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## RENEWING THE NATIONAL ARTS AND DISABILITY STRATEGY

Museums Galleries Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission as part of the consultation process towards renewing the National Arts and Disability Strategy.

Before briefly addressing specific issues, we will outline who we are and what we do, and stress the importance of the cultural sector to Australia and the ways in which it contributes to wellbeing.

### Who we are

Museums Galleries Australia 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.

All of our members are, however, 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.

MGA 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 inspiring and essential training programs. More information on the organisation and our members can be found at <https://www.museumsaustralia.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. 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. (Darren Henley, *The Arts Dividend: Why investment in culture pays*, 2016)

### Vital statistics

- 98% of Australians engage with the arts. (*Australia Council National Participation Survey Report 2017*)
- In 2016-17 over 10 million people visited the national collecting institutions (on + off site)

- 33% of people with a disability had visited a museum or gallery in 2014 (*ABS General Social Survey, 2014*)
- Over 50,000 Australians volunteer in museums and galleries

## Challenges

We live in a rapidly changing environment: a world of immense social, environmental, economic and technological change. This is especially pertinent for our galleries and museums and how they serve their communities and the nation. The CSIRO's Global Foresight Project identified a number of 'Mega trends', two of which are significant in this context:

- Great Expectations: expanding consumer and societal expectations for services, experiences and social interaction; and
- Virtually Here: increased connectivity, impacting organisations, cities, governance models and lifestyles.

A range of museum-led audience research is also revealing changing contexts, behaviours and expectations. Significantly, social media and new technology are also changing the dynamics of power: changing the way people interact with each other, within communities, with the media and institutions, including with museums and governments. Rising expectations both challenge organisations and create opportunities for doing things differently and better. User-testing has moved from the realm of designing industrial products to designing policies and programs that place citizens and communities at the centre of the whole process.

Better access is increasingly regarded as core business by all cultural institutions. This encompasses physical and online access (as well as intellectual – that is a range of public programs for people of differing levels of ability, age and engagement).

Arts practice has also changed significantly over the decade, particularly through Australia Council support to encourage and enable artists to develop their skills and exposure.

In the spheres of health and education, extensive research shows that “long term arts engagement supports positive health outcomes”, and “arts in education ... contributes in important ways to the factors that underpin learning, such as cognitive abilities, confidence, motivation, problem-solving and communication skills”, (*Crossick & Kaszynska, Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture, AHRC, UK 2016*)

## Consultation Specifics

**The Discussion Paper is seeking information on what has changed in the last decade that would help shape the renewal of the national strategy.**

### 1. Disability

The Discussion paper defines disability according to the social model. We understand that there are a number of ways in which disability can be experienced, which bring different considerations about forms of affirmative or remedial action that might be pursued. Disability can be thought of as physical, social, intellectual, cultural, and political – and these may overlap variously for different user needs. Age, gender and other orientation issues or needs are also relevant.

While the current National Arts and Disability Strategy tends to focus on physical and learning disabilities (including medical needs, carer support, and some aspects of geographical location and access to governmental services), museums and galleries have special skills to assist in other access areas. They can crucially augment the front-line strategies identified in calls for better government support and services, to help increase access to creative development, social engagement, interpersonal exchange, knowledge increase of various kinds, and a rich cultural life at various levels of readiness.

For example, museums and galleries have long recognised the actuality and potential of digital transformation for increasing access, and there are numerous examples of the powerful ways in

which they are harnessing, exploring and adapting digital technologies and encouraging digital literacy. On-line access to collections has been growing steadily over the last decade, as an integral part of each institution's mandate for accessibility. Digital platforms and other forms of electronic access to museum and gallery-sector resources, which can range from 24/7 electronic access to the most tailored group or one-to-one interpersonal experiences, can greatly assist or back up physical and other access programs.

## 2. Trends and Resourcing

We support and confirm the findings relating to the museum and gallery sector in the Research Overview into arts and disability in Australia prepared as input to renewing the national strategy. There have been very positive developments over the last decade in understanding needs and issues, and in better access to and participation in culture and the arts. It is good to see the recognition of the range of programs such as the Art and Dementia programs run by the National Gallery of Australia and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The positive impact of a national arts and disability strategy, high-level political commitment, targeted legislation, and access to funding opportunities for people with disability is clearly demonstrated.

We also confirm the finding in the second evaluation (2013-2015) that “arts organisations are providing broad, accessible and inclusive participation opportunities, **however limited resources and an increasingly constrained fiscal environment is affecting their ability to do so**” (my emphasis)

**The lack of a national cultural policy framework, the diminished level of Commonwealth government support for the national institutions over the last decade, and the generally piecemeal and under-funded approach in most states and territories to their own cultural institutions and activities in both the capital cities and the regions, means that the Australian cultural sector is struggling to meet many significant challenges. This does not bode well for any Australian, whether with a disability or not.**

A renewed national arts and disability strategy should include programs of targeted support for changed practice, infrastructure development, promotion of standards, and communications strategies in the museums and galleries sector.

## 3. Further considerations

The Discussion Paper's references to the creative case for inclusive arts, and the connections between arts practice, participation and experiences with wellbeing and social inclusion are welcome and supported.

MGA has just completed the development of a 10-Year Indigenous Roadmap for Change in the cultural sector. Implementation of this will be crucial for breaking down barriers and improving the participation of Indigenous individuals and communities in our museums and galleries. **The Roadmap should be referenced and supported in the renewed national arts and disability strategy.**

Similarly, the work of GLAM Peak has revealed the power of digital discoverability and access to collections for increasing participation and connection by people with disabilities – whether physical, age-related or locational. **A national strategy that supported digitisation of collections in regional and community galleries and museums would be an invaluable contribution to Australians' wellbeing and artistic development.**

Museums Galleries Australia, in our role as setting standards and providing skills development, is currently reviewing and updating *Museum Methods*, the manual underpinning the national standards, and our suite of access and equity policies and guidelines. Disability access and participation considerations are significant priorities in this work.

## Conclusion

As we stated in our original submission to the development of the first national arts and disability strategy, Museums Galleries Australia upholds the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and supports the right of all people to participate freely and actively in the artistic and cultural life of the community. We agreed that this principle must be considered as a cornerstone of social inclusion. Moreover, the museums community had long recognised the need to take affirmative action on disability issues in order to act upon the broader social objectives that are now fundamental to museums' self-definition.

Current research is revealing the deep value of arts, culture and heritage to society and the economy in increasing numbers of ways, including business innovation and health and wellbeing.

The national government has a leadership role in cultural, arts and heritage policies, programs and investment frameworks, which should also be recognised as part of Australia's innovation, growth and social inclusion agendas.

The government's updated arts and disability strategy needs to support more cross-governmental strategies and programs that enable all museums and galleries to provide the greatest possible access to and use/re-use of their content and programs, and thus contribute to a more equitable and thriving Australia.

## 4. Further Reading/References

Indigenous Roadmap: <https://www.mgaindigenousroadmap.com.au/>

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>



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