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Executive Summary

State Records NSW city office

In late 2011, the State Records Authority of New South Wales announced the closure of the city reading room effective 30 June 2012. The History Council of NSW believes that the access to records is fundamental to the study of history.

State Records has been directed, along with other state government agencies, to make substantial savings to their budgets. Over the next four years State Records is expected to save a total of \$1.8 million.

State Records is one of NSW's key cultural institutions and an invaluable research facility for any historian's investigations into aspects of the functioning of the state, from colonial and convict history, through all the permeations of the state's role in people's lives.

While the History Council acknowledges the challenges faced by State Government to be fiscally responsible, the budget cuts imposed on State Records NSW has a severe impact on the accessibility of records and services. The cuts will downgrade the archives, undermining its position as a key cultural institution, limiting access for key user groups, and hampering the organisation's role to inform and support state government, especially in its ongoing role in the state's Digital Archives as well as guiding digitisation of records across NSW government.

Background to history of downgrading of services

State Records has undergone a debilitating series of incremental cuts to its budget and services over the past thirty years.

Foreshore House, the current city home for State Records was purpose built for the Archives Authority of NSW in the 1970s, including facilities for the secure storage of original records. Before the building was occupied however, the top two floors were transferred to the Public Service Board, compromising the records storage space from the outset and ownership was vested in other Government agencies requiring State Records to pay rent. Nevertheless, their tenure is safe. The State Property Authority has stated that it does not want to remove tenants from Government owned properties.

In 2004 a decision was made to transfer all remaining original records out to Western Sydney Office in Kingswood. No transfer system was implemented to service readers in the city. Many in the history community were concerned by these cuts, but were reassured that there would be

no more. The city office maintained its public outreach and access to key records through the provision of public access archivists, microfilms of records, computers, training facilities and exhibition space (although funding to support changing exhibitions has also been discontinued).

The city office is now a reference portal, supporting indexes and microfilm access to records. The public access archivists provide specialist advice for researchers. The research room also provides access to digitised Lands Department maps and plans.

Over the last few years many government departments and agencies have been required to meet an efficiency dividend in their budgets. This is a small percentage cut to budgets to encourage the efficient use of funds and rises in productivity. As a result, State Records' budget has been slowly declining over a number of years. There has been a freeze on staff recruitment for a number of years and initiatives such as the magazine, *Vital Signs*, have been cut and exhibitions pared back.

State Records is now expected to make \$1.8 million in savings between now and 2015, as part of the government's cost cutting measures across all departments to protect the state's AAA rating. The cuts for State Records are divided up as follows:

- 2011/12 - \$200,000
- 2012/13 - \$400,000
- 2013/14 - \$600,000
- 2014/15 - \$600,000

This level of savings is based on State Records current budget of \$7m per annum. The cuts were calculated by Treasury as a percentage of each department's annual budget. However, in the case of State Records, it does not recognise that a large proportion of State Records annual budget is made up from income generated through the Government Records Repository (GRR). So it is a double whammy. State Records is "punished" for having a decent income and has had to find savings on its full budget, rather than simply the smaller amount provided by Treasury. The percentage savings should have been calculated on the percentage given to the agency from State coffers; not from income generated.

The required savings of \$1.8 million is going to place many stresses and strains on the organisation over the next few years and it is likely that many of State Records' performance indicators and timelines for achieving results on current projects will have to be significantly amended.



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The 2011/12 cuts have been “achieved” by not filling the Manager, Special Projects position; closing the city reading room on Saturdays from the beginning of September 2011; and closing the Exhibitions Program.

The Director at State Records NSW has decided to save approximately \$1.5 million by 2014/15 by closing the city office of State Records NSW from 30 June 2012. The savings in rent and 'on costs' over a 3 year period should enable State Records to come close to achieving its required savings.

But what is the impact of these required budget cuts (or savings)?

Money might be saved but cultural capital will be lost and the state’s history will be under threat.

The history sector is dismayed at the latest budget cuts and the impact this will have on the services and projects of State Records NSW. It is the latest in an ongoing series of cuts that has seen continued diminishing of services. It is very much death by a thousand cuts. Each previous cut has been quietly accepted by the sector as necessary in difficult times – but there are many of the History council’s constituents that are no longer willing to see such a degradation of services.

The budget cuts will not only see the closure of the city office, but will also result in the loss of key staff, and the taking down of a major exhibition on the Stolen Generations. It will severely impact on the accessibility of the States’ records.

The budget cuts on State Records NSW also threatens major new initiatives such as the Digital Archive, to ensure state government electronic records can be captured, archived and made accessible in the future.

Key impacts of the \$1.8 million cut and closure of city office

1. Accessibility

It is the role of the State’s archival institution to provide access to NSW citizens to the records that document their rights and entitlements. The closure of the city office will impair the organisation’s ability to provide equity of public access to archives.

There are significant public transport challenges getting to the Western Sydney Records Centre (WSRC) which is a critical issue. The infrequency and potential vulnerability of bus links between the WSRC and Penrith and St Mary’s railway stations are a key concern and a major hurdle for many researchers.

The fact that there is no taxi rank or public transport connection from Kingswood to the WSRC has caused and will continue to cause delays, confusion and complications for researchers.

The distance of Kingswood from the CBD will impact on the ability of researchers reliant on public transport to access the WSRC, particularly those travelling from the Central Coast, Newcastle, and Wollongong. An average trip from the city to the Western Sydney Records Centre takes at least 1.5 hours on public transport. Many researchers need first to travel into the city in order to access the train to St Mary's railway station, adding an extra half hour or more to the journey.

Feedback received by State Records staff and the History Council of NSW from its constituents indicates that many users find the trip difficult.

The public have a right to a reasonably accessible place (near public transport) to get help with researching the State's archives and to talk to an archivist.

The closure of the City Records office disadvantages core user groups, including:

- researchers;
- educational groups at secondary and tertiary level;
- PhD students;
- academics;
- professional historians;
- regional users; and
- the Aboriginal community.

All research is framed by the availability and accessibility of records. The poor public transport connections to the Western Sydney already act as a severe disincentive for tertiary students, who if unable to readily access records, are more likely to choose another topic area for their research. The poor access to New South Wales' historical records held in Western Sydney, combined with the closure of the City office, will lead to a decline in students researching and writing about New South Wales' history. These students are our future historians, teachers, politicians and business people. It is imperative that they are given every opportunity and encouragement to study and understand our state's history.

With the national curriculum at secondary level making history a compulsory subject, the historic documents, indexes and guides are an important historical resource for teachers and students. In addition to specialist advice, the Public Access archivists deliver a wide range of talks and archival information sessions in the city office. These information sessions are delivered to schools, university students, genealogists and a wide range of other interested groups. These



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information sessions are a key mechanism by which the public learns about State Records' collection and services. They are an important way in which new readers and new generations of readers discover State Records. While there is some demand for these services at the WSRC, the lack of accessibility by public transport limits use of the archives by many university and school groups.

Over the last decade, State Records has made significant efforts to reach out to the Aboriginal community and provide access to records associated with the Stolen Generations. This has been supported by an exhibition, *In Living Memory*, which is now on permanent display in the city office.

This marginalised group understandably have issues of mistrust and suspicion of government agencies. State Records has provided culturally appropriate support with a Koori archivist and a non-confronting environment to support indigenous researchers. They have worked hard with the community to make the State Records City Office a welcoming and safe environment.

Although there is a shift to digital recordkeeping and online galleries, there is still the need for a physical version of the *In Living Memory* exhibition. The Aborigines Welfare Board photographs include sensitive images about an important time in Aboriginal history. For this reason the photographs are not available online. The only way to see them is through the exhibition, where they are shown in a culturally sensitive way with support for visitors from Aboriginal staff. There is currently no exhibition facility at the Western Sydney Office.

Many indigenous researchers need to sit down with the archivist to talk through and access records in person. Online access, or access only at Western Sydney, will not be able to supplant this service.

2. Interconnectivity of cultural institutions in the city

The presence of State Records in a city location aligns it with the other key cultural and research institutions.

The city reading room has a unique place within Sydney's historical precinct consisting of the State Library of NSW, the Historic Houses Trust NSW properties, the Royal Australian Historical Society, Land and Property Information, the Society of Australian Genealogists, the Museum of Sydney and The Rocks area itself. The proximity of these complimentary collections provides very significant research benefits to a wide range of researchers. It also creates a vital interconnectivity for researchers and historians, strengthening each of those institutions in turn. The implications of the 'on-costs' of a city office closure would be very far reaching.

3. Digitisation for access and privatisation of records

State Records has made inroads into the provision of records digitally. There are indexes and databases on their website. While a gradual effort to digitise the State archives collection is underway, only a very small proportion of the overall holdings have been put online to date, and often researchers who have accessed these will require a discussion with a reference archivist if they are to progress their research. Indexes only get you so far.

An agreement with the commercial company Ancestry.com has seen approximately 400,000 items digitised. Many colonial records are now widely available through Ancestry.com, including colonial secretary's and immigration records.

Digitisation through Ancestry.com primarily services family historians and genealogists. It does not mean, however, that the indexes and searches are useable for all researchers. The type of indexing and access to records provided by Ancestry.com does not suit many students, academics, professional historians or other researchers, who require wider, more contextualised access to records rather than name based searches.

It should also be recognised that Ancestry.com is a subscription-based service. Libraries and individuals are required to pay for access. The digitisation efforts through Ancestry.com are essentially a privatisation of the records, pushing the costs of access onto public libraries, community history groups and the general public. These subscription costs are a barrier to public access to the states' records.

Access to the state's archival documents should be free. Digitisation with third party providers should not be seen as the answer to public accessibility issue.

Given the costs, time constraints and practical difficulties, it is unlikely that large proportions of the State Records collection will be available online, for free, for some time to come. Therefore digitisation cannot be relied upon as a strategy to resolve equity of access issues.

4. Records and good governance

In 2007 the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), in a list of government business activities at risk, identified 'recordkeeping' as the fifth highest risk activity in government. In the significant transition to digital business systems, cloud computing frameworks and web 2.0 technologies, recordkeeping would now be significantly higher up that list.

State Records relies on its regular series of training programs, briefing sessions and other education and communication programs to foster good recordkeeping across government. Face to face training is currently still a key (and essential) means by which good recordkeeping is enabled across government.



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The loss of the city office would adversely affect its ability to provide these programs. Training programs have regularly been offered at the WSRC but they have been significantly less successful than city office based operations – 70% of Kingswood-based GRR training courses are cancelled.

Decreasing the effectiveness and the reach of this training could have significant flow-on impacts for the collection of records vital to transparent and good governance, and essential for documenting the state's decisions and history.

The impact of budget cuts on the ongoing development of the Digital Archive for preserving the electronic records for the future is also to be questioned. There is no commitment beyond the initial 4 years of funding for this vital project to ensure the preservation of our state's records. How will this and any future budget cuts or dividend cuts affect the Digital Archive? There is no ongoing commitment, which is shameful.

Solutions

It is the role of the State's archival institution to provide access to NSW citizens to the records that document their rights and entitlements. The closure of the city office should be reassessed.

Required savings for State Records NSW should be re-calculated based on their Treasury allocation only, excluding income generated from GRR.

If the city office closure is to proceed, then the History Council of NSW suggests the following solutions:

1. A permanent home for the Government Record Keeping Archivists to be found in the city (not a temporary fix).
2. A shopfront for State Records needs to be maintained in the city to provide equity of access and specialist research advice.

The History Council recommends setting up a regional access point in the State Library of NSW, staffed by public access archivists. There are 42 regional access points around the state. An access point staffed by a public access archivist in the city would support public access and facilitate better access to all records at WSRC.

State Records has indicated that discussions with the State Library of NSW and Society of Australian Genealogists are underway for the transferral of microfilms following the closure of the city office. The State Librarian and Mitchell Librarian have indicated some interest in exploring this opportunity for an access point within the State Library of NSW supported by trained public access archivists.

The History Council believes the microfilms in the city office should be transferred to the State Library as part of the access point, with staff to support training for public and the government in the city.

3. More money for the digitisation of historical records to increase public access, preferably to be made available on State Records' website. A digitisation on demand program, like that provided by the National Archives, could be investigated.
4. The state government needs to give a commitment to the long-term funding of the State's Digital Archives to ensure current electronic records are preserved and made accessible for the future.

Prepared by Mark Dunn and Dr Lisa Murray on behalf of the History Council of NSW. Endorsed March 2012.