

## Shaping the next National Cultural Policy: State Library of Queensland's response

State Library of Queensland welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the next National Cultural Policy. As an essential part of Australia's cultural infrastructure, State Library collects, preserves and shares Queensland's history through a living collection that evolves and grows with the people, cultures and communities of the state. State Library works in partnership with local governments to support a vibrant and dynamic network of more than 325 public libraries and Indigenous Knowledge Centres. These free and welcoming spaces break down barriers to accessing information and strengthen communities through place-based services.

As a member of National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA), State Library is part of a strong coalition that has become a driving force for innovation and professional development. Working as a coalition provides a mechanism to collaborate on approaches to collecting, service delivery, research, advocacy, skills development, and library standards. It brings shared expertise and economies of scale to our work. Trove is such a powerful example of the impact of NSLA's efforts, bringing Australians a unified digital platform to access our nation's documentary heritage.

As trusted, low-barrier cultural institutions, libraries are instrumental in:

- enabling reading, with benefits for wellbeing, social cohesion and as a cultural practice
- delivering equitable access to information and services to all Australians
- supporting creators, researchers and communities
- preserving national memory and knowledge systems
- providing versatile community infrastructure that supports local priorities
- creating welcoming, safe and inclusive community spaces
- sharing culture and encouraging active citizenry.

Libraries sit at the centre of Australia's cultural ecosystem, connecting readers, writers, ideas, and communities while providing the infrastructure that ensures stories circulate widely and equitably. More than access points, they are trusted institutions that turn reading into shared experience and ensure perspectives can be encountered with depth and care. They play a crucial civic role by preserving knowledge, expanding access, and enabling people to see themselves and each other in the national story.

Libraries remain deeply relevant, operating at the intersection of arts and culture, heritage, education, research, technology and community wellbeing. They are a vital third space for building the social cohesion that underpins our democracy. To quote the *IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*<sup>1</sup>:

*Constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information.*

With rapid technological change, information disorder, and growing social fragmentation, these foundations are increasingly fragile, leaving modern democracies exposed to erosion and mistrust. Libraries are uniquely positioned to effect change as trusted public institutions that

enable informed participation, strengthen critical thinking, and provide inclusive spaces for dialogue.

### **Key policy challenges**

As the next National Cultural Policy is developed, we must plan for Australia's capacity to:

- preserve and interpret its cultural record in an era of digital acceleration
- implement structural change that protects First Nations' cultural knowledge and rights
- ensure equitable access to trusted information and services
- respond to rapid technological change without widening cultural and digital divides
- support diverse forms of cultural and creative expression, including local and place-based practices
- foster resilient and connected communities.

### **Key policy drivers**

In considering the next National Cultural Policy, State Library highlights the following elements as key drivers shaping the policy environment:

- the social, cultural and economic benefits of a strong reading culture
- the growing recognition of culture's role in wellbeing, democratic participation and social cohesion
- the responsibilities and rights which stem from Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), including the need for new legislative frameworks
- that digital transformation and AI are reshaping how culture is created, recorded, discovered and reused
- the critical importance of libraries as trusted institutions that protect information integrity and support democratic participation.

Against this broader policy backdrop, this submission now considers the 4 pillars from *Revive* which are most relevant to libraries, focussing on the specific challenges to be addressed and the opportunities that emerge for the people and communities we serve.

### **Pillar 1: First Nations First**

There are over 150 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups in Queensland<sup>2</sup>. State Library collaborates with communities to support the preservation, revitalisation and continuation of traditional languages. This includes languages that are living and those that are sleeping. The National Indigenous Languages Survey reported 26 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages spoken in 2018-29<sup>3</sup>. This underscores the importance of the languages sector and efforts aimed at language continuation and revitalisation, acknowledging that language heritage and knowledge always remain with the Traditional Owners, Elders, language custodians and community members of each language group and Country.

State Library supports revitalisation through initiatives such as digitising collection material that includes languages and commissioning digital stories and oral histories to support language scholarship. Well-considered and strategic investment in the Indigenous Languages and Arts Program remains essential to sustain and expand this work. First Languages Australia is

advocating for legislation to support and protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. To date, State Library has profiled an estimated 101 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and dialects, and we lend our support to advocacy for the National Cultural Policy to elevate strategy and support for the languages sector.

Libraries are committed to strengthening relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and ensuring practices reflect expectations for respectful and culturally informed engagement. Access, connectivity and digital literacy are all critical to safeguarding the ICIP of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As ICIP is not yet formally recognised in Australian law, organisations, including State Library, have developed culturally informed principles and protocols to guide respectful access, use and management of Indigenous cultural heritage and knowledge.

The library and information sector brings deep expertise to support implementation of commitments to ICIP and data sovereignty, along with language preservation and Indigenous-led collecting. Prioritising digital repatriation is an important strategy to support culturally appropriate management of collections.

#### Opportunities

- Pursue ICIP legislation to set and uphold standards.
- Embed ICIP, Indigenous data sovereignty and self-determination across national cultural policy settings.
- Expand digital repatriation to foster Indigenous-led collections management and interpretation.
- Invest in the capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to revive, document and preserve traditional languages, recognising the importance of speaking and transmission.
- Invest in First Nations leadership pathways.
- Invest in long-term partnerships by designing decision-making processes which preference these over shorter-term projects.

### **Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story**

Collections act as a form of cultural ballast, helping to balance and hold diversity of opinion and experience over the long term. Library collections are cultural infrastructure that anchor records, stories and histories to place, enabling deeper understanding of personal and national identities. Active engagement with this diversity is essential: in an increasingly polarised world, the ongoing collection and engagement with multiple perspectives deepens our understanding of the ways identity, cultures and values are shaped over time.

Libraries play a vital role in ensuring there is a place for every story, preserving and sharing the diverse experiences that shape our collective identity. This ambition continues to grow as digital collections expand, increasing the reach and accessibility of library services so that people can discover, connect with and contribute to cultural knowledge anytime, anywhere.

While libraries continue to evolve to meet changing community needs, they must remain safe, trusted and inclusive spaces. In everyday ways, libraries enable people to experience the benefits of being together—whether through reading, working, learning or simply sharing space in the company of others. These low-barrier, welcoming environments foster connection and inclusion. They provide a trusted setting for individuals and communities to engage with

knowledge and culture, strengthened by local programs that support literacy, creativity and community wellbeing across all stages of life.

Building social connection and civic trust is a priority. Libraries recognise the importance of actively ensuring information remains discoverable, freely accessible, and usable. This connection between information and civic trust is illustrated by the Australian Public Service Commission's approach to monitoring satisfaction with democracy, which includes measures on public perceptions of free access to information<sup>4</sup>.

#### Opportunities

- Commit to a national reading program to promote reading for pleasure, wellbeing, social connection and to build trust in a complex society.
- Recognise libraries and collecting institutions as foundational national storytelling infrastructure.
- Invest in libraries as place-based civic infrastructure to enable participation and achieve social cohesion and digital inclusion.
- Strengthen libraries as trusted, locally embedded public spaces where culture is encountered, practiced and shared, and where people engage with ideas, knowledge and creative expression in everyday life.

#### **Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure**

Equitable access remains a key priority for a future cultural policy. It is foundational to meaningful participation in cultural life. This includes reliable and sustained access to digital materials. Interconnected policy challenges stem from rapidly evolving AI, increasingly sophisticated cyber threats and critical gaps in digital access and ability<sup>5</sup>. There is an opportunity to establish a National Digital Library to provide equitable access to online reading resources for all Australians. This could be pursued through nationally negotiated agreements with publishers and platforms. It would enable more efficient use of public funding rather than multiple separate agreements with suppliers of ebooks, subscription databases and research tools.

State Library has a strong, long-term partnership with local government for the provision of library services and programs, administering \$32.3 million in Queensland Government funding in 2024-25 to 325 public libraries and Indigenous Knowledge Centre (IKC)<sup>6</sup>. Contemporary libraries provide dynamic, locally responsive cultural infrastructure that supports the learning and engagement needs of communities. There is an opportunity for all levels of government to work together to sustain this vital cultural architecture.

Over the past 3 years, State Library's Digital Inclusion Program addressed persistent digital exclusion in regional, rural, and remote Queensland communities. Funding of \$9 million supported libraries as digital hubs that provided locally led access to essential services, fostering creativity, and supporting economic participation. Evaluation of the project indicated it achieved an estimated social return on investment of \$36 million, with even greater benefits evident in regional and remote areas<sup>7</sup>. The evaluation also found that meaningful digital inclusion outcomes depend on delivery that is tailored to local contexts and led in collaboration with communities<sup>8</sup>. There is great potential for the next National Cultural Policy to shift rates of digital inclusion through creative and purpose-driven approaches grounded in communities.

Programs such as this evidence the case for local, relational delivery models and continuous investment in digital infrastructure.

## Opportunities

- Establish a National Digital Library to provide equitable access to online reading resources for all Australians.
- Build capability to care for collections by fostering our nation's professional expertise in conservation and improving collaboration with communities and across jurisdictions.
- Strengthen digital inclusion through sustained and strategic commitments to address barriers and improve access, capability and digital participation.
- Pursue community-controlled knowledge initiatives to amplify First Nations governance models for the management of collections.
- Pursue mechanisms and incentives designed to increase non-government investment in arts and cultural infrastructure.

## Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Libraries are uniquely placed to engage audiences at all stages of life, and in a wide variety of interests. In Queensland, the First 5 Forever<sup>9</sup> initiative promotes early childhood development and fosters a love of learning from an early age. It empowers parents and caregivers with the knowledge, tools and confidence to support their child's learning through talking, reading, singing and playing. The success of this program highlights the importance of honouring children as audiences and building the capacity of the cultural sector to respond to children and families through evidence-informed programming that is embedded, considered and enables rich interactions.

Libraries, together with archives and other collecting institutions, are well placed to harness technology to capture and share Australian narratives in new ways. The success of Australia's beloved Trove platform has demonstrated the potential for deep and sustained cooperation. The next National Cultural Policy provides an opportunity for a significant, collaborative agenda to centre audiences and their engagement with film, video and audio content.

## Opportunities

- Build the capability of artists and cultural workers to respond to evidence-based, early learning priorities through innovative programs.
- Launch a single streaming platform to connect Australian audiences with their cultural collections and creative content, taking a broad view to include broadcasters, libraries, archives, galleries.
- Harness audience data to further enhance programs and services to suit local needs.

## Conclusion

A strong National Cultural Policy should enable cultural rights, equitable access, the preservation of national memory and ongoing innovation. Libraries present opportunities because they are trusted, locally embedded institutions that connect people with knowledge, stories and each other. By recognising libraries as essential cultural infrastructure, the National Cultural Policy can unlock opportunities to strengthen inclusion and social cohesion, support creators and communities, and build capability across the sector. Libraries are uniquely positioned to respond to the challenges and opportunities outlined in this submission, and will be central to sustaining an informed, connected and resilient democracy for all Australians.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://repository.ifla.org/handle/20.500.14598/2006><sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> State Library of Queensland, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages*, State Library of Queensland website, Queensland Government, accessed 15 May 2026.

<sup>3</sup> NILS3 (National Indigenous Languages Surveys) in combination with external sources of information as detailed on the Productivity Commission (2025) *Closing the Gap Information Repository—Dashboard*, accessed 15 May 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Public Service Commission (2026) *Satisfaction with Australian Democracy – Pulse reports*, APSC Website, accessed 6 May 2026.

<sup>5</sup> As documented in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index. See Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Ormond-Parker, L., Morrison, K., Rea, H., & Ganley, L. *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. DOI: 10.60836/mtsqa-at22

<sup>6</sup> Note this includes First 5 Forever funding. Library Board of Queensland (2025). *Library Board of Queensland Annual Report 2024-25*. Library Board of Queensland.

<https://content.slq.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/Library%20Board%20of%20Queensland%20Annual%20Report%202024-25.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Osman, K., Dezuanni, M., Genon, L.J., Anzari, P. & Bromage, M. (2026). *Evaluation of State Library's Digital Inclusion Program: The impact of place-based approaches in regional, rural and remote Queensland*. Brisbane: Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/about/partnerships-and-collaborations/enduring-partnership-local-government/first-5-forever>