

Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum Submission to Australia's National Cultural Policy

Australia's cultural future depends on both supporting new creative activity and safeguarding the cultural inheritance that gives it depth, meaning and context. Cultural inheritance informs new creative endeavours that build on a wealth of historical lessons. Sound preservation policies protect and maintain intrinsically valuable works and structures long beyond the expiration of any novelty value.

As the board of the Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum, we welcome *Revive's* recognition of culture as a living, national asset, particularly its strong commitment to restoring, celebrating and protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts, languages, stories and cultural authority. This work is essential. We also appreciate the policy's broader recognition that culture is central to national identity, social connection and economic resilience.

While the Museum board found the Museum's needs and interests represented by a number of the pillars and action items, these have not yet translated into positive outcomes for the Museum, nor from what we can see, for the heritage and museum sector generally. We are also deeply concerned that ever since the abolition of the Australian Heritage Commission and the Register of the National Estate in 2004, heritage appears to be largely overlooked. As a result, some precious heritage items are now at great risk and many are already lost.

Local arts and cultural activities enable communities across Australia to tell their stories, create their own cultural identities and build local resilience. Local cultures enable the sharing of stories between generations. This includes creating stories for children and young people, based on the wisdom, experience and perspectives of local elders. When all generations participate in cultural activity, it has a positive effect on local communities. Local governments and smaller organisations play a key role in supporting local arts and cultural practice across Australia.

And, when we identify, protect and manage these important components of Australia's heritage, we ensure that places and stories will continue to inspire future generations.

The Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum has faced ongoing uncertainty for the past two years following a theft and the subsequent breakdown in plans when commitments around the transfer of the historic buildings the Museum relies on were not realised.

The impact of the theft would have been recovered from in the first year, however, the longer-term consequences for site security have been far more significant, with the Museum unable to reinstate its full displays and plan for its future.

The Museum is volunteer-run, preserving some of Australia's most significant stories, with collections, industrial machinery and UNESCO-listed archives that trace our industrial history back to the federation of our nation in 1901. It is one of the few museums of its type in the world on its original factory site. It is now campaigning to secure a stable, long-term future on the site, which is integral to its purpose and interpretation.

A third-party nomination for heritage listing, which is still in progress, is strongly supported by the Museum as an important step in protecting the site from loss or insensitive redevelopment, particularly given the owner's stated intentions for the site.

The Museum also operates under a significant regulatory burden associated with its firearms collection. In 2017, it fought regulatory changes that would have destroyed the aesthetic and research value of a large portion of its firearms collection. The Museum maintains that historic artefacts in a museum context, are fundamentally different from general firearms in use. Our collection is extensively used for legitimate research purposes and is a valuable resource for the many law enforcement agencies that contact us for information. Current regulatory approaches are inconsistent with its value as a heritage institution and a research resource.

Across the country, volunteers, community organisations and local custodians are carrying an extraordinary burden through unpaid labour to preserve collections, stories, places and skills that have national and international significance. Many are doing so while feeling overwhelmed, under-resourced, and increasingly fearful that despite years of dedication, these assets may still be lost on our watch.

Too many regional museums are left to die through lack of support and interest from Government - museums of substantial potential and uniqueness. A program to identify and support these museums is needed and then funding appropriately given, rather than hit-and-miss grants to whoever manages to get a good application in.

When their museums die, communities are unable to make the most of their stories, affecting not only current and future generations, but also tourism-driven economic benefits - for towns with dying industries in particular. A dedicated government-backed assistance body could help, not only with funding, but also assisting museums such as the Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum - and others - to overcome serious threats to their ongoing survival and operation. These museums are a national asset and funding and sustainability should not always fall to local councils, or worse, to the volunteers themselves! They should be supported as part of the shared heritage and responsibility of all Australians.

Revive recommends training for artists. It would also be of great benefit to provide targeted assistance and training for worthy regional museums to reach set national standards. Distance TAFE/university/private training could be offered free for all committed volunteers to improve their skills, and therefore the offerings of their cultural institutions, as well as acknowledging the vital role they play in preserving our heritage under, often difficult circumstances, and with very little support.

The national cultural policy could strengthen recognition of heritage within Australia's cultural framework by:

1. Recognising historic sites, industrial heritage places and cultural landscapes as important forms of cultural infrastructure.
2. Supporting place-based museums that interpret history within the historic locations where it occurred.
3. Strengthening recognition of regional heritage institutions as key contributors to cultural access, education and tourism.

The Prime Minister's address to Revive states that the policy builds on the legacy of the Whitlam and Keating Governments. In terms of the creative arts it may well do so. However, alongside creation of the Australia Council for the Arts, the Whitlam Government appointed the Hope Inquiry into the National Estate which led to creation of the Australian Heritage Commission and the Register of the National Estate. These actions once afforded recognition and a degree of protection to the Lithgow Small Arms Factory, and other significant sites. Since the abolition of the Australian Heritage Commission, state and local government controls have not filled the need. Revive does include some references and recommendations in favour of heritage protection however the commitment appears limited in scope and emphasis. There is very little attention given to built heritage and moveable heritage in the Revive policy.

Following is a list of sections of Revive (in the left column) that we feel are relevant to the Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum, and our comments and suggestions relating to each.

Pillar 2 - A Place for Every Story: Reflecting the breadth of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.

"A Story for Every Place".

Signals that cultural heritage should remain connected to its physical and community context

For the Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum, the story is not just about artefacts such as rifles or machinery.

The real cultural value comes from:

- original factory buildings
- industrial landscape
- the town built around the factory
- the people who worked there
- the community shaped by the industry
- Employee records provide a critical link to family histories and are regularly requested by families all over Australia.

If the site is destroyed or the museum relocated, the story loses much of its meaning. The current board and executive of the museum would need to walk away and Lithgow and Australia would lose a significant asset.

Revive promotes principles of access, equity, participation and representation in arts and cultural activities for all Australians. This is consistent with Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that 'everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.'

As a major local and national cultural institution, the preservation of the Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum complies with Article 27.

We were informed by a council employee that Lithgow is a "trade town" and that if "everyone in Lithgow wins lotto" then an arts precinct could be considered. This same employee was content for the Small arms Factory to be demolished and replaced with a token partial brick wall to commemorate it.

<i>Establish artist residencies to visit Australian World Heritage Sites to produce artworks to tell stories of place and heritage.</i>	We would like this program extended to other cultural icons including industrial heritage sites. This depends upon those heritage sites and facilities thriving. The Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum, recognised in parliament as being of international significance, very often assists and inspires artists, authors, filmmakers and musicians, the latest being Australian artist, Sybil Curtis. Our strategic plan includes the establishment of artist residencies but this, and all other plans, remain on hold until we have secure tenure and the heritage site is no longer under imminent threat of demolition.
<i>Protect and conserve Australia's natural, historic and First Nations heritage places for future generations through the next phase of Natural Heritage Trust funding</i>	We see and applaud the work being done to protect and conserve First Nations heritage and would like to see similar care extended to heritage sites and institutions representing the past 250 years of Australia's history. The Lithgow Small Arms Factory site is at risk of demolition and our Museum, which interprets its history within its intact site, is at risk of closure. Many museums owned by the Department of Defence are in danger as their premises are being sold off. Many other museums are struggling and many have already been lost.
<i>Improve access to services that enhance community wellbeing, including First Nations and intergenerational playgroups that will support early engagement with arts and culture.</i>	As a town transitioning from extraction industries, the Lithgow SAF Museum is one of the main attractions that can help to boost tourism and the flow-on economic and cultural benefits to the community. Our strategic plan includes creation of a community venue and a play space for young children and their caregivers to engage with our stories. More generally, heritage acts as a vital bridge to the arts for everyone, including young children, by anchoring abstract concepts of culture, history, and identity in tangible, engaging artistic experiences. Given that the factory is such a significant component of Lithgow's history The Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum assists in understanding personal and collective history, fostering a sense of belonging and community.

<i>Increase support for regional arts and culture through an increase to the Regional Arts Fund, and continuation of the Festivals Australia program.</i>	Cultural heritage makes a significant and meaningful basis for regional festivals. If supported by government to the degree that it is valued by the public, many more regional festivals could grow organically from treasured local history and culture preserved in intact built heritage, collections and sites. We have noticed a tendency in regional NSW in recent years, towards government funding being utilised for contrived, formulaic events that ignore local assets, even at times appropriating features of entirely unrelated cultures.
<i>Action:</i> <i>The Government has avenues including the Regional Precincts and Partnerships Program which will provide a strategic, nationally consistent mechanism for funding and coordinating projects that transform a place, to benefit communities in regions, regional cities and rural Australia — the program could fund arts and culture precincts.</i>	The Lithgow Small Arms Factory contains many heritage buildings unsuited to modern arms manufacture which could provide an amazing asset to the town if repurposed for cultural pursuits while retaining the important history and providing access to the public.
<i>Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure: Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts, culture and heritage.</i>	
<i>Action: Deliver a triennial State of Australian Culture Survey, to be developed by the newly established Creative Australia in partnership with Screen Australia</i>	This appears to exclude museums and cultural heritage sites since heritage does not appear to be a feature of the newly established Creative Australia As a heritage institution we often receive surveys full of questions that only relate to creative arts and irrelevant to our institution. This reinforces again and again that museums are not considered by government or other arts-serving organisations. This would not be a problem if heritage places were given due consideration by other means.

<i>Action: Re-establish intergovernmental meetings between Commonwealth, state and territory cultural ministers, and the Australian Local Government Association</i>	Will museums and cultural heritage sites be included in this?
<i>Action: Update the methodology used in the Australian Bureau of Statistics Cultural and Creative Activity Satellite Accounts to better capture the contribution of the cultural and creative sector, including investigating options to better capture other activities such as the events sector.</i>	Historical aspects as well as creative aspects need to be included.
<i>Action: Streamline programs that incentivise philanthropic support for the arts, such as the Register of Cultural Organisations, to assist cultural organisations to attract funding and cultural gifts from businesses and individuals</i>	The museum has benefited from the cultural gifts program. Please ensure incentivisation includes museums and heritage institutions. Definition of a cultural organisation on the DGR website of the ATO states: "Cultural organisations promote one or more of the specified cultural forms. They include choirs, dance groups, festivals, theatre groups and art exhibition venues." The only reference to heritage is to "movable cultural heritage" which covers portable items of cultural significance, such as maritime collections, rare books, archaeological artefacts and scientific specimens. Organisations must demonstrate public benefit and the importance of the collection through independent expert recognition or preservation efforts.

	It is one thing to exclude heritage from the arts, given that it is ideally considered separately, but removing it from “cultural” is a glaring omission.
<i>Cultural infrastructure includes: • traditional arts and cultural institutions • not-for-profit and commercial arts organisations and venues • broadcasters • ‘bricks and mortar’ buildings – including cinemas, performing arts centres, theatres, museums, archives, libraries and galleries It also includes creative practices and the communities that these institutions foster. Much of this infrastructure is moving online.</i>	As caretakers of a living museum we do provide online offerings and expect this to expand, however it is not envisaged that it will ever be a major part of the value we offer which can only be experienced in person. The rise of online is often used to justify a degradation in real life services and the arts and heritage are areas where we feel that real life experience is incomparable to online. We hope that the new cultural policy will not hint at any possibility that culture can be as effectively delivered online as via this critical cultural real-life infrastructure.
<i>The centrepiece of the National Cultural Policy will be establishing Creative Australia</i>	Creative Australia appears to focus solely on creative arts so a similar institution for heritage sites, museums, libraries and other cultural organisations is required and should be given equal priority.
<i>To measure the success of the National Cultural Policy and to see the ambitions of the sector grow, the Government will publish a report on the state of culture in Australia every three years. The report will be based on a survey of Australians’ attitudes and experiences with arts and culture, including Australian content, across a range of formats, including screen, music, performing arts, visual arts, design and literature.</i> <i>The survey will also include questions to better understand Australians’ attitudes and awareness of issues relating to ethical sourcing, production</i>	Museums have again been excluded from the National Cultural Policy. This and other sections of the policy make it clear that heritage is not included consistently. Government recognition and support does not appear to be in step with the value placed by the general population on its heritage including heritage organisations. The lack of support for small regional museums is well known – especially when we see them falling over, one after another, through lack of support by – and often through the actions of - Governments of all levels. It’s not that the public doesn’t value

<i>and consumption of content, including content created by First Nations peoples.</i>	these museums – they do! Museums and heritage would be better handled, and funded, separately from The Arts.
<i>The Government plays a national leadership role by fostering collaboration across portfolios, and coordination between all levels of government, to create an environment that both values cultural and creative activities, and promotes participation, partnership and investment both within Australia and overseas.</i>	The Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum has not felt valued and supported by government at any level.
<i>Galleries, libraries, archives and museums continue to demonstrate resilience and innovation through embracing digital technologies to deliver core functions and remote delivery to increase audience engagement and reach, including learning in schools.</i>	As mentioned, some institutions have closed and Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum is at risk of closure. Museums are often resilient due to the dedication of their volunteer management but are still in need of support if they are to ensure longevity. If it survives, the Lithgow Small Arms Factory museum will continue its work in providing school resources such as STEM interactives, activities and engagement, and other digital resources.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience: Making sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad

Action:
Continue collaboration with the arts and cultural sector to deliver on the national visitor economy strategy, THRIVE 2030, by supporting artistic and cultural events and incorporating cultural assets into destination marketing and campaigns

The Lithgow Small Arms Factory museum would benefit from this if included.

