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Submission to Consultation on the Next National Cultural Policy

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to consultation on the next National Cultural Policy.

As a representative of a regional community museum, I strongly support the direction established through Revive and welcome the government's recognition that arts and culture are essential to Australia's identity, wellbeing and social connection. The five pillars continue to provide a valuable framework for thinking about culture as something that belongs to all Australians and is created in many ways across communities.

However, from the perspective of regional museums and local heritage organisations, there remain important gaps in how cultural policy recognises and supports our sector.

Community museums, historical societies and heritage organisations play a vital role in Australia's cultural life. We preserve local stories, collections and community memory, capturing and telling the stories of the places where we live. We contribute to tourism, education, intergenerational learning and social cohesion. In many regional communities, museums are among the few accessible cultural spaces where people gather to connect with place, identity and shared history.

Despite this, the heritage sector is often positioned adjacent to the arts rather than recognised as an active and essential part of Australia's cultural ecosystem.

The consultation paper speaks positively about participation, storytelling, local identity and community connection, but there is little direct recognition of the contribution made by volunteer-led museums and historical societies. Across regional Australia, these organisations are sustained largely by ageing volunteer workforces who carry increasing responsibilities for governance, collections management, exhibitions, public programming, compliance, fundraising and digital engagement.

If the next National Cultural Policy is to genuinely support community cultural participation, it must explicitly recognise volunteers as a critical part of Australia's cultural infrastructure.

The policy should also acknowledge that regional organisations face very different operating conditions from larger metropolitan institutions. Expectations around digital engagement, audience development and innovation continue to grow, but many small organisations lack the staffing, technical expertise and financial capacity required to meet these expectations sustainably.

'Where your stories live'

Regional organisations also face difficulty attracting specialist expertise, with many consultants and technical professionals unwilling or unable to travel to regional centres such as Batemans Bay. By contrast, regional organisations are often expected to absorb the time and cost of travelling to metropolitan centres to access expertise, training or institutional support. Accommodation costs, transport limitations and the lack of reliable public transport place further financial pressure on regional museums and volunteer organisations.

Digital engagement is important and creates exciting opportunities for museums and heritage organisations to reach new audiences, particularly younger people. However, digital transition should not become another unfunded expectation placed on small volunteer organisations. Regional cultural organisations need practical support for digital capability, training, equipment, preservation and long-term maintenance.

Regional museums also face growing pressures associated with climate risk, disaster preparedness and collection preservation, particularly in coastal and bushfire-prone communities. Long-term cultural sustainability must include support for protecting collections and community memory from environmental threats.

The consultation paper also places welcome emphasis on participation and audience engagement. Community museums are already delivering this work. Increasingly, museums are not simply places of static display. They are community hubs where local stories are interpreted, shared and experienced through exhibitions, talks, school programs, digital storytelling, events and partnerships. In regional communities such as Batemans Bay, heritage organisations contribute directly to cultural tourism and local economic activity while also strengthening community identity and belonging.

Importantly, local history and heritage should not be viewed solely as preservation activity. Heritage is active cultural practice. It connects generations, strengthens understanding of place and provides opportunities for communities to reflect on who they are and how their stories are shared.

Community heritage is not separate from contemporary culture. It is living culture — continually interpreted, shared and renewed through exhibitions, events, storytelling, education programs and community participation.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to more clearly embed community heritage within Australia's cultural future.

In particular, consideration should be given to:

- greater recognition of museums, historical societies and volunteer heritage organisations within national cultural policy settings
- stronger support for regional and volunteer-led cultural infrastructure
- investment in digital capability and storytelling for community organisations
- long-term sustainability funding, not solely project-based funding
- support for volunteer development, succession planning and governance capability
- support for climate resilience, disaster preparedness and collection protection for regional cultural organisations
- stronger recognition of the role local heritage plays in tourism, education and community wellbeing
- support for intergenerational and youth engagement in heritage and local storytelling
- greater integration of local museums and heritage organisations into broader cultural, tourism and education strategies.

The strength of Australia's cultural life does not rest solely in major institutions or capital cities. It also lives in local halls, historical collections, community museums, volunteer organisations and the stories communities tell about themselves.

A future-focused cultural policy should recognise that regional heritage organisations are not simply preserving the past. We are helping communities understand themselves in the present and imagine their future.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important consultation.

Kind regards,

Ewan Morrison

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Batemans Bay Heritage Museum