



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

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Submission to Australia's New National Cultural Policy

National Archives of Australia (National Archives) supports a renewed National Cultural Policy, with a continued focus on the 5 pillars of *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place* (Revive). Under the *Archives Act 1983* (the Archives Act), National Archives' role is to preserve and provide access to the official record of the Commonwealth and set government information management standards.

As Australia's national archival institution, National Archives recognises an opportunity for cultural institutions and policies to enhance public engagement in alignment with broader government priorities related to trust and inclusion. Australian Government information is a national resource and the national archival collection a significant asset for all Australians. With more than 54 million items, the collection enables Australians to better understand their history, engage with complex and sometimes contested narratives, and participate respectfully in informed cultural and civic dialogue. This places archives as critical national and cultural infrastructure.

The Archives Act has not been substantially amended since it commenced in 1983 and as such, significant and urgent reform of the Archives Act remains critical. Identified as an action under *Revive*, legislative reform will enable National Archives and Australian Government agencies to operate more effectively and efficiently. Reforms will also address key risks by aligning the Archives Act with contemporary information management practices and the digital environment Australian Government agencies are operating in, improve accountability, avoid loss of Commonwealth records and improve access to the collection. This will enable National Archives to better perform our role to secure, preserve, and provide access to the collection. Key reforms include:

- Updating the objects of the Archives Act to adequately reflect government and community expectations of National Archives' role in a digital world.
- Provisions that enable National Archives to establish culturally appropriate and respectful recordkeeping practices and access arrangements, including through introducing an exemption for culturally sensitive material and conditional access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural material and other materials.
- Provide National Archives the power to set mandatory record-keeping standards. Mandatory standards will ensure National Archives and Australian Government agencies run effectively and efficiently and meet government and public expectations on how records are created, managed and made available.
- Improving access to the collection by providing the Director-General discretionary powers to manage high-volume applicants and powers to strengthen consultation requirements.

Securing these important amendments to the Archives Act will support the objectives of a renewed National Cultural Policy.



National Archives holds records central to First Nations history and truth-telling and is committed to providing culturally safe pathways to access. National Archives is committed to culturally appropriate and respectful recordkeeping practices, including recognition of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and Indigenous data sovereignty. We support a National Cultural Policy that strengthens First Nations leadership and cultural rights and recognises the important role of cultural institutions in building strong relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. National Archives' organisational strategy supports this position by centring First Nations perspectives and strengthening how the collection is understood and managed. This includes an internal cultural capability uplift to ensure First Nations records are managed and accessed in ways that align with cultural practices and protocols, including through the recognition and application of ICIP. These efforts support First Nations peoples, researchers and the broader community to access, interpret and connect with records relating to culture, identity and history, in ways that respect cultural knowledge, practices and community expectations.

National Archives supports democratic accountability and resilience through access to the collection. Access to evidence of government decision-making in archival records supports education, research, storytelling and public understanding of Australia's history, and democratic processes. Importantly, supporting research of archival records creates new knowledge, interpretations and understanding of democratic accountability. Continued investment in cultural infrastructure will more effectively enable National Archives to deliver our core functions, build trust in our public institutions and support Australians to engage with the collection, regardless of location or background. Digitisation, discoverability and accessible services support broader participation in Australia's cultural life and help ensure the collection remains relevant, useable and connected to the needs and interests of current and future generations. Strengthening archival infrastructure requires long-term investment in digital preservation systems and skills needed today and in future to manage records created through emerging technologies.

National Archives is investing in solutions to support a more digitally empowered cultural future and recognises the growing opportunities and challenges presented by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other digital technologies. AI technologies can enhance discoverability, accessibility and engagement with the collection through improved search, description, transcription and navigation of large-scale collections, helping Australians more easily discover and connect with the nation's records and stories. National Archives is also demonstrating how the responsible use of AI can support Australian Government entities to meet their recordkeeping and archival obligations in a more optimised way.

As AI technologies become more integrated into government and culture sector practices, National Archives recognises the importance of applying these technologies in ways that support trusted public access, responsible stewardship and confidence in the integrity of the collection. The use of AI must be responsible and ethical. AI must not undermine the rights or entitlements of individuals or artists, compromise the integrity of records, or diminish trust in the official record. Importantly, information relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may be culturally sensitive or personal, requiring careful consideration of whether and how AI tools are applied in managing, describing or providing access to such material. A renewed National Cultural Policy provides an opportunity to set clear expectations for the responsible use of AI across the cultural sector, ensuring that innovation improves access and engagement while safeguarding cultural rights, record integrity and public trust.

In an increasingly digital world, a fundamental role of archives and other collecting institutions is safeguarding the enduring value of physical history and ensuring that tangible objects, with all their material and cultural significance, are not lost amid the convenience of digital access. As digital technologies transform how we access and engage with information, physical artefacts take on a heightened, not diminished, importance. These objects embody history and hold significant meaning that cannot fully translate into digital form. By honouring the authenticity and intrinsic value of the original physical artefact, archives and other collecting institutions can continue to provide a direct, unmediated and authoritative connection to the past, present and future. The new National Cultural

Policy provides the opportunity to embed this fundamental role of archives and enable collaboration across collecting institutions that protects the tangible foundations of our shared stories and history.

The arts and cultural sectors also serve as a powerful device to connect the community with diverse stories of the nation that focus on what we have in common to enhance trust and foster empathy. National Archives contributes to democratic accountability, institutional trust, and resilience. By collecting, preserving, providing access to government records and supporting researchers, National Archives supports transparency, accountability and democratic engagement — all essential contributors to building social cohesion. The new National Cultural Policy provides the opportunity to embed these contributions of archives and other collecting institutions and reinforce our role in supporting individual wellbeing, strengthening shared identity, and fostering a more connected and inclusive society.

National Archives looks forward to continuing to work in partnership across government and the cultural sector to support a renewed National Cultural Policy that strengthens cultural integrity, public access and trust in Australia's national record.



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Director-General