

6 June 2019

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to make a submission to the Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives of Australia.

I worked for the National Archives from 1984 to 2010, mostly on project work to do with records policy and standards, descriptive and discovery metadata, and for the last stage of my career at the National Archives (NAA), as a digital preservation specialist and project leader. I look back with very positive feelings about my time in the organisation. I had the opportunity to take on a number of very interesting and challenging tasks and feel that I had been able to make valuable contributions to archival practice in Australia.

I have observed with some dismay, since I left the organisation, the serious reductions in resourcing and status imposed on the NAA by successive Governments over the last 9-10 years. What was once a world recognised and leading archival institution has become what can only be called 'second rate', due to resourcing constraints that imperil the legislative mandate of the organisation. These cuts, and the so-called 'efficiency dividend', threaten the ability of NAA to continue to work towards collecting, keeping and making accessible to all citizens the archival collections and heritage of Australia. They make it difficult for the organisation to understand and monitor developments in recordkeeping in government agencies, and lessen NAA's ability to develop, test and promulgate recordkeeping policies and practices that ensure efficiency in the creation, use and disposal of records in government agencies. Too much focus on public activities, exhibitions and displays for example, have relegated the very important recordkeeping functions of the NAA to a secondary and underfunded role in the organisation. Without efficient and practical recordkeeping practices in government agencies now, future generations of Australians will not be able to call on and access their administrative, historical and cultural heritage.

NAA has a vital role to play in our democratic and cultural infrastructure, and must be funded well enough to ensure that the organisation can support an accountable, open and transparent democracy, records documenting Australia's history and culture are collected and kept for current and future generations, and records are made as accessible as possible for all Australians. Finally, NAA must be able to ensure that the memory of the Australian government is managed and preserved for future generations.

An increase in funding for NAA is necessary to allow it to hire appropriately skilled staff, and to meet the huge demand for digitisation and collection of born-digital content in particular. At the same time, physical collections needed to remain accessible to everyone, and digital collection and access should not be at the expense of the parts of the NAA collection in other formats. To meet these aims NAA's funding needs to be raised and guaranteed, and the necessity for the organisation to meet the unrealistic efficiency dividends be dropped.

NAA should be kept as an independent statutory body in order to make sure it becomes more accountable and transparent; has greater control over its policies and strategic direction; has the impartiality necessary to perform its regulatory functions; and is able to develop and maintain relationships with various interest groups, and repair its international reputation that is seen to have been damaged in the last decade.

The National Archives has been a trusted and highly praised national institution and all governments need to recognise and encourage the contribution NAA makes to the democratic and cultural well-being of the nation. NAA can again have the high-standing it once enjoyed national and globally if the government and the organisation work together to ensure the legislative mandate of the organisation is accepted and strengthened.

The Australian public has a democratic right to know that significant administrative, historical and cultural records of Australia, whatever their format, are kept, maintained and made available to them and future generations. The Australian public want to be confident that NAA has appropriately curated and prioritised the timely collection and preservation of government digital content, government record-keeping and items of cultural or historical significance. The public need to be assured that NAA receives adequate funding to guarantee that the democratic and cultural heritage of Australia is being preserved and looked after.

I encourage the government to make more resources, both budgetary and human, available to the NAA to help it continue to make its important contribution to Australia's democratic and cultural heritage.

Yours sincerely

Dr Andrew Wilson