

Submission to the Australian Government Public Consultation into a New National Cultural Policy

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Summary

- **Community heritage organisations:** Volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies are important sites of cultural participation, community connection and historical preservation.
- **Diverse cultural expression:** Community heritage organisations support local and place-based cultural activity through participatory approaches that enable communities to collect, preserve, and share histories on their own terms.
- **Cultural participation:** Volunteers actively contribute to Australia's cultural life through collecting, curating, digitising, interpreting, and sharing cultural materials and histories.
- **Sustainability challenges:** Funding precarity, ageing volunteer bases, infrastructure strain, digital capacity gaps, and limited policy recognition threaten the long-term sustainability of the community heritage sector.
- **Policy opportunity:** The next National Cultural Policy provides an opportunity to recognise volunteer-managed community heritage organisations as a vital component of Australia's cultural infrastructure and to develop targeted support measures that strengthen their resilience and sustainability, helping them survive and thrive into the future.
- **Recommendations:**
 - Explicitly recognise volunteer-managed community heritage organisations as a key component of Australia's cultural infrastructure within the next National Cultural Policy.
 - Support locally embedded and community-led heritage activity as an essential part of Australia's cultural ecology.
 - Establish dedicated funding streams for organisational sustainability for community heritage organisations, targeting capacity-building, succession planning, digitisation, and crisis support for at-risk organisations.
 - Strengthen communities of practice and mentorship programs between national collecting institutions and community heritage organisations to support knowledge-sharing, skills transfer, and volunteer capacity-building.
 - Recognise volunteering in the community heritage sector as a significant form of cultural participation and civic contribution requiring ongoing policy support.

Introduction

This submission draws on our Australian Research Council-funded research examining the organisational sustainability of Australia’s volunteer-managed community heritage organisations, including galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next National Cultural Policy and particularly the consultation’s focus on diverse forms of cultural participation (Pillar 2) and resilient cultural infrastructure (Pillar 4). These pillars matter because community heritage organisations are critical sites of historical preservation, cultural participation, and social connection, yet they remain chronically under-recognised and under-resourced within Australia’s cultural policy settings. While the current National Cultural Policy, *Revive*, acknowledges the importance of community heritage organisations – noting they ‘provide free or low-cost access’ to ‘rich holdings of cultural material’ (pp. 75–6) – it does not offer concrete mechanisms to support their long-term sustainability. The next National Cultural Policy should more fully recognise volunteer-managed community heritage organisations as a vital part of Australia’s cultural infrastructure and develop targeted policy, funding, and partnership initiatives to support their sustainability.

Cultural expression and participation

... mainstream institutions are never going to tell our stories either in the complexity, the depth, the diversity, or anything ... there needs to be focused community orgs that are connected and can do this with the beautiful complexity that we have. (volunteer, Australian Queer Archives)

Community heritage organisations play an important role in supporting diverse forms of cultural expression and participation across Australia. Volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies are deeply embedded within their local communities and communities of interest (see Cantillon & Baker 2025b, 2026a, 2026b; Kirry, Baker & Cantillon 2026; Kirry, Cantillon & Baker 2025). They are places where people participate directly in cultural production through collecting, preserving, curating, interpreting, and sharing histories and cultural memories.

Distinct from large state or national institutions, community heritage organisations operate through highly participatory and place-based approaches. Many adopt what we have elsewhere described as a ‘do-it-yourself’ approach to heritage (Baker 2018), enabling volunteers and community members to author and curate stories on their own terms. As sites of ‘heritage from below’ (Muzaini & Minca 2018), these organisations preserve local, marginalised, and enthusiast histories that might otherwise remain absent from official cultural narratives. In regional communities, volunteer-managed heritage institutions often play a key role in recording local histories in ways that bring communities together.

Diverse participation

I think it’s through the collection and being able to bring people together where people can connect and learn more about Vietnamese culture and

heritage and history, find each other, learn about the plurality of Vietnamese experience and support Vietnamese diaspora creatives, be inspired by the amazing stuff that's being produced. (volunteer, Đất Nước Library)

Community heritage organisations demonstrate that cultural participation extends far beyond attendance at major cultural institutions or engagement with professionally produced creative content. These volunteer-run places actively contribute to cultural life through collecting objects, digitising records, documenting oral histories, creating exhibitions, maintaining archives, organising public programs, and sharing knowledge with others. This form of participation is sustained through social relationships, intergenerational learning, and community connection (Baker 2017; Hanley 2017).

The consultation paper's recognition of local and place-based practices is therefore particularly important. Community heritage organisations are fundamentally place-based cultural institutions (Winkworth 2011). Their collections and activities are often tied to specific localities, industries, migrant communities, social movements, creative scenes, or shared interests that may not be represented within larger collecting institutions (see Cantillon & Baker 2025b; Kirry, Baker & Cantillon 2026; Kirry, Cantillon & Baker 2025). As such, these organisations help communities maintain a sense of identity and continuity (see Cantillon & Baker 2026a, 2026b).

At the same time, community heritage organisations increasingly support emerging modes of cultural participation and engagement. Digital platforms, social media, community digitisation projects, and online collections have expanded opportunities for volunteers and audiences to interact with heritage materials in new ways (Hanley, Baker & Pavlidis 2018; Holcombe-James 2022; Ruge et al. 2017). Community heritage organisations frequently use digital tools to connect geographically dispersed communities of interest, share collections online, and foster participatory forms of storytelling.

However, the ability of community heritage organisations to support diverse participation is constrained by significant structural challenges. Despite their cultural and social value, these organisations are chronically under-resourced. Many operate with ageing volunteer bases, limited technical infrastructure, and precarious funding arrangements (Cantillon & Baker 2025a). Without greater policy support, there is a risk that many of these locally embedded and participatory forms of cultural expression will disappear (Baker & Cantillon 2020).

This issue is particularly significant because community heritage organisations often support participation by groups who may otherwise have limited representation within mainstream cultural institutions (see Cantillon & Baker 2026a, 2026b). Community heritage organisations can provide culturally meaningful spaces where communities exercise agency over how their histories are collected, interpreted, and shared (Baker & Huber 2013). They also create opportunities for participation among older Australians, regional communities, volunteers, and people with specialist or enthusiast interests whose cultural contributions are often overlooked in broader cultural policy frameworks. These opportunities strengthen a sense of belonging and can have positive impacts on health and well-being (Baker 2017).

Volunteer labour

We need to get more people to be interested in joining ... like a lot of community groups, the numbers are falling and our demographic is quite an older demographic. ... I think the biggest threat [to our sustainability] is the number of people. ... unless we continue to get more people who are prepared to volunteer for things, it is not going to continue as it has been.
(volunteer, The Embroiderers' Guild, Queensland)

Importantly, recognising diverse forms of participation also requires acknowledging the labour that underpins this work. Volunteers sustain Australia's community heritage sector through significant unpaid labour, often involving specialised skills and long-term commitments to collections care, administration, public engagement, and governance (Cantillon & Baker 2020b). Yet this labour is frequently invisible within national cultural policy settings.

Our research has found that volunteers derive important social, emotional, and cultural benefits from participation in community heritage organisations, including a sense of purpose, community connection, intergenerational exchange, and opportunities for lifelong learning (Baker 2017; Cantillon & Baker 2020a, 2022). However, the sustainability of this volunteer labour cannot be taken for granted. Ageing volunteer cohorts, difficulties recruiting younger volunteers, and increasing administrative and governance burdens all place pressure on the sector (Baker & Cantillon 2020; Cantillon & Baker 2025a; see also Kirry, Baker & Cantillon 2026). Cost of living pressures are exacerbating the challenges these organisations face in recruiting and retaining volunteers.

Volunteer labour is a form of cultural participation and needs to be recognised as such in national cultural policy. There also needs to be a consideration of how national cultural policy can better support and sustain the contribution of volunteers to the community heritage sector through such things as an investment in volunteer training, provision of intergenerational mentoring, delivery of skills development, and fostering of communities of practice that strengthen organisational capacity and support knowledge transfer. It might also be asked, how could volunteer-managed heritage institutions be better supported to become part of the nation's heritage education infrastructure in ways that will build capability and experience in the broader GLAM sector?

Recommendations

The next National Cultural Policy should adopt a broader understanding of cultural participation that recognises volunteer labour, community-led heritage work, and grassroots cultural production as important forms of cultural activity. Cultural participation should not be understood solely through audience attendance or consumption metrics, but also through the active practices of care, stewardship, interpretation, and knowledge-sharing undertaken within community heritage organisations.

More specifically, the next National Cultural Policy should:

- Recognise volunteer-managed community heritage organisations as important sites of cultural participation and local cultural expression.
- Support locally embedded and community-led cultural heritage activity as a central component of Australia’s cultural ecology to strengthen regional communities.
- Acknowledge the role of community heritage organisations in preserving diverse histories and experiences that may be absent from mainstream institutional collections.
- Recognise volunteering in the community heritage sector as a significant form of cultural participation and civic contribution and plan for and invest in capacity-building.
- Support digital inclusion initiatives that enable community heritage organisations to expand participation and engagement through online collections, digitisation, and digital storytelling.

Resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose cultural infrastructure

... we just need good storage for our artefacts, particularly paper, because that does need a controlled environment, which we don't have. And they're just going to deteriorate and deteriorate. ... Paper, fabrics. ... Our humid climate here is just disastrous for all that. (volunteer, Ipswich Historical Society)

Australia’s community heritage sector is nationally significant in scale. Surveys suggest that more than half of heritage organisations in New South Wales, for example, are run entirely by volunteers (Museums & Galleries of NSW 2023), a proportion far higher than in comparable countries (Mark-FitzGerald 2016). These organisations preserve nationally significant cultural materials. Despite their contributions to maintaining the diversity of the nation’s histories, community heritage organisations face acute organisational sustainability challenges. Our research and that of others (Baker & Cantillon 2020; Cantillon & Baker 2020a, 2025a; Gibbons 2019; Holcombe-James 2022; Robinson 2018; Ruge et al. 2017; Wessell & Thorpe 2023) highlights persistent issues relating to:

- Funding precarity
- Volunteer succession
- Ageing infrastructure and inadequate storage facilities
- Climate related risks to archives, collections and buildings
- Digital literacy and digitisation gaps
- Limited policy recognition and structural support

Fifteen years ago, Winkworth (2011) described a ‘sustainability crisis’ in Australia’s volunteer-managed museum movement. These concerns remain pressing today, with closures and at-risk organisations continuing to be reported across the sector (see, e.g., Evans 2024; Kwon 2025). Without targeted support, there is a significant risk that valuable collections, histories and community knowledge will be lost. The closure of CHOs can have profound consequences, including the dispersal or deterioration of collections, loss of organisational

knowledge, and the weakening of local cultural networks (Baker & Cantillon 2020). What happens to collections when organisations fold? How can volunteer-managed heritage institutions be supported to manage that process?

Funding

We've been lucky we've had recent grants, but without ongoing, recurrent funding for heritage, you're always going to have sustainability issues.
(volunteer, Miss Porter's House)

One of the central challenges to sustainability in the community heritage sector is the lack of equitable and stable funding structures. These organisations often rely on small project grants, local fundraising, and volunteer labour to remain operational. Federal initiatives such as the Community Heritage Grants Program provide important support for specific projects but do not address broader organisational sustainability issues. However, project-based funding models are often poorly suited to the realities of volunteer-managed heritage institutions. Volunteers may lack the time, expertise, or administrative capacity required to apply for and manage competitive grants (Cantillon & Baker 2020a). Moreover, project funding rarely supports the core operational needs that underpin long-term sustainability, including governance, volunteer coordination, succession planning, building maintenance, and strategic development (Cantillon & Baker 2025a). Ever increasing costs of maintaining State and National collections means larger institutions are the beneficiaries of major funding bids, with the bulk of the nation's heritage institutions – that is, community heritage organisations managed by volunteers – missing out.

Social infrastructure

... we try to be a community within ourselves, but as a not-for-profit of volunteers, we're a project to preserve history. We try to do that in a communal way; caring for one another as well as caring for the collection and that sort of thing. But we don't exist for ourselves, we exist for the community. (volunteer, Queensland Air Museum)

Resilient cultural infrastructure is not only about buildings and physical assets, though these play a significant role. It is also about the social infrastructure that enables cultural participation and cultural continuity. Cultural heritage organisations often function as important community gathering places, sustaining networks of care, intergenerational knowledge exchange, friendship, mentoring, and belonging (see Cantillon & Baker 2025b, 2026a, 2026b; Kirry, Cantillon & Baker 2025). As social infrastructure, community heritage organisations strengthen civic and cultural life by bringing people together around shared practices, histories, and identities – particularly relevant for regional and remote Australian communities. The next National Cultural Policy should recognise organisational sustainability as more than a question of financial viability, also taking into account the capacity of community heritage organisations to sustain collections, volunteers, community relevance, outreach, and organisational knowledge over time.

Tourism

[We] added the accommodation in the museum grounds, all to encourage tourism to the town and museum. (volunteer, Braidwood Historical Society)

Community heritage organisations are important regional and local tourism assets. Local museums, historical societies, community archives, and specialist collections frequently operate as visitor attractions that encourage engagement with local histories, creative practices and distinctive community identities (Young 2006). In many regional and remote communities, volunteer-run heritage institutions form part of broader cultural tourism ecosystems alongside festivals and heritage sites. They can encourage visitation to towns and regions that may otherwise receive limited cultural tourism attention, while also supporting local economies through visitor spending in accommodation, hospitality, and retail sectors (Pope 2009). Community heritage organisations often provide highly localised and community-authored interpretations of place that differ from standardised tourism experiences, enabling visitors to engage with histories and cultural narratives grounded in lived experience and local knowledge (Hanley 2018; Gilbert 2006). Yet, the tourism and regional development value of community heritage organisations remains largely absent from national cultural policy settings. Supporting the sustainability of these organisations will contribute to the ongoing social and economic vitality of communities across Australia.

Recommendations

The next National Cultural Policy should move beyond symbolic recognition of community heritage organisations and develop practical policy measures to support their long-term sustainability. In particular, there is a need for:

- **Greater inclusion of community heritage organisations in national cultural policy:** Ensuring that volunteer-run heritage institutions can continue operating through funding, training, and support programs will require strengthening the inclusion of these places in policy at all levels of government. Their inclusion in *Revive* is cursory and does not adequately recognise or address their contribution to the national cultural infrastructure. Without greater attention in national cultural policy, there is significant risk that community heritage organisations will remain marginalised relative to larger heritage institutions, resulting in further closures and collection losses (Baker & Cantillon 2020). The next National Cultural Policy should therefore explicitly recognise community heritage organisations as a key part of Australia's cultural infrastructure and acknowledge the distinctive challenges faced by volunteer-managed heritage institutions.
- **A national assessment of the sector:** There is a need for a national assessment of the sector to determine how much cultural heritage material is held by volunteer-managed community heritage organisations, what proportion have undergone assessments, how much funding they receive, and from which sources. A snapshot of sector, including how many have partially funded roles and what physical infrastructure is in place to

keep the collections safe, would provide information that is needed to deliver more resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose infrastructure.

- **Dedicated funding streams for organisational sustainability:** There is a need for recurrent or capacity-building funding tailored to the needs of volunteer-managed community heritage organisations, not limited to project-based grants. Targeted funding streams could support:
 - Organisational development and strategic planning
 - Volunteer recruitment, retention, and training
 - Governance and succession planning
 - Building maintenance and collection storage
 - Digitisation and digital access initiatives
 - Conservation and preservation work
 - Crisis support for at-risk organisations

Importantly, policy settings should also consider what happens when community heritage organisations are no longer able to continue operating. Funding that supports the transition of collections from organisations facing closure to other collecting institutions would help safeguard community records and reduce the risk of significant cultural losses.

- **Strengthening communities of practice between national institutions and community heritage organisations:** The next National Cultural Policy should also support stronger partnerships between publicly funded collecting institutions and volunteer-managed community heritage organisations. Our research has found that communities of practice can cultivate volunteers' heritage skills through interactions with professionals at national collecting institutions (Baker 2018). Knowledge transfer opportunities can increase volunteer motivation and retention, supporting organisational sustainability (Cantillon & Baker 2025a). Professional advice and mentoring from publicly funded institutions can play an important role in strengthening volunteer expertise and capacity-building across the sector. Establishing inter-organisational mentorship programs that facilitate skills transfer between generations and across different organisational contexts may therefore provide significant benefits. Such partnerships may also help address inequities in access to expertise, resources, and professional networks between large institutions and volunteer-run organisations. The next National Cultural Policy should encourage collaborative approaches that recognise community heritage organisations as valued partners within Australia's broader cultural ecology.

Finally, discussions of resilient cultural infrastructure should acknowledge that sustainability requires long-term policy commitment. Short-term or fragmented approaches to funding and support are insufficient for addressing the structural challenges facing the community heritage sector. Achieving sustainable futures will require more robust engagement with community heritage organisations through coordinated policy development at national, state, and local levels.

Conclusion

Community heritage organisations are vital components of Australia’s cultural landscape. They support diverse forms of cultural participation, preserve local and marginalised histories, foster community connection, and contribute significantly to the nation’s cultural infrastructure. Yet despite their importance, they remain precarious and under-supported. 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/>).

We identify the following challenges and opportunities for the next National Cultural Policy in relation to the community heritage sector:

Challenges

- **Policy invisibility and marginalisation:** Community heritage organisations remain largely peripheral within national cultural policy despite their scale and cultural significance. Their inclusion in *Revive* is symbolic rather than structural.
- **Organisational sustainability:** Many community heritage organisations face ongoing precarity due to limited recurrent funding, ageing volunteer cohorts, succession challenges, and increasing governance and compliance burdens.
- **Funding inequities:** Volunteer-managed heritage institutions often compete against larger professional institutions for small pools of project funding that do not address long-term operational sustainability.
- **Loss of collections and community knowledge:** Organisational closures risk the dispersal or disappearance of locally significant collections, volunteer expertise, and community memory.
- **Digital capability:** Limited digital infrastructure, digitisation capacity, and digital literacies constrain participation, accessibility, and long-term preservation.
- **Uneven access to expertise and support:** Many community heritage organisations lack access to conservation advice, strategic planning support, mentoring, and professional networks.
- **Volunteer sustainability:** The community heritage sector depends heavily on unpaid labour that is frequently overlooked within cultural policy despite its significant civic, social, and cultural value.
- **Infrastructure pressures:** Ageing buildings, inadequate storage facilities, and limited preservation resources undermine resilience and long-term viability.

Opportunities

- **Recognising community heritage organisations as cultural infrastructure:** The next National Cultural Policy should explicitly position volunteer-managed heritage institutions as a core part of Australia’s cultural ecology and infrastructure.

- **Broadening definitions of cultural participation:** Policy can move beyond attendance-based models to recognise volunteering, community archiving, collecting, curating, and stewardship as important forms of cultural participation.
- **Strengthening place-based cultural activity:** Community heritage organisations provide opportunities to support local cultural expression, regional cultural development, and community-led storytelling – strengthening social cohesion, community well-being, local identity, and intergenerational learning.
- **Supporting social infrastructure:** Community heritage organisations function as spaces of social connection, intergenerational learning, care, belonging, and wellbeing, contributing to stronger communities as well as cultural preservation.
- **Developing targeted sustainability funding:** Dedicated operational and capacity-building funding streams could strengthen organisational resilience and reduce closures and collection losses.
- **Building communities of practice:** Partnerships between national collecting institutions and volunteer-managed organisations could support mentorship, skills transfer, volunteer development, and knowledge exchange across the sector.
- **Enhancing digital participation and access:** Investment in digitisation, digital storytelling, and online collections could expand public engagement and improve accessibility for dispersed communities.
- **Supporting intergenerational engagement:** Policy initiatives focused on training, mentoring, and volunteer succession could help sustain cultural knowledge and participation over time.
- **Safeguarding diverse histories:** Community heritage organisations preserve local, marginalised, enthusiast, and everyday histories that are often absent from mainstream institutional collections, contributing to a more inclusive national cultural record.
- **Strengthening regional cultural ecosystems:** Many community heritage organisations operate as community hubs and tourism assets in regional and remote areas, offering opportunities for integrated cultural, social, and economic development.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to develop practical measures that support the long-term sustainability of community heritage organisations. If Australia is to maintain a diverse, accessible, and community-connected cultural heritage ecology, policy frameworks must move beyond symbolic recognition of the community heritage sector and provide meaningful support for the organisations and volunteers who sustain these important cultural institutions.

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