

NSW REGIONAL GALLERIES STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT REPORT

By Sue Boaden, Director, Australia Street Company

Sustainability is one of those words, like culture, that means many things to many people. It is also in danger of becoming meaningless, because of overuse. Be that as it may, the question of sustainability is one that concerns policy makers and planners in many sectors including the cultural sector. It was one of the key issues that drove the thinking behind last year's Regional Gallery Scoping Study commissioned by Museums and Galleries NSW and funded by the Visual Arts and Crafts Program of the NSW Ministry for the Arts.

The Study was ambitious in its objectives. It sought to document and measure the resources of the regional gallery sector in NSW, to define their operational context, and to identify opportunities to firmly position the sector within a sustainable future. The NSW Ministry for the Arts was looking for strategic information that could provide a firm basis for reviewing its program objectives and funding categories.

The Australia Street Company, cultural and socio-economic strategists and management consultants, was commissioned to undertake the Study and teamed with Patricia Parker from Admin Art to collect data and to then analyse and evaluate both qualitative and quantitative information in order to identify a framework for the future.

The Study involved gathering core data via desktop research and then to collect more complex information on each gallery via interviews with each Gallery Director. The consultant team undertook desktop research on issues and trends in the sector and developed a snapshot of local, national and international arts and cultural policies relevant to art gallery/ art museum funding.

Despite their busy schedules, Gallery Directors willingly gave their precious time providing responses to a range of probing questions and then checking, reviewing and verifying the data for their Gallery. In particular, Directors were asked to assess their collections against established criteria for significance and to provide comments on strategic goals and future plans.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

One of the first steps was to define the scope of the Study. It was agreed at the outset that the Study would focus on the 34 regional art galleries supported and maintained by local government and managed by professional and qualified staff. This definition includes art galleries that are not be directly managed by local government but which are provided with a building or are subsidised by their local council. Under this definition, artist run initiatives and volunteer-run galleries were not included. Due to the non-availability of two directors, data was collected and analysed for 32 galleries only.

STEERING COMMITTEE

The Study was supported by a Steering Committee of representatives from the Ministry for the Arts and Museums and Galleries NSW. The Study consultants also provided regular update reports to the Ministry for the Arts Visual Arts and Crafts Committee.

Study Steering Committee

Deborah Ely, Ministry for the Arts
Dolla Merrilees, Museums & Galleries NSW
Sarah-Jane Rennie, Museums & Galleries NSW
Maisy Stapleton, Museums & Galleries NSW



KEY ISSUES AND TRENDS

From our research we came up with the following summary of the context in which regional galleries are operating.

- **Touring** - support for touring exhibition programs is crucial, since it provides significant benefit at the local level but also across the sector.
- **Artist in residence programs** – programs that engage with the local community and result in the creation of product have a positive impact on local cultural industries as well as on cultural life.
- **Internships and mentorship programs** - programs that foster and encourage skills development are critical to future sustainability
- **New model galleries** – funding programs should embrace all gallery models and not just those that are collection-based.
- **Convergence** - opportunities to integrate regional collection planning and management in galleries, museums, libraries and archives are growing and having a potential for economies of scale and the development of shared goals and objectives.
- **Scholarship** –Audiences expect galleries to deliver layers of information and to provide authoritative content but resources don't always stretch to support scholarly practice.
- **Subject based networks** – managing, marketing and improving access to subject based collections should be fostered. They provide opportunities for research and program development including the innovative use of new technology.
- **Collaboration** - more research is needed into best-practice models that encourage regional leadership and foster local cooperation.
- **Audience development** - rigorous research into audience development is crucial for the sustainability of the sector.
- **Program evaluation and performance measurement** –the sector needs access to reliable and robust statistics that demonstrate the value of government investment and inform policy and planning.
- **Lifelong learning** –Developing links to other cultural facilities through the learning window provides galleries with building blocks for the future.



Tweed River Regional Art Gallery

KEY FACTS 2005

CATEGORY

Number of regional galleries in NSW

Oldest gallery

Youngest gallery

Average local government net annual operating cost per gallery

Approximate level of local government sector support 1992 to 2005

Approximate level of Ministry for the Arts funding to the sector 1992 to 2005

Approximate level of Australia Council support to the sector 2000 to 2005

Average opening hours per week

Total visitors to 32/34 galleries in 2004

Total school group visits in 2004 (based on data for 12 galleries only)

Average number of workshop programs per gallery in 2004

Total insured value of collections 2005

Total items in NSW regional gallery collections

Average number of one-off, internally curated exhibitions per gallery per annum

Most common governance/management structure

Average staff numbers

Number of galleries with 2 or fewer staff positions.

Galleries with current Strategic Plan/Business Plan

Number of galleries with active collections

Galleries with no collection

Number of galleries providing digitised access to collections

Number of galleries with research programs

Number with audience research programs

Number of galleries with formal partnerships

Number of galleries receiving awards/ public recognition since 2002

DATA

34 (32 surveyed)

Broken Hill established 1904

Hawkesbury Regional Gallery established June 2005

\$434,089

\$63,577,026 (\$4,890,540 pa)

\$21,501,227 (\$1,653,940 pa)

\$350,079 (\$70,015 pa)

38 (23 out of 32 are closed on Mondays)

1,225,365

2,427 groups

98 (up 42% from 2003)

\$142,577,598

42,405

16

"Board"/ Advisory Committee plus Council line-management.(25 galleries)

3.3 full time and/or 4.03 part-time positions (in 2004)

6

15

22

5

15 (on site access not web based)

14

6

22

6

Susan Milne and Greg Stonehouse, Hospital Beds, 2005, Hawkesbury Regional Gallery. Photo: Greg Stonehouse



Campbelltown City Art Gallery



Sue Boaden, *the MAG* Article May 2006

KEY FINDINGS

1. The regional gallery sector in NSW is diverse, made up of at least three distinct types of galleries. These include:
 - Regional galleries with high visitation levels, at least 6 full time staff, above average annual funding and diverse programming. (5 galleries – Casula, Hazelhurst, Newcastle, Penrith and Wollongong).
 - Regional galleries with 3 to 5 full time staff, modest visitation, average annual funding and an active exhibition program (24 galleries – Albury, Bathurst, Blacktown, Broken Hill, Campbelltown, Dubbo, Fairfield, Gosford, Goulburn, Grafton, Hawkesbury, Lake Macquarie, Lismore, Maitland, Manning, Manly, Moree, Mosman, New England, Orange, Port Macquarie, Tamworth, Tweed, Wagga Wagga).
 - Regional galleries with two or less full time staff, below average funding, low visitation and a modest annual exhibition program (5 - Bega Valley, Coffs Harbour, Cowra, Griffith and Muswellbrook).

This variety in delivery standards and diverse geographic spread is documented in the following Map. (Insert Sarah Jane's Map)

The Map identifies significant gaps in delivery in some regions (e.g. Illawarra/ South Coast) and also provides a snapshot in relation to demographic data and financial resources. Best practice models of excellence can be identified and could be used as a basis for strengthening the sector overall. This will require support from the 3 tiers of government.

2. Regional galleries no longer require collections as a basis for their existence. New operational models are emerging where education, participation and community engagement are just as important as collection development, management and interpretation. Overall, collection management across the sector is well managed and resourced.
 - 55% of collections were assessed as being of moderate State significance and 77.8% were assessed as being at a good level of condition.
 - 24 galleries indicated that they had special collections
 - 10 galleries acquire works via acquisitive competition
 - Most galleries indicated an interest in acquiring works by local/ regional artists
 - Emerging collection areas include the works of multicultural artists and local Indigenous art
 - 15 galleries indicated that their collection was digitised
 - 87.5% provide information and referral services particularly in relation to their collections.
3. Gaps in data are significant in the area of gallery programming and more research is urgently needed to complete the roadmap. Anecdotal evidence suggests that galleries support a range of programs but available data on for example numbers of internally curated exhibitions, scale of audience development and workshop programs is limited.
4. Trends in the sector indicate that there is increasing pressure to measure and improve performance in order to identify and demonstrate effective and efficient ways of achieving objectives. However performance measurement in the sector is generally underdeveloped and available data is inconsistent. The level of engagement in critical assessment is not sufficient to inform effective strategic advocacy and planning. This needs to be urgently rectified.
5. Comparative data collected in a systematic way can yield significant results. The development of standards for data collection and the maintenance of that data over time are crucial to the development of benchmarks and in improving sector performance.

Although this Study has provided new insights into the regional gallery sector, gaps in data remain. In order to better understand the sector in its context and to plan for a sustainable future, the following areas require further and ongoing analysis:

- financial data including level of earned income, grants, bequests
 - staffing levels including equivalent full time and part time staff
 - program development including specific audience development and education programs
 - impact assessment and social benefits
6. The raw data collected in this Study has formed the basis for the design and development of a Regional Galleries database. The database provides a crucial building block for the sector and builds on files maintained at MGNSW. Resources and leadership are needed to design, develop and maintain an enhanced database of accurate and relevant information to inform decision making and to influence strategic directions.

The way forward

The Study acknowledges the crucial role played by Museums & Galleries NSW and recognises that MGNSW is well-positioned to provide leadership in moving the sector forward. A number of practical strategies were identified during the Study which would provide much needed operational support for the sector. These strategies could logically be coordinated by a MGNSW Working Party on behalf of the sector in close consultation with local government. Strategies could include:

- the design and implementation of a program of standardised data collection systems across the sector
- as a first step, develop an annual state-wide survey of gallery visitors, based on a standardised template for use in each gallery with results evaluated centrally and communicated in a usable form to gallery management.
- Update and maintain the MGNSW facility database as a crucial planning resource for local councils.
- Design and coordinate a rigorous research based clearing house on audience development programs
- Continue and enhance support for touring exhibition programs
- Support the development and upgrade of short term Artist in residence programs that focus on engagement with the local community as well on creative production.
- Support and strengthen internship and mentorship programs between regional galleries and major State galleries.
- Review opportunities to integrate regional collection policy, planning and management via galleries, museums, libraries and archives. This might include fostering consultation with the Collections Council of Australia and support for programs that encourage skills development, IT hardware/ software systems support, awareness raising and promotion.
- Expand seminar/ workshop programs that support the development and management of volunteer programs in anticipation of a growth in demand across the sector.
- Explore the development of a state-wide program that provides an integrated approach to affordable and appropriate digital technology and training which improves collection access as well as supporting mixed media exhibition development.
- Cultivate and market the value of regional galleries programs in lifelong learning that crosses institutional boundaries e.g. between museums, galleries and public libraries.
- Research and prepare a toolkit which provides managers with basic information such as:
 - essential steps and tools in art gallery/ cultural facility planning including the importance of feasibility studies and business plans
 - best practice governance and management models for galleries
 - best practice models for friends/ volunteer programs
 - Best practice models for the development of formal partnership agreements

IN CONCLUSION

The 2005 NSW Regional Gallery Scoping Study analyses and documents the state of the environment for the sector, identifies trends and issues and puts forward a roadmap for the future. The Study highlights the diversity of practice and capacity across the State and documents the access challenges presented by the unevenness of geographic spread. Lack of reliable data and the limited nature of standard setting tools and the paucity of performance evaluation programs impacts on strategic planning. Programs which foster collaboration and partnerships will be crucial in growing financial resources – local, state, regional, national and corporate. An ongoing program of data gathering and update will provide a critical basis for ensuring the development of policies and programs that foster sector sustainability.