

Friends of the Library – exploring advocacy opportunities in Geelong

A Friends of the Libraries (FOL) group is one that is formed to support the libraries in their communities. FOLs operate on a volunteer basis and participate in activities such as –

- Fundraising
- Advocacy
- Volunteering
- Initiating and organising special events
- Partnerships with community groups
- Literacy promotion

The Geelong Regional Library Corporation (GRLC) operates 13 libraries and three mobile libraries in the municipal districts of the Borough of Queenscliffe, City of Greater Geelong, Golden Plains Shire, and Surf Coast Shire. There is not currently a FOL group in the region, however there has been in the past, and both staff and library members have suggested that there is still interest within the community. GRLC's Executive Management Team is currently exploring the feasibility of establishing a FOL group by improving its understanding of global trends, FOL group structures, success factors, sustainability issues, and resource implications.

A preliminary meeting was held on Thursday 10 December 2009 at GRLC's Newcomb Library where Dr. Alan Bundy and Daniel Ferguson of FOLA (Friends of Libraries Australia) were invited to tell us more about FOL groups, how they work, how they are

structured, their benefits and risks, and how they can be aligned with strategic planning processes and advocacy strategies. They facilitated our exploration of the issues associated with establishing a group in this region and the identification of some of the key decisions that must be made to ensure that we learn from the experiences of others and maximise our chances of success.

Following an introduction by Patti Manolis, GRLC's CEO, Alan Bundy explained what FOL groups are, the 'big' picture benefits, why they are important in the development of the public library network, and the potential benefits for libraries and communities. He also covered the relationships with the Australian Library and Information Association, local, and state governments.

Daniel Ferguson then presented some structural models and discussed how they work. He discussed local issues that work in support of a FOL group and the success factors related to the establishment of Friends groups. Daniel's 10 commandments provided us with a structure to use to move forward with our explorations:

1. The Library Manager must want a Friends group.
2. Library staff must be willing to work with Friends.
3. All parties must realise that a time commitment is involved.
4. The library must agree which of its resources will be used.
5. A committed core group must exist.
6. The authority to which the Library Manager reports must be aware of the Friends group.
7. Communication must be open.
8. All parties must realise that the friends do not make library policy.
9. The library must decide, in discussion with the Friends, the roles it wishes the group to play.
10. All involved must understand that Council, library management, and Friends have separate functions.

We left the meeting realising that it will require a significant amount of effort to establish a FOL group here in Geelong, but that the potential benefits are enormous in terms of community consultation and engagement, communication, and service development. The main issues that we identified were:

1. Structure – whether we have one FOL group or many. We have 13 libraries (soon to be 16) and 3 mobile libraries covering coastal, rural, and city areas of the region. Having one group may be difficult but managing/coordinating many groups would also be difficult;
2. Legal status – to incorporate or not. Incorporation has advantages in that Friends can then apply for grant funding etc;
3. Documentation – the development of appropriate supporting documentation such as a FOL Charter, Guidelines for Friends, Communication and Promotion Plans, etc;
4. Relationships, reporting, and resourcing – the relationship between the Friends group/s and the Executive Management Team and how the reporting will take place, resourcing, and where the relationship building will fit, and with whom, internally.

Discussions with staff will continue and decisions will be made regarding the feasibility of the establishment of a FOL group in the Geelong region. We are extremely grateful to Alan and Daniel for giving of their time and expertise so generously.

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