

# Australia's National Cultural Policy

Submission by [REDACTED]

## Introduction

I am an experienced museum worker with more than 25 years' experience working in the regional and remote museum and cultural sector. I have a PhD in museum studies and community engagement, was part of a team that won the [REDACTED] [REDACTED], has delivered award-winning projects and was recognised with an [REDACTED]. In 2024 I received a [REDACTED] to explore innovations in museum practice that can inspire and sustain museums in regional Australia, and my report recommendations are available [here](#).

Based in [REDACTED], I travel widely to identify key needs and challenges facing museums, keeping places and the people who work in them. I work collaboratively to create solutions and deliver revitalised museums, creative exhibitions, strategic development, engaged volunteers, and community disaster recovery. I currently work as a Senior Museum Development Officer at Queensland Museum.

## Recognising museums as key cultural providers in the National Cultural Policy

Museums – national, state, regional and local - provide people with a bridge to the past, to place, culture, traditions and identity. They help visitors and communities understand what we have been and done; and they offer a space to contemplate what we could be and do in the future.

Australia's substantial network of regional museums and keeping places are home to significant collections. In many towns, these museums act as cultural hubs, making them critical parts of a region's cultural network. Through the preservation of objects, memories and stories they have the capacity to create social connection and knowledge. Through their membership and activities, they can promote belonging and inclusion. Through their displays, publications and outputs, they, can advance reconciliation and understanding. Through their visitation they boost regional economies.

This clear list of attributes, however, is at odds with the current challenges that regional museums face to remain sustainable, particularly those in smaller townships and those run by communities.

### ***Regional museums under pressure***

Many regional and community museums rely heavily on volunteers and receive minimal government support. Without stable funding and staff, operations, maintenance and collections care and program development can be hard. Buildings often fall below standards, and many collections are stored in compromised facilities. Visitation is impacted by minimal display turn over, a need for more contemporary or inclusive content and immersive activities.

Regional museums operate in a volatile world of funding cycles, government policy, changing social demographics, tourism seasons and an ever-increasing number of natural disasters.

While the cultural sector is always under pressure, cuts to cultural funding programs at all levels of government have impacted the arts sector substantially, and none more so than regional museum sector. In Australia, each state has a different mechanism for supporting regional museums –in QLD the Museum Development Program; in NSW the Museum Advisors Program; the Community Museums Program via the History Trust of South Australia; the Regional Museum Grants Program in the Northern Territory; the Roving Curator Program in Tasmania, the Regional Museum Access Program in Victoria and the WA Museum Development Service: in Western Australia. But a lack of unified national advocacy for regional museums is impacting the industry, with the result being a deterioration in collections care, creative output, infrastructure and operational sustainability. This has led some, like museologist Kylie Winkworth, to challenge the equity of the way funding (taxes) is distributed to the cultural sector.<sup>1</sup>

Regional museums have historically relied heavily on the altruistic culture of their communities and volunteers. Without this, many museums would no longer be able to open their doors. But volunteer numbers are in decline and the way people choose to volunteer their time is changing.<sup>2</sup> Volunteer training programs don't always cater for local needs and are often delivered by industry experts whose understanding of running a museum in the regions is well meaning but narrow. Paid employment in regional museums is limited - salaries are usually well below remuneration rates and struggle to attract long term professional staff.

Many collections need more rigorous collection policies, are overcrowded and housed in old buildings, vulnerable to the impact of our changing climate. Building upgrades or new storage infrastructure are essential for sustainable collection management, yet requests are frequently passed over in favour of new arts venues and activities.

More engaging, contemporary experiences in regional museums are critical if museums are to stay relevant. It's not an unreasonable request. Visitors' desire for museums that have high quality, ethical and engaging content aligns strongly with the 'Great Expectations' megatrend that the CSIRO's Our Future World report argued will change the way we live.<sup>3</sup> The expectation for quality experiences is legitimate but without realistic long-term funding it is almost impossible to deliver.

Cultural and interpretive redevelopments require leadership, cultural advocacy, project management, community engagement and truth telling - First Nations, migrant and climate. This means dedicated and experienced staff with an understanding of how to interpret contentious issues, not inexperienced and underpaid staff already stretched to capacity.

## Ideas from sector professionals

In 2002 Australia's Cultural Ministers Council commissioned A Study into the Key Needs of Collecting Institutions in the Heritage Sector.<sup>4</sup> It identified gaps in the management of

---

<sup>1</sup> Winkworth, K, 2016. "More on the museum diet: Ten Strategies for sustainable museums and collections" in ed. Simpson A. and Hammond G. (eds). *A Cultural Cacophony: Museum Perspectives*.

<sup>2</sup> MacDermot, Jack, 2024. "Navigating change and charting a new course: volunteering in recent times", Canberra: Volunteering Australia [Navigating Change - Volunteering Australia](#)

<sup>3</sup> Hajkowicz, Stefan; Cook, Hannah; Littleboy, Anna. Our Future World: Global megatrends that will change the way we live. Brisbane: CSIRO; 2012. csiro:EP126135.p.21. <https://doi.org/10.4225/08/584ee9706689b>

<sup>4</sup> Brophy, C; Birtley, M; Sweet, J; Carr, R; Haysom, R (2002). Study into the key needs of collecting institutions in the heritage sector: final report May 2002. Deakin University. Report. <https://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30006388>

Australia's heritage collections and led to the formation of the Collections Council of Australia in 2004. A major concern was the need for more coordinated, sector wide representation, and the report paid attention to the needs of regional institutions. When funding for the program ceased in 2010, it left Australia as one of the few developed nations without a national peak body for the collections sector.

Advocacy for the regional museum sector was taken up by museologist Kylie Winkworth, who challenged the equity of the way funding (taxes) is distributed to the cultural sector.<sup>5</sup> But her advocacy also contained some hard truths for the sector. Winkworth critiqued the tendency for Australian communities to build new museums rather than fixing the ones they have. Arguing for a more strategic approach to collecting, she suggested Australia's museum sector go on a 'museum diet' in a quest to become more sustainable.<sup>6</sup>

Six years later, Winkworth called for a major an overhaul of the way regional and community museums were represented, funded, managed, and staffed.<sup>7</sup> She recommended 10 strategies to advance sustainability and create change in the regional museum sector. These included:

- Plans for new museums take the needs of existing museums into account.
- Realistic funding models for regional museums instead of trickle-down economics.
- Strong, supported regional museums and regional hubs.
- Collection focussed regional museum strategies that build significant collections and address long term management and preservation.
- Sustainable collection plans that recognise museums' contribution to economic development, education and creative enterprises.
- Dedicated, paid regional museum staff with access to career paths and reasonable wages.
- Viable museum economies value financial expertise, business planning and asset values.
- Reframed regional museum advocacy informed by regional museum workers that focuses on goals and funding strategies rather than training and accreditation programs.<sup>8</sup>

Ten years on, most of these strategies could still form the basis of radical sector revival. Good practice is possible through good funding. Good funding schemes grow out of good policy. Good policy, in turn, relies on policy makers understanding what issues are facing an industry through meaningful engagement with relevant stakeholders and collaboratively developing strategies to improve the industry.

---

<sup>5</sup> Winkworth, K, 2016. "More on the museum diet: Ten Strategies for sustainable museums and collections" in ed. Simpson A. and Hammond G. (eds). *A Cultural Cacophony: Museum Perspectives*.

<sup>6</sup> Winkworth, K., 2010. 'Museums, Collections and Sustainability: Contending Concepts', Interesting Times, Museums Australia 2010 Conference.

<sup>7</sup> Winkworth, K, 2016. "More on the museum diet: Ten Strategies for sustainable museums and collections" in ed. Simpson A. and Hammond G. (eds). *A Cultural Cacophony: Museum Perspectives*.

<sup>8</sup> Winkworth, K, 2016. "More on the museum diet: Ten Strategies for sustainable museums and collections" in ed. Simpson A. and Hammond G. (eds). *A Cultural Cacophony: Museum Perspectives and Projects. Museums Galleries Australia. Canberra.* pp72.84.

Could more money be directed to regional museum operations? Could the States adapt and set up frameworks to support the industry in a more sustainable way? Could, for example, the model of the federally funded Community Heritage Grants to assist Australia's 'Distributed National Collections' be implemented at a state level, whereby state governments fund 'Distributed State Collections'?<sup>9</sup> Could the same happen at a local level or via the regional hubs concept if it was initiated?

## Changing the narrative

If regional and community museums are to survive the next ten years, changes are required in sector advocacy and funding. I believe the sector needs to change the narrative around need, success, innovation and industry sustainability and create an outcomes-based paradigm. Museums must move away from the praising 'strength despite adversity' mantra and move towards a 'look what happens when we are properly funded'.

Inspiring, best practice regional museum projects should not be the exception to the rule – it is what communities, organisations and tourists need. Resilience and altruism should not be prerequisites for delivering projects that other businesses benefit from – support should be available to projects with strategic business cases and plans.

A strategic approach to sector development includes considering needs and sustainability. We must aspire to create better understanding of museum needs through cultural plans, creative, contemporary redevelopments, innovations in collection storage, inspired contemporary interpretative frameworks and consider alternative ways of engaging volunteers and minimising volunteer dependency.

My submission focusses on the Australian museum sector with emphasis on the following issues and in relation to the first four pillars of the strategy:

- Recognising representation of museums as key agents within the cultural sector and reinstating a Collections Council (or equivalent) at the national level to ensure museums are properly represented and valued. Regional representation on this council is critical.
- Recognising the regional museum sector and supporting organisations that preserve the Australia's distributed collection (rather than just focusing on national and state agencies).
- Allocating sufficient funds to the Community Heritage Grants to pay realistic rates for collection work to deliver real outcomes.
- Recognising museums' operational realities, funding and staffing requirements
- Redeveloping and overhauling collection storage and infrastructure, for museums and keeping places, particularly in regional communities in the face of increasing climate challenges and severe weather impacts.
- Valuing museums and collections as incubators for cultural and artistic production and the need for these to be accessible.

---

<sup>9</sup> Office for the Arts, Commonwealth of Australia. (2026). *Distributed National Collections* [Australian Distributed National Collections](#) | [Office for the Arts](#)

- Recognising the important role museums have in reconciliation and truth telling initiatives.
- Valuing, respecting and recognising museum workers as cultural workers.
- Acknowledging the continued reliance of local council, education and tourism operators on volunteers to manage significant collections and undertake core visitor services.
- Recognising the need for radical change in the face of changing participation practices in volunteer run museums, particularly in regional areas.
- Acknowledging museums' contribution to cultural tourism economics at a local, regional and national level.
- Acknowledging museums' contribution to social cohesion, mental health and healthy communities.

### **Pillar 1 — First Nations First**

*Recognising and respecting the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia's arts and culture.*

- Liaise with relevant stakeholders to develop a permanent memorial at the centre of the National Museum of Australia to recognise the impact of government policy on First Nations culture, landscape and wellbeing – and be a leader for other state and federal agencies that represent and reflect the national story
- Encourage regional areas with museums to create permanent memorials to recognise the impact of government policy on First Nations culture, landscape and wellbeing.
- Support the development of keeping places in regional communities to house repatriated cultural material, boost cultural education, create job opportunities and cultural agency, and support recognition of cultural rights.
- Support volunteer run organisations with access to First Nations advice regarding truth telling in museums and how to address cultural collection issues and repatriation

### **Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story**

Reflecting the breadth of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.

- Cultural organisations draw on the unique stories from individuals, communities and landscapes to build their identity, relevance and appeal to tourists and visitors. Many have access to staff and budgets to build these stories into exhibitions, digital stories and other programs. Regional museums, however, struggle to compete with larger cultural agencies for an equal share of the budget, often having to rely on state budgets, and local council budgets to deliver programs. The reality of building engaging cultural tourism across the country is that local councils need to balance critical infrastructure and services often supersedes the needs of cultural facilities and tourism. These areas would benefit from support that helps build engaging storytelling experiences that reflect the experiences and reality of different communities.
- Organisations are leaning on digital platforms to deliver to regional audiences on a regular basis without understanding the loss of the in-person experience, or the power

of telling stories in a public setting. In person experiences provide opportunities to gather, build community, build social support and create a stronger sense of identity. They are also important for young people as an alternative mode of learning and interaction.

- Truth telling opportunities, around First Nations experiences, multiculturalism and migration, or around climate are important considerations for storytelling and sharing.

### **Pillar 3 — Centrality of the Artist**

*Supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators.*

- Recognise ‘cultural workers’ as a key agents, producers and creators of cultural work, product and outcomes. The term ‘artist’ places too much emphasis on contemporary arts practice at the expense of other cultural workers (voluntary and paid) within the cultural sector.
- Museum workers are frequently left on the sidelines of cultural practice when it comes to cultural recognition. The protection of cultural collections, for example, and the skill of conservation and preservation, is not always recognised as a creative practice but is in fact critical to the work of our cultural sector.
- Many museums rely on volunteers to remain open. These people, often untrained, identify and help preserve culture, facilitate access to collections and create ways of presenting it often with no recognition by those who use this work for their creativity.
- Relying on a volunteer workforce to support the cultural sector is no sustainable or equitable as cost-of-living soars and volunteering patterns change. Local museums drive tourism and provide learning opportunities – discussion around how this work is valued and supported is required for smaller cultural institutions to remain viable.
- Youth volunteering within the museum sector may be vastly different if there were greater employment support and opportunities to activate work experience and paid support. Investing in paid internships, perhaps through arts and heritage funded unemployment schemes, may help address ongoing museum management issues, particularly for regional and smaller organisations.

### **Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure**

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

- Museums store collections which are the incubators of ideas, creativity and education. But many are struggling with their storage facilities and in urgent need of support, particularly in regional Australia.
- Australia’s Distributed National Collection is held in museums, historical societies and archives across the country. The storage facilities for these collections are often in disrepair, in urgent need of upgrades and expansion, and require skilled staff. Access to funding to facilitate work required to preserve our cultural stories is currently inequitable, with the vast majority being allocated to the national collection institutions. To sustain the unique collections held in regional Australia for future generations, there

is an urgent need to support regional collection facilities as critical cultural infrastructure.

- Shared regional cultural storage facilities have the potential to support both the preservation of cultural assets and build regional capacity and economics. The retention of cultural items in the regions means collections are more accessible to communities, ensures their ongoing protection from our rapidly changing climate and extreme weather, and create jobs for arts practitioners in regional.
- As many cultural institutions, particularly federal and state, are seeking to repatriate cultural artefacts to First Nations communities, there is a growing an urgent need to develop culturally appropriate and accessible keeping places for cultural artefacts in community. Communities in the Torres Strait, for example, are facing challenges from rising sea levels which is threatening their cultural heritage but currently do not have facilities where their artefacts, and repatriated collections can be held on country and managed by community.
- To create safe, appropriate and viable facilities, however, requires planning and leadership. They need to be approved by and with First Nations communities, and ensure First Nations practitioners are leading, informing and working on any centre design and operational plans.