

**Submission  
No 10**

**INQUIRY INTO STATE RECORDS ACT 1998 AND THE  
POLICY PAPER ON ITS REVIEW**

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## **Submission to the Review of the State Records Act 1998**

William Oates

Background – I base this short submission on the professional experience I have gained in over thirty years of public service as a record keeper or archivist in regional New South Wales. In my current role as University Archivist for the University of New England I have been responsible for the NSW State Archives held by UNE for the State Archives and Records Authority for over 17 years. In this time I have visited NSW government agencies on behalf of the State Archives and Records Authority in locations as remote as Walgett, Coonamble, Tenterfield, Coffs Harbour and Tamworth. I have also been invited to visit other agencies in Grafton, Glen Innes, Armidale and many small schools and numerous local historical societies. As a regional archive, we have actively collected State Archives across the region and have identified and helped recover estray government records in numerous locations.

I commend the recommendations of the Policy Paper to the committee. Protecting the public from corruption or mismanagement by individuals within an agency starts with robust recordkeeping systems that are an integral part of any audit process.

A specific section of the recommendations is worthy of note.

In particular, the recommendation 3.3.4 recommending that records in the open access period be opened by default unless a ‘closed to public access (CPA) direction has been lodged. It has been too easy for agencies to ignore making open access determinations in order to frustrate public access to records held by organizations.

General discussion on the regions.

Since the beginning of responsible government in NSW recordkeeping failures are frequently related to significant organizational change. The further an agency is geographically located away from Sydney, the greater the risk of archives loss due to agencies closing public offices or schools. Because we are dealing with historic records and not current events, the creation of estray records occurs as local officers’ deal with volumes of material often not identified as archives or covered by an appropriate disposal schedule. Indeed remote police stations and court houses have been reclaimed by the bush in some areas; records lost. Public records remain difficult is not impossible to track in locations like Wellingrove or Willsons Downfall because of a lack of recordkeeping rigor at the time of the organizational change.

Historically significant records can actually exist because a disposal process was not followed by earlier generations of public servants. The professional interpretation of the value of old records is often missing in the remoter parts of NSW because professional archivists are not on the ground when these decisions are being made. Arbitrary disposal decisions made by unskilled staff have led to considerable levels of destruction of archival records over time.

While it is not a matter for the new Act to address the problems of geographic disparity in managing the capture of the social, historical and cultural identity, or the resourcing required to improve matters. I would hope that the new model for museums and archives in NSW sees greater emphasis placed on regional and remote cultural locations. State funding of Regional Archives Centres has been diminished over the last twenty years to the point where local communities now are lobbying agencies to request they retain State Archives.

Regional archives centres cover the northern third of NSW, Newcastle, Wollongong and the southern third of the State. No regional centre for NSW archives exists in the Central West of NSW. Outside of Sydney this is one of the oldest settled areas on NSW. Could the model for the creation of these centres be improved to fill this gap?

How people living in rural and remote NSW could perceive current support can be seen in the nomenclature 'Sydney Living Museums'. Yes, lots of culture in NSW if you visit Sydney. The geographic spread of regional museum sites and professional curatorial staff rests with Local Government. The new arrangements proposed in this policy paper will allow for new directions for all the state.