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**Submission to the Standing Committee on Social issues  
NSW Legislative Council**

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The Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a short submission to the Inquiry into the *State Records Act 1998* and the Policy Paper on its review.

Before making specific comments, we will outline who we are and what we do.

### **Who we are**

AMaGA is the national membership association and peak advocacy body representing museums and galleries. We encompass a wide and diverse range of national, state, regional and community museums, art galleries, historic sites, botanic and zoological gardens, research centres, Indigenous cultural centres, and Keeping Places across Australia. Our 1400 members represent additional thousands of individual professionals through the large institutions.

All of our members are linked by a shared dedication to culture and the communities they serve. They understand that Australian cultural life is a dynamic ecosystem that generates creativity and innovation and contributes to the social and economic wellbeing of the country.

AMaGA is an advocacy, research, service and professional development organisation. We seek to enhance the value of Australia's collections, public programs and stories by sharing knowledge, developing skills, inspiring innovation and providing leadership and the authoritative voice in protecting and promoting our arts, science and cultural heritage.

We advocate for museums and galleries, identify and undertake strategic research, inform policy, set ethical standards and run a broad range of training programs. More information on the organisation and our members can be found at <https://www.amaga.org.au/annual-reports-0>

We build on a history of museum professional association activity that extends back to the 1930s, have branches in every state and territory, and support professional national networks of expertise. The NSW Branch is one of the largest, with 318 members in total, comprising 141 organisations (ranging from national to remote, volunteer-run institutions) and 177 individuals, both professional and volunteer. The branch has three chapters throughout rural and regional NSW.

This submission draws both on the lived experience of our galleries and museums, and state, national and international research, expertise and standards.

### **The cultural sector**

The cultural sector is the parallel source of knowledge to the formal education system and museums and galleries, as core parts of this sector, are fundamental sources of information, learning and engagement for people of all ages and abilities. These institutions encourage curiosity, creativity and critical thinking, offer rich aesthetic and emotional experiences through art, science, history and story-telling, and enable people to access objects and collections in ways that enrich lives and society. Furthermore, they help foster the creative industries which are one of the engine houses of the economy. (Henley, *The Arts Dividend*, 2016)

## Comments on the Inquiry

Given AMaGA's role and expertise, our comments to this Inquiry are focused on the potential impact to Sydney Living Museums (SLM), and the importance of history, stories and increasing public access to and engagement with collections. We will not comment on the State Records Authority of NSW. Our response addresses the following Terms of Reference:

- (a) The role and purposes of Sydney Living Museums
- (d) The operation and effect of the proposed reforms in the attached Policy Paper, in particular:
  - (iii) whether the proposed reforms will increase public knowledge and enjoyment of the stories that shape our social, historical and cultural identity, enhancing social outcomes for the people of NSW
  - (iv) whether the proposed reforms will enhance the protection of the key cultural assets of NSW

We commend the Minister for the Arts, Don Harwin MLC, for his expressed aim for "increasing public knowledge and enjoyment of the stories that shape our social, historical and cultural identity." Our major concern is to ensure that the proposed or further reforms do indeed enhance and support the ability of the SLM to best fulfil all the requirements of its mandate, operating as a complex museum organisation of historic sites, collections, cultural landscapes and networked relationships.

## Key Response

We have found that the Policy Paper provides minimal rationale for amalgamating two separate organisations with quite different legislative and management responsibilities. There is no focus on the current operations and effectiveness of the SLM – as to be expected in a process that was reviewing the State Records Act.

However, if a proposal of this nature is to be considered coherently, there needs to be a publicly available body of work that assess the current situation of the SLM, what limitations or impediments there are to its effectiveness, and the exploration of a range of options for improvement, including potential changed operating and governance structures.

AMaGA did pursue more information and discuss the proposal with stakeholders. It appears that the intent is to create a new organisation with history as its core mandate. This would be a worthwhile and exciting initiative - the question is whether the best way to achieve it is the current proposal. There needs to be more research and analysis, including more stakeholder consultation, and reference to museum principles, guidelines and standards.

This work should also be carried out within the framework of an overarching and coherent state-wide museum strategy – the development of which the cultural sector has been calling for over the last several years and which the Local Government Association of NSW also overwhelmingly supported in 2019. This is particularly pertinent to the SLM which manages, curates and presents a number of heritage sites and historic house museums across regional NSW.

AMaGA commends the focus on expanded user access to archives and collections, and greater citizen engagement with multi-layered histories and the ongoing exploration of identity. The desire to develop better and richer interpretations is one shared by museums world-wide. The question, yet to be answered, is whether amalgamating the two organisations will lead to a better outcome, than, for instance, greater collaboration, and increased funding to both organisations to support these types of goals.

It should be noted that other state cultural institutions, such as the Australian Museum, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, and the State Library of NSW, also have remits to telling the stories of the state. There has long been a high level of co-operation, partnerships and loan

programs between all the state institutions. Consideration of the impacts of the proposed amalgamation upon the other institutions and their long histories of collecting is also important.

Digital access to collections is a recognised policy imperative across Australia, though yet to be adequately resourced. Providing digital access is an effective way of ensuring Australian arts, scientific collections, historical records and heritage, in all its many forms, can be discovered and enjoyed by audiences in Australia (both in cities and in the regions and remote areas) and worldwide. However, the cost of maintaining a vital online presence does not come cheap, and it needs more regular major renewals than, for example, permanent exhibition fit-outs.

GLAM Peak (Australia's network of peak bodies in the galleries, libraries, archives, historical societies and museums sectors) over the last four years has revealed the power of digital discoverability and access to collections for increasing participation, social connection, creativity and lifelong learning. Drawing on their extensive work, including the development of a national framework, we support the development of state-wide Digital Access Plans for each state's cultural collections. Better funded and directed strategies and support for the digitisation of collections in both state-funded and regional and community galleries and museums is a critical investment. The proposal under review, while being considered as part of the NSW Digital Government Strategy, should also be developed with reference to a state Digital Access to Collections Plan. It is unclear if this has been the case.

Finally, there is an essential range of expertise required to manage heritage sites, cultural landscapes, museum collections and museum public engagement programs. Any new governance structure must include an understanding and experience of these areas at the highest level.

## Conclusion

Cultural institutions are central to a sense of place, time, identity and social cohesion. They connect Australians with the stories, art, heritage and histories of their community at a local, regional, state, and national level. AMaGA commends the NSW state government for initiating a process of review and strongly advises that further work needs to be carried out.

Fundamental changes to these valuable institutions need to be clearly evidence-based and enable them to thrive as they deliver on the government's policy outcomes.

## Reading/References

GLAM Peak and Digital Access frameworks: <http://www.digitalcollections.org.au/framework>

Six case studies in developing digital access to collections in 2016: <http://www.digitalcollections.org.au/case-studies>

AMaGA Submission to Infrastructure Australia

[https://www.amaga.org.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/SubmissionsPolicies/amaga\\_submission\\_to\\_infrastructure\\_australia\\_31\\_october\\_2019.pdf](https://www.amaga.org.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/SubmissionsPolicies/amaga_submission_to_infrastructure_australia_31_october_2019.pdf)

AMaGA Submission to Senate Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy

[https://www.amaga.org.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/SubmissionsPolicies/amaga\\_submission\\_to\\_senate\\_inquiry\\_into\\_nationhood\\_national\\_identity\\_an.pdf](https://www.amaga.org.au/sites/default/files/uploaded-content/website-content/SubmissionsPolicies/amaga_submission_to_senate_inquiry_into_nationhood_national_identity_an.pdf)



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### *Our vision:*

*Inspiring Australia's cultural life through a thriving and valued museum and gallery sector*