

Submission
No 22

**INQUIRY INTO GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE
POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND
CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Museums and Galleries of NSW

Date Received: 29 April 2020

Museums & Galleries of NSW

1st May 2020

The Hon Robert Borsak MLC
Chair, Select Committee on the Government's Management of the Powerhouse Museum
Parliament House
Macquarie St
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Chair

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) appreciates the opportunity to contribute this submission to the *Select Committee on the Government's Management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales*.

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 and the Federal Government through the Australia Council's Four-Year Funding for Organisations Program (pending). 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 communities.
- We are an energetic and experienced team of arts and culture professionals.
- While our attention is primarily on the 500 plus small to medium organisations in NSW, the impact and reach of our 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.

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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.

In response to selected TOR we offer the following recommendations and comment:

Recommendations

- **NSW State Government to devise a Museum Strategy for NSW with sufficient resources to ensure visual arts and cultural heritage led vibrancy, collection care, local storytelling and digitisation initiatives are supported, developed and maintained for communities throughout the State.**
- **Additional program funding and supplementary support in response to COVID-19 impacts be allocated across Create NSW's investment programs.**
- **That in response to COVID-19 impacts on volunteer run community museums, an operational support and collection care/rescue program be funded to ensure maintenance of local cultural heritage under threat of loss or closure.**
- **That Museums & Galleries of NSW's Collections and Stories digitization program be prioritised for roll-out to ensure significance assessment, documentation and connected storytelling of collections throughout NSW.**

Comment

(a) The proposed move of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Powerhouse Museum, from Ultimo to Parramatta, including:

- (i) The core visions behind the move

The Powerhouse Museum has held a leadership role for the State's professional and volunteer run museums and galleries for many years.

At this exciting time in the Powerhouse Museum's development, Museums and Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) looks forward to continuing its involvement with MAAS in Parramatta. We also look forward to finalising an MOU currently in negotiation, whereupon in partnership we can deliver enhanced professional development programs

utilising the vast expertise of MAAS staff, and the opportunities that relocation presents, connecting with new audiences and new ways of working.

We acknowledge and are excited that:

- **Powerhouse Parramatta will reflect the communities and cultures of Western Sydney**
- **It will hold First Nations culture at its core**
- **The Powerhouse will create a world-class education, research and community facility in Parramatta**
- **The Powerhouse Precinct will include the Powerlab and 60 dormitory beds known as The Academy for regional and rural NSW children who will have an opportunity to immerse themselves in the programs of the Museum**

M&G NSW looks forward to continuing to support the development of the Powerhouse Parramatta, to assisting with the effectiveness of its regional connections and to participating in the ongoing success of the institution, as it embraces change, becomes reimagined and firmly future focused.

(b) the Government's management of all museums and cultural projects in New South Wales, including

(i) current Government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries across regional New South Wales,

Since Portfolio Committee No.4, in its Report 40 *'Museums and Galleries in NSW'* reported, much has changed on the policy and funding front for museums and galleries in NSW.

A state-wide Cultural Infrastructure Strategy has been published by Create NSW and through the Regional Cultural Fund (RCF) a significant injection of funding was received by a range of museums and galleries in support of capital developments and improvements.

These projects ranged from collection digitisation, display upgrades, building additions and refurbishments, to construction of new facilities including the State's first regional collection store, currently being built by Bathurst Regional Council. Create NSW has also reviewed its funding program guidelines and has introduced an artform board assessment process, which includes separate expert panels for museums and for the visual arts (galleries) among other art form areas. These developments were favourably received by the sector.

- **While the RCF did provide a significant capital boost, access to additional program funding is required, with all components of the sector reporting a strain on resources through increased demand and cost pressures across their portfolio of activities.**

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 this report are of course pre COVID-19 lockdown, the effect of which is anticipated to negatively impact across the sector in many ways, some of which are yet to be fully realised and/or understood. This submission is predicated by that concern and the certainty that disruption will occur across community/volunteer led and local government programs state-wide.**

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 is able to 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.

Museum Strategy for NSW

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

NSW regional galleries enjoy an association with local government in excess of 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 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 the NSW State 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 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 NSW and in outer-metro areas of Sydney, in the Hunter and Illawarra regions.

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.

- **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.**

(ii) whether there is equitable access to collections across New South Wales, including at the Powerhouse Museum and the Australian Museum,

For residents of regional NSW, physical access to the collections of MAAS, The Australian Museum, Art Gallery of NSW, State Library of NSW and others held in trust is dependent on the level of professionalism and management, climate and security controls, and available funding of regional galleries and museums – their individual abilities to afford loans and provide set standards for the safe storage, handling and display of objects and artworks.

Major cultural institutions require an assurance of environmental and security controls, professional handling and due notice to consider and assess any request for loans. Most professionally staffed regional museums and galleries comply and can successfully negotiate to borrow; however, in some instances they can't - costs are either prohibitive and/or environmental, security and/or handling controls cannot be ensured and prove unreliable within internationally set standards and protocols.

See Bizot Interim Guidelines: <http://www.icom-cc.org/332/-icom-cc-documents/declaration-on-environmental-guidelines/#.XpfAEi17Gi4>

With regional NSW's first collection store under construction in Bathurst, a glimpse of a future that might allow collections held in trust for the people of NSW 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 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. A dedicated stream focusing on collections held by independently run small museums in regional NSW has been proposed and received widespread support.

Through a successful 1st round RCF submission, M&G NSW was contracted to develop a prototype Collections & Stories website to tell a thematically linked story of NSW collections and to create a state-wide framework for collection documentation and significance assessment. Priority should be placed on reviving and fast tracking this work.

See: <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-as-culture-moves-online-regional-organisations-need-help-bridging-the-digital-divide-135050>

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Rolfe
CEO