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NATIONAL STANDARDS TASKFORCE: NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION

The National Standards Taskforce consists of representatives from 6 state organisations who oversee the development of the [*National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries*](#). Taskforce members work closely with the volunteer and small museum and gallery sectors, supporting advocacy through the development of the *National Standards* and working with advocacy bodies.

The Taskforce currently consists of members from:

- Arts Tasmania
- History Trust of South Australia
- Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory
- Museums & Galleries Queensland
- Museums & Galleries of NSW
- Australian Museums and Galleries Association Victoria

The National Standards Taskforce welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's renewed National Cultural Policy. This submission focuses on the role of small-to-medium museums, galleries, volunteer-run museums, community heritage organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural centres as essential components of Australia's cultural infrastructure.

Across regional, rural, remote and outer-metropolitan Australia, these organisations preserve and activate cultural heritage, support community identity, social cohesion and participation, and provide access to culture where few other opportunities exist, and safeguard collections of local, state and national significance. Many are volunteer-led and operate with minimal operational support, despite delivering substantial public value.

While Australia's major cultural institutions play a vital role, the long-term sustainability of the national cultural ecosystem also depends on investment in the distributed network of community museums and heritage organisations embedded across the country. These organisations are often the first point of cultural engagement for communities and visitors, yet remain under-recognised in federal cultural policy and funding frameworks.

Key Priorities

This submission identifies four priority areas for the National Cultural Policy:

1. Recognition of small to medium museums, galleries and movable cultural heritage as vital to Australian storytelling
2. Sustainable support for volunteer-run and small-to-medium museums and heritage organisations
3. Protection of collections and cultural heritage from climate and disaster risks
4. Investment in workforce capability, including volunteer development and First Nations cultural leadership and cultural safety

Pillar 1: First Nations First

Volunteer and community museums, First Nations cultural centres and regional heritage organisations play an important role in preserving and sharing First Nations histories and cultural knowledge at a local level. However, many organisations lack the resources, staffing and training required to undertake this work appropriately and sustainably.

The National Cultural Policy should strengthen investment in First Nations-led cultural heritage initiatives, particularly in regional and community settings, and ensure that smaller organisations have access to culturally safe guidance, partnerships and training.

Priority Actions

- Support First Nations-led collection management, digitisation and cultural heritage projects
- Invest in First Nations workforce development and leadership across the museum and heritage sector
- Ensure the National Cultural Policy aligns with the principles of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*
- Support state-based and regional organisations that provide cultural capability development to volunteer-run and small museums

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Small and volunteer-run museums are central to preserving Australia's local histories, migration stories, industrial heritage, military history, First Nations cultural heritage and community memory. They are often operated by volunteers, historical societies and local communities with very limited operational funding.

Despite their importance, museums and heritage organisations remain largely absent from federal cultural funding frameworks. Many volunteer-run organisations are ineligible for key funding programs, lack access to professional development opportunities, and operate in ageing facilities with limited capacity.

The invisibility of the sector within national policy settings places significant collections and community knowledge at risk.

Additionally, regional and remote organisations need financial support and resourcing to activate communities geographically distanced from major metropolitan areas. When considering like for like programs between regional/remote and metropolitan organisations; the former face significantly higher delivery costs.

Priority Actions

- Formally recognise small to medium museums and galleries being central to the telling of local stories
- Establish a modest national operational support or stipend program for volunteer-run museums and heritage organisations, administered through state-based peak bodies/service organisations
- Increase investment in training, collection management support and workforce development for volunteer-led organisations

- Recognise barriers faced by regional and remote organisations to providing cultural access to communities
- Improve access pathways for small museums and heritage organisations to participate in federal cultural funding programs

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

For many communities, particularly in regional and remote Australia, small museums, galleries and heritage organisations are the primary cultural infrastructure available to the public. However, these organisations face increasing pressures from rising operational costs, ageing facilities, climate impacts and disaster risks.

The sector requires targeted support that recognises the vulnerability of volunteer-managed collections and the importance of safeguarding Australia's movable cultural heritage.

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. 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.

The 2022 sector census undertaken by Museums & Galleries of NSW found that 95% of NSW organisations identified risks to their collections, with 19% identifying a high risk of natural disasters to collections. We expect that these figures would be similar in a national context.

Priority Actions

- Establish a National Cultural Recovery and Resilience Fund to support museums and heritage organisations impacted by natural disasters and climate events
- Invest in disaster preparedness, collection care and sustainability initiatives for small-to-medium organisations
- Develop stronger partnerships between federal, state and local governments to support community cultural infrastructure
- Support the work of volunteers
- Recognise operational sustainability as equally important as capital infrastructure investment

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Small museums and heritage organisations deliver significant social and cultural outcomes despite limited resources. They provide accessible cultural participation opportunities, intergenerational learning, volunteer engagement, tourism benefits and community wellbeing outcomes.

In many regional communities, museums are among the only publicly accessible cultural spaces and are maintained almost entirely through volunteer labour.

Strengthening these organisations strengthens cultural participation nationally.

Priority Actions

- Support programs that improve access, participation and audience development in regional and remote communities
- Invest in volunteer capability and succession planning to ensure long-term sustainability of community museums
- Support digitisation and collection accessibility initiatives to improve public engagement with local heritage
- Ensure regional and community-based organisations are appropriately represented in national cultural policy implementation

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Recognise small to medium museums and galleries being central to the telling of local stories**
2. **Establish a national operational support or stipend program** for volunteer-run museums and heritage organisations, administered through state-based sector organisations
3. **Invest in workforce capability, volunteer training** and collection management support for small-to-medium museums and heritage organisations
4. **Recognise the financial barriers faced by regional and remote organisations** and provide relevant financial support to overcome these barriers
5. **Enable tax deductions for volunteer expenses** – to reduce financial barriers and improve retention in a sector where 76% of organisations are volunteer-led
6. **Support First Nations-led cultural heritage**, collection management and digitisation initiatives across the museum and heritage sector
7. **Establish a National Cultural Recovery and Resilience Fund** to support disaster preparedness, climate adaptation and recovery for museums and heritage organisations
8. **Improve access to federal cultural funding programs** for small and volunteer-run museums and heritage organisations, particularly in regional and remote Australia

Conclusion

Australia's cultural life is sustained not only by major national institutions, but by thousands of small museums, heritage organisations and volunteer-run cultural spaces embedded within communities across the country.

These organisations preserve collections, safeguard stories, strengthen identity and provide cultural participation opportunities in places where access would otherwise be limited or absent. Yet they continue to operate with limited visibility and inadequate support within national policy settings.

A renewed National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to recognise museums and heritage organisations as essential cultural infrastructure and to invest in the sustainability of the volunteer and small-to-medium sector that underpins so much of Australia's cultural life.

Targeted investment in this sector will deliver significant cultural, social and community outcomes while protecting Australia's movable cultural heritage for future generations.