

HISTORY COUNCILS OF AUSTRALIA



4 May 2021

The Hon Senator Amanda Stoker
Assistant Minister to the Attorney-General
Parliament House
Canberra
E: senator.stoker@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Stoker,

I write to you as Chair of the History Councils of Australia about the recent release of the Functional Efficiency Review of the National Archives of Australia (NAA), known as the Tune Report.

The combined History Councils of Australia (NSW, Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia) welcome the recent release of the Tune Report. We strongly support many of the Report's recommendations, which – if acted upon – will facilitate the expeditious collection, maintenance and accessing of archival records.

We also note that *The Conversation* [article](#) (27/4) and *The Age* [editorial](#) (26/4) highlight the critical situation facing the NAA and its core mission: in its own words, to collect 'records of Australian government decisions and actions as evidence' in order to 'connect Australians with the nation's memory, their identity and history.'

Archives all over the world are confronting similar problems of managing rapidly increasing digital records while preserving vast print, oral and other records in different, often fragile formats. As we saw recently, a fire at the University of Cape Town library reminds us of the

potential disaster of losing an archive. They need financial support to function securely and durably and preserve our history. The NAA is no exception.

The NAA is a critical repository for historians and researchers. The interest in the Tune Report from History Council members, organisations and supporters has been significant – indeed the History Council of NSW has reported the largest social media engagement statistics¹ of any recent history issue in the state.

Australian Historians have seen what can only be described as an erosion of NAA services over recent years. Many now report inordinate delays in gaining access to records not yet examined for access clearance. Delays of more than five years before researchers hear the results of their requests for access are now commonplace. There is even a reluctance for academic supervisors to recommend doctoral research topics that might draw on archival records, for fear that it would not be possible to complete a thesis in a timely manner.

Having watched the erosion of staff numbers in recent years, we applaud the Tune Report's emphasis on the need to increase skilled staff as well as invest in technology. We also welcome Recommendation 7, calling for the implementation of a seven-year programme to digitise high priority (at risk) records. This initiative will greatly increase the collections that are available to interstate researchers.

The History Councils of Australia are concerned, however, about the implications for interstate researchers in establishing a Centralised Storage and Preservation Model (CPSM) (Recommendation 10). We appreciate the savings estimated by centralising record storage, which could be channelled into the NAA's resources for record collection and digitisation. But we are aware that, even with proper resources, it will take years to digitise significant portions of the collections. Many researchers in Victoria, South Australian and Western Australia in particular are not in a position to undertake expensive travel interstate to view paper records, nor to invest in large-scale copying of records, sight unseen. Consequently, the History Councils of Australia do not support the wholesale relocation of interstate files to a central repository.

We also query the implications of Recommendation 12, which refers to reviewing 'arrangements' for state and territory offices to 'ensure they remain fit-for-purpose'. The NAA's WA branch has been re-located in recent years to centrally-located, modern facilities – a process that involved considerable disruption for researchers, with files unavailable for long periods of time. We hope that the Perth office should not require reviewing to ascertain that it is 'fit-for-purpose' and that other branches be considered in a similar manner.

We note that Recommendation 15 calls for 'new public user fees'. While recognising the NAA's need to raise revenue, the History Councils of Australia request more clarity in Section 6.4.6 'User Fee opportunities'. For example, what would 'membership affiliation' entail? The recent members' programme, with an annual membership fee starting at \$20, appears to benefit only those with access to the National Office in Canberra. Given that interstate

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/HistoryCouncilNSW> - 890 people reached & 202 engagements from Historians (27 April - 4 May 2021)

researchers are generally more dependent upon archival copying services than local users (hence they are more likely to have to pay for records they cannot self-digitise), the History Councils of Australia are concerned that interstate scholars and researchers will be disadvantaged by the imposition of new fees.

In summary, the History Council of Australia supports recommendations that empower the NAA in decision-making, increase staff numbers and resources, invest in new technologies, enable the speedy acquisition and classification of collections, and make records more accessible to all researchers, including those who are based interstate. We are however very concerned that recommendations to centralise collections and increase user fees will discriminate against interstate researchers in particular. We are also very concerned that the NAA should not compromise on which records are kept, or on the quality of their maintenance.

Studying our past and telling our stories is critical to our sense of belonging, to recovering hidden and at times awkward histories, and to creating our shared future. Our National Archives are the core resource for these stories, as well as the indispensable repository of official records. We urge your attention to the points raised and to support the NAA mission to truly 'connect Australians with the nation's memory, their identity and history.'

Regards

Stephen Gapps

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[Cabrogal to Fairfield City](#) (NSW Premier's History Award 2011)

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I acknowledge Aboriginal nations and Torres Strait Islanders as the First Peoples of Australia. I thank them for their custodianship of these lands and waters and pay my respects to Elders past and present.