

Museums & Galleries of NSW Submission: Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) is a peak body and service organisation supported by the New South Wales Government through Create NSW, with a Purpose to '*build the capacity of small to medium museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres so they can maximise their impact on their communities*'. We develop these organisations skills, connect them with others in the industry, provide funding, point visitors their way, and give them access to ground-breaking exhibitions.

Increasingly, and especially throughout the previous 12 months, we have played a key role in supporting small to medium museums and galleries who have been severely impacted by natural disasters, especially flooding, with significant losses in cultural heritage material.

Please see below our submission as it relates to the Terms of Reference:

(a) Current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, including:

- i. the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability;***

Over the past 12 months, M&G NSW has been working closely with 4 cultural organisations impacted by flooding. The number of flood damaged cultural heritage items would number in the thousands.

1. Lismore Regional Gallery

Lismore Regional Gallery is one of the longest-running regional galleries in NSW, first established in 1953 and owned and operated by Lismore City Council. Prior to the 2022 flood, there were over 1400 artworks in the permanent collection. A highlight is *The Hannah Cabinet* and constructed by Lismore-based master craftsmen Geoff Hannah. It was acquired in 2019 for \$1,000,000 after an extensive community driven fundraising campaign. At the time of the flood, the gallery had 4 exhibitions on display on loan from artists and private lenders.

The gallery had a robust Disaster Plan, which covered the protection of all artworks above the 1 in 100-year flood level on the second level. The gallery's main exhibition spaces, and permanent collection store are all located on the second level. Office furniture, gallery library, and all technical equipment were located to the second floor of the gallery on Sunday 27th February when the warnings issued were for a flood height in the vicinity of 11.5m. The resultant 14.5m flood, 2.5 metres above previous records, had a severe impact on the gallery and its collections. Current estimates indicate that 50% of the gallery's will be able to be salvaged. Emphasis is being placed on saving higher value, and more significant objects. It is anticipated that perhaps there will be a loss of \$780,000 in works from the gallery collection, or 20% of its overall value.

The building itself will not be ready for occupation until 2024 and will be unable to insure collections and travelling exhibitions, thereby severely impacting on its capacity to deliver the programs and services it has done for the past 70 years.

2. Lismore Regional Museum

The museum is an award-winning facility and is 100% volunteer managed by the Richmond River Historical Society, which since 1936 has collected, preserved, displayed and disseminated the history of the region. It has a total collection of more than 20,000 items, divided between museum objects and research archive items.

Lismore Regional Museum's Disaster Plan adequately protected their collections in all previous floods and in 2022 objects stored in the lower level of the museum were located above the 1 in 100-year flood level.

However, as with Lismore Regional Gallery, the scale of the flooding did mean objects thought to be safe were damaged in the initial flood. While the upper floor of the museum escaped the initial flood, the resulting mould growth, spurred by weeks with no electricity, meant the entire building needed to be emptied for cleaning. This stretched the capacity of an already exhausted volunteer workforce.

3. Eugowra Historical Museum & Bushranger Centre

The museum holds and exhibits hundreds of objects and is housed in a former stock and station agent's shop. Along with local bushranging history, the displays focus on the region's earliest European settlers and their way of life. The Museum also has a significant collection of wartime memorabilia and souvenirs, as well as a comprehensive catalogue of Eugowra residents who undertook military service. It is 100% volunteer run.

Eugowra is well-known as the village where the bushranger Frank Gardiner and his gang held up a gold escort coach during its routine journey to Bathurst from nearby goldfields, on the 15th of June 1862. It was the biggest gold robbery in Australia's history and in today's money would be worth about \$8 million.

Flooding in Eugowra in November 2022 came at such speed that the Museum had no forewarning to enact any disaster protocols.

As such, there was extensive damage to the majority of its collections.

4. Harden-Murrumburrah Historical Museum

The Harden-Murrumburrah Historical Museum is housed in a 1912 School of Arts building and features the local history of gold mining, agriculture, railways, the 1st Australian Light Horse regiment and domestic life. It is 100% volunteer run.

Displays include a blacksmith's and wheelwright's premises (1874 – c.1940), historic garments from 1880, the impressive Harden Railway refreshment room bar, made of oak and brass, plus railway memorabilia and artefacts, a chemist's shop exhibition with items dating back to 1890, a music room, an early Australian kitchen with paraphernalia, a vintage bathroom and thunderbox, a child's bedroom and a photographic collection.

Fifty percent of the museum collections were damaged when the lower basement storage area flooded on 31 October 2022. The volunteers attempted to prevent the flooding through sandbagging the doors into the basement storage area, however the flooding rose higher than experienced previously and same in through the windows. Due to the capacity of the committee, they self-managed an initial disaster response, which has comprised conservation outcomes.

Museums & Galleries of NSW

In the first three instances, a consortium of government (state and local), sector and business organisations worked together to support the affected organisations in the immediate aftermath, and subsequent conservation process. Further, none of the community operated museums noted above had their collections insured. This equates with figures identified in the 2022 M&G NSW Sector Census which found only 25% of respondents have a level of insurance of their collections (either full or part insurance for significant items). Additionally, only 5% of respondents reported having no threats to their collections from building issues and climate related disasters.

While the State Government funded the majority of the recovery, and did so in a timely manner, it did highlight that peak bodies such as ours are not able to act as quickly without specific funding to support smaller organisations – particularly in those immediate days in the wake of an event. Despite the great support of the NSW Government and Create NSW, organisations such as ours are able to work in a more nimble and responsive manner if resources were available.

(b) Consideration of alternative models, including:

- i. repurposing or adapting existing Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services, and***
- ii. overseas models and best practice;***

(c) consideration of the practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would be required to support improving Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters;

While fully aware that disaster response needs to focus on immediate needs such as preservation of life; and the subsequent issues of housing; education; employment; business retention; and health and mental health needs, we stress the importance of supporting the cultural sector and particularly cultural heritage as vital issues in ensuring the longer-term wellbeing and vitality of the city.

Our organisation has been funded to provide programs to communities across NSW to encourage enhanced disaster planning, particularly in the context of increased threats beyond historical norms.

The recently released *National Cultural Policy: Revive*; is underpinned by the concept of 'a place for every story and a story for every place'. Community museums and galleries encompass that narrative; and with the tragic loss of the very items that tell their local stories, this cultural policy is undermined in this localised setting.

MUSEUMS & GALLERIES OF NSW RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That a National Cultural Recovery Fund is established, managed by state-based peak bodies, to quickly respond to the needs of the sector in times of disaster;
2. A National Insurance Scheme for community museum, gallery and Aboriginal Cultural Centre collections.
3. Establish a National Cultural Infrastructure Fund to support the protection of cultural heritage items in the care of small to medium museums, galleries and Aboriginal Cultural Centres.
4. That Offsite Regional Collections Facilities are established to provide industry standard storage and services for significant items from smaller regional museums, historical societies and education facilities, as well as Aboriginal Cultural Centres on a negotiated basis. These facilities can be resources to provide support to damaged collections in times of need.

We also work very closely with NAVA (National Association for the Visual Arts), and support the recommendations as outlined in their Submission to this Inquiry.