

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

Organisation: Port Macquarie Museum

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Partially
Confidential

Submission to the NSW Inquiry into the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales

This submission addresses Part 1(b) in particular of the Terms of Reference and makes the following observations and recommendations:

Observations

- The level of government funding and support available to community run and managed museums in NSW is inadequate or inconsistent for systemic improvement and the long term needs of the State's cultural collections
- There is a need for dedicated museum funding in regional areas across the State, particularly for museum collection management and infrastructure/capital projects
- There is no overall Museum strategy in New South Wales resulting in poor planning, poor leadership, lack of vision and inadequate resourcing
- There is a lack of leadership at a planning and policy level in respect of cultural heritage collections across the State, particularly in regard to collection research, management and access
- Community owned cultural heritage facilities are continuing to fall through the cracks of an unintegrated approach to capital investment and planning
- There is a lack of coordination, consultation and commitment between all levels of Government, with an assumption that local government will resource community owned museums and collections

Recommendations

- The role of Create NSW in relation to all museums and galleries in NSW needs to be clearly and consistently defined.
- That the NSW Government in consultation with the sector develop a State-wide Museum Strategy that encompasses all museums, including community run and managed museums. That strategy would address not only infrastructure requirements, but also those of collection management including digitisation, staffing, operational resources, etc.
- That the NSW Government create a Museums Authority or similar to implement the Museum Strategy and that funding, programs and management be separate from Create NSW.
- That all work on the Parramatta Powerhouse Museum project, including closure of the Ultimo site, be put on hold until the completion of the NSW Museum Strategy and then be re-evaluated.

The following documentation supports and evidences these points and recommendations, drawing on the experiences of the author, our museum and other museums with whom we collaborate.

Debbie Sommers
17 May 2020

Port Macquarie Museum

Introduction

The Port Macquarie Museum welcomes the opportunity to comment on and make recommendations about the Government's management of all museums and cultural projects in New South Wales.

Many of the issues we raised in our submission of August 2016 to the NSW Upper House Inquiry into NSW Museums and Galleries remain as fundamental and strategic gaps in the way the New South Wales Government has chosen to recognise, support and value community run and managed museums who have the responsibility of caring for community cultural heritage and cultural identity. Whilst this is not surprising, it is certainly disappointing.

We make this submission as one of over 300 community run and managed museums in NSW. The 2018 NSW Museums and Gallery Sector Census identified 337 community run and managed museums in NSW.¹ We receive no operating funding from any level of Government, i.e. Commonwealth, State or Local Government, however we do apply for and receive grants to carry out specific projects such as collection management activities, staff training and development, and grants to assist us in the care and maintenance of our State heritage listed building and additions.

As was the case with the Government's 2016 inquiry we expect that there will be few submissions to this inquiry from community run museums. Most of us are busy working on COVID-19 business recovery plans on top of increasingly challenging survival plans. This follows down turns in the visitor economy due to drought and bush fires over the past 18 months, yet increasing costs of operations. For those of us located in Heritage buildings, the challenges and responsibilities of continuing our community work are even greater.

About Us

The Port Macquarie Historical Society was formed in 1956 and opened its first museum in 1957. Since 1960 the Port Macquarie Museum has been located at its State Heritage listed site and pre-COVID opened Monday to Saturday from 9.30am to 4.30pm, on the first Sunday of each month and at other times by appointment. The Museum charges admission fees to fund its operating expenditures which include insurance, power, security, internet, building repairs and maintenance, collection management, staff training, exhibitions, etc.

Earlier this year, we updated our vision and mission as part of a visionary strategic plan to transform our community museum into a world class regional museum, cultural destination and community meeting place to meet community and audience expectations and needs into the next century.

Most of our work focuses around our award winning Museum and collections. The Museum has an extensive nationally significant collection, and its holdings of Annabella Boswell's papers were inscribed to the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World in February 2019.

The Society and Museum are managed by a volunteer committee. The Society owns its land, buildings and collections, is not-for-profit and a registered charity. Sustainability is a key and ongoing strategic objective. We operate with a staff of 60 volunteers. There are no paid staff. The Port Macquarie Museum attracted 8578 visitors in 2018/19.

In 2018 the Port Macquarie Museum received a North Coast Tourism Hall of Fame Award for Cultural Tourism and was a finalist in the NSW Tourism Awards. In 2013 the Society was recognised as the Port Macquarie-Hastings Community Group of the Year. It was the recipient of two Museums

¹ <https://mgns.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/research/2018-nsw-museum-gallery-sector-census/>

and Galleries IMAGinE awards in 2010, highly commended in 2012 and received another award in 2015 for its collaborative online project 'Our Rivers Our History'.

The Port Macquarie Museum is the leading museum on the Mid North Coast and as such also leads the Hastings Museums and Heritage Group and the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (formerly Museums Australia) Mid North Coast Chapter.

The author of this submission is the Volunteer Curator at the Port Macquarie Museum, President of Australian Museums and Galleries Association - Mid North Coast Chapter, Convenor of the Hastings Museums and Heritage Group, secretary of Arts Mid North Coast and a member of Museums and Galleries NSW Volunteer Peer Panel. She mentors museum volunteers across the Mid North Coast of NSW and beyond. She has been the recipient of two individual Museums and Galleries NSW IMAGinE Awards for her work in collection documentation and regional mentoring.

General Observations about Museums, Galleries, Libraries and Archives

Over recent years, we have continued to see the push in NSW to combine collections and collecting organisations. The most recent of these is the somewhat ludicrous proposal to merge Sydney Living Museums and State Records. Museums, Galleries, Libraries and Archives all hold collections and that is where their similarities end.

Museum collections require rigorous cataloguing regimes often including determining provenance and therefore significance. Much of the State's significant cultural heritage materials are held by community run and managed museums. This continues to be overlooked in State Government policy and planning. Many of those museums also own and/or manage community owned heritage listed buildings. Community run museums generally charge an admission fee or fund raise in other ways to pay their operating costs. Unfortunately, fund raising activities like jam-making and weekend markets, often take the focus off the important issues of collection management and building maintenance and their important role as cultural keeping places, community story-tellers and knowledge banks.

Community museum collections are not just about social history, education and entertainment. Museums certainly hold items of historical significance, but like Galleries they also hold items of aesthetic, artistic and design value. They hold items associated with important places, people and events in our history. They hold collections that with research, can add to our collective knowledge of science and the natural environment. They hold items that are of high spiritual and ongoing social value to sectors of our communities. They hold items that speak to issues of prejudice, diversity and social justice. Their collections are intended to be kept for posterity.

Many Local Government Councils in NSW have recognised the importance of community museum collections and supported by Council funded Regional Museums or other Council staff have established and resourced support networks for community run museums. The application and consistency of these arrangements varies from region to region.

In contrast, most community gallery collections are smaller and cataloguing is a relatively simple process. Most gallery collection items are by known artists with existing profiles, so there is rarely need to determine significance. Most public galleries are managed by paid professionals. Most public galleries are funded by Councils and their collections are exhibited and stored in purpose built or modified, and well maintained facilities. Most galleries are able to host touring and big ticket exhibitions as they have the physical facilities required to do so. Entry to most Council operated galleries is free.

Library collections are primarily materials common to many libraries. There is an agreed method of cataloguing and all libraries use that standard method. With the exception of our State Library,

libraries are not required nor expected to hold onto their collection materials indefinitely. Advances in technology have particularly impacted libraries and many are now branching out into other activities in an endeavour to retain relevance and staffing levels.

Archives collections are important and contain unique materials, like museums, that cannot be found in any other place. Some regional archives are associated with libraries, others with museums. The need to catalogue and provide public access to archives has never been greater. They too hold items that are intended to be kept for posterity.

1(b) (i) NSW Government Funding, Policy and Support

Funding from the NSW Government specifically for community run and managed (volunteer managed) museums is small and limited to some project based grant programs managed by Museums and Galleries of NSW, as devolved grants from Create NSW. Grants to assist museums like ours to manage our collections are limited to \$2,000 and under, with museums only able to receive one grant under the program per year. Development and Skills Development Grants under the same program provide for a small number of grants up to \$7500. There have been no changes to these programs over the past five years. The NSW Government does not provide any operating funds to community run and managed museums that we are aware of.

Our Museum has been a regular and successful applicant under the M&G NSW Volunteer Museums grants program. In 2018 the M&G NSW total grants program for community run and managed museums amounted to \$79,400. The program funded 37 museum projects, an average of \$2145 per project.² If we divide the total funding by the number of volunteer managed community museums the amount available to each museum would be \$235. This amount would fund less than one month of our building insurance costs, and less than one month's electricity costs. It would however fund a roll of acid free tissue paper and a couple of archival boxes for collection conservation storage.

The Port Macquarie Museum was one of seven museums to participate in a pilot grants program, Regional Museums Networking Grants, funded by then Arts NSW and administered by Museums and Galleries NSW in 2013. The resulting project 'Our Rivers Our History' won both a State IMAGInE Award in 2015 and a National Museums and Galleries Award (MAGNA) in 2016. Sadly this pilot grant program ran for only two years, with Arts NSW determining that museums should apply for future funding for similar larger scale projects under its Arts and Cultural Development Program (ACDP). ACDP project funding grants include creative performance and arts practise projects, that is, discretionary funding. Pitching museum exhibitions and long term collection management projects against creative art forms and projects suggests to us a complete disregard for the ongoing needs and obligations of community held cultural materials and sustainable cultural assets management. It also undervalues the significant contributions made by volunteers in collecting, managing and preserving cultural heritage collections across the State.

In 2019, we, like many other organisations, applied for a Project grant under Round 2 of the Create NSW 2018/19 Arts and Cultural Projects program. Our application was unsuccessful, as were most other applications. We were advised that our application was ranked in the middle third of all applications received.³ The feedback also indicated the following grant program statistics:

- 164 applications received, a total request of \$6,221,814
- 7 applications funded, totalling \$377,700
- a 4.6% success rate, or a 95.4% unsuccessful rate

² <https://mgnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/MG-NSW-Annual-Review-2018-WEB-RES.pdf>

³ Email from @create.nsw.gov.au on 27 August 2019

We will continue to submit applications however the above statistics do indicate that the program is not addressing sector needs. Changes made to the program last year to make it simpler and easier to submit applications, will attract even more applications and therefore more competition for the same bucket of funds.⁴ The move to specific art form boards to assess grant applications is welcomed.

Over the past year, there has been significant resourcing of the Powerhouse Museum's collection digitisation project associated, it seems, with the Museum's planned move to Parramatta. Whilst this program has been promoted as a new project,⁵ the Powerhouse Museum has been digitising and placing its collection online since the late 1990s. We have been and remain extensive users of the Powerhouse Museum's online collection to assist our collection research, documentation and cataloguing work since 2010.

Whilst there appears to be general agreement and consensus around the need to digitise the State's cultural collections, whether they be in community run or publicly funded collecting organisations, there has been no commitment from Government to date, nor an overall strategy to resource this. We are aware of a number of pilot projects and the Collections and Stories prototype project managed by Museums and Galleries NSW in 2019, but there remains no clear policy from Government about where digitisation and the wider role of collection management (of which digitisation is but one element), fits into the State's cultural framework and how this will be resourced.

Since 2010, in the absence of any State sponsored initiatives, the Port Macquarie Museum has been digitising its collection and making it accessible and discoverable online using an online collection management system called eHive. Its initial licence purchase was supported by a small Commonwealth grant through the Community Heritage Grants program. Unlike the newly branded Powerhouse Museum digitisation project, with a focus on high mega pixel digital images of objects in the collection, our project has been driven by the desire to share our collection, its connections and stories with the widest possible audiences. Our digitisation project has a focus on ensuring objects and their stories are, where possible, well-researched, documented and shared. We are making them discoverable on the National Library's Trove database, and more widely through internet search engines. The success of our project is not just about how many items we have digitised so far, but rather how our digitised collection is being used and who is connecting with it.

Whilst we have the capacity and capability to have started our own collection management project, including digitisation, many community-run and managed museums do not have the resources to do this without start up resourcing, training and ongoing professional support. The support needs to be on the ground and consistent, not occasional hand holding visits or advice from afar. We would have preferred to participate in a State-wide approach, but it has been too long in coming.

The current management and resourcing of museums in regional NSW is left primarily to local government. In our LGA there is little interest in supporting and resourcing community run and managed museums to the level necessary for a sustainable future, particularly when it comes to collection management activities, including digitisation. Museum service organisations such as Museums and Galleries NSW have been reluctant until last year to address the issue of digitisation of collections, yet it has been talked about for the past 10 years.

There is also a Create NSW expectation that projects and indeed program funding will have some level of Local Government support, this again excludes or makes it difficult for some of us to achieve,

⁴ <https://www.create.nsw.gov.au/news-and-publications/news/simpler-nsw-arts-funding-launched-with-call-for-expert-artform-boards-2/>

⁵ <https://camd.org.au/maas-launches-powerhouse-digitisation/>

particularly where Councils do not wish to fund or resource community owned cultural collections and heritage infrastructure. In the case of our Council, they tend to view any notion that Council's need to make cash contributions to community cultural projects as yet another form of cost shifting from the State government to local government.

Many of our collections are housed and exhibited in Heritage listed buildings. The condition of these buildings presents challenges for collection management and appropriate building maintenance and upgrades including adequate fire services, security and public access. For example the Port Macquarie Museum does not have lift access to its second storeys, making parts of the museum inaccessible to visitors and also to the volunteers who care for the collection. In fact much of our collection storage is on the second level to maximise ground level exhibition space, this means our volunteers are constantly walking and moving collection items up and down stairs. Having to use stairs to move objects rather than lifts places the collection at risk of damage and our volunteers at risk of injury.

The Port Macquarie Museum was fortunate to receive funding through the NSW Government's Regional Cultural Fund to develop a Masterplan for the upgrade of the Museum's premises. The project is in its final reporting and acquittal stage. However, there is currently no follow on funding program for a project such as ours. The Regional Cultural Fund was an exciting and welcomed program for regional NSW. It provided a much needed boost to regional cultural projects. What needs to happen now is a commitment to an ongoing allocation of funds for regional cultural projects. The next detailed planning phase of our project is going to cost close to \$1M before we can be shovel ready. The build and fit out is going to cost \$20M, a drop in the ocean compared to the \$1.5 Billion the Powerhouse Museum relocation project is expected to cost.

In the meantime, we have secured funds through the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage to address structural failures in our State Heritage building. Unfortunately, such grants only ever fund up to 50% of such works, meaning we have to fund (and find) the other \$20,000 to complete the remediation works.

Whilst the Regional Cultural Fund grant program provided some wonderful new cultural infrastructure in many regions, the program did not address the ongoing operating costs of such infrastructure and how those new cultural facilities will be resourced into the future, other than being a further resourcing demand on local government.

There is a noticeable lack of Government policy in NSW around museums and how they fit into the wider State arts and cultural agenda and framework. We support the resolution made at the 2019 NSW Local Government annual conference for '*... the NSW 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.*'⁶

The Government's current policy, funding and support for museums and galleries across regional and metropolitan NSW appears to be the responsibility of Create NSW. The Create NSW website still lists their current priorities as, amongst other things, Strategic leadership in delivering the *Create in NSW: The NSW Arts and Cultural Policy Framework* which has a section on Regional NSW, although museums in particular are not specifically addressed. The Policy Framework was developed in 2015.

However, more recently, we note that Create NSW describes itself as '*...Create NSW is the NSW Government's Office of Arts, Screen and Culture. We advise, engage and invest to develop and support the arts and screen sector. Create NSW was formed in April 2017 as a consolidated agency to*

⁶ <https://www.lgnsw.org.au/files/imce-uploads/90/2019-LGNSW-Annual-Conference-resolutions.pdf>

*replace Arts NSW and Screen NSW. We work closely with the state's major cultural institutions and significant cultural organisations to champion the success and future of arts, screen and culture for NSW...'*⁷ It is therefore not surprising that matters of policy, support and funding of museums across regional NSW are being overlooked and perhaps explains why there is no overall Museum Strategy for the State other than for the large Sydney institutions. This needs immediate redress.

Community run and managed museum collections are being undervalued, not only in their intrinsic value and cultural significance but also in their value as important community cultural assets. This is partly due to the lack of support and investment in training and collection management and documentation and therefore poor understanding of the significance of community collections. It is also due to the lack of collection valuations. The cost of having collections valued is prohibitive for community-run museums who already have to source funds for their entire operations, including ongoing maintenance of heritage buildings. Valuations are important tools in understanding and engaging with funding partners around project investment and economic returns. The economic value and contributions of cultural collections and museums to regional economies and the NSW visitor economy is not well understood or well documented and therefore also undervalued.

1. (b) (ii) Equitable Access to Collections

There is not equitable access to collections across New South Wales. Much of the State's significant cultural heritage materials, objects, artworks, documents, archives, etc. are held in community run and managed museums across the State and particularly in regional areas. The vast majority of them, whilst treasured and well cared for to the extent that community funding provides, are not yet digitised and properly documented with Statements of Significance. They may be able to be viewed during a museum visit, but most collections and their stories are certainly not accessible or discoverable online.

Equitable access to the Powerhouse Museum collection is improving through the current digitisation project and as mentioned above, has been quite good for the past 20 years. However, digitisation is not just about making a high resolution image of the object accessible online it is also about ensuring that the object's story, the information about its importance or what makes it special is also accessible. This is a major task and needs to be resourced accordingly. Most importantly, this work needs to be valued. It is time consuming, it requires good research, it requires skills and it is always the first work to be pushed to one side when budget cuts are made or funding programs removed.

On the Mid North Coast, with the assistance of several project grants over the past 18 years, we have trained and upskilled many volunteers in this work. When working with volunteers though, the training needs are ongoing. Volunteers come and go. An investment in a team of State-wide collections officers, physically located at regional community run museums and physically working on regional collections digitisation and documentation projects is needed to ensure collections across the State have equitable access. Those workers could also provide training and support to volunteer workers, but we do think their primary role should be the collection work itself. Training volunteers to do the work of trained professionals is not the long term solution and undervalues the importance of our cultural collections.

For community run and managed museums who wish to borrow items for display from the Powerhouse Museum and other large State collecting institutions, the hurdles are great. Most of us cannot comply with environmental control requirements, and many cannot comply with safety

⁷ <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/create-connects-arts-and-culture-webinar-episode-4-registration-103309690064>

requirements. Associated costs of safe transport, insurances etc. also contribute to making inward loans out of reach for most community run museums.

1.(b) (iii) Consultation around Cultural Policy and Projects

Our submission on this point is limited to two specific issues, digitisation and Firearms Museum regulation.

Firstly, in regard to digitisation of collections, we are yet to see or hear the Government's response to the Collections and Stories pilot project and other digitisation projects funded through the Regional Cultural Fund. An information session about the Collection and Stories project outcomes in June 2019 hosted at our Museum indicated that consultation would take place. This has not yet occurred.

The policy changes to Firearms Museums in New South Wales and heritage arms and armour collections in 2019 were poorly handled. There was little consultation, particularly with those most impacted by the legislative changes, those of us with Firearms Museum licences. Most of all, there was as we understand it, little consultation with the Firearms Museum in NSW most impacted by the changes, the Lithgow Small Firearms Factory Museum. There was little consideration given to the impact of the regulations and the potential for irreversible damage to its collection, and therefore its historical, scientific and research value and significance.

Like many Firearms Museums licence holders in NSW, we do not portray ourselves as a Firearms Museum. We are considered a Firearms Museum because we are a museum with firearms. Firearms have been a part of our history since European settlement. We cannot and should not ignore the role of firearms in our history. Men, women and children have used firearms to not only protect themselves and control others, but mostly to feed and clothe themselves. Firearms were once everyday household objects, just one of many items associated with domestic life. In many ways, the Firearms Museum licence requirements have impacted how we interpret and exhibit our firearms collection. The firearms must be exhibited in special display cabinets restricting us from interpreting them in their true context and exhibiting them within themed exhibitions, as we do for other objects in our collection.

Firearms are in many community museums in NSW not to flaunt gun laws, nor to tell the story of gun control but rather the story of pioneers in NSW. The way we are made to exhibit them no longer meets contemporary museology. We support the need for security measures and comply with current requirements, however we understand that the application of those requirements differ from region to region and town to town across NSW. Likewise we are at a loss to understand why other dangerous weapons, such as swords, can be freely traded and purchased from anyone, anywhere in NSW. The basis for the severe and draconian requirements around gun collections in NSW Museums has not been justified, nor even explained. Firearms, like all other significant items in our collection are treated by us with the respect, care and security that they deserve. Permanently damaging any other items in our collections beyond repair and so that their form, manufacture or functionality cannot ever again be examined or further explored would be considered negligent and irresponsible. Yet this is what the current Firearms regulations endorse and require for some historic firearms.

1. (b) (vi) Strategies other than the sale of the Powerhouse Museum

At the present time it is difficult to see how the sale of the Powerhouse Museum site is going realise funds to support Museum development across NSW. The amount of funding being spent on the Parramatta Powerhouse Museum project suggests there will be nothing left over to share.

We support the view that the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo site should not be sold, and that the Powerhouse Museum should not be relocated. We support the view that the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo should be refurbished to bring it up to world class standards. We also support the view that the NSW Government should build and fund a Museum of Western Sydney.

What needs to come first though, is a State-wide Museum Strategy. We believe that Government funding for Museums as well as any other publicly funded infrastructure, needs to be strategic, considered and purposeful. Such infrastructure investment also needs to consider how the operations and maintenance costs of those facilities will be funded in the longer term. Museum infrastructure is about respecting, protecting, exhibiting and sharing cultural collections with the community, and not simply about building a venue.

The ad-hoc planning and building of museum infrastructure, without an overall State museum strategy and vision is a considerable failing of current cultural policy and leadership. Despite being Australia's first State, we remain the only state of Australia without a State Museum, need more be said?