

## **Position Statement on National Archives of Australia threatened Closures Issued 4 March 2010**

The Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) opposes the closure of the National Archives of Australia's (NAA) offices and physical presence in Darwin, Hobart and Adelaide. The projected net savings to be achieved through the closure or relocation of NAA offices and collections are trivial compared to the long term practical and symbolic damage to the evidence and memory of Australian society and government administration.

The closure or relocation of offices will diminish NAA's role in facilitating open and accountable Government. It will also diminish the opportunity for citizens in all states and territories to understand past experiences and connect these experiences to the present and future directions of Australia.

### **1. NAA has an ongoing responsibility to record creators as well as record users**

The NAA has a responsibility beyond the records held currently in its collections. NAA's professional archivists need to work directly with records creators in each of the states and territories so the essential evidence of government actions and decisions is not lost as technological and organisational environments change. The permanent presence of professional archivists in all states and territories allows Commonwealth responsibilities and services to be closely aligned to local needs and priorities.

### **2. Digitisation is not the answer for all**

Digitisation is beneficial to many users with particular needs, but it is an expensive endeavour that does not offer a suitable substitute for research access to original records in their context. It is delusional, particularly given current pressures to reduce costs, to assume that within the timeframe of the proposed closures or relocations of NAA's collections it is possible to digitise the entire collection and ensure all individual records are adequately described for universal retrieval while also ensuring all personal and sensitive information is appropriately protected. In practice, NAA's digitisation program is necessarily selective and primarily satisfies only the needs of some segments of the research community. Digitisation programs require everyone to have equal access to the internet and other technologies.

It can, therefore, introduce new inequities if physical access to professional archival services is not available in all states and territories.

### **3. Professional archivists must be appointed to deliver archival services**

Government archives need to make the investment in employing professional archivists who are qualified and skilled in providing entry points into the billions of government records held across the country.

Archivists provide contextualised pathways enabling any researchers to meaningfully interpret and reuse records in an informed manner. Additionally archivists link records of the past with the records of current Government activities. Archivists, therefore, play a critical role in facilitating Government transparency and accountability. Unless the Commonwealth Government engages professionally qualified and experienced archivists in all states and territories, then equity of access to complete meaningful and trustworthy records within a democracy will not be achieved.

Equity of access is also dependent upon the presence of professional reference archivists in the regional offices to assist the public with their unique knowledge, their awareness of other records and to help individuals navigate records collections which may hold significant personal resonances, particularly in the case of indigenous communities.

### **4. The true costs and implications of co-location for others must be identified and fully considered in consultation with stakeholders**

The ASA supports co-location models provided they are fully explored with all possible repercussions understood and considered within a framework of genuine consultation with all stakeholders, including the ASA. The ASA is particularly concerned that co-location models may offer a local service for current research priorities, but not necessarily for records creators or other research needs or interests. Additionally co-location that focuses only on records currently held in the custody of regional offices may mean that records series and collections will be fragmented across Australia increasing the cost and complexity of access, management and control of records. It is the ASA's view that co-location projects planned with like-minded research institutions should be mutually beneficial, ensure professional archival standards and practices are in place without any additional stress on other under-resourced segments of the cultural and collecting sector.

**Acknowledgments:**

The ASA Council would like to acknowledge all the ASA members who have participated in this robust discussion and thank you for your valuable contributions in the formulation, drafting and finalisation of this position statement.

**Contacts:**

Jackie Bettington, President, Australian Society of Archivists Inc.

Phone: 0432 150 446

Email: [president@archivists.org.au](mailto:president@archivists.org.au)

Pat Jackson, Vice President, Australian Society of Archivists Inc.

Phone: 0429 099 1455

Email: [vicepresident@archivists.org.au](mailto:vicepresident@archivists.org.au)