



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF AUSTRALIA

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
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Submission: Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

1. Summary

National Archives of Australia (National Archives) welcomes the opportunity to respond and make this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's (DFAT) inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

As a world-leading archive, we are uniquely placed to support and enable capacity building among our Pacific neighbours, particularly with regards to information management, preservation and digitisation of the unique and irreplaceable documentary heritage of the Pacific. As custodian of many significant records of the Pacific region, we also play a vital role in preserving and providing access to these records.

National Archives actively supports governments and archives in the Pacific region through participation in international councils and associations, digitisation of and access to records, official visits and online engagements. We have in place formal and informal arrangements to facilitate this work, including Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs).

Building relationships with our neighbours and enhancing Australia's position as a partner of choice for the Pacific region has been, and will continue to be, a priority for National Archives.

2. The role of National Archives

The *Archives Act 1983* establishes National Archives as the Commonwealth agency with the functions and powers to collect, preserve and make publicly available the archival resources of the Commonwealth. National Archives is unique among Australia's cultural and collecting institutions. As custodian, we care for the national archival collection and facilitate different ways the public can access these records. We also set the information management standards for the Commonwealth and provide best practice advice to Australian Government agencies.

We hold the memory of our nation. We do this so everyone can access evidence of government decisions and actions, increasing government transparency and accountability. Our records connect us with the stories and people that define our past, shape our future and help safeguard our democracy.

The most significant records of the Australian Government are selected for inclusion in the national archival collection. They tell the story of Australia and illustrate how the government affects, and is affected by, Australian society. They are preserved for Government and the public by National Archives and made accessible to be re-used for community benefit.

With Australia's longstanding interests in the Pacific, National Archives has a broad collection of records relating to the region. Notably, through times of crisis in Papua New Guinea when there was a need to evacuate and protect records, it was to Australia that they were sent to for safe keeping.

3. Collaborations and partnerships

National Archives' commitment to supporting archives in the Pacific region is reflected in our ongoing participation in the **Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA)**. National Archives' Director of Information Governance holds the Treasurer position and is responsible for finances, membership and website management.

We supported the attendance of the PARBICA President at the International Council on Archives (ICA) Conference in Rome in September 2022, and are currently supporting their attendance at the reopening of the Royal Tonga Archives in July 2024.

Current work includes involvement in program development and management of a joint conference with the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA), Archives and Records Association of New Zealand and PARBICA to be held in Christchurch, New Zealand in October 2024. Our involvement will ensure the content includes relevance for Pacific archives. PARBICA is supporting the President and the head of Tuvalu Library and Archives to attend the conference and participate in a plenary session with the national archivists of Australia and New Zealand.

Demonstrating our ongoing leadership role within the Pacific region, we have formalised arrangements for the temporary storage of East Timor Relief Association archival records in our New South Wales Office free of charge under a supporting MOU. The records were deposited in August 2022 and the MOU provides secure and safe storage while arrangements are made for the long-term preservation of these important records.

Pre-COVID, National Archives also had an MOU in place with Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, with components of this arrangement focused on public engagement and access, and training on best practice information management standards, specifically implementing metadata standards in their recordkeeping system.

4. Capacity building

National Archives is committed to providing world-leading advice and guidance relating to archive operations, including collection preservation. Often, international archives seeking advice from National Archives are facing significant challenges in storing and preserving deteriorating paper records.

We provide recommendations for the creation and storage of archival documents to reduce the speed of deterioration, including handling techniques, environment, shelving, packaging, pest management and disaster recovery. We provide this support through our work with PARBICA and via the [National Archives website](#).

In addition to resources on the National Archives website, the [PARBICA website](#), managed by National Archives, supports professional development of records and archives capability primarily through the Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit - a set of 25 guidelines available in English and French. These guidelines were made possible through a PARBICA partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the ICA. National Archives contributes to ongoing content development of the toolkit modules.

More generally, we are experiencing a significant increase in requests from international archives, not limited to the Pacific, for onsite current state assessments, guidance on best practice information management, digitisation skills development and technology recommendations. It is apparent that our technical expertise is gaining international recognition, as are our world-leading purpose preservation facilities.

National Archives designs and builds repositories that attracts archival institutions not just nationally but across the world to learn about our facilities operation. We share technical and building advice on our unique tailored designs that includes specialised plant equipment we install; through to how we manage facilities on a daily basis, through to lifecycle planning, and building business continuity process. Each of our facilities is designed differently to accommodate the unique collection items and weather conditions. The opening of our state-of-the-art preservation facility in the Australian Capital Territory, named the Peter Durack building, attracted international attendance from archives in Indonesia, Fiji and New Zealand among others. The environmentally sound building was designed and constructed to hold 15 million items, from traditional paper records, audiovisual, photographic, and other long-established formats, to the increasing number of digital records. To facilitate both storage and access, the building provides flexible access to records storage on one side, and records management and preservation on the other. In addition, our repository in Belmont, Western Australia is a draw card for international archives, with an energy efficient design and unique double-stacked compactus. National Archives has seen significant cost-savings with our modern, energy-efficient facilities and appreciates the opportunity to share our learnings with others who are looking to do the same.

5. Providing access to the national archival collection

National Archives provides access to records within the national archival collection in a variety of ways. These include via our online catalogue [RecordSearch](#), formal and informal onsite events, and public engagement activities.

Onsite visits

In February 2024, National Archives welcomed Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Hon James Marape, MP as part of a visiting dignitaries program, coordinated by DFAT and Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). Prime Minister Marape and his delegation were invited to view a selection of photographs and records that illustrate Papua New Guinea's journey of cultural change, leading up to the 50th Anniversary of the Independence of Papua New Guinea. The delegation was presented with specially curated records including architectural plans, patrol reports, anthropological photographs, documentaries and war service records, important administrative, legal and legislative correspondence as well as records relating to land ownership and land title.

Further, in March 2024, National Archives presented a series of records to a delegation from the Government of Nauru, coordinated by the Department of Home Affairs. These records included signed copies of the Nauru Island Agreement Acts from 1919 and 1932, diaries of administrators, stamp issues, photographs, a Nauru dictionary and grammar and other records of the former British Phosphate Commission.

In April 2024, DFAT included a record viewing at National Archives as part of the Canberra Fellowships Program for current and emerging leaders from Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea guests accompanied by DFAT staff viewed records that had been displayed for Prime Minister Marape's visit in March.

It is evident through our recent onsite record viewings that National Archives plays an important role in forging people-to-people connections. We do this by linking our Pacific partners with records of

significance held within the national archival collection. We continue to support viewings on request, often in collaboration with relevant Australian Government departments.

Proactive digitisation

National Archives is committed to providing resilient access to records of significance to the Pacific that are held in the national archival collection, achieved through a proactive digitisation work program. Online availability of key records enables researchers, community and government to access records of history, and ensures their preservation for generations to come.

Our proactive digitisation efforts to support the Pacific region have been focused on the large and often fragile files relating to the expropriated properties in Papua New Guinea (series A1345 and A1713). To date, 116 files (10,615 pages) have been digitised and will be progressively uploaded to RecordSearch, enabling access from anywhere in the world. Personnel dossiers of unattested Indigenous Papua New Guineans serving in the Australian Army during the Second World War are among further records marked for proactive digitisation, along with gazettes, ordinances and other printed material from the territories of Papua and New Guinea between 1899 and 1965.

In addition, in mid-2023 we completed the digitisation of 10,000 architectural plans that detail works carried out by the Australian Government in Papua New Guinea prior to its independence in 1975. We are currently considering technological solutions to enable access to the digitised plans to the Papua New Guinea Office of Libraries and Archives and the University of Papua New Guinea.

A number of key records including the Papua New Guinea Independence Act 1975 were also digitised following the recent visit to National Archives by Prime Minister Marape. These were gifted to Prime Minister Marape by the Honourable David Hurley AC CVO DSC (Retd), to mark and celebrate the strong ties between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Access requests

National Archives responds to a range of requests for access to records in the national archival collection that document Australia's longstanding and enduring relationships with Pacific nations and those that relate specifically to Pacific nations' people. These requests include those from individual researchers looking for records for family and community history research as well as higher-level requests received from government and non-government institutions from Pacific nations. National Archives also works with other Australian Government agencies such as DFAT to support relationship-building with Pacific nations through access to records, including for research for the long-running DFAT [Documents on Australian Foreign Policy](#) project.

6. Working across government to mark the 50th anniversary of Papua New Guinea independence

Collaborating across government to deliver on broader international engagement priorities is a focus for National Archives in 2024-25. Notably, we are working with DFAT to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Independence of Papua New Guinea in 2025.

In addition to a range of public engagement activities, National Archives is exploring ways to facilitate the digital return of select significant records relating to Papua New Guinea. We also plan to support a small number of Papua New Guinea archives staff to attend the 2025 ASA conference and establish a short internship-type program to build archival and preservation practice for Papua New Guinea archives staff.

7. Conclusion

National Archives thanks the Committee for consideration of our submission to this inquiry.

Through our ongoing engagement with Pacific countries, we aim to build upon the longstanding positive partnerships forged by DFAT and the Australian Government more broadly. By maintaining

deep cultural connections with our Pacific neighbours, we will continue to align our international engagement priorities as strategically required.

National Archives has a crucial function to fulfil in strengthening cultural diplomacy in the Pacific. We play a vital role in ensuring documents that demonstrate the historical connections between Australia and the Pacific are preserved and accessible into the future, and importantly, we can connect communities to records of significance and share our world-class archival knowledge with international archives.

We will continue our emphasis on supporting and engaging with archives and governments in the Pacific to support efforts to ensure a peaceful and productive relationship with the region.

Sincerely

Simon Froude
Director-General