that they have sought staff support in the past year). Much like Collections and Spaces, clients generally experience the greatest impact in

the Emotional and Intellectual dimensions, with the Knowledge parameter scoring the highest (at 3.3) followed closely by Well-being (3.1).

While Expertise received the lowest profile average score, the significant peaks in the Knowledge and Well-being Parameters are indicative of the core support provided by this service, in alignment with the library's mandate and the intended service outcome. The result is not reflective of a negative impact; it reflects the extent to which the service is perceived to result in a positive impact.

While the study did not dive deep into the reasoning behind client responses, it is important to note that fewer clients indicated that they sought staff support. OPL data shows that in accessing collections (the most used service), clients tend to use the holds service for physical adult collections nearly 60% of the time.

As identified in the brand strategy, staff expertise is best understood when employees are seen as guides who help clients achieve outcomes rather than simply providing transactional assistance. The new brand creates an opportunity to increase the visibility of staff expertise using human-centered stories. In addition, OPL's emphasis on strengthening internal culture and developing a more consistent approach to client interactions aligns with emerging best practices across the library sector.

### **Next steps**

The results of the Impact Study serve as a point-in-time measurement of service impact for the SDF and the Service Strategies outcomes. The results of the study will support national and regional conversations about the importance of public libraries to local communities and to Canada as a whole. Alignment with and validation of previous research undertaken by OPL is clear, and the data provides common language and quantifiable impact stories that help to demonstrate the value of OPL, and Canadian public libraries, to their communities.

The results provide OPL with additional quantitative support for current directions including, supporting collections as a core driver of value, enhancing program access and participation, and elevating spaces for well-being and belonging.

In addition to other purposes, the impact study data will be used to support staff and the Board in advocating for library funding, creating community partnerships, and

demonstrating how the Library complements City services and contributes to broader municipal objectives.

From a data perspective, staff will consider the Impact Study as a tool for ongoing use as part of the Performance Measurement Framework review.

## **CONSULTATION**

The external consultation conducted as part of this report is detailed in the methodology section noted above.

## **ACCESSIBILITY IMPACTS**

Ottawa Public Library complies with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, (2005)* in its operations. There are no accessibility impacts associated with this report.

## **BOARD PRIORITIES**

This report aligns with the Board's Strategic Plan (2023 – 2028) Direction to "Demonstrate the Value of OPL" as it provides a measurable framework for understanding and demonstrating impact. In addition, it aligns with the Direction to "Build Organizational Capacity," specifically as it relates to "Increase data-driven decision-making."

## **BUSINESS ANALYSIS IMPLICATIONS**

The business analysis implications are related to the identification of a point-in-time understanding of service impact. These results will be considered in the upcoming review of the Performance Measurement Framework as a method of evaluating OPL's overall impact.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications associated with this report. Should there be interest in conducting this study at a standardized frequency, as part of the overall performance measurement approach, funding will be confirmed as part of the respective annual budget.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no legal impediments to approving the recommendations in this report.

### **RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

There are no risk management implications associated with this report.

### **TECHNOLOGY IMPLICATIONS**

There are no technology implications associated with this report.

### **SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**

Document 1 - The Impact of Ottawa Public Library

### **DISPOSITION**

Upon receipt of the study results, staff will:

- Use the data and quantifiable impact stories to continue to demonstrate the value of OPL; and,
- Consider the Impact Study as a tool for ongoing use as part of the Performance Measurement Framework review.