



historycouncilnsw

SUBMISSION TO THE NSW GOVERNMENT'S ARTS & CULTURAL SECTOR POLICY

From the Executive Committee of the History Council of NSW

August 2023

Introduction

On behalf of the History Council of NSW (HCNSW), we welcome the NSW Government's openness to consultation on the State's first Arts, Culture and Creative Industries Policy.

First and foremost, we urge the NSW Government to incorporate an understanding of the value of *history* in its 'new look at culture'. We begin this submission by drawing attention to excerpts from the [Value of History Statement](#), adopted in 2019 by the History Councils of NSW, SA, Victoria and WA:

History shapes our identities, engages us as citizens, creates inclusive communities, is part of our economic well-being, teaches us to think critically, inspires leaders and is the foundation of our future generations.

All these elements are in close alignment with the 5 pillars of *Revive*, the National Cultural Policy, as well as with the NSW Government's aims to grow the NSW arts sector, to boost audiences, to enhance NSW tourism, and to support the people who work, create and volunteer within the state's cultural and creative industries.

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We emphasise that cultural content is not only created by 'artists', but also by historians, archivists, authors, curators, oral historians, community workers, museum guides, teachers, heritage experts, craftspeople and documentary-makers, among others. In many instances, historians and curators work closely with visual artists, musicians, filmmakers and others, creating cultural content. Understanding and supporting this diversity of cultural activities, and diversity of cultural practitioners, is essential for a well-developed cultural policy.

The history sector is vital to NSW's community vitality, to education, and to tourism. To quote the *Value of History Statement* again, we note that:

History is a catalyst for economic growth. People are drawn to communities with a strong sense of historical identity, material heritage and character. Cultural heritage is a demonstrated economic asset, and an essential component of any vibrant local economy, providing an infrastructure that attracts local talent and enhances business development, including cultural tourism.

In essence, history and heritage are the platform for a huge amount of our cultural production. It would be a mistake to develop cultural policy without a strong commitment to the support and development of the NSW history sector, as it is through history that our collective stories are told, shared, challenged and understood, and through history that we can really understand who we were, are and will be. To once again quote the *Value of History* statement:

History lays the groundwork for strong, diverse and inclusive communities ... Communities are wrapped in human memory: Indigenous knowledge, family stories, oral histories, social customs, cultural connections, heritage and civic commemorations. ... History supports a sense of community identity and place; and that in turn promotes social cohesion, individual and collective wellbeing, and resilience.

Likewise, it is through heritage (physical and intangible) that we retain connections to the past, which has incredible value for cultural belonging, for meaning-making, community-building, and for creating vibrant and much loved places to live in and visit in NSW.

When we refer to the history sector's contribution to NSW arts and culture, we are referring to:

- i) **Historians**, and history-related cultural **practitioners and authors** (both within the academy, professionally, and within local communities. This also includes artists, musicians, filmmakers, etc.);
- ii) **Historical and cultural organisations** (ranging in scale from small local groups to large national bodies. This includes consideration of employees, volunteers and community participants in these organisations);
- iii) **Museums and other collecting institutions** (again, ranging in scale from very small community ventures to national-scale institutions. This includes consideration of their employees, volunteers and visitors);
- iv) Public-facing history - that is, history-related **events, festivals, memorials, education programs**, including within schools,
- v) History-related **content as shared through film, video and online platforms**, online exhibits, archives, catalogues, podcasts, documentaries, online events, oral histories and digital repositories;
- vi) **Heritage**, including environmental, architectural and place-based heritage, significant objects, and, crucially, often ignored **intangible cultural heritage**, for example: First Nations cultural knowledge, heritage craft skills and local community memories.

All of these elements - engaged communities, historians, organisations, events, and heritage - are vital parts of a vibrant and healthy cultural sector in NSW.

We also note that history-related activities are a core component of tourism: tourists are some of the most active consumers of history-related activities, and this is well aligned with the NSW's government's new focus on *experience*-related tourism. Several examples of how history is currently being celebrated throughout NSW are [History Week](#), which has been coordinated throughout NSW by the HCNSW for member organisations since 1997, and the HCNSW's

successful staging of the Annual History Lecture in Orange in 2022 to a sell-out audience of 120 people. This event featured leading First Nations author, Bruce Pascoe, and was supported by Create NSW, Destination NSW and the Orange City Council. It was also recorded by the HCNSW and published on our website, as well as ABC Radio National.

Where should the NSW Government focus the greatest effort and resources?

The NSW Government should focus its efforts and resources into areas that have heretofore been undervalued and ignored. This includes affording far better support at the smaller-scale, for creators of cultural content, such as small-scale GLAM institutions (galleries, libraries, archives and museums), curators, historians and local history organisations. This also includes supporting First Nations voices, organisations, artists, authors and practitioners.

Furthermore, NSW must recognise that its stories (and by default, its *histories*), as a state, are not singular: there are many voices and perspectives in NSW, and the stories and histories of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities have for a long time been overshadowed by more mainstream perspectives. This dynamic must shift. History must be seen as a more critical element of arts and cultural policy.

In NSW, small-scale cultural and historical organisations and local museums receive very little funding (if any) from both state and federal sources. As a result, they are often run almost exclusively through volunteer labour, and many organisations are highly dependent on annual grants funding. This generates a disconnect between arts organisations and local and regional history, heritage and museums.

There is so much potential in such local museums and heritage sites. Some few such as the Kandos [Cementa](#) festival have been launched specifically with the platform of heritage fabric and local history. In fact it promotes its origins and setting in a 'post-industrial town of Kandos'. But these incredibly successful examples of connecting history, heritage and arts are rare. Another example is the highly successful Blackheath History Forum which has an array of important

events by highly prominent historians and authors, but operates under a Federal Government CHART grant. While this forum is achieving amazing results, it has no relationship with NSW arts and cultural policy.

What barriers can the NSW Government remove to unlock the full potential of arts, culture and the creative industries?

One of the biggest barriers that small arts and cultural organisations face is the uncertainty of funding from year to year. This situation could easily be improved by **providing multi-year funding**, enabling longer-term event planning, a degree more employment security, and enabling a deeper development of community, sector and industry partnerships, due to more certainty in future planning. Currently, multi-year funding tends to only be accorded to medium to larger-scale organisations, while smaller ones get left out.

The commercial sector is put off by the uncertainty that many organisations currently have about their future, and the HCNSW believes that more certainty will support the development of partnerships, sponsorships and joint programs. In the present situation, the NSW cultural sector is at risk of losing some of its best workers, who currently face highly precarious employment conditions while they stay working within the cultural sector, and often opt to leave in search of a more secure living wage and more long-term employment certainty.

Short-term funding uncertainty needs to be addressed through altered policy settings and the creation of a number of different layers/levels of funding, with more flexible timeframes for grant use.

We also recommend that volunteer-run museums and cultural organisations should stop being taken for granted. A huge amount of both economic and cultural value is generated in NSW through the unpaid volunteer labour of students and retirees. A fully developed NSW cultural policy that addresses barriers to expansion needs to grapple with the fact that a huge amount of cultural work is done *for free*, which is ultimately an unsustainable situation, particularly given current pressures on the cost of living.

Other barriers include addressing current divisions in funding. Currently the division in funding between Create NSW and Screen NSW prevents cultural organisations funded by Create NSW in simultaneously applying for Screen NSW funding for the creation of digital products, and vice versa. This makes little sense, and is a barrier to cultural industry growth, as digital content is increasingly produced by cultural organisations funded by Create NSW which then find themselves limited by the cost barriers of production and post production of this product. If this barrier was removed, this could leverage a large back-catalogue of existing digital products for new audiences.

There is also the need for more collaboration *between* arts and culture organisations, to enable the sharing of information, infrastructure, events and community connections – this can be fostered through government-led structures and the encouragement of partnerships.

What does NSW do well?

NSW has a legacy of iconic cultural buildings and successful large arts events of an international standard. Large-scale visual arts events and iconic infrastructure are already hallmarks of the NSW cultural economy, and they also attract philanthropic and corporate funding. We urge the NSW government, however, to think beyond the flashier, 'big-event' forms of culture, and to cease trying to reinvent or corporatise large institutions such as the Powerhouse.

Instead, more attention is needed in relation to cultural production on the "grassroots" level - at the local community and regional level. The NSW Government should look to support forms of culture that currently gain less philanthropic support, less corporate sponsorship and less media coverage. These forms of culture create community well-being, identity and the potential for the local creation of cultural exhibition outside of large corporate structures.

What can NSW do better?

Arts and cultural organisations of all sizes are still reeling, having emerged from both the Covid-19 disruptions *and* many years of under-funding and disrespect accorded by previous state and federal governments. For a long time, NSW arts organisations have not been taken seriously for the cultural and economic benefits they bring, and for the sense of belonging that they foster. This has to change, fundamentally.

To better support the cultural contributions made by smaller organisations, museums and arts/history workers, the NSW Government must shift its support away from large new infrastructure commitments, toward more community-focused, worker-focused, practitioner-focused and local/regional activities. For now, we do not need any more new, large iconic building projects (beyond one important one - an Australian Frontier Wars museum and cultural centre, though this could be developed in a sustainable reused site or similar). Arts, culture and history workers need to be paid living wages for their labour. And cultural organisations in regional areas that were affected by recent bushfires and floods need support to rebuild, and the confidence to look towards their future.

Currently, there are serious risks to the long-term sustainability of small regional historical museums and collecting institutions, for example, due to their heavy dependence on volunteer retiree labour. A recognition of the economic and cultural value that these unpaid individuals and organisations bring to the state of NSW is long-overdue.

Also overdue is a long-term plan for how intangible cultural heritage will be preserved in NSW. To give some examples: First Nations knowledge, heritage skills, local place-based cultural knowledge and labour history knowledge are all at risk of being lost, simply through the passing of time and generations. Without adequate programs in place to support the sharing of such knowledge in a culturally appropriate and properly remunerated manner, then NSW risks becoming a bland 'entertainment state', without a genuine historically-informed sense of local

belonging, and without an ability to learn from past mistakes. Intangible cultural knowledge - such as the heritage skills required for operating heritage machinery, or highly skilled manual craft methods - also requires funded training programs to ensure such knowledge is passed on to younger generations.

What's our big idea?

Our big idea is to connect local communities interested in their heritage and history with local arts and cultural practitioners in a more fundamental way. Part of any and every community-based project application should address HISTORY & HERITAGE or STORIES and HISTORIES. What connections can be made? What collaborations can occur? History and heritage should be a platform for arts and culture, not a forgotten cousin.

For this to occur, a critical element would be security of funding for long term projects. History and heritage are not always one off events, but they underpin many, many practices of artists, musicians and others. Rather than see history and heritage as stage sets for arts and culture, they should be fundamental, connected components. Only by looking at the past can we truly understand where we are and, as a result, have greater insight into where we can or will go in the future.

Beyond ensuring funding to history and heritage, one vitally important practical project that could roll out the connections between shared histories and arts practice would be the establishment of a Frontier Wars Museum - a site of truth-telling for people in NSW. Perhaps it is part of a broader First Nations cultural centre, or a community led keeping and learning place. Whatever the case, it is both well past time that these histories were truthfully recognised and a site for their story-telling, their performances, their artworks and songs is established.

Submissions can be published or anonymous - are you happy for it to be published?

We are happy for it to be published.

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