

Museums & Galleries of NSW National Cultural Policy Submission

23 May 2026

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) welcomes the development of a renewed National Cultural Policy and supports its five-pillar framework.

M&G NSW is a peak body and service organisation supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW to support small-to-medium museums and galleries across the state. Of the organisations we support, 55% are fully volunteer run and the vast majority are regionally-based.

Small-to-medium (S2M) museums, galleries, Aboriginal cultural centres and heritage organisations are foundational to Australia's cultural ecosystem—particularly in regional, outer-metropolitan and remote communities. These organisations:

- Support artist career pathways
- Preserve and activate cultural heritage
- Enable place-based storytelling
- Strengthen community cohesion and wellbeing
- Deliver cultural access across diverse and geographically dispersed communities

Despite this impact small to medium organisations, and museums in particular, remain under-recognised and under-resourced in national policy settings. Globally, museums and movable cultural heritage are prioritised in an estimated **70–90% of national cultural policies**, yet this sector was largely absent in the first iteration of *Revive*.

Our submission calls for a **more balanced, distributed model of cultural investment**—one that supports national institutions while sustaining the local cultural infrastructure that underpins Australia's creative life.

Framing Themes

This submission is largely structured around three intersecting priorities:

1. **Recognising small to medium museums and galleries being central to the telling of local stories**
2. **Investing in the small-to-medium sector as the engine of access, participation and artist development**
3. **Strengthening the visual arts and exhibition touring ecosystem**

Pillar 1: First Nations First

M&G NSW supports the centrality of First Nations culture and calls for structural, resourced leadership across the sector.

M&G NSW has supported the development of the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Arts Association (ACHAA) and continues to prioritise First Nations-led touring and programming. However, sector-wide capacity and embedded culturally safe governance remains limited in non-First Nations organisations due to funding constraints, while financial support for First Nations-led organisations needs uplift.

We note and support the establishment of the 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Expert Working Group on ICIP' to support the development of new legislation to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional knowledge and cultural expressions. We also want to ensure that *Revive* aligns with the principles of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

M&G NSW also supports ACHAA's Submission, where their priorities focus on First Nations employment and skills development and collection management, particularly the digitisation of collections.

Key Issues

- Insufficient funding for culturally safe practice for non-First Nations organisations
- More financial support for First Nations-led organisations is needed
- Vulnerability of cultural heritage, especially in regional areas

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Small-to-medium organisations are the primary vehicle for place-based storytelling but face systemic underinvestment. In particular, we also highlight the near invisibility of the museums and moveable cultural heritage sectors within *Revive* and the lack of financial support from the Federal Government to the small to medium sector generally.

These issues are highlighted through the critical underinvestment in museums and visual arts as an area of practice as outlined in Creative Australia's 2024/25 Annual Report:

- Orchestras: 26%
- Theatre: 13%
- Opera: 10%
- Dance: 9%
- Music: 9%
- **Visual Arts: 6%**

We also note that regionally-based organisations (across all artforms) received 13% of Creative Australia funding, while 36% of Australia's population is regionally-based.

Further, in 2025, 0.18% of Creative Australia funding went to local government galleries, while museums and heritage organisations received zero funding through Creative Australia.

The M&G NSW pilot program, *Lights On Doors Open*, distributed \$2,000 to volunteer-run organisations and made a significant impact to these organisations to address urgent needs, while also working towards achieving goals from the [National Standards for Museums and Galleries](#).

Key Issues

- Structural underfunding
- Limited access to federal programs
- Policy invisibility of museums and heritage
- Workforce and volunteer capacity gaps
- Inequitable geographic funding distribution

Pillar 3: The Centrality of the Artist

Small-to-medium galleries, museums and touring networks are essential to the artist ecosystem – in particular, living artists. These organisations provide early and mid-career opportunities, especially outside major metropolitan centres and can often be the first prospect for artists to present in a professionally run organisation. For example, the current artist representing Australia at the Venice Biennale, Khaled Sabsabi, had his first solo exhibitions at Casula Powerhouse and Campbelltown Arts Centre – both local government operated public galleries.

As NAVA noted in their submission, the establishment of Visual Arts and Craft Australia will provide direct support to the visual arts, craft and design sector through audience development, strategic planning, investment attraction and sector-wide advocacy.

Furthermore, touring programs, including those delivered through NETS (National Exhibition Touring Support) agencies, are critical in extending artists' reach and building sustainable careers.

NAVA makes a number of compelling cases and recommendations in support of artists and the S2M sector who work with them. M&G NSW backs NAVA's submission in full.

Key Issues

- Limited investment in S2M sector support for living artists
- Over-reliance on major institutions
- Weak financial and regulatory settings for artists

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The small to medium sector is foundational in supporting the cultural needs of the community nationally while simultaneously fostering the careers of living artists and arts and cultural workers. A New Approach's recent report, [The Big Picture](#), observed a small increase in cultural funding from Local Government to this sector, but did note the increasing strain being felt as: '*Government investment in arts and culture is not keeping pace with population growth*'. We also acknowledge the points made by The Lock Up in its submission on the significant expectations placed on small organisations from funding bodies.

The Local Government NSW report: [Cost Shifting 2023: How State Costs Eat Council Rates](#) found that in just over 5 years cost shifting on to NSW local government rose 78% from \$820 million per year to more than \$1.36 billion per year.

To support this vital part of the cultural ecosystem, we call for the implementation of a program based on the United Kingdom's [Museums and Galleries Exhibition Tax Relief](#), introduced in 2017. This program allows museums, galleries and libraries to apply for up to 40% of costs associated with exhibition production and display. Claimants must be a charitable company, or a company wholly owned by a charity or local authority, which is responsible for maintaining a museum or gallery. This program was recently [put forward by M&G NSW](#) and other organisations at the 2025 Cultural Tax Reform summit.

Additionally, the sector faces growing risks from climate change and natural disasters which not only impact organisational viability but also create great risk to our collective cultural heritage.

The [M&G NSW 2022 Sector Census](#) found that 95% of organisations cited at least one risk to their collections, with 19% stating they are at high risk to natural disaster. A National Cultural Recovery Fund, managed by state-based peak bodies/service organisations who could quickly respond to the needs of the sector in times of disaster, would ensure losses of vital moveable cultural heritage would be minimised.

We also call for embedding Climate Policy across all 5 pillars of *Revive*. Arts On Tour has made critical recommendations on this in its Submission which could be implemented across art forms.

Finally, volunteer-led organisations make up approximately 76% of the NSW cultural sector. One of the greatest challenges facing this sector is volunteer retention. It is recognised that volunteering contributes \$566 billion to the Australian economy annually ([A Snapshot of Volunteering in Australia](#), 2023), while at the same time volunteers spend an average of \$13.97/hour on their volunteering. Of this, 14.4% is spent on equipment, technology, self-education, training and courses. Given these figures cover all volunteering activities, we would surmise that the average spend for volunteers at under-resourced volunteer-led organisations would be much higher. As we argued in our [2025 Submission](#) to the Cultural Tax Reform Summit, we recommend the ability for volunteers to be able to tax deduct relevant expenses associated with their volunteering (similar to work related expenses), to ensure greater viability for volunteer-led organisations.

Key Issues

- Heavy reliance on local government funding amid increasing cost shifting
- Lack of operational funding to complement infrastructure investment
- Competition between national institutions and smaller organisations for funding
- Under-supported exhibition production
- Increasing climate-related risks to collections and facilities
- Limited sector capacity to implement sustainability measures
- Volunteer retention

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Small-to-medium organisations are critical to audience engagement, particularly in regional and remote communities where they may be the only cultural providers. 2025 M&G NSW Benchmarking found that the 32 public galleries across NSW engaged 5,046 artists in their programs reaching audiences numbering 941,560. This indicates a cost-effective way to simultaneously support the careers of artists and the cultural needs of community. M&G NSW is also one of seven NETS agencies (National Exhibition Touring Support). Throughout 2025, the NETS agencies toured 43 exhibitions reaching audiences of 353,247. This included touring to 76 Regional venues and 11 Remote venues.

Touring programs significantly expand access but are increasingly constrained by rising costs and could also be assisted by enhanced funding mechanisms. A key issue to address is the variances between Visions of Australia (administered by the Office For The Arts) and Playing Australia (Creative Australia) funding. We call for an alignment of these programs so that Visions of Australia would:

- operate 3 rounds annually;
- allow for Contingency as an allowable budget line;
- support 1 year of programming support to an organisation across multiple tours.

We also call for the National Collecting Institutions to be in a separate funding pool from the rest of the sector, given that they also have the ability to apply to the *National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program*.

M&G NSW also seeks to highlight the role museums and galleries play in supporting community wellbeing and social cohesion – particularly in regional and remote Australia.

Museums and galleries address social isolation, reduce loneliness and foster belonging. Orange Regional Gallery's *Connecting to Place* pilot program with migrant and refugee communities, identified that participants reported a stronger sense of belonging to their local community, demonstrating the unique role cultural institutions play in creating meaningful social connections. This has been reiterated in the 2026 Regional Australia Institute report, [Regional Migration Experiences](#).

Along with Accessible Arts, we also recommend that disability inclusion and representation be embedded as a cross-cutting principle across all pillars of cultural policy. Embedding this principle across the entire policy architecture is essential to driving consistent structural change, rather than limiting responsibility to isolated programs or targeted initiatives.

Key Issues

- Rising freight and touring costs are limiting reach
- Variation of funding programs
- Undue competition between national institutions and other parts of the sector
- Under-recognition of the role of culture in community wellbeing
- Disability inclusion across entire policy framework

Museums & Galleries of NSW Recommendations:

PILLAR 1: FIRST NATIONS FIRST:

1. Fund First Nations roles in peak bodies (when not competing with First Nations-led peaks)
2. Resource First Nations-led peak bodies
3. Dedicated funding for First Nations-led touring and collections projects
4. Align *Revive* with the principles of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*

PILLAR 2: A PLACE FOR EVERY STORY:

5. Recognising the role of museums and movable cultural heritage in *Revive*
6. Establish a national Stipend program for volunteer-led organisations, managed by state-based peak bodies
7. Funding regionally-made touring work
8. Invest in workforce development and training
9. Equitable geographic funding distribution

PILLAR 3: CENTRALITY OF THE ARTIST:

10. Increase direct funding to S2M organisations supporting living artists
11. Establish Visual Arts and Craft Australia providing support to visual arts, craft/design
12. Implement NAVA Recommendations

PILLAR 4: STRONG CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE:

13. Design a Tripartite funding agreement across 3 tiers of government
14. Implement Exhibition Offset Scheme

15. Establish National Cultural Recovery Disaster Fund, managed by state-based peak bodies
16. Implement Arts On Tour sustainability recommendations
17. Enable tax deductions for volunteer expenses

PILLAR 5: ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE:

18. Align Visions of Australia with Playing Australia
19. Separate National Collecting Institutions from Visions of Australia funding
20. S2M funding to support wellbeing and social connectedness programs
21. Embed disability inclusion and representation as a principle across all pillars of *Revive*

Conclusion

A successful National Cultural Policy must move beyond the concentration of resources in major institutions and metropolitan centres. Cultural life in Australia is sustained through a distributed network of small-to-medium organisations embedded in communities. Museums, galleries, Aboriginal cultural centres and heritage organisations are not peripheral – they are **essential infrastructure**.

By investing in this sector, the Australian Government can:

- Strengthen cultural participation and access
- Support artists and creative workers
- Preserve and activate cultural heritage
- Build resilient, connected communities

This submission calls for a policy that is:

1. **Visible** in recognising museums and heritage
2. **Equitable** in distributing resources
3. **Ambitious** in supporting local cultural ecosystems

Note: M&G NSW has collaborated with, and supports the Submissions (and associated Recommendations) from:

- Aboriginal Culture Heritage and Arts Association of NSW (ACHAA)
- National Exhibition Touring Support (NETS) Australia
- Regional Public Galleries NSW
- National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA)
- National Standards Taskforce
- Arts On Tour
- Accessible Arts
- Regional Arts NSW
- Chau Chak Wing Museum/The University of Sydney
- Writing NSW
- Diversity Arts Australia

In particular, our Submission aligns with and supports the Submission from our sister organisation, Museums and Galleries Queensland.