

Senate Estimates 22 October 2020

Opening Remarks by the Director-General

The principal role of the National Archives of Australia is to ensure that all Australians have access to the essential evidence of the actions and decisions of the Commonwealth Government.

We perform this role by exercising the powers and functions prescribed by the Commonwealth Archives Act, 1983.

The Act assigns to the National Archives the responsibility to oversee record-keeping across the Commonwealth through the determination of standards and the provision of advice. Under the Act, it is an offence for any person to engage in conduct that results in the destruction or disposal of any record unless that conduct has been authorised by the National Archives or another law.

In today's government the overwhelming majority of commonwealth records are created in digital form. Records are found in the data holdings of email systems, financial management systems, case management systems, shared drives, document management systems, social media posts and mobile devices. Our legislated responsibility to oversee record-keeping therefore requires us to issue standards and advice that ensures the Commonwealth's digital information management systems and data governance structures adequately protect the integrity of the Commonwealth record.

We are currently finalising our next policy release on record keeping, to take effect from 1 January 2021. The new policy, titled "Building Trust in the Public Record" provides advice for Commonwealth entities to:

- manage information assets strategically with appropriate governance and reporting;
- implement fit-for-purpose information management processes, practices and systems that support information asset creation, use and re-use; and
- reduce areas of information management inefficiency and risk to ensure public resources are managed effectively.

The Act specifies that any records that have been identified by the National Archives for permanent preservation must be transferred to the care of the Archives within 15 years of the record coming into existence. This requires a huge uplift in the digital capability of the National Archives. We are therefore directing whatever resources we can into the substantial upgrade required to our technical infrastructure and digital skillset, including data storage, digital preservation, secure connectivity and cybersecurity.

The Act also obliges the National Archives to make Commonwealth records available for public access once the record is more than 20 years old; unless the record meets one of the specified exemptions. Fulfilling this requirement of the Act is placing a strain on our resources. Currently we receive around 45,000 applications for access each year, we have the capacity to complete around 40,000. Consequently we have at present around 19,000 applications for access that have not been

completed within the statutory consideration period. We continue to explore alternatives to clear the queue.

The National Archives collection is vast – some 40 million items, occupying over 350 shelf kilometres and over a PetaByte of digital material. Much of the collection however is on fragile media and requires active preservation if it is to be kept accessible and usable into the future. A particular preservation priority for us relates to the 270,000 audio and video items held on magnetic tape. These records are at serious risk of loss over the next five years, due to obsolescence of playback equipment, disintegration of the media and the loss of skilled engineering and maintenance staff. They need to be digitised, otherwise this important record of 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia will be irretrievably lost.

These pressures must be balanced with our commitment to Public Engagement – to promote the appreciation and use of Australia’s archival resources and to ensure Australians enjoy access to their public records. We are the only cultural institution with public premises in each Australian State and Territory and across Australia we conduct outreach activities, education programs and touring exhibitions.

As a national cultural institution, we serve to represent Australian values within Australia and to the world; we have a soft power influence. Last year, our international conference attracted over 600 people from 61 countries to Adelaide, and our strong on-line presence and international engagement contributes practical professional resources to many other countries, most notably in the Pacific region.

In an age characterised by misinformation and disinformation, the work of the National Archives is as important as ever: for the integrity and accountability of public administration; to uphold individuals’ rights and entitlements; and to connect all Australians with their national memory and identity.

Thank you Chair for allowing these brief opening remarks.