

To whom it may concern,

I have felt compelled to submit feedback to this policy in my capacity as the convenier of the Hunter Region Chapter of the Australian Museums and Galleries Association, and as a cultural practitioner with 20 years experience working and volunteering in cultural institutions in regional Australia. The absence of real engagement with regional museums and collecting institutions in this document is an alarming blindspot for a federal policy, and one that needs urgent rectification.

Outside Australia's capital cities, movable cultural heritage is in the hands of almost exclusively local government and volunteer initiated organisations. Regional Australia has a vibrant, but vulnerable network of museums, cultural collections, and community history organisations. These organisations and the staff and volunteers that support them are performing cultural functions and producing cultural work. The country's collecting institutions are cultural engines, collecting, interpreting and protecting the stories and material culture of Australia and its peoples. These organisations perform a function not met by the various state and federal collections - regional institutions lead the way in genuinely community-focused and engaging projects that collect, interpret and celebrate local stories in accessible and meaningful ways. They preserve the stories, identity and spirit of communities across Australia.

I have been associated with the Hunter Chapter of AMaGA since 2020, when I commenced a new role with Newcastle Museum as Curator. Until recently, I was the only paid staff member participating in this group. The Hunter Region has a population of over 700,000 people and is made up of 9 Local Government Authorities. I was the only local government employee that had this scope within my role. The rest of the chapter was made up exclusively by volunteers. In my time with the chapter, we have seen multiple member organisations close, experience building insecurity, and suffer collection disasters. I have come to the conclusion that most of the institutions in the Hunter Chapter are not sustainable and have no long term future without government intervention.

Most of these museums were established in the post-war-boom, when there were less pressures on property and land values, disposable income and leisure time. A community museum is a sustainable prospect if you have plenty of volunteer labour, the local council or business community hands you a free or very cheap building to occupy, and volunteers have time to invest in supporting the institution's success. All that has changed, quite rapidly in the last 20 years. In the Hunter Chapter, we have an ageing volunteer workforce. Council's are selling land and buildings that have been occupied by volunteer initiated museums for 40 years with no strategy for their exit. There is little to no philanthropy available from local businesses and industry. The next 10 to 15 years will be pivotal for the survival of regional museums and their collections.

Australia needs to rapidly professionalise the regional museum sector and provide new cultural infrastructure. Ways to achieve this could include:

- Legislated requirements for cultural/museum services and staffing in regional communities, similar but totally separate to how information services are a legislated requirement of council services.

- Incentivising LGAs to include the provision of funding for museum and heritage services in developer contributions, similar to how public art projects are funded.
- Incentivise LGA spending on moveable cultural heritage by matching operating budgets for interpretation and care of cultural collection material.
- Nationalise State and Federal collecting institutions, developing regional campuses that are embedded in local communities and focuses on collecting and interpreting local stories and identities.
- Establish a Cultural Infrastructure fund that supports the building and maintenance of new museums and collection storage facilities in regional places.

I am quite frankly, shocked, that a supposedly broad and inclusive national cultural policy could have such an ignorance of the full breadth of how culture is conceived and expressed across society. In my professional experience museums and collecting institutions are constantly enabling, advocating and championing on behalf of culture and cultural practitioners. From offering the only avenue to sustainably collect sorties and objects of local significance to working with artists, filmmakers and architects on the development of new exhibitions. Our museums are the spaces and places that enable culture across Australia.

Kind Regards

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