

**CAIRNS LIBRARIES – FIRST 5 FOREVER PROGRAM OUTCOMES REPORT
2025-2026**

L&C | 52/4/3/02 | #7904300

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council notes the successful delivery of the First 5 Forever Early Literacy Program in 2025/26.

INTERESTED PARTIES:

State Library of Queensland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Cairns Libraries provide free early years sessions in inclusive, play-based environments that support childhood development and community connection. Delivered through the First 5 Forever (F5F) early years program, the sessions have become a cornerstone of Cairns Libraries' community engagement for the past decade.

Developed and coordinated by the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) and funded by the Queensland Government, F5F is designed to strengthen language and literacy environments for children aged 0–5 and their families. The program empowers parents and caregivers as their child's first and most important educators and is delivered across all eight Cairns library branches and through targeted outreach initiatives.

From 1 July 2025 to 30 June 2026, Cairns Libraries' F5F program delivery decreased by 3.42% (218 fewer sessions) compared with the previous year, primarily due to the Smithfield Library closure for refurbishment from September 2025 to April 2026. Despite fewer sessions, participation remained strong, demonstrating sustained community demand for early literacy support and free family-friendly library services.

2025/26

Locations	No of Programs	No of Participants
Onsite	510	17,823
Offsite	27	29,316
Total	537	47,139

(Table 1)

BACKGROUND:

F5F creates opportunities for families and caregivers to support their children's development through free, fun, play-based experiences at their local library. Talking, reading, singing and playing throughout the first five years of age builds a strong

foundation for children's wellbeing and development across their lives. F5F empowers families to help children thrive, no matter where they live or their circumstances.

From the very moment their life begins, a child's experiences and environments will have a foundational impact and shape their learning, development, health and wellbeing for their whole life. While brain development continues through life, and positive changes can be made at any age, the early years provide the best opportunity to create healthy foundations for a baby's brain.

To make the most of this unique window of opportunity, F5F has developed an Early Years Story. The F5F Early Years Story provides a shared, strengths-based way to communicate what children need to thrive, and how libraries can help make it happen across Queensland.

COMMENT:

Public libraries have evolved from being book lenders to vibrant community hubs that support lifelong learning, digital access, social connection, and resilience. As trusted inclusive spaces, they foster creativity and participation, especially in diverse and growing communities.

Programs such as F5F reflect this shift, demonstrating how libraries support early development, family engagement, and community wellbeing. To ensure Cairns Libraries continues to meet the changing needs and expectations of the community, a new Library Services Strategy is currently being developed. The strategy will offer a clear and practical framework for future service delivery, one that builds on existing strengths while embracing contemporary approaches to engagement, digital transformation, and inclusive service models responsive to population growth and social change.

Key Outcomes (2025–26):

Cairns Libraries delivered a comprehensive suite of services through F5F, including both on-site and offsite programs:

- 510 early years sessions hosted at library branches, with 17,823 family participants.
- 27 outreach programs delivered in collaboration with local organisations, reaching 29,316 participants.
- 19 active partnerships with state agencies, Council departments, and community organisations to support coordinated service delivery.
- 12 months of integrated promotional activity across digital, print, and community channels to drive awareness and participation.

These programs also support broader early childhood outcomes through:

- Expanded early years-focused services and resources.
- Strengthened community partnerships.
- Ongoing staff mentoring and professional development to build internal capability.

Inclusive and Accessible Programming:

Cairns Libraries delivers a diverse suite of programs both onsite and offsite, designed to

support early childhood development, community engagement, and equitable access to learning opportunities. These initiatives ensure library programs are responsive, inclusive, and accessible to all families, regardless of location or circumstance.

2025–26 Highlights:

- Successful delivery of a Pop-Up Library at the Stratford Library, creating an engaging, welcoming, and accessible space for children and families to explore, learn, and connect during Smithfield Libraries closure. From October 2025 to February 2026, Stratford Library usage (including the Pop-Up Library) increased by more than 52% compared with the same period in the previous year. Over the same timeframe, attendance at First 5 Forever programs grew by 122%, highlighting strong community engagement and the value of library services and early literacy initiatives
- Coordination and delivery of a diverse range of library programs across all eight libraries, supporting early literacy, wellbeing, learning, and community connection. Key initiatives included reintroducing Make and Create at Babinda Library after a long break; launching Giggle and Glue at Stratford Library to meet growing demand; introducing Baby Rhyme Time at Edmonton Library, restoring an early year's program after many years without one; establishing series of weekend Dad and Me at City Library; Auslan Storytime at Earlville Library; and creating the Sing and Create with Mr Nate afternoon playgroup at Manunda Library.
- A successful partnership with Play Matters to facilitate regular playgroups within library spaces, providing inclusive opportunities for children and caregivers to connect, learn, and develop through play.
- Successful launch of the Little Explorer Kits and Sensory Packs, expanding access to play-based learning resources and supporting family engagement beyond the library for families with diverse needs.
- Collaboration with community organisations to deliver Picnic and Play sessions, encouraging outdoor play, social interaction, and stronger community connections for families.
- Enhancement of the children's collection through the introduction of resources supporting the Little Explorer Kits initiative, increasing access to hands-on learning and discovery opportunities (Attachment 6).
- Support for staff capability building and strengthened service excellence through a range of professional development opportunities, including both online and face-to-face training.

Collaborative Partnerships (Attachment 3):

Cairns Libraries have integrated F5F delivery within a strong network of 19 formal community partnerships, many of which were continued during the reporting period. These partnerships extend the program's reach and inclusivity across the Cairns region by providing cross-sector collaboration and shared program delivery. This has been achieved through regular engagement with local service providers, co-design of programs and sessions, and targeted delivery in diverse community settings.

Marketing and Promotion (Attachment 4):

A multi-channel campaign boosted engagement via bus ads, radio, digital media,

Facebook, and print. New collateral developed included posters, booklets, stickers, and F5F-branded materials.

Professional Development (Attachment 5):

To ensure consistent delivery and quality service, staff engaged in training via online events, mentoring, and peer learning. These initiatives build capacity and uphold service excellence across all F5F programs.

Collection Development (Attachment 6):

Enhancement of the children's collection through the introduction of resources supporting the Little Explorer Kits initiative and Yoto Players (Attachment 6). These resources provide families with free access to engaging, high-quality learning experiences that support early literacy, creativity, and discovery-based play. By enabling families to borrow and enjoy these resources at home, the initiative has increased access to hands-on learning opportunities, reduced barriers to participation, and reinforced the library's role in supporting children's learning and development within the community.

OPTIONS:

Option 1: (Recommended)

That Council notes the successful delivery of the First 5 Forever Early Literacy Program in 2025/26.

Option 2:

That Council requests officers provide further information.

CONSIDERATIONS:

Risk Management:

The sustainability of the F5F program relies on annual Queensland Government funding. Discontinued funding is a potential risk for the program however, given the program has existed since 2015 and has received bipartisan support from across Government departments, along with SLQ regularly reporting on program progress, the level of risk is mitigated.

Council Finance and the Local Economy:

State Investment

F5F is supported by the Queensland Government through five key funding streams: statewide services, capability building, innovation, First Nations engagement, and family outreach.

Funding is distributed based on Australian Early Development Census data and remoteness classifications to ensure equitable support across councils. The Cairns Regional Council F5F Service Level Agreement states:

- The Library Board may reduce the amount of funding by notice to Council if it determines that changes to the State budget or policies of the State or Commonwealth government impact on the continued provision of funding to Council or to recipients of similar funding generally.

Cairns Regional Council Allocations (2027–2029):

Period	Allocation
1 July 2026 – 30 June 2027	\$210,842
1 July 2027 – 30 June 2028	\$210,842
1 July 2028 – 30 June 2029	\$210,842

(Table 2)

The funding model has recently been updated, and a new three-year Service Level Agreement (SLA) will take effect from 1 July 2026. Councils will continue to receive direct annual funding, while SLQ will maintain its statewide coordination and support role.

Investment Acquittal

In 2025/26 Council received F5F grant funding of \$210,842. The funds have been fully acquitted.

Program Revenue & Expenditure 1 July 2025 – 30 June 2026:

First 5 Forever Program - Revenue & Expenditures 1 July 2025 - 30 June 2026	
Operating Income	
SLQ F5F Program Grand Funding	210,842
Total Income	210,842
Operating Expenses	
Catering	79
Conference & Travel	2,226
Employee Costs	93,079
Media Advertising	29,861
Outreach Events Delivery	7,735
Program Consultants	26,579
Program Materials	15,505
Program Services	36,246
Promotional Material	3,077
Total Expenses	214,387
Unused Funds	NIL

The increased expenditure reflects the planned renewal of early years (0–5) program material resources across all library branches. This included updating books, literacy kits, interactive materials, and program tools essential to delivering high-quality F5F

programming. This investment was a scheduled initiative to strengthen community engagement and align with current early childhood literacy standards.

To accommodate the additional costs, adjustments were made across other operational areas enabling Cairns Libraries to absorb the remaining \$3,545 in expenses within the overall library budget, ensuring continued program quality and impact. This approach maximised the impact of external investment while maintaining strong program outcomes and alignment with early childhood literacy standards.

Community and Cultural Heritage:

Local F5F programming plays a key role in supporting families and caregivers to engage in their child's early literacy journey. Cairns Libraries continues to expand its impact through strategic partnerships, community initiatives, diverse programs, active family involvement, targeted promotion, and ongoing evaluation.

These efforts reflect a strong commitment to meeting local needs and delivering programs that are inclusive, relevant, and culturally responsive. See Attachment 3 for more detail.

Corporate and Operational Plans:

Corporate Plan:

Focus 3: Design for Liveability:

A place-based approach that celebrates our community

Focus 4: Community and Culture:

Fostering a vibrant, healthy and inclusive community

Creative Life Plan:

Priority 2: Culture, Heritage and Place

Network of regional organisations to drive cross promotion, project development, shared resources and professional development.

Libraries Strategic Plan:

Goal 1: Connecting the Community:

Deliver engaging and innovative early childhood programs and activities under the F5F Program.

CONSULTATION:

Consultation and engagement continue to occur with State Library of Queensland and local community organisations.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1 Onsite Programs and Events

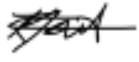
Attachment 2 Offsite Programs and Events

Attachment 3 Community Partners and Networks

Attachment 4 Promotion and Marketing

Attachment 5 Professional Development

Attachment 6: Collections



Karen LeRoy
Executive Manager, Creative Life



Destry Puia
Director Lifestyle & Community

Attachment 1: Onsite Programs and Events



Temporary Pop-Up Play Space at Stratford Library



Baby Rhyme Time at Smithfield Library



Partnership with the Pyjama Foundation to delivery Stuffedie Storytime at Earlville



Digeridoo and Art with Jason Von Roehl



Storytime at City Library

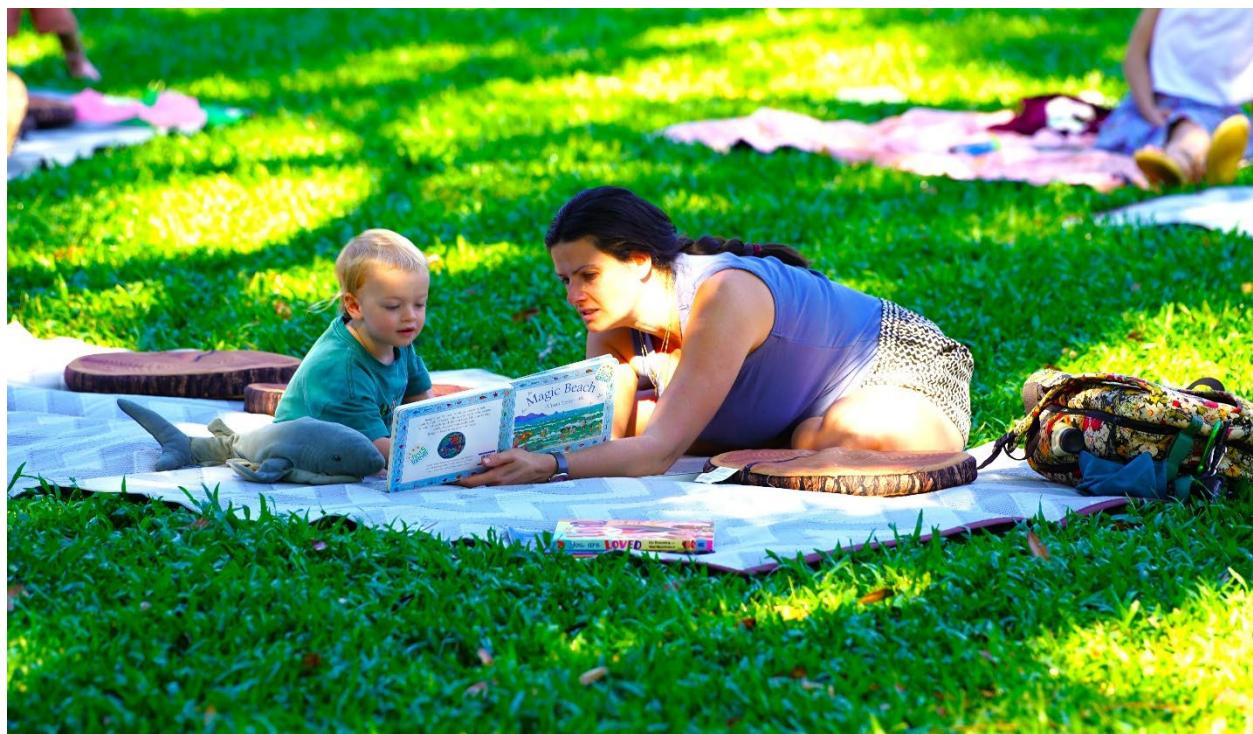


Sing a Song session at Manunda Library

Attachment 2: Offsite Programs and Events



Eco-Fiesta Pop up Library



Picnic in the Park in Glenoma Park, Brinsmead



Cairns Children's Festival – Story Walk: The Gruffalo



Community Outreach at Mt Sheridan Shopping Centres



Cairns Festival Carnival on Collins – Pop up Library at the Tanks



Community Day in the Park at Norman Park Gordonvale



Cairns Show 2025



Little Qld Day at Cairns Esplanade Western Events Lawn

Attachment 3: Community Partners and Networks

Key Community Partnerships 2025/26:

- Benevolent Society
- Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service
- CRC Creative Life
- CRC Planning, Growth & Sustainability
- Deaf Connect
- Department of Education QLD
- Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety
- Earlville Shopping Town
- FNQ Nature Quest
- KindyLinQ
- Local Authors
- Local Early Learning Centres
- Mission Australia Hambleton House
- National Pyjama Foundation
- Play Matters
- Queensland Ballet
- Skyrail Rainforest Cableway
- TAFE Far North QLD
- Wuchopperen Health Service

Attachment 4: Promotion and Marketing



New Parents Packs



City Life Magazine



Digital Billboard



Mega Bus Side



DL Flyers



Social Media Post



In library spaces: Digital screens, What's On booklet

Attachment 5: Professional Development



Staff Professional Development



Attended 2026 Early Years Conference



State Library of Queensland Brain Building Workshop

Attachment 6: Collection



Sensory Pack



Little Explore Packs