

# Submission to the Parliament of Australia Inquiry into National Cultural Policy

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## Summary

- **Community heritage organisations:** Volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies safeguard local and marginalised histories.
- **Scale and significance:** Over half of heritage organisations in Australia are volunteer-managed, a higher proportion than comparable countries.
- **Value:** Community heritage organisations contribute to cultural diversity in the nation's heritage collections, with flow on impacts for education, regional tourism, and community cohesion.
- **Challenges – a sector in crisis:** Funding precarity, ageing volunteer bases, infrastructure strain, and limited digital capacity undermine organisational sustainability.
- **Policy gap:** *Revive* acknowledges community heritage organisations but provides no concrete measures to support them, leaving a critical gap in safeguarding an important segment of the national cultural infrastructure.
- **Recommendations:**
  - **Greater inclusion of community heritage organisations in the National Cultural Policy:** Ensure their sustained operation through funding, training, and support programs at all levels of government. Without stronger recognition in *Revive* community heritage organisations risk further marginalisation and closure.
  - **Dedicated funding streams for organisational sustainability:** Establish recurrent or capacity-building funding tailored to the needs of volunteer-managed community heritage organisations, not limited to project-based grants. A targeted scheme could also support organisations at risk or in crisis, including the safe transfer of collections when closures occur.
  - **Strengthening communities of practice with national collecting institutions:** Develop mentorship and knowledge-transfer programs that link volunteers with professionals in the national collecting institutions to enhance heritage skills, boost motivation and retention, and support long-term organisational sustainability.

## Introduction

This submission responds to the Parliament of Australia's inquiry into the National Cultural Policy, *Revive*, by drawing on our Australian Research Council-funded research which examines the organisational sustainability of Australia's volunteer-managed community heritage organisations.

Our submission focuses on the role and sustainability of community heritage organisations in the context of the National Cultural Policy. While *Revive* acknowledges community heritage organisations 'provide free or low-cost access' to 'rich holdings of cultural material' (pp. 75–6) it offers no concrete strategies to support their viability. In our view, this omission represents a critical policy gap. Without explicit recognition and resourcing, the long-term sustainability of community heritage organisations – and the cultural diversity they safeguard – remains under serious threat.

## The role of community heritage organisations

Australia's community heritage sector encompasses a diverse array of volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies. Radical libraries, community archives, artist-run initiatives, and local museums are common terms for such places. Distinct from government-operated institutions, community heritage organisations are generally:

- **Volunteer-led:** They operate without paid staff, sustained solely by a community of interest's commitment.
- **Locally embedded:** They are interwoven with the social fabric of their communities, documenting local, marginalised, or enthusiast histories.
- **Flexible in form:** A 'museum' may also hold archives; a 'historical society' may operate a gallery or house a library.

Australia's community heritage sector is nationally significant in scale. Surveys suggest that in New South Wales, for example, over 50% of heritage organisations are run entirely by volunteers (Museums & Galleries of NSW 2023), far higher than comparable countries (see, e.g., Mark-FitzGerald 2016).

These organisations play a crucial role in collecting, preserving, interpreting, and transmitting histories that might otherwise remain invisible. The 'do-it-yourself' (Baker 2018), 'heritage from below' (Muzaini & Minca 2018) approach taken by many community heritage organisations enables volunteers in these places to author and curate historical narratives on their own terms.

## Organisational sustainability challenges

Despite their significance, community heritage organisations are chronically under-resourced and face acute sustainability challenges. Our research and that of others highlights:

- **Funding precarity:** Community heritage organisations often rely on small, competitive project grants that pit them against larger, professionalised institutions. Federal programs such as the Community Heritage Grants Program support valuable projects but do not provide ongoing operational funding and only a fraction of community heritage organisations secure grants (Gibbons 2019).
- **Volunteer succession:** Many community heritage organisations are run by ageing volunteer bases, with limited pathways for intergenerational transfer of skills and knowledge (Cantillon & Baker 2020).
- **Infrastructure strain:** Ageing buildings, inadequate storage, and limited resources for preservation threaten both collections and organisational futures.
- **Digital capacity gaps:** Without investment in digital literacies, digital infrastructure, digitisation and digital access, many collections remain inaccessible, and some risk obsolescence (Holcombe-James 2022).
- **Policy neglect:** Community heritage organisations operate at the margins of cultural policy frameworks, receiving limited recognition and little structural support (Baker & Cantillon 2020; Robinson 2018).

Fifteen years ago, Winkworth (2011) described a ‘sustainability crisis’ in the volunteer-managed museum movement. These warnings are even more pressing today, with closures and at-risk community organisations regularly being reported (see, e.g., Evans 2024; Kwon 2025).

## Policy gaps in *Revive*

The National Cultural Policy identifies ‘strong cultural infrastructure’ as a central pillar. Yet while *Revive* acknowledges the contributions of community heritage organisations, it does not outline any mechanisms to support them. This absence underscores what Winkworth (2011) and Robinson (2018) have identified as persistent policy and funding blind spots in Australia.

As the Prince Henry Hospital Nursing and Medical Museum stated in its submission to the inquiry into the National Cultural Policy in 2023, ‘the absence of a policy and appropriate funding framework’ for community heritage organisations ‘imperils our future and the security of our collection’. Their position echoes the Women’s Art Register’s submission to the Parliament of Australia’s inquiry into Australia’s creative and cultural industries and institutions in 2020 which stated, ‘strategic and targeted policies and an ongoing funding structure’ for community heritage organisations ‘would go a long way to securing the precarious position of such organisations’. These testimonies are echoed across the sector.

Our own work reinforces these concerns (see e.g. Baker & Cantillon 2020):

- Achieving sustainable futures will require a more robust engagement with the community heritage sector through development of government policy at the national, state and local levels.
- The lack of policy and equitable funding structures has exacerbated the sustainability crisis in the sector.
- Without policy commitments to organisational sustainability, the presence of the historical past, so lovingly fostered in community heritage organisations, could slip beyond the reach of the communities of interest for whom those artefacts and their stories hold meaning.

In short, the omission of targeted measures in *Revive* for the community heritage sector risks accelerating losses to collections, knowledge, and cultural diversity. It is an omission that puts at-risk an important component of the nation's cultural infrastructure.

## **Why organisational sustainability matters**

We define organisational sustainability as the ability of community heritage organisations to sustain and adapt their operations, collections, and community relevance over time. This includes:

- Financial and operational viability
- Recruitment, training, and succession of volunteers
- Preservation and accessibility of collections
- Relevance to communities of interest
- Strategic agility in the face of change

Organisational sustainability, then, is not simply about keeping doors open. It is about ensuring these organisations continue to play their vital role as custodians of local histories, educators, spaces of social connection, and contributors to regional tourism.

As we have argued in our published research, achieving long-term sustainability for community heritage organisations will be important if there is to be a diverse, accessible record of the nation's past as it was lived and experienced. Without targeted support, from all levels of government, these records, and the communities that give them meaning, are at risk of disappearing.

## **Recommendations**

- **Greater inclusion of community heritage organisations in the National Cultural Policy:** Ensuring that volunteer-run community heritage organisations can continue

operating through funding, training, and support programs will require strengthening the inclusion of these places in policy at all government levels. Their inclusion in *Revive* is cursory and does not adequately recognise or address the contribution of community heritage organisations to the national cultural infrastructure. Without greater attention in the National Cultural Policy, there is a significant risk that these organisations will remain marginalised relative to larger heritage institutions resulting in further closures and collection losses (Baker & Cantillon 2020).

- **Dedicated funding streams for organisational sustainability:** Establish recurrent or capacity-building funding tailored to the needs of volunteer-managed community heritage organisations, not limited to project-based grants. Schemes like the Community Heritage Grants Program administered by the National Library of Australia are important for supporting projects undertaken by volunteers, but a targeted scheme is also needed that could support volunteer-managed community heritage organisations that are at-risk or in-crisis. Funding that would support the transition of collections from a community heritage organisation in the throes of closure to another collecting institution (volunteer-managed or otherwise) would be especially useful for safeguarding community records.
- **Strengthening communities of practice between the national collecting institutions and community heritage organisations:** Communities of practice can cultivate volunteers' heritage skills through interactions with professionals at the national collecting institutions (Baker 2017). Provision of knowledge transfer opportunities can increase volunteer motivation and retention, supporting organisational sustainability (Baker 2018). Establishing inter-organisational mentorship programs that facilitate skills transfer between generations and across different organisational contexts may be of benefit. Our research found that the provision of professional advice to volunteers by publicly-funded heritage organisations strengthens the skills and expertise of individual volunteers and supports capacity-building in these organisations (Baker 2018).

## Conclusion

Community heritage organisations are the custodians of the everyday, the marginalised, and the local histories of the nation. They are vital to Australia's cultural infrastructure, yet they remain precarious and undersupported. In the absence of adequate policy, our Australian Research Council-funded research, 'Co-creating a sustainable future for the community heritage sector' (Australian Research Council Discovery Project, 2025–2028) is working to support the sector by collaborating with volunteers from community heritage organisations across Australia to develop benchmarks of organisational sustainability (see: <https://communityheritagetoolkit.com/>).

If *Revive* is to realise its ambition of 'a place for every story, a story for every place', it must explicitly address the organisational sustainability of volunteer-managed community heritage organisations. We urge the Committee to recommend that the National Cultural Policy strengthen its support for community heritage organisations through policy recognition, targeted

funding, and sustainability measures. Without such action, Australia risks losing an irreplaceable layer of its cultural fabric. With it, we can secure a future where community heritage organisations continue to connect communities with their histories, foster identity, and enrich the nation's cultural life.

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