

Submission
No 7

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

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The Committee Manager
Public Works Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

19th August 2008

Dear Catherine

Please find below some background information and response to your inquiries.

Background

This submission is on behalf of Arts Upper Hunter, a Regional Arts Board servicing the five local government areas of ; Upper Hunter, Muswellbrook, Singleton, Dungog and Gloucester. Arts Upper Hunter Inc. was established in 2003 with the Upper Hunter and Muswellbrook Shire Councils, the other three councils have joined over the intervening years with Dungog joining most recently in July this year (2008). Arts Upper Hunter is a young Regional Arts Board and as the following will demonstrate the area is not advanced in the way that it engages with cultural development. There is a dearth of cultural infrastructure and an understanding of potential development and funding opportunities is yet to be established.



The region is currently starting the process of engaging with cultural planning and beginning to see the importance and potential that it provides. Gloucester and Muswellbrook have recently developed cultural plans and have cultural committees as part of Council. Singleton is in the process of setting up a cultural committee whose agenda is to assist Council with the development of a cultural plan. The Upper Hunter and Dungog do not have any formalised planning at present. None of the 5 Councils has a cultural development officer. One thing all councils have in common is a desire to make themselves attractive places to live work and play. This is forefront on the agenda as boom in the mining industry

is bringing new people to the area and there is the need to entice medical practitioners and other necessary services to the area to cater for this change in demographic. Arts Upper Hunter's current focus is to demonstrate the enormous role that the arts play in achieving this, and to make the arts more visible and acceptable. In effect the best way that we can do this is to assist the community in presenting projects that accomplish this whether it is, by incorporating public art into public spaces, or being able to put on regular events/performances cultural activities. The focus for the region in the last ten years has been on coping with the change in industry from farming to mining and the impact this has had on demographics, skills, social connections and values. Drought has had far reaching impact.

Arts Upper Hunter had a period of 18 months when in effect there was no Regional Arts Development Officer. During this time engagement with the State Government was in securing funding for the Regional Arts Board to continue its program and to enable it to employ a full time RADO. In 2008 there has been interest by a number of groups in applying for the State Government's Cultural Grants, this program is on hold which is not helpful.

The amount of funding spent on arts and cultural activities is minimal. In this region the reliance is still very much with volunteers for the staging of events art prizes etc... and in acting as presenters for touring performances. In the last year three new private galleries have opened and a fourth is due to open before the end of the year. These businesses are attempting to survive financially through the sales and are currently looking at ways of supplementing this by providing workshops and activities. This will potentially be successful and has the dual effect of filling another large gap which is that of the potential for skill development within the region. Music has become strong within the region which timing would suggest is attributable to the starting of the Upper Hunter Conservatorium of Music in Muswellbrook (now in its eleventh year). Music has been supplemented privately by Kia-Ora stud who developed the Kia-Ora music camp (an annual event) and the Upper Hunter Shire is now a partner.

The region has not in the past engaged publicly with cultural practices and creative industries and therefore there is not an existing network of workers particularly within local Government who are skilled in this regard. Nor is there an established understanding of process. It is an area ready to grow and develop in this manner and again the change in demographics will help push this further as those moving to the area have experience and expectations that will assist.

Following is a report on the particular areas identified which we hope will be helpful. We thank you for the opportunity to have input and hope to be able to work together to best assist the development of our region.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bridget Nicholson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Bridget Nicholson
Regional Arts Development Officer
Arts Upper Hunter

Inquiry into the development of Arts and Cultural infrastructure outside the Sydney CBD

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

At the moment there are not strong relationships between Government and the private sector in regards to arts and cultural practices. Private funding is something that needs to be pursued in this region particularly where the resource industry is playing such a large role in bringing people into the area. Coal and Allied have funded the employment of a grants officer for the Upper Hunter, Muswellbrook, and Singleton Shires this followed a trial in Singleton where a grants officer has been employed for two years and has assisted the community in accessing grant monies. The need for infrastructure has increased and the pressure on local government is out of balance. There have been some projects recently, a library in Denman, and a Youth Centre in Singleton that have resulted from partnerships between local Government, Federal (through the Regional Partnerships program) and in Singleton Coal and Allied. While the Federal Government is reviewing their infrastructure funding and the State Government is not releasing their program there is not much happening.

2. Suitability of public infrastructure for arts and cultural life

There is not an abundance of infrastructure available in the region. Singleton Civic centre is the main space that has a proper large stage and an audience capacity for 450 people. The theatre is used for a large number of shows eg. Trade shows, wine show etc... and also heavily utilised by the schools. It is pretty well booked out with by local organisations. The new Youth Centre may now be able to supplement this and provide for smaller productions. The Upper Hunter has a lack of any large public venue. The theatrical group in Scone own their own building and it has an audience capacity of 96. The council have made enquiries into buying the Cinema which is privately owned, empty and dilapidated; the owners do not want to sell and are currently undermining the public presentation of the town. Muswellbrook also has no publicly owned large venue. Most performances take place in school halls which make it difficult as stage, props and lighting have to be dismantled each day for the school. There is a lack of cultural presenters in both these shires which can be attributed to the lack of available venues. In regards to the visual arts Muswellbrook has a Regional Arts Centre. There is good exhibition space but no additional facilities which is limiting and means that the gallery does not run a public program as such. The gallery draws an audience from Muswellbrook and the Upper Hunter but Singleton people do not seem to venture north. Gloucester has an artist run gallery space on the ground floor of the Arts Council Building. Council assist them with a grant each year that covers their rent. They have received funding from Arts NSW in the past which established the gallery. There is a group in Singleton who has been lobbying Council for a number of years for a regional gallery. They do not connect to either the Maitland or the Muswellbrook Gallery. Dungog also has a strong group of visual artists who would like a space. In both these locations a solution may be a workshop space where artists can work which may grow into an exhibition space. There is a definite call for this type of space which currently sits outside of the norm but should be considered and eligible for Government funding from all levels.

3. The desirability of locating cultural facilities in close proximity to create hubs

Within a given place this works very well activities complement each other and people have the chance to network and become part of a bigger community. There is no such hub of this nature in the region at the moment. Creating central hubs to service a region requires careful analysis as is demonstrated with the Singleton/Muswellbrook Arts Centre, there is no apparent reason for Singleton people not to participate and be part of the Muswellbrook Art gallery community, but it does not happen. Geographic location alone is not sufficient reason to establish facilities, behavioural patterns, transport and other factors must be considered on an individual case basis.

4. Accessibility of cultural and arts education

Singleton TAFE offers a visual arts course in drawing and painting. This is the only educational program available within the region. The arts and crafts organisations within the region are currently the main source of workshops and most of these rely on the Country Art Support Program for funding. These organisations realise that they need to be more self sufficient and need to be able to run these activities in a commercial format to make them sustainable. The business acumen to be able to do this is something we are currently trying to access. The private galleries who are pursuing workshops will also assist in bridging this gap.

Newcastle as an educational resource is not being utilised nearly as much as it could be. The challenge seems to be that it is very hard to find accommodation. International students have priority for the onsite accommodation and so regional students are mainly trying to rent houses, however they only want an 8-9 month lease which is not attractive to landlords, and while the housing market tightens students become the least desirable tenants. Trains timetables are not aligned with student needs, this is something that should be considered and a means of better servicing this group explored.

5. Economic impacts on communities

Drought has had the biggest impact in the last 5 years, with far reaching effect. Time and energy as well as income have been expended. In an area where volunteers drive the existence of cultural activity it has understandably dried up. Assistance with putting on more would greatly benefit the community an example was an Opera hosted at Moonan Flat last year. The project was initiated by a tennis club, and with assistance from the Country Arts Support Program and a Drought Fund were able to present an Opera, the event was sold out. New people coming into the region need to be drawn into networks and encouraged to participate.

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 regional would benefit enormously from a statewide cultural plan. The research and mapping process in itself would provide a very useful resource and assist in identifying needs.

7. Any other relevant matters

Arts and Cultural Infrastructure in the Upper Hunter rests on the shoulders of volunteers. Volunteers need to work as presenters, project initiators, grant writers, and project managers. To work across all these areas requires skills and confidence. In order to encourage and facilitate this we need to assist people in acquiring the skills, and connect them into networks that can work with them. Understanding insurance and responsibilities is a large part of this. A lack of cultural infrastructure is paramount and affects in particular the ability to attract touring programs. An audit of cultural infrastructure and 'people' resources across the region would assist in identifying a way forward. Planning in infrastructure assistance would be put to very good use.