

# Museums & Galleries of NSW

21 October 2020

Committee Secretary  
Committee on Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Chair

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) appreciates the opportunity to contribute this submission to the Committee on Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions'

M&G NSW is an organisation that helps small to medium museums & galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres create exciting experiences for audiences and, through this focus, thriving local communities across NSW.

- Established in 1999, Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) is a well-recognised not-for-profit company funded by the NSW Government through Create NSW. M&G NSW is recognised as a leading provider of services for museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres Australia-wide, helping to create exciting and inspiring experiences for audiences and visitors, while contributing to strong, thriving local community cultural outcomes.
- While our attention is primarily on the 500 plus small to medium organisations in NSW, the impact and reach of our NETS Australia aligned touring exhibition program is nationally recognised and our widely distributed website resources are used across Australia and referenced internationally. M&G NSW's work aims to inspire communities and audiences to engage with, experience and be captivated by art, artefacts, stories, histories and the challenge of connecting these to contemporary culture and ideas.
- This submission acknowledges the strength of museum, gallery and Aboriginal cultural centre programs and activities Australia wide, with specific reference to NSW. It also acknowledges and supports submissions made by National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Australia, and the National Public Galleries Alliance (NPGA).
- M&G NSW also seeks to highlight the contribution of small volunteer community museums and their custodianship of significant collections.

# Museums & Galleries of NSW

## **Our Purpose is:**

*To support small to medium galleries, museums and Aboriginal cultural centres to maximise their impact and help create strong and thriving local communities.*

## **Our Vision is:**

*For gallery, museum and Aboriginal cultural centre programs to be at the centre of communities and audiences in NSW.*

## **Recommendations:**

**1 the Australian, state / territory and local governments increase support to peak bodies to collect vital longitudinal cultural organisation data; and that government leverages industry specific data collected and produced by peak bodies to promote awareness of the economic impacts of Australia's museum, gallery and Aboriginal cultural centre sectors.**

**2 the three-tiers of government invest in specialist staff and the technology required for public galleries, museums and Aboriginal cultural centres to digitise and promote their collections and stories This important undertaking will build awareness of Australia's rich and unique cultural heritage. In seeking to showcase the objects and stories of First Nations communities, appropriate protocols and respect for cultural ownership be developed, negotiated and applied in consultation with those communities, with the aim of boosting national identity and global audiences.**

**3 the federal government work with peak bodies to develop a *National Arts and Culture Policy* that accurately represents and reflects Australia's creative and cultural industries; positions arts and culture as central to Australian life and our ambitions as a nation; has agreed economic and participation measures to ensure we are on the right path; and has agreed levels of investment over the duration of the policy, to provide certainty to Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions at all levels.**

## **Commentary:**

During the latter part of 2018, Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) undertook a comprehensive Census of the Museum and Gallery sector in NSW.

See: <https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/research/2018-nsw-museum-gallery-sector-census/>

- **Metrics published in the above report were recorded pre-pandemic and COVID-19 lockdown. The effect of both has negatively impacted across the sector in many ways, some of which are yet to be fully realised or understood. This submission is predicated by that concern and the certainty disruption will continue to occur across community/volunteer led and local government programs state-wide.**

# Museums & Galleries of NSW

Using the M&G NSW database as a starting point, the 2018 Sector Census contacted every operational museum, gallery and Aboriginal cultural centre in NSW that have collections, present exhibitions, are accessible to the public on a regular basis and are operated on a not-for-profit basis, including those run and operated by local councils. In total 524 organisations that met the criteria were identified, including 337 community run and managed museums, 58 public and regional galleries, 58 public and regional museums, 39 community run, and managed galleries and artist run initiatives and 32 Aboriginal cultural centres.

The overall objective of the study was to gain factual and reliable data for the sector on collections, staffing levels, facilities, funding and visitation. By comparing this data against previous census findings M&G NSW can provide an overview and health check of the sector and build on previous research.

The survey was conducted online and by phone over a 3-month period and received 377 respondents. Approximately two thirds of respondents were from outside metropolitan Sydney.

## **Some key findings of the census include:**

- Surveyed organisations reported visitor numbers of more than 5 ½ million in 2017. This included over 3 million visitors across country NSW\*.  
\* includes all areas of NSW outside of the greater Sydney Metro area.
- Organisations reported an average of 10,000 objects per collection across the sector. 90% of organisations manage a collection, yet less than half of these collections have been fully catalogued. Organisations reported 824,957 individual items currently in collections with over 3 million additional items estimated.
- Half of all museums described their collection as relating to the immediate local history of their region.
- Organisations reported a total number of 4069 exhibitions and 21,572 events/public programs across NSW. Of these, 2955 exhibitions and 15,312 events/public programs took place outside metropolitan areas.
- Respondent museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres directly support 797 equivalent full-time employees.
- Over half of all organisations surveyed reported that they rely solely on volunteers.
- The survey reported 8,629 active volunteers giving almost 5 million hours in 2017, worth over \$100 million per annum @ \$20 per hour.

These statistics highlight what we know to be a vitally important (and large) culture and heritage contribution delivered across communities in this state and Australia wide.

NSW regional galleries enjoy an association with local government of more than 100 years. They represent long held community aspirations and many have become significant economic, social, wellbeing and cultural contributors to the regions they serve. While there are an increasing number of regional museums similarly well supported by local councils, overall the museum/gallery cultural heritage sector (including Aboriginal

# Museums & Galleries of NSW

cultural centres and volunteer run museums) require access to increased resources and a sharper strategic policy focus.

At the 2019 NSW Local Government Conference a recommendation “That Local Government NSW (LGNSW) lobby government to devise a Museum Strategy for NSW with sufficient resources to ensure cultural heritage led vibrancy, collection care and local storytelling initiatives are supported, developed and maintained for communities throughout the State” was unanimously supported.

Proposed by four regional councils, success of the motion highlighted the significant commitment local government has to community cultural development Australia wide and to the provision of cultural services across the arts. It also served to highlight the aspirations shared within communities for access to, and development of, improved facilities and programming – particularly in regional areas.

Specifically, the recommendation focussed on the need for an overarching museum strategy for NSW, one that also includes targeted support for volunteer run community museums and their significant collections. Lack of resources and coherency, of an overarching vision, has hampered any ability to effectively harness state-wide benefits, often glimpsed, but not fully realised. Small museums also stimulate visitor economies, tourism opportunities and foster wellbeing.

## **Volunteer Sector:**

New South Wales has a large and diverse community (volunteer run) museum and gallery sector, which sits beside and complements many other volunteer operated community cultural, health, and capital building enterprises. It is recognised that volunteers in regional communities are often actively engaged in more than one community sector and/or organisation.

A paper published by the Curtin Institute in March 2019 identified many factors impacting on the availability of volunteers across Australia.

See <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2019/03/rural-volunteers-crisis/>

These factors include:

- Volunteer burnout particularly faced by those in multiple volunteering roles;
- Volunteers relocating to larger communities to access increasingly centralised retail, health services and care services;
- Ageing rural and regional populations;
- General failures of governments to provide adequate resourcing to support volunteer organisations.

It is considered that the decline in numbers of volunteers will impact on the museum sector during the next decade. A decline in volunteer input, now hastened by COVID-19, will directly affect the sustainability profile of many community museums - leading to a loss of association and connection between local stories, cultural knowledge and collections.

# Museums & Galleries of NSW

The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on collection care is also of great concern, potentially leaving many community collections uncared for and increasingly under threat of degradation and theft.

With regional NSW's first collection store under construction in Bathurst, a glimpse of a future that might allow collections held in trust for communities to be more widely stored, distributed, affordable to borrow and accessible, is offered.

It should be noted that while access to state significant collections in regional NSW is ongoing and needed, significant and important regional collections also exist and warrant exposure. Curatorial skills and capacity within regional institutions themselves, skills that support local storytelling and professional expertise and skills development, should be prioritised.

There is clearly a related need for the sector to more fully embrace opportunities presented by digitisation. To both expand access opportunities and to improve documentation and significance assessment processes associated with effective and informed collection management.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission with you further, please do not hesitate to contact.

Yours sincerely

Michael Rolfe  
CEO