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Submission to the National Cultural Policy Review

South Australian Museum, May 2026

Executive summary

The South Australian Museum welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy. The Museum supports the ambition of *Revive* and the continuation of its five enduring pillars: First Nations First; A Place for Every Story; Centrality of the Artist; Strong Cultural Infrastructure; and Engaging the Audience. The next policy must now address a significant gap: the role of museums, collections, research institutions and public knowledge infrastructure must be more clearly recognised and supported.

Revive restored culture to the centre of national life and has delivered important reforms, including the establishment of Creative Australia and investment in national collecting institutions. As of March 2026, 75 of the 85 announced actions had been delivered. However, the policy framework has not yet adequately reflected the full public value of museums as institutions that care for collections, generate research, support education, enable truth-telling, contribute to tourism and economic development, and serve as trusted civic spaces.

<https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/public-consultation-paper-national-cultural-policy-2026.pdf>)

The South Australian Museum is one of Australia's most visited museums. It holds collections of national and international significance, including more than four million specimens and cultural items, and is a leader in Australian Aboriginal heritage, scientific research, regional engagement and public learning (<https://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/>). Its Strategic Plan 2025–2030 positions the Museum as a place where collections, research and knowledge are made accessible, inclusive and connected to community; where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority guides collections, research, exhibitions and programs; and where research outcomes are applied to present and future challenges.

The next National Cultural Policy should recognise museums as essential national infrastructure: not only as visitor destinations, but as custodians of cultural and natural heritage, research engines, education partners, community anchors and civic institutions. Cultural and creative activity contributed \$67.4 billion to Australia's economy and employed more than 591,000 people in 2023–24, but the value of museums extends beyond direct economic measures into biodiversity knowledge, climate adaptation, truth-telling, reconciliation, lifelong learning, regional access, tourism and social cohesion (<https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/public-consultation-paper-national-cultural-policy-2026.pdf>).

The South Australian Museum recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

1. Explicitly recognise museums, galleries, libraries, archives, keeping places and collections as national cultural, research, education and community infrastructure.
2. Establish a standing Collections and Heritage Committee reporting to Cultural Ministers, supported by Commonwealth, state, territory and local government participation, First Nations representation and sector expertise.
3. Create a dedicated Collections Investment Fund to support core operations, collections care, digitisation, conservation, storage, security, research translation, repatriation, exhibitions, education and regional access.
4. Develop a national research and collections infrastructure strategy linking museums to universities, national research infrastructure, biodiversity policy, climate adaptation, biosecurity, cultural heritage, data systems and public science.
5. Invest in First Nations cultural authority, repatriation, truth-telling and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property protections as core museum functions, not discretionary projects.
6. Support exhibitions, touring and public programs as national access infrastructure, including expanded indemnity, freight, insurance, touring, regional presentation and exhibition development support.
7. Embed museums in national education policy, including curriculum-linked learning, teacher professional development, STEM and HASS engagement, lifelong learning and public research participation.
8. Strengthen mixed public/private funding models, including matched giving, endowment incentives, simplified philanthropic pathways, tax settings that encourage cultural giving, and commercial revenue support that does not undermine public access.
9. Measure public value, not only activity, by adopting evaluation frameworks that capture research impact, collection access, education outcomes, regional reach, First

Nations leadership, social cohesion, wellbeing, environmental knowledge and public trust.

10. Ensure national cultural policy is implemented across portfolios, including arts, education, research, environment, tourism, industry, regional development, First Nations affairs and social infrastructure.

1. Museums must be visible in the next National Cultural Policy

The South Australian Museum supports the five-pillar structure proposed for the next National Cultural Policy. However, the next policy must more directly articulate the place of museums within that framework. Museums are not simply presentation venues. They are long-term public institutions that hold evidence, knowledge, memory and material culture on behalf of current and future generations.

Museums are where collections, research, education and community come together. They hold cultural and scientific collections that cannot be recreated once lost. They produce and translate knowledge. They support schools, universities, researchers, Traditional Owners, community groups, families, regional audiences, tourists and policy makers. They are spaces for difficult conversations, truth-telling, curiosity and shared civic life.

The South Australian Museum's Strategic Plan describes the Museum as a "hub of community identity" that preserves cultural, zoological and geological heritage, safeguards collective memory, generates knowledge through research, and educates across generations. It also frames the Museum as critical infrastructure for education, health, environment and economy: its collections are evidence for scientific and humanities research; its research informs biodiversity and climate policy; and its programs develop future scientists and innovators.

This is the frame the next National Cultural Policy should adopt nationally.

2. Museums as community infrastructure

The next National Cultural Policy should define museums as community infrastructure. Infrastructure Australia describes social infrastructure as the facilities, spaces, services and networks that support quality of life, wellbeing, learning, inclusion, cohesion and liveability. It explicitly includes arts and culture as part of the social infrastructure system.

Museums perform these functions every day. They provide trusted public spaces where people encounter knowledge, stories, cultural heritage, science and each other. They support belonging and social cohesion by helping communities understand where they live,

who has cared for Country, how societies have changed, and how knowledge can inform the future.

For South Australia, the Museum is an anchor institution in the North Terrace cultural precinct. It is also a statewide institution with responsibilities to regional and remote communities, Aboriginal communities, researchers, schools, visitors and future generations. Its value is not limited to attendance numbers. It lies in the enduring public benefit created through collections care, research, interpretation, education, access and cultural stewardship.

The next policy should therefore treat museums in the same way governments increasingly treat libraries, schools, universities, parks and public health assets: as core civic infrastructure requiring long-term planning, baseline investment and cross-portfolio coordination.

3. Collections are national assets, not passive holdings

Collections are the foundation of museum public value. They are not static stores of objects; they are active knowledge systems. The South Australian Museum holds more than four million specimens and cultural items that provide irreplaceable records of the natural and cultural world and contribute to international scientific and anthropological knowledge (<https://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/>)

The Museum's Strategic Plan commits to caring for cultural and scientific collections to the highest international standards, digitising priority collections, making data globally discoverable, and increasing access through partnerships with regional and remote communities.

At a national level, biological collections are fundamental infrastructure for taxonomy, biosecurity, biodiversity science, environmental approvals, agriculture, health and conservation. The Atlas of Living Australia has noted that only about 30 per cent of Australia's biodiversity has been identified and described; that biological collections underpin what we know about species; and that more than 80 per cent of environmental approvals under Australian environmental law rely on biological collections data (https://ala.org.au/app/uploads/2024/07/Accelerating_Discovery_and_Access_to_Australias_Biological_Collections_2024_July.pdf)

The next National Cultural Policy should include a national collections investment agenda covering:

- secure storage and environmental conditions;
- conservation and collection management;
- digitisation and data infrastructure;
- collection documentation and provenance research;
- First Nations cultural authority and access protocols;
- repatriation and restitution;
- regional and On Country access;
- emergency preparedness and climate resilience;
- workforce skills in conservation, taxonomy, collection management, registration and digital systems.

This work is operationally essential, but often invisible to project-based cultural funding. Without it, exhibitions, research, education, tourism and public access cannot be sustained.

4. Research is core cultural work

The next National Cultural Policy should recognise museum research as cultural work, public science and national research infrastructure.

The South Australian Museum's Strategic Plan identifies research as foundational to public value. It positions research as the engine connecting collections to discovery, learning, conservation and societal benefit, and commits to research that aligns with government priorities and serves the South Australian community.

Museums are distinctive research institutions because they connect scholarly knowledge with public audiences. Their research is object-based, place-based, community-facing and often interdisciplinary. It contributes to biodiversity, climate, geodiversity, health, culture, repatriation, provenance, language, cultural heritage and public policy.

AMaGA has argued that museums and galleries are already playing a vital role in the research ecosystem, but their contribution is under-leveraged; with the right investment, they can amplify research impact and innovation at the community level. It has identified the need for funding models that recognise co-design, First Nations-led methodologies, shared research infrastructure, cross-sector fellowships, data infrastructure and diverse research outputs beyond academic publication.

The next policy should create a national GLAM research framework that:

- recognises museums as research-performing institutions;
- enables museum eligibility in research infrastructure and applied research funding;
- supports partnerships with universities, CSIRO, herbaria, Traditional Owners and industry;
- funds research translation through exhibitions, digital platforms, public programs and citizen science;
- values collections data as national research infrastructure;
- supports First Nations-led research and ICIP governance;
- funds early-career and mid-career museum research pathways.

5. First Nations First must include museum transformation

The South Australian Museum supports the continued centrality of First Nations First. For museums, this pillar must be operational and structural, not symbolic.

The Museum's Strategic Plan commits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority guiding collections, research, exhibitions and programs. It also commits to ensuring Aboriginal matters are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Museum policy, practice and operations.

The next National Cultural Policy should support museums to undertake the long-term work required to transform relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. This includes:

- properly resourced repatriation and restitution;
- community-led access to collections;
- On Country care and access models;
- truth-telling about collecting histories and colonial practices;
- First Nations leadership roles and career pathways;
- ICIP governance and cultural data sovereignty;
- co-designed education and public programs;
- partnerships with art centres, keeping places, language centres and cultural organisations;
- national standards for cultural safety in collections, exhibitions, research and public engagement.

This work cannot be delivered through short-term project grants alone. It requires ongoing funding for people, relationships, travel, community engagement, cultural authority, collection documentation and care.

6. Exhibitions and public programs are access infrastructure

Exhibitions are one of the principal ways museums translate collections and research into public value. They are also a major driver of tourism, education, civic engagement and earned revenue.

The South Australian Museum's Strategic Plan commits to delivering dynamic, relevant exhibitions that draw on collections and research and respond to contemporary issues; renewing permanent exhibitions; strengthening school participation; and working across the cultural precinct and broader cultural sector.

However, exhibitions require significant upfront investment. Costs include research, design, interpretation, conservation, mounts, freight, insurance, installation, digital production, marketing, evaluation and public programming. For state museums, these costs are often difficult to meet through existing grant programs, particularly where programs are designed for short-term creative projects rather than long-term institutional access.

The National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program currently supports eligible national collecting institutions, with \$1 million available each year, to tour collections nationally and internationally. However, eligibility is limited to national collecting institutions, excluding major state museums that hold nationally and internationally significant collections and serve large public audiences (<https://www.arts.gov.au/funding-and-support/national-collecting-institutions-touring-and-outreach-program>)

The next policy should establish a national museum exhibitions and touring framework that:

- supports state, territory and major regional museums as well as national institutions;
- expands touring and loan programs;
- funds freight, insurance, conservation and exhibition-ready preparation;
- expands indemnity arrangements for incoming and outgoing exhibitions;
- supports regional presentation and school access;
- enables partnerships between museums, universities, festivals, tourism bodies and community organisations;
- supports lower-cost, flexible exhibition models as well as major blockbuster exhibitions;

- recognises exhibitions as both cultural access and economic development infrastructure.

7. Museums are education partners

Museums are education infrastructure. They support early learning, school education, tertiary education, teacher professional learning, vocational pathways, lifelong learning and public science.

The South Australian Museum supports families, educators and schools through programs, the Discovery Centre, education resources, school group bookings, Museum in the Classroom, early learning and teacher professional learning (<https://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/>) Its Strategic Plan commits to enhancing engagement with school students through innovative programs and to transforming collections and research into experiences that spark curiosity, build skills and deepen cultural understanding across all ages.

The next National Cultural Policy should position museums within national education settings. This should include:

- curriculum-linked museum learning in science, history, geography, civics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, sustainability and critical thinking;
- teacher professional development using museum collections and research;
- national support for museum education officers and learning producers;
- digital access for regional, remote and low-SES schools;
- student research pathways with universities and TAFEs;
- citizen science and public humanities programs;
- partnerships between museums and education departments.

Museums help young people understand evidence, complexity, culture, Country, science and society. These capabilities are essential to Australia's future workforce and civic life.

8. Sustainable funding: public base, private leverage, earned revenue

The South Australian Museum supports a mixed funding model. Museums should be entrepreneurial, commercially capable and open to philanthropy, tourism, partnerships and earned income. However, private and earned revenue cannot replace the need for adequate public funding for core obligations.

Museums care for public assets that often cannot and should not be fully commercialised. Collections storage, conservation, repatriation, research, documentation, security,

environmental control, education and public access are essential functions. They create public benefit, but they do not always generate direct revenue.

The next National Cultural Policy should distinguish between three types of funding:

- **Core public funding** for baseline operations and statutory obligations, including collections care, security, conservation, storage, staffing, research, education and access.
- **Strategic public investment** for transformation, including capital works, digitisation, exhibition renewal, education centres, research infrastructure, regional access and First Nations-led projects.
- **Leveraged private and earned revenue** through philanthropy, memberships, sponsorship, commercial exhibitions, venue hire, retail, tourism, licensing, research partnerships and digital engagement.

The policy should avoid treating philanthropy and commercial revenue as substitutes for public investment. Instead, government funding should be designed to leverage private money, reduce risk and create confidence for donors and partners.

9. Tax and philanthropy settings

Australia already has important cultural tax settings. The Cultural Gifts Program allows donors to donate significant cultural items to eligible institutions and receive a tax deduction for the market value; donated property is exempt from capital gains tax and deductions may be spread over up to five years. Eligible gifts can include technological or scientific collections as well as art, books, manuscripts and other cultural material. ([Office for the Arts](#)). This is valuable, but it primarily supports the donation of objects. The next policy should consider broader tax and philanthropic settings to support the full lifecycle of collections and public access.

The South Australian Museum recommends that the Commonwealth, working with Treasury and the sector, examine:

- enhanced matched giving programs for museums and collections;
- incentives for donations to museum endowments and research funds;
- streamlined DGR pathways for museum support bodies and foundations;
- tax-effective giving mechanisms for conservation, digitisation, storage and access, not only acquisition;
- a national cultural infrastructure investment incentive for approved museum capital, digital and collections infrastructure projects;

- bequest incentives and public recognition programs;
- simplified valuation and administrative processes for scientific, cultural and mixed collections;
- philanthropic challenge funds where government investment unlocks private contributions.

Tax incentives should be designed carefully. They should support public benefit, transparency, access and long-term stewardship. They should not encourage acquisition without funding for care, nor should they privilege already wealthy institutions at the expense of regional and community access.

10. National coordination through Cultural Ministers

The next National Cultural Policy should be supported by stronger intergovernmental coordination. Current arrangements allow Cultural Ministers to meet approximately twice a year on an ad hoc basis to progress arts and culture policy matters requiring intergovernmental cooperation (<https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/ministerial-intergovernmental-engagement>).

The South Australian Museum recommends the establishment of a standing Collections and Heritage Committee reporting to Cultural Ministers. This committee should include Commonwealth, state and territory officials; local government representation; First Nations representatives; museum directors; collection, conservation and research experts; regional and community museum voices; and philanthropy/private sector expertise.

Its work program should include:

- national collections priorities;
- First Nations repatriation, ICIP and cultural authority;
- research infrastructure and data systems;
- digitisation and discoverability;
- climate adaptation and emergency preparedness;
- museum workforce and skills;
- touring, loans and indemnity;
- regional and remote access;
- education and curriculum partnerships;
- funding models and philanthropy settings;
- performance measurement and public value reporting.

This would not require replacing existing ministerial arrangements. It would give museums a structured mechanism inside them.

11. Implementation model: a Collections Investment Fund

The South Australian Museum recommends a dedicated Collections Investment Fund with four streams.

Stream 1: Core collections care and access

Funding for storage, conservation, documentation, digitisation, environmental control, collection risk management, security, access systems and collection staff.

Stream 2: Research and knowledge infrastructure

Funding for museum research, research partnerships, collection data, biodiversity and cultural heritage research, citizen science, public humanities, university partnerships and research translation.

Stream 3: First Nations cultural authority and repatriation

Funding for First Nations leadership, community engagement, repatriation, restitution, ICIP, cultural data sovereignty, On Country access, truth-telling and co-designed interpretation.

Stream 4: Exhibitions, education and public engagement

Funding for permanent gallery renewal, temporary exhibitions, touring, regional access, school programs, digital engagement, teacher professional learning and public programs. The fund should include both competitive and formula-based components. Competitive project funding alone is insufficient because core museum obligations are continuous. A portion should support long-term operating capacity tied to public outcomes and transparent reporting.

12. Why government should invest

Government should invest in museums because they deliver benefits that no single market actor can provide.

Museums preserve public assets across generations. They care for evidence that supports science, culture, law, identity and policy. They enable truth-telling and reconciliation. They support research that informs biodiversity, climate, health, heritage and environmental decisions. They educate children and adults. They attract tourists and support precinct economies. They create trusted spaces for dialogue. They connect regional and remote communities with national and international knowledge.

The South Australian Museum's collections and research help South Australians understand their deep natural and cultural past, engage with the present and shape the future. That is

not a discretionary cultural extra. It is part of the infrastructure of a healthy, informed and resilient democracy.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore make a clear statement:

Museums, galleries, libraries, archives, keeping places and collections are essential national cultural infrastructure. They preserve memory, generate knowledge, support First Nations cultural authority, enable research and education, strengthen communities, and connect Australia with the world. Their long-term sustainability requires coordinated public investment, private partnership and policy settings that recognise their full public value.