

Submission by Federation of Australian Historical Societies to the National Cultural Policy Consultation, May 2026

1. Introduction to The Federation of Australian Historical Societies, and Australia's history and heritage state and territory umbrella and member societies

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies (hereafter FAHS) was established in 1977,
has eight constituent members and is
*the national peak body representing the interests of approximately
1,200 historical and heritage societies
in every electorate and local government area
including approximately 100,000 members
throughout Australia.*

Community history and heritage societies are numerous, alive and active Australia-wide.

The eight FAHS state and territory umbrella constituent members are:

- Canberra & District Historical Society
- Historical Society of the Northern Territory
- History Trust of South Australia (with representation also from the History Council of South Australia)
- History West / Royal Western Australian Historical Society
- Royal Australian Historical Society
- Royal Historical Society of Victoria; and,
- Tasmanian Historical Research Association (with representation also from the Launceston Historical Society)
- The Royal Historical Society of Queensland.

Their delegates can be found here: <https://www.history.org.au/about>

To-date in 2026, and partly in preparation for its 50th Anniversary in 2027, FAHS has:

- launched a new website (1 March): where much of the excellent work of the above can be pursued conveniently through links: <https://www.history.org.au/>
- offered new Associate Member benefits which are progressively being taken up: <https://www.history.org.au/directory>; and,
- achieved a record and verifiable subscriber list at time of writing of 2,104 individual subscribers, many of which are societies as well as state, territory and Australian government departments that share and act upon national news.

Also, in 2025, FAHS:

- released a 'new look' quarterly newsletter emailed to all of the above subscribers: *Historical Society Matters*, and to which every constituent member contributes

quarterly and any recipients may forward on:

<https://www.history.org.au/newsletters-and-ebulletins>; and,

- ensured that two active delegates were representing each constituency (excluding HSNT which, nevertheless, is incredibly active *per capita*).

FAHS does not manage a collection – but most of its constituents and the majority of their historical and heritage society members across each state and territory ‘do’.

The collections amount to many millions of historical sources and are very often unique to a location: written documents, photographs and other image-based sources, including significant artworks, oral histories and other sound recordings, and an extraordinary diversity of objects.

The members of the societies caring for the above come from different educational, career *and cultural backgrounds* yet hold in common an active passion for preserving, promoting and sharing with others locally, nationally and even globally the diverse facets of their Australian community’s local histories, heritage and cultures.

2. FAHS Council response to *Revive: A Place for Every Story and a Story for Every Place, 2023*

As part of this submission, FAHS Council members have re-visited and discussed anew *Revive: A Place for Every Story and a Story for Every Place, 2023*.

FAHS has always been pleased to observe its acknowledgements such as the following which reflect the reality of perspectives and holdings of Australia’s history and heritage organisations [FAHS emphases are italicised]:

Technology is constantly evolving and increasingly culture is streamed to us through our phones and on our many shiny screens. At the same time, *hundreds of our local galleries, museums and historical societies are serviced by an army of ageing volunteers working tirelessly to bring collections to life and to safeguard ageing physical infrastructure.*

Government needs to be alert and responsive to these paradoxes and ensure all Australians have the necessary tools and skills to receive and enjoy our stories, old and new. (p. 12);

The way our towns, suburbs and cities look, sound and feel — *the historical values*, unplanned but transformative experiences of arts and culture, and the present livability of our civic landscapes — is also encompassed by this National Cultural Policy. (p. 42); and,

Australia is further enriched by state institutions and a network of private, commercial, regional, local and community arts, historical and cultural organisations – large and small – located in all jurisdictions. Collectively, these institutions have rich holdings of cultural material, including built, physical, audio-visual and digital objects related to art, anthropology, archaeology, history, literature, science and technology. These include both Australian and international holdings. *Crucially, many*

of these institutions include resources and holdings central to, and in the custodianship of, First Nations peoples. At-risk First Nations cultural material must be preserved for future generations. (p. 75).

There were also 75 recommendations, including for funding. The references to the recommendations, the funding - and to Creative Australia - were excellent news upon release.

However, the FAHS larger state and territory umbrella constituencies as well as the many hundreds of diverse 'historical societies' have too rarely, in reality, been 'acknowledged' since then by way of funding. Indeed, some have reported feedback to them that the work of such organisations and their historians is 'not sufficiently creative'. FAHS disagrees, as the following pages further explain.

3. Broad FAHS Council response to the National Cultural Policy: Public Consultation Paper, 2026

In recent weeks, FAHS Council has also reviewed the *National Cultural Policy: Public Consultation Paper, 2026*. FAHS is again pleased to observe elements of it that accord with FAHS values and activities. For example, FAHS applauds acknowledgements of funding and partnership programs that 'boost regional creativity, community festivals' (p. 5). Most definitely in these, Australian histories, cultures and heritage are often represented, if not foundational.

However, FAHS contends that there are significant omissions which, while surprising, are able easily to be addressed in the next iteration. Thus,

this submission draws to all readers' attention, the
expert and vitally diverse contributions of Australia's historical and heritage societies,
nationwide, to the widest possible definition of 'Australian culture'.

Further to the points that follow, this submission offers, in the final section, specific information from FAHS to facilitate redress.

4. Australian definitions of 'culture', 'history' and 'heritage'

According to Australia's own *Macquarie Dictionary* online, accessed 18 May 2026:

'culture' is

the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings ... transmitted from one generation to another;

'history' is

the branch of knowledge dealing with past events ... continuous, systematic ... written ... relating to a particular people, country, period; and,

'heritage' is

the culture, traditions and national assets preserved from one generation to another.

FAHS seeks immediately to draw readers' attention to the powerful interdependence – mutual reliance - of history, heritage and culture. Indeed, if the next Policy writers think the three are unrelated, then FAHS urges them to seriously re-consider.

5. The Paper's omission of Australia's 'history and heritage' as contributors to Australian 'culture'

The Public Consultation Paper declares:

This will be the first time in Australia's history that we will have consecutive national cultural policies. (p.4)

The Paper, thus, seems to declare 'history' as something important, yet this is, surprisingly, the only explicit reference in the entire Paper to 'history' as a contributor to a nation's culture.

The Paper does rightly acknowledge 'First Nations cultures':

First Nations cultures are Australia's oldest continuing heritage and a defining source of cultural strength. (p. 6).

Yet, the Paper then falls short by not at all acknowledging *all groups of different cultural origins or current practices living within Australia who would define their cultures as 'source[s] of cultural strength'*. The absence of such inclusiveness seems to be at odds with Minister Burke's broader and welcome desire in the opening statement to 'build a cultural landscape that reflects our diversity ... and strengthens the nation we share'. (p. 4). Australia is home to 'more than 300 different ethnic ancestries' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/latest-release>.) These different ancestries, be they large in numbers or small, need to be included in all thinking; indeed, they all need to be welcomed into umbrella and smaller local history and heritage societies to more accurately embrace, preserve and promote the broader definition of Australian *culture - or cultureS*. The next National Cultural Policy has a wonderful opportunity to *inclusively lead a way*.

The only other reference explicitly to 'heritage' is in the Paper's Pillar 4:

Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts, culture and heritage.

The government is seeking views on how Australia's cultural infrastructure can remain resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose, including how existing partnerships, investment, infrastructure and systems could be used more effectively to support long-term sustainability. (p. 7).

(FAHS would be interested to know how 'heritage' is defined here.)

And - beyond the above fleeting references, there is an *alarming absence overall in the Paper of historical consciousness, and no specific or direct reference to historical and heritage societies, their members, collections and activities, all of which seek to preserve, promote and sustain Australian culture in all of its diversities*. This absence needs to be

addressed in the new Policy if the Policy is to truly bring to life the Minister's worthy statement. An Australian document by and for all Australians has the opportunity to lead *an inclusive way forward as an example in policy making for other nations*.

6. Omission of historians and heritage personnel as 'creative contributors' to 'culture'

History and heritage professionals and enthusiasts, be they paid or volunteer, are found in the above state and territory umbrella bodies as well as the many member societies nationwide. The above people *work with and interpret evidence found in diverse repositories and source forms*. Equally, the people *present* their findings in diverse forms. For those who work with history and heritage, the work from start to finish is a *highly creative enterprise*. Creative Australia has, indeed, overlooked the work of historians as 'creative'.

To quote from a RHSV Council May 2026 discussion:

exhibition design, oral history collection, community education programs, local heritage walks, and local histories are all acts of *cultural production* — they *create* new knowledge, new perspectives, and new ways of understanding place and identity.

Pillar 2 declares the Australian Government's wish to 'recognise diverse forms of cultural expression and participation' (p. 7) yet the Paper has overlooked history and heritage work, paid or voluntary, as creative – and foundational to - cultural expression.

7. Omission in the Paper of state and territory historical umbrella bodies and smaller community 'groups' as 'places' of cultural collectivity and strength

Pillar 2 is aptly named 'A Place for Every Story'. The pillar references 'local and place-based practice' (p. 7). Yet, again the Paper overlooks *local community historical and heritage groups that are, in most communities, the very institutions focusing on people and place - 'Australian cultures in all of their diversities'*.

And - while Australia's leading galleries, libraries, archives, museums and the Academy (GLAMAs) have large and visible presences on the Australian landscape, it is exactly *the state and territory umbrella historical society bodies and the smaller community groups that more intimately preserve and promote 'the stories of every place' at local levels*. Moreover, the umbrella bodies and smaller societies with their localised experts and 'stories' are very often the organisations upon which *governments and GLAMAs directly rely*.

The RHSV Council discussion specified:

Historical societies document the lives of everyday Australians in ways that national institutions cannot and do not. They preserve the records of local industries, schools, churches, sporting clubs, families, and communities. They make sense of landscape and place over time — recording not just what a place looks like, but what it has

meant to the people who have lived in it across generations. This work is foundational to any genuine account of Australian culture.

GLAMAs often decry cuts to their funding and FAHS is sympathetic; indeed, GLAMAs and some of their leaders are FAHS Council or other FAHS members. Yet, it is the smaller community collectives (of which GLAMA leaders are also often members) that have *preserved and promoted localised 'culture'* without anywhere near such respect, including funding. The umbrella bodies, smaller historical societies, their leaders and members are holding an almighty share of the nation's cultural capital.

As stated earlier, *Revive* was correct that *the majority of 'local cultural custodians' are volunteers*. FAHS adds that they are in the progressively ageing Australian demographic, often retired. FAHS has long-championed how historical and heritage societies create significant social and economic benefits for a remarkably small level of government contribution.

To replace the volunteer labour with paid equivalents or to re-house collections assembled over generations in larger GLAMAs would be impossible.

Yet, FAHS hastens to add that the remarkable success of the above people as 'local cultural custodians' *should not* be accepted as reason to retain the *status quo*; the thinking underpinning the next Policy should more positively be, '*What more might local history and heritage groups achieve if properly supported - sustained?*' Pillar 4 is correct in seeking to offer 'support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain [FAHS emphasis] arts, culture and heritage'. *History and heritage groups of all sizes should, thus be respected and supported, including through funding, as part of this pillar.*

FAHS wishes to conclude this section of response to other dimensions of the work of the above groups in creating and sustaining culture. History and heritage groups at state, territory and local levels are often respected community hubs, places of 'identity', places of 'commune', and places where answers might be found or new questions asked. A community's constituent parts and overall culture – *along with its custodians— are kept well* when history and heritage groups are respected and sustained. And positive and effective succession-planning for the next generations of 'local cultural custodians' can only happen when the current custodians are visible, respected and supported. FAHS draws regularly in its events on the research available via the Volunteering Australia website and draws readers' attention to it: <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/>. Again, this positive picture requires Policy embrace – and funding.

Thus, not only for the specialist history, heritage and cultural work they do, but in acknowledgment of their *past, present and future contribution to the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals of all ages from diverse cultural backgrounds*, history and heritage societies, large and small, deserve explicit and 'visible' inclusion in the next Policy. Such inclusion will provide a respectable foundation by which all such groups above can apply with more confidence for essential support or automatically be rewarded, including through funding, and from governments as well as others.

8. FAHS assistance in shaping the next National Cultural Policy

In 2019 (then reviewed in 2026), FAHS created a two-page summary of the enormous 'social value' generated by community history and heritage societies. The document is the first

item under 'Resources and Training' on the FAHS website:

<https://www.history.org.au/resources>.

The document is still distributed at FAHS, state and territory constituent events as well as smaller local society events. The highly visual and dynamic document is uploaded with this submission but only the 'executive summary' points are reproduced here. More complete 'paragraph' statements can be found on the second page of the document and, again for convenience, FAHS links to the relevant pillars are noted below. In summary:

*History and heritage societies,
large and small,
in cities and suburbs,
in large regional towns and the smaller remote towns,
nationwide -
and all while embracing enormous cultural diversity –
add 'incalculable social value'
and contribute to the widest possible definitions of Australian culture and well-being.*

They achieve the above underlined by:

- building safer, stronger communities, bonded by a shared understanding of local history and heritage and an intersectional exchange of knowledge (Pillars 1, 2, 3, 4);
- contributing to lifelong learning from providing history education to school students, to developing digital skills for older Australians to facilitate social engagement (Pillars 1, 2, 3);
- creating enriching visitor experiences, especially in regional Australia where cultural tourism is a major source of revenue (Pillars 1, 2, 3; 4, 5);
- helping to tell the story of the world's longest living cultures, showcasing our national identity, and seeking to preserve our cultural heritage through engagement, education, and storytelling (Pillars 1, 2, 3, 5); and,
- supporting the health, mental health and well-being of older Australians, providing active ageing activities and skills that contribute to society, and continue to be valued in the senior years (Pillars 1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to comment and extends best wishes to the Policy writers.

To support the writers – as well as the history and heritage umbrella bodies and smaller societies that are the foundation of this submission - FAHS would be pleased to provide additional information.

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