

Museums & Galleries of NSW Submission: National Cultural Policy Inquiry

22 February 2023

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) is a peak body and service organisation supported by the New South Wales Government through Create NSW, with a Purpose to *'build the capacity of small to medium museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres so they can maximise their impact on their communities'*. We develop these organisations skills, connect them with others in the industry, provide funding, point visitors their way, and give them access to ground-breaking exhibitions.

While we applaud the implementation of *Revive*, the new National Cultural Policy, and support many of its actions, we would like to take this opportunity to highlight the lack of support to the small to medium sector, and in particular to museums who play a crucial role in ensuring the safeguarding of our collective cultural heritage. In saying this, we do note the inclusion of the update to *Significance 2.0*.

Our organisation supports the work of just over 500 organisations, of which 319 are community run and managed museums and 57 public and regional museums. While our entire sector relies on government support, with state and local governments providing the majority of that financial backing, we would like to identify the museum sector as one that is particularly invisible within the Policy, and as recipients of Australia Council funding.

In 2022, of the 886 funded applications through the Australia Council for the Arts, 1.2% were awarded to regional and university galleries (though we note that organisations such as ours, and individual artists had received funding to support programs in these institutions); while there were no successful applications to identified heritage museums or heritage related projects. The pathways for funding for small to medium museums is restricted, with a perception that Federal Government support is non-existent.

This perception has been emphasised on the release of *Revive*. Small museums play a vital role in preserving Australia's cultural heritage, indeed, they underpin the very notion of the Cultural Policy's by-line: *'a place for every story, a story for every place'*.

As a result of the minimal resources available, many small museums are unable to properly care for their moveable cultural heritage items, which can lead to loss or damage of significant cultural objects.

Many other countries have implemented cultural policies that include the protection and preservation of moveable cultural heritage items, especially those held by small museums. A *Culture Strategy for Scotland* sees heritage as a vital ingredient to their strategy.

Canada operates the Museums Assistance Program (MAP) to *'support heritage institutions and workers in the preservation and presentation of heritage collections. The program fosters the preservation of Indigenous culture and facilitates access to heritage collections for all Canadians. It also promotes professional knowledge, skills and practices related to key museum functions.*

The MAP provides funding to Canadian museums and related institutions through several components, and each has its own eligibility criteria.'

It is imperative that Australia follows suit and implements federal policies to support small museums in the preservation of their moveable cultural heritage. This can include measures such as funding for conservation and restoration, guidelines for proper care and handling of cultural objects, and support for education and training for museum staff.

Over the past 12 months, M&G NSW has been working closely with a number of cultural organisations impacted by flooding. While these organisations had solid disaster plans in place, the unparalleled scale of these flooding events rendered them useless, and left thousands of destroyed and damaged cultural heritage objects.

None of the community operated museums we worked with had their collections insured. This equates with figures identified in the 2022 M&G NSW Sector Census which found only 25% of respondents have a level of insurance of their collections (either full or part insurance for significant items). Additionally, only 5% of respondents reported having no threats to their collections from building issues and climate related disasters. When weighed against the findings of our 2018 Sector Census, which reported 824,957 individual items currently in collections with over 3 million additional items estimated, there is major concern about the sustainability of this sector, and how much longer this important heritage is able to be preserved.

Our submission to the National Cultural Policy in 2022 outlined some other key points on the state of our small museum network, including figures such as 22% of small museums operate on a budget of less than \$5,000 annually, as well 67% of the entire sector facing a reduction in volunteers.

MUSEUMS & GALLERIES OF NSW RECOMMENDATIONS*:

1. Acknowledge the vital role that galleries, libraries, archives and museums play in preserving our collective cultural heritage and shaping our national story;
2. That a National Cultural Recovery Fund is established, managed by state-based peak bodies, to quickly respond to the needs of the sector in times of disaster;
3. A National Insurance Scheme for community museum, gallery and Aboriginal Cultural Centre collections;
4. Establish a National Cultural Infrastructure Fund to support the protection of cultural heritage items in the care of small to medium museums, galleries and Aboriginal Cultural Centres;
5. That Offsite Regional Collections Facilities are established to provide industry standard storage and services for significant items from smaller regional museums, historical societies and education facilities, as well as Aboriginal Cultural Centres on a negotiated basis. These facilities can be resources to provide support to damaged collections in times of need.

* Some of these recommendations were also made in our submission Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience