INQUIRY INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE OUTSIDE THE SYDNEY CBD

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Submission by Clarence Valley Council to the Inquiry into the Development of Arts and Cultural Infrastructure Plan outside the Sydney CBD

Clarence Valley Council (CVC) is pleased to make a submission into this inquiry in recognition of the role that cultural activities play in developing and maintaining the liveability and economic sustainability of our local area on other in regional New South Wales.

Our comments reflect the range of cultural services provided and/or supported by the CVC, including the Grafton Regional Art Gallery, Clarence Valley Regional Library, Clarence Valley branch libraries, museums, community centres and cultural development activities.

Clarence Valley Council welcomes the development of a carefully considered statewide arts and cultural plan aligned to broader government planning strategies and local circumstances to achieve substantial arts and cultural infrastructure in regional areas. This support derives largely from the initiatives that CVC has already undertaken in recognition of the value of the cultural dimensions of our local lifestyle and their contribution to our economic future.

The Clarence Valley Economic Development Strategic Plan includes two specific strategies, of its twelve major actions, that support the development of the creative industry sector and attract infrastructure and facilities to support growth of tourism, community connectivity, social infrastructure and sporting excellence in Clarence Valley.

Those economic development strategies are embedded in the Clarence Cultural Plan 2007 – 2012. Its action plan reflects guidance from our extensive community engagement and it aims to foster and develop the Valley's already vibrant cultural life through diverse initiatives. Its development also reflects increasing expectations for local authorities to adopt a more strategic approach to arts and cultural development in determining their future.

The keys themes are inclusive of the range of issues that might need to be addressed in any cultural plan. These include protecting local character, building a shared identity, Aboriginal heritage and culture, cultural tourism, creative industries, cultural facilities, facilitating and supporting arts and culture as well as fostering life long learning.

A statewide plan would ideally incorporate developing of partnerships and funding arrangements so vital in regional areas in addition to the matters identified above. I look forward to the outcomes of this enquiry and potential opportunities to participate in the more detailed development of statewide cultural plan.

Yours faithfully

Stuart McPherson
General Manager

1.   Issues of public and private funding and allocation of resources

The allocation of public funds to art and cultural infrastructure must recognise the fundamental differences between regional and metropolitan areas as they relate to population size, density and profile, the economic base and emerging trends and pressures.

The extent of the area covered by local authorities, its patterns of population distribution and access challenges demand funding and resource allocation mechanisms that are sympathetic to the complexities of achieving equity for regional communities compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

Focusing on metropolitan areas reaches vast numbers of people and may appear economically efficient, but does not consider equity issues and sustainability for regional communities. Regional areas often lack the resources associated with major industries, higher income levels and competitive service delivery. Arts and cultural resources therefore become very heavily reliant on resources from local councils already struggling to address all of the budgetary requests across an increasing range of services they are expected to provide.

Yet local Councils don't shirk that responsibility - they know only too well the contribution of the cultural sector to community well-being and economic development. This is very clearly demonstrated in the Clarence Valley in its Economic Development Plan and inter-related Cultural Plan.

Our libraries have one main funding source which has recently been the centre of pleas from local communities to address the dwindling level of support and the inequities compared to other states. The State currently provides approximately 10% of current library funding with the remaining amount to be sought elsewhere. This is less than half the amount they funded 20 years ago and significantly less than other state governments provide for their library services. Developing necessary infrastructure means a long wait, possibly a decade or more, for both libraries and galleries. And then the state government's contribution is often only a fraction of what councils have committed to the project.

Currently the Grafton Regional Gallery utilises the services of organisations such as MGNSW, AbaF, Regional Arts, Arts Law and Vi$copy. These provide very important professional support to all arts organisations and can help develop private sector funding, sponsorships or trusts for regional arts and cultural funding and infrastructure. A regional delivery of services would enhance the services on offer.

To retain our youth and manage changing population profiles, regional areas need to be able to respond more quickly to public cultural infrastructure needs. Ageing, more educated and growing populations are placing greater pressures on limited cultural infrastructure.

While metropolitan areas struggle with their growing populations, regional areas struggle to develop the lifestyle infrastructure that would act to retain populations and ease the burden on metropolitan areas.

A regional approach to funding non-metropolitan infrastructure would benefit both metropolitan and regional areas to maintain and enhance their unique identities through infrastructure that reflects its past and present cultural values.

2.   Suitability of public infrastructure for arts and cultural life

The Clarence Valley, like many regional communities, needs to refurbish existing facilities and provide new infrastructure that fosters inclusiveness and draws on its rich artistic and cultural identity.

The Clarence Valley has numerous small and ageing facilities with limited functionality and flexibility to accommodate contemporary artistic and cultural interests. The maintenance costs of those impinge on Council's capacity to embark on major new developments that are desperately required to respond to community needs, interests and aspirations. Rationalising the provision of facilities across a local government area and a region presents additional challenges which may only be resolved with a strategic regional approach.

Physical access to these facilities, in particular to libraries which are the most frequently visited of this type of infrastructure, is impeded due to design features that make areas inaccessible to people with disabilities and mothers with prams. In many cases the only solution is a completely new facility or virtual access. None of our libraries meets current guidelines and industry standards. Virtual access presents technology and socio-economic barriers in our local area. This is particularly concerning given the role that libraries play in the lives of all our community members in terms of improving life chances, socialisation and mental acuity.

A support strategy similar to the Western Sydney Arts Strategy of Arts NSW would boost the capacity of regions to nurture and develop their unique culture. This strategy could provide the opportunity for local indigenous culture to be supported through collaboration with existing cultural institutions in building the capacity of the local indigenous community to manage that infrastructure. In addition it could include strategies for providing museum style display of their history and traditions.

The lack of suitable spaces for emerging and existing artists and performers will impact on the future of this sector. The low density of artists is insufficient to enable the natural development of artist spaces in the Clarence Valley and similar regions. This is where the collaborative and convergence models of infrastructure development may yield effective outcomes.

The Clarence Valley has a severe shortage of community display space, temporary performance space and exhibition space especially in the Lower Clarence area. Yet it has a very active community in all the arts, sports and leisure activities. Developing a space which can be utilised as an artist run space, a temporary exhibition space and performance venue would directly support professional development of artists and improve access to current exhibition and public programs. Ideally, the space would be attached to a branch library and effectively promote diverse cultural interests. This type of opportunity is not currently available in the area and requires significant external funding to achieve.

The integration of open space planning with the cultural plan enables an efficient method for the development of exterior spaces that can support a wide variety of cultural, sporting and recreational activities. Support through Arts NSW would be an effective mechanism for local councils to undertake integrated cultural planning/planning for cultural infrastructure.

3.   The desirability of locating cultural facilities in close proximity to create hubs
The Clarence Valley is typical of many regional areas in that there is one major and two minor population centres servicing numerous villages and rural areas. School buses are often the only public transport available to residents outside of the population centres.

Hubs work for some activities while for others it has an isolating effect. It is often hard to avoid perpetuating the capital city model when using hubs, where all available funding is allocated on a per head basis which results in the majority of resources being allocated to one central place.

Hubs can also lead to a loss of identity or the opportunity to develop identity as all resources are allocated to the hub. The use of various models at a regional level allows for the development of a diversity of cultural activities. In the Clarence Valley the existing cultural infrastructure of most villages includes a hall, open parkland and sporting facilities. Many villages then become well-known for their annual events associated with that infrastructure and attract a broad audience. Support for these smaller hubs needs to be maintained as they form part of the cultural identity of an area, underpin social interaction, build the capacity of smaller communities and ultimately support their sustainability as a community.

However cultural precincts or hubs are a very effective model in the major population centres in regional areas. These centres are visited by the outlying population who access the services in the centre on a regular basis. Grafton is an example of a city that services a large population who live in the outlying villages and rural areas. In effect the citizens of the Clarence Valley are tourists in their local town or city. The development of a hub is an effective way to provide most cultural services to this population.

Care has to be taken in regional areas to avoid developing hubs on a regional basis which limit access to the facilities. Most residents in the local government area have to travel up to two hours to access the facilities. Public transport is limited and for many families prohibitively expensive. Where only one large facility has been has been established in one city or town in the region, it often struggles due to access issues. The smaller facilities also struggles as funds are allocated to the one major facility.

A range of models are necessary for regional areas that see support for small facilities to operate more effectively, support for outreach and travelling shows whilst still considering the need for hubs in larger centres.

The structures of the Regional Arts network offer opportunities to implement cultural planning on a regional level.

4. Accessibility of cultural and arts education

Access to education is a major problem of most regional areas. Students need to access the major tertiary institutions to gain the necessary cultural and arts education. While there are financial support mechanisms for isolated students to access secondary and tertiary education this is insufficient and forces students to take a gap year and places further financial burdens on families in regional areas where wages are lower than in metropolitan areas.

A network of local opportunities can enhance access for career pathways as well as encourage life long learning.

Visual arts education is actively supported and developed by the regional galleries of NSW. This network is able to attract national and international practitioners to its venues to present arts education programs due to its professional infrastructure and staffing.

5. Economic impacts on communities

The development of cultural and arts infrastructure has a very positive effect on regional communities. This is well recognised the Clarence Valley Council's Economic Development Plan which recommended the development of Creative Industries Business Plan as a priority activity. Delivery of that Business Plan commenced in January this year and will span three years. This strategy was inspired by the recognition of the economic value of the cultural sector, the competitive advantage it presents for the area and its potential for growth. The business plan focuses on addressing the inherent fragmentation within the cultural sector through establishing a financially sustainable organisation that will support a virtual hub of creative businesses and build their individual and collective capacity for growth.

The Clarence Valley has a very strong tourist base. While much of that interest has been, and will continue to be, derived from its natural environment, its cultural and artistic identity is proving to be a major attractor. This is evidenced in the in another economic development priority strategy, 'Clarence River Way', which will see the development of a master plan that will clearly identify visitor touring routes along the Clarence River, investment opportunities and enhance access for visitors to the natural assets of the region and some key cultural, historical and icon visitor experiences.

6.   The adequacy of the NSW State Plan and desirability of a cultural plan for the state to maximise diversity of access, with reference to the Tourism Masterplan and other relevant planning strategies
The NSW State Plan aims to improve urban environments through more people participating in the arts and has set a goal of increasing visits to and participation in the arts and cultural activity by 10% by 2016. The specific strategies aim to promote activities in parks mainly and largely ignore the need within the cultural sector to strengthen its own capacity, to support avenues for career pathways within the sector, to fund significant infrastructure and support for local solution. The strategy also has a strong focus on the metropolitan cultural spaces with little emphasis on support for regional attractions.

The State Plan does present opportunities for the development of a statewide cultural plan which would certainly help to address the gaps in the State Plan and guide local areas in developing localised strategies. The extent to which these matters may addressed in regional plans currently being developed for our area is yet to be assessed. The Tourism Masterplan presents opportunities for regional areas which may be explored through specific statewide plan.