

Submission
No 46

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

Organisation: History Council of New South Wales, Inc

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HCNSW Submission

"The State Records Act 1998 and the Policy Paper on its review"

Preamble

The History Council of NSW, Inc (HCNSW) believes that history shapes the present and the future.

Through its work as a membership-focussed Not-for-Profit Charity and the peak body in this state for historical organisations, the HCNSW fosters the practice of history in all its forms.

The objectives of the History Council of New South Wales are to:

- provide a forum for identifying and responding to issues of relevance to the practice of history
- support history's role in informing and shaping public debate, policy and future planning
- recognise the diversity of historical perspectives, including those of Indigenous peoples, and encourage excellence in historical practice
- facilitate communication within the history community and provide opportunities for collaboration
- provide professional development activities and opportunities for our members and audiences across NSW.

In 2019, the combined History Councils of Australia released the **Value of History Statement**. The HCNSW is dedicated to achieving widespread knowledge and recognition in all areas of society about the critical nature of history and how it underpins cultural practice, economies and community well-being. The Council acknowledges that the emphasis on making history accessible in the proposed policy objectives is an important and laudable one.



Guided by our objectives, the HCNSW is delighted to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues about "The State Records Act 1998 and the Policy Paper on its review".

Submission

The HCNSW commends the NSW Government's four policy outcomes:

- Stories that shape the social, historical and cultural identity of NSW are widely shared and understood
- Records of enduring value to the citizens of NSW are managed, preserved and made accessible
- Citizens have timely access to records documenting the activities and decisions that shape NSW and the lives of its citizens
- NSW public offices create, keep and protect records as evidence of their activities and decisions

The Council supports the review of the *State Records Act 1998*. This review is overdue and the proposals are in line with responsible record keeping to support good governance, decision making, and transparency, as well as to ensure government records are available to the public and accessible into the future through the timely transfer of records to the state archives. The Council also supports the interrogation of 'factors constraining public access to and use of the documentary and material heritage of NSW'.

However the Council raises questions about the other elements of the proposal. In particular, the benefits of the merger between State Archives and Records Authority (SARA) and Sydney Living Museums (SLM) are unclear to the Council since these organisations have distinct aims which, while complementary, are not perfectly aligned. State Archives and Records and Sydney Living Museums are distinctive entities with very separate roles and responsibilities.

SARA's mission is: "to preserve the State archives and enable and promote their use, and set standards and provide guidance and services to improve records management across the NSW public sector including local government, the universities and the public health system" <https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/about-state-records/who-we-are>

Sydney Living Museums "cares for 12 of the most important historic houses and museums in NSW on behalf of the people of NSW. Our vision is to create a living future for the past. Our mission is to cherish, protect and share our places and stories".
<https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/museum-of-sydney/visit>



While both seek to maintain links between the past and present, they do so in very different ways, which only overlap in that SLM exhibitions may be informed by materials held by SARA, and that SARA mounts a small number of exhibitions to showcase aspects of its collection. Both have much wider briefs which do not intersect, with SLM's heavy focus on material history, from small artifacts to its 12 properties, its role in the tourism and education sectors and its broad audience; and SARA's more specialist audience of historical researchers and statutory role in guiding excellence in records management in the NSW public sector.

We are not aware of a case that has been made as to why these two entities would function more effectively if merged. We prefer to have them continue to serve the people of the state in their very important functions separately, employing specialists and designing processes and structures to serve their own purposes. This will avoid the inefficiencies which can plague organisations without a clear and unified purpose.

A particular concern for our members, many of them based in regional NSW, is public access to the materials held by SARA. In the Council's view, improving the existing models of public access, rather than creating new models would be a more sensible, efficient and effective option.

If the proposed merger led to a focus on public access to historical records and archives via exhibitions, this would be mediated access, directed by curatorial management rather than the direct, unmediated viewing of archival material both online and especially on-site and in-person which is currently undertaken by our members and many others from professional researchers to family historians to people with general interest in records. It appears to the Council that the current proposal will limit proper in-person access to archives, exacerbating the problems caused by the closure of the Sydney office in 2012 (after 34 years at the Rocks site), and undermining the recent improvements in online access facilitated by digital technology. At a time of COVID-19 crisis, when we are all working on ways to foster online engagement, it seems the perfect opportunity to forge ahead with digitisation projects which make the state's records and archives accessible.

It remains unclear to the HCNSW whether the proposed reforms will 'increase public knowledge and enjoyment of the stories that shape our social, historical and cultural identity, enhancing social outcomes for the people of NSW' through the proposed merger. The suggestion that material in the State Records and Archives needs to be part of 'storytelling' in exhibitions discounts the widespread use of this material in published historical work over many years. Indeed, these archives have formed the backbone of history in this state as a critical resource for historians.

It also remains unclear to the HCNSW whether the proposed reforms will 'enhance the protection of the key cultural assets of NSW'. The development of Sydney Living Museums



is encouraged. However SLM has its own developmental trajectory and is not a broad state-wide organisation with sites and spaces that neatly sit with the material of SARA. As its rebranding from Historic Houses Trust of NSW to Sydney Living Museums signalled, SLM is only a small though significant part of the broader NSW heritage landscape and 'cultural assets'. The Council is not averse to a stronger collaboration between various history agencies - indeed we commend this in principle. However it is unclear why a merger is required to facilitate this, or, indeed, why these two agencies have been chosen to merge.

In conclusion, the HCNSW finds few compelling reasons to support the merger of SLM and SARA. It very much welcomes the current efforts to focus on history in NSW, and to think of new ways of bringing the value of history onto the state agenda. The Council hopes this moment may prove fruitful in a broader-ranging discussion about the institutions which support history across the state in all its forms.