



Australian Library and
Information Association

Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee review of the *National Emergency Declaration Act 2020*

27 February 2026

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee's [Inquiry](#) into the operation and effectiveness of Australia's [National Emergency Declaration Act 2020](#) (NED).

This submission aims to highlight the importance of including cultural heritage in the emergency management agenda in these challenging times. Specifically in relation to the NED, we recommend that amendments be made to recognise harm to cultural heritage as a nationally significant matter relevant to the making of emergency declarations.

In writing the submission we draw on the library and information services (LIS) sector's practical experience supporting communities during disasters such as bushfires, floods, cyclones and storms, as well as ALIA's longstanding work in disaster risk reduction. In considering the below, we encourage the Committee to reference our [submission](#) to the [Second National Action Plan under the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#) (NAP), which expands on the points made.

About ALIA

ALIA is the national professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector, founded in 1937. With 5,000 members across Australia, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support. Our members work across public, state and territory, academic, school and special libraries.

ALIA's core [values](#) include:

- promotion of the free flow of information
- connection of people to ideas
- respect for the diversity and individuality of all people
- preservation of the human record.

ALIA is a founding member of [Blue Shield Australia](#) (BSA). BSA is a network of peak organisations committed to the protection of the world's cultural property, and is concerned with the protection of cultural and natural heritage, tangible and intangible, in the event of natural- or human-made disaster.

Libraries as Critical Community and Cultural Infrastructure

Libraries are central to Australia's national identity and community cohesion. Australia's diverse library collections contain significant materials and unique knowledge that comprises our nation's heritage. They provide critical community infrastructure, delivering essential social services and promoting community cohesion, particularly in remote and regional areas. They are some of the most trusted and frequently used government institutions both in Australia and globally.

As with other cultural and community institutions, libraries can find their premises, collections, staff and users under sudden threat in the case of local or large-scale disaster, such as a bushfire or flood. Yet libraries are often overlooked in emergency planning frameworks.

Experience demonstrates that libraries play two distinct and nationally significant roles during emergencies:

- **Custodians of irreplaceable cultural heritage**

Library collections - physical and digital - contain unique historical, legal, scientific and community records. If destroyed, these materials cannot be replaced. Damage to collections is not merely institutional loss; it is permanent loss of national memory and cultural identity.

- **Frontline community recovery hubs**

In times of crisis, they support both information access and community cohesion. During disasters, libraries:

- provide safe spaces and temporary shelter
- enable internet and device access for insurance, Centrelink and emergency services applications
- support displaced community members
- assist with recovery of personal documents and treasured items
- collect and preserve community accounts of the disaster itself

Experiences during the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the 2011 Queensland floods and the 2019–2020 bushfires illustrate that libraries form part of the social and informational backbone of community recovery and resilience.



National Emergency Declaration Act 2020

To address these shortfalls, ALIA submits that risk of harm to Australia's cultural heritage should be embedded as an explicit consideration within the national emergency framework, and the NED specifically.

Internationally, the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage in disasters is recognised in the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [Sendai Framework](#) and in the work of [Blue Shield International](#), as well as Blue Shield Australia. The NAP references these materials and endorses their position by stating that heritage considerations should be incorporated into decisions and investment around risk deduction (p.73).

The NED, however, does not reflect this position. Importantly, it does not include heritage or cultural impacts as a consideration in its definition of "nationally significant harm" (s10(a)). Although impacts on libraries and other cultural institutions or collections may at times overlap with considerations listed in the current definition, such as damage to property (s10(a)(iii)) or disruption to an essential service (s10(a)(v)), this fails to fully acknowledge the important long term and downstream impacts of harm to cultural heritage.

Failure to integrate cultural heritage protection into emergency systems leads to systemic gaps such as:

- cultural collections not being prioritised in disaster risk management and response planning
- first responders lacking guidance on stabilising damaged heritage materials
- recovery funding excluding memory institutions
- poor or non-existence coordination between emergency management agencies and cultural institutions.

Conclusion

National emergency frameworks are ultimately about safeguarding people, communities and the systems that sustain them. Cultural memory, trusted information access and community gathering spaces are fundamental components of resilience. Libraries are not peripheral to emergency management - they are integral to it.

ALIA therefore submits that recognising harm to Australia's cultural heritage as a core consideration in the *National Emergency Declaration Act* is fundamental to strengthen Australia's disaster planning, preparedness and recovery.

ALIA would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence to the Committee and to contribute to strengthening Australia's emergency preparedness framework in a way that protects both people and the nation's memory.