

Supplementary Budget Estimates Program 2021-22
Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
Director-General National Archives of Australia, 26 October 2021

OPENING STATEMENT

Defend the Past, Protect the Future

On 1 July 2021, the Government announced funding of \$67.7 million across four years to the National Archives of Australia to provide a funding boost for its critical functions as the custodian of Australia's history through the preservation of Commonwealth records.

With this funding, the National Archives is implementing its Defend the Past, Protect the Future program of work, which is underpinned by improved digital service delivery and technical infrastructure. This will equip the National Archives to meet the evolving needs and expectations of the community and government in the digital age.

The comprehensive program of work will:

- Enable digital preservation of 270,000 of the most at-risk collection items
- provide digital storage, preservation and access to more of the national archival collection via:
 - an upscaled cyber-secure trusted digital archive
 - increased resources to proactively digitise records for easier, faster access by all Australians
 - a specialised fit-for-purpose digitisation hub, and
 - consolidation of the nationally dispersed collection into facilities with superior preservation and digitisation capability
- it provides additional capability to work with government agencies to identify archival-value records to be transferred into the collection, and to accelerate public access to declassified government records.

The Defend the Past, Protect the Future Program will further the Australian Government's *Digital Transformation Agenda* and its reform agenda for the *Australian Public Service – Delivering for Australia*.

This is a transformational investment for the National Archives. It will enable important next steps to realise our vision set out in our *Strategy 2030: a transformed and trusted National Archives* – a world-leading archive empowered and resourced to ensure that authentic government information is created, secured, preserved and accessible to government and the community.

Building trust in the public record policy

Another major achievement this year was the completion and launch of the National Archives' whole-of-government information policy, Building Trust in the Public Record – which provides guidance to all government agencies in records management. The policy supports continued improvement in government information and data management capability to meet current and emerging information challenges, and to support broader government priorities such as digital transformation and data use and sharing.

Securing preserving and digitising the national archival collection

National Digitisation and Preservation strategies have been refreshed to identify priority digitisation projects for both at-risk and high-demand collections. The current focus areas include magnetic tape records, our photographic collection and high-demand series, particularly World War II service records.

In 2020–21 the National Archives progressed significant capital works projects to accommodate current and future operational needs. The completion of our film preservation laboratory at Chester Hill, NSW, and refurbishment to our digitisation area at the Canberra Preservation Facility were major capital works projects this year.

Engagement

Despite the limitations placed on every Australian by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the first half of 2020–21, the National Archives found ways to provide services and engage with its clients and the community. Understandably, face-to-face engagement decreased this year, however online visitation across all our media platforms increased by more than 515 per cent, and throughout the year we had extraordinary spikes in media attention.

The 'NAA Members Program' was launched in November 2020 to provide new opportunities for Australians to experience their National Archives and join the archives community. The Program now has a membership of 930. I was delighted when Her Excellency Mrs Linda Hurley agreed to become the inaugural NAA Members' Patron.

This year, we received unprecedented contributions from the public to support our activities, approximately \$1.1 million to date, from 912 individual donations. Most notably, we received a \$1 million contribution from Ms Barbara White from Sydney, which will be used for the preservation and ongoing access to the photographs contained within the World War II service records. Our gratitude for these donations cannot be overstated. This show of public support affirms the value and importance of the National Archives' role to preserve the nation's historical record.

Concluding Remarks

The National Archives of Australia is the only Commonwealth Government entity legislated with the task to ensure that the essential evidence of government activity is secured, preserved and made accessible. This unique aspect of the National Archives defines its principal role to carry Australia's memory from one generation to the next. The national archival collection includes hundreds of millions of records. In physical form, we have papers, photographs, films and audio recordings that occupy some 360 shelf kilometres. In digital form, we have accumulated over 5 Petabytes of documents, images and audiovisual content. For the most part, these records are not souvenirs, or edited opinions. They're the evidence of what has taken place – an essential resource for a nation that wants to understand its past, and shape its future.

As my term of appointment with the National Archives ends in December this year, I would like to publicly express my thanks to the Executive team and all staff that I have worked with, and I would also like to acknowledge the sustained support of the National Archives Advisory Council (acknowledging the presence today of one of its Members, Senator Carr) and the community, and the engagement and support of the Assistant Minister Senator Stoker's office since her appointment this year.

Finally, through you Chair, I would like to thank this Committee for the attention that it has given to the Archives. After all, the National Archives is an institution of public accountability and I have always regarded it as a valued duty and a privilege to participate in this process in this place, providing accountability to the Australian Parliament.

Thank you.