

## Submission: Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019

**30 October 2019**

National and State Libraries Australia ([NSLA](#)) welcomes the addition of social infrastructure to the Australian Infrastructure Audit for the first time this year.

NSLA is the peak body for Australia's national, state and territory libraries – nine in total. They are the National Library of Australia, State Library of New South Wales, State Library of Queensland, State Library Victoria, State Library of South Australia, State Library of Western Australia, Library & Archives NT, Libraries ACT and Libraries Tasmania. This collaboration dates back to the 1970s, and has enabled the sharing of expertise, resources and infrastructure.

Our libraries hold rich collections that serve the education, research, innovation and cultural needs of Australians every day. In 2018-2019, we welcomed a combined total of 9.5 million visitors. Online visits to our library catalogues and websites reached 58.7 million. Our collections, including every Australian publication available under legal deposit legislation, were valued at \$4.1 billion.

### Infrastructure for arts and culture

Under section 6.5, the audit discussion paper sets out a number of challenges and opportunities for arts and culture infrastructure. We are in broad agreement with these, and commend the authors of the report for clearly articulating some of the more pressing issues common to collecting institutions.

These issues include the continuing inadequacy of physical storage space; the high costs of collection preservation; the operational costs and diversity of skills required for maintenance and curation of digital infrastructure assets; the increasing need for cultural institutions to seek philanthropic and own-source revenue; and the barriers to online engagement in many communities despite the advantages of digital technology and digitised collection content more broadly.

Below are a number of further points for consideration by Infrastructure Australia in the development of national and state level priorities.

### Consumer expectations

Over the last two decades, libraries have revolutionised their approach to the accessibility and re-use of collections. All NSLA member libraries have undertaken extensive digitisation projects to enable online access to a vast range of collections including manuscripts, sound recordings and oral histories, newspapers, maps, photographs, art collections, works of fiction and non-fiction, and legal deposit publications including government reports.

These digitised materials, combined with contemporary born-digital publications and websites, make up an incredibly rich national collection for the benefit of all Australians. Wherever possible, digital publications held by NSLA libraries are made available through library catalogues and through the national discovery service, Trove. In 2019, the Australian Web Archive was added to the Trove discovery platform and already receives an estimated 90,000 views per month.

In 2019, NSLA libraries jointly launched the [National edeposit service](#) (NED), which collects all electronic publications produced in Australia. This unprecedented collaboration ensures the

collection and preservation of Australia's digital documentary heritage, while broadening access to Australian publications for library users across the country. In its first few months of operation, NED had received close to 7,000 deposits from publishers.

Beyond Trove and NED, NSLA libraries collaborate by sharing tools, guidelines and policies relating to digital infrastructure, and by contributing to joint subscriptions for eresources such as journals, newspapers, ebooks and reference publications.

Despite these significant achievements and the requisite investment by NSLA libraries, our primary challenge remains keeping pace with customer expectations within the constraints of budget allocations and limited human resources. Though our digitised materials make up only a fraction of our holdings, there is a common public perception that 'everything is available online', and an expectation that information can be retrieved instantly. In other words, that the pace and extent of our national, state and territory library services should be commensurate with that of Google.

## Research infrastructure

In addition to providing essential social infrastructure, Australia's national, state and territory libraries are sustaining research infrastructure for the humanities. Our libraries have rich traditions of supporting scholarship, and in recent years this has extended to providing the primary infrastructure used by historians and other scholars to digitally interrogate Australia's documentary heritage. This is most evident through [Trove](#), which has underpinned hundreds of PhDs and scholarly publications, including the 2019 winner of the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Australian History.

However, as NSLA libraries are outside the tertiary education centre, they have not been able to access funding through the Research Infrastructure Roadmap to sustain these services, or to support new and computationally-intensive humanities and social sciences research. This means that a crucial element of cultural infrastructure remains at risk.

## Budget constraints

Scoping, building, maintaining and enhancing the digital infrastructure that we need to make our collections both appealing and accessible online is expensive. Much of the infrastructure required to ensure a satisfactory user experience – such as cross-institutional metadata standards, guidelines to ensure consistency in the presentation of collection materials, or coding protocols that will allow systems to be interoperable – is complex, time-consuming and unattractive to funding bodies.

Most NSLA libraries have been experiencing a decline or freeze in government funding for some years. A recent report from independent think tank 'A New Approach' – [The Big Picture: Public Expenditure on Artistic, Cultural and Creative Activity in Australia](#) (2019) – confirms that federal expenditure per capita on cultural activity has dropped significantly in the last decade, and that the majority of funding goes to recurrent costs rather than capital expenditure. This decline coincides with an increase in visitor numbers and in service expectations.

For the most part, libraries are reliant upon in-house improvisation and have had to find the funds to build, maintain and improve major digital infrastructure assets within recurrent budgets. In some cases, philanthropic donations or government grants have funded valuable digitisation work, but this tends to be allocated through irregular capital funding, and leaves libraries to cover associated longer-term costs and overheads within shrinking budgets. Directors and CEOs of our libraries spend a large proportion of their time cultivating philanthropic contributions and liaising with donors.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and collections

The audit report discusses the social and economic empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through arts and culture infrastructure – emphasising art, performance and tourism. It also notes that digitisation of collections has a role to play in keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and customs alive. We can and should do much more than this, and libraries have an important role to play here.

In 2019, the National Library of Australia worked with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) to integrate language codes from its Austlang thesaurus into collection item records. NSLA libraries cooperated in a ‘code-a-thon’ during NAIDOC Week, resulting in the enhancement of over 8,000 library records with 465 unique language codes. This means those items can much more readily be found by searching for language names rather than the names of primarily Western authors, missionaries, anthropologists or academics. By successfully lobbying the Library of Congress, AIATSIS and the NLA have ensured that the codes can be applied in a standardised way by libraries all over the world.

NSLA libraries hold a large number of collections containing a wide range of material pertaining to Indigenous communities. Family portraits, sound recordings, diaries and artefacts, for example, can help trace family histories or piece together lost identities. Libraries must continue to work to ensure that this content is surfaced and shared with communities by building long-term, trusting relationships. Community members must have the autonomy to set conditions of access, correct or add to descriptions, and make decisions about how and where materials should be stored.

A number of NSLA libraries have adopted digital platforms specifically designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled collections, such as Ara Irititja and Mukurtu. To be effective, these platforms must be continually adapted and updated, and communities must have access to the hardware and training necessary to use them effectively.

In 2018, NSLA launched the Culturally Safe Libraries Program which begins with cultural competency training for over 2,000 staff by 2021. Collections staff will receive additional, Indigenous-led training in access and description. Without a radical shift in the cultural competency of all staff, we cannot hope to improve retention of Indigenous staff or engagement with Indigenous communities.

These aspirations are shared by other GLAM sector institutions – and we note the acknowledgement of the GLAM Peak committee in the audit report. In October 2019 the Director-General of the National Archives of Australia, David Fricker, auspiced the *Adelaide Declaration* signed by representatives from collecting institutions and cultural organisations around the world, including NSLA. The statement includes a series of commitments for collecting institutions under themes of property and ownership, recognition and identity, research and access, and self-determination.

## Volunteers

All NSLA libraries work with a large number of volunteers who conduct library tours, assist library visitors, or carry out collection-based tasks. Trove volunteers number over a thousand, and offer their time daily in correcting machine-generated transcripts of older materials. Some of these volunteers assisted with the Austlang code-a-thon referenced above.

The role of volunteers in arts and cultural infrastructure receives little mention in the audit report, but is essential in most arts and cultural organisations. The benefits of volunteer programs go two ways, generating value for institutions through time and human resources, and offering social connection and wellbeing for volunteers in return.

NSLA libraries look forward to contributing to future plans for national and state level infrastructure that recognise the vital contribution of arts and cultural infrastructure to the health of our society.

Dr Marie-Louise Ayres  
Director-General, National Library of Australia  
Acting Chair, National and State Libraries Australia  
[www.nsla.org.au](http://www.nsla.org.au)  
[nsla@slv.vic.gov.au](mailto:nsla@slv.vic.gov.au)