

Submission by Endangered Heritage Pty Ltd

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The gap in Closing the Gap: cultural infrastructure

The National Agreement acknowledges that strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are fundamental to improved life outcomes. Yet Australia does not have a coherent national cultural infrastructure system capable of preserving, connecting and making appropriate use of the cultural assets distributed across communities, Country and institutions.

This is a significant omission.

Australia has community-held knowledge and languages, archaeological sites and collections, keeping places, community-controlled organisations, regional museums and galleries, libraries and archives, digital cultural resources, state collections and more than one million items held by AIATSIS.

What is missing is the use of cultural infrastructure connecting them.

The consequences extend beyond heritage. Cultural infrastructure supports identity and belonging, intergenerational knowledge transmission, relationships between Nations, truth-telling and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It can also distribute cultural tourism, employment and economic activity into the communities and regions from which nationally significant cultural knowledge originates.

The Productivity Commission's 2026 data demonstrates the broader challenge. Of 19 Closing the Gap targets, only one has been met and three are on track; five are improving but not on track and four are worsening. Progress cannot yet be assessed for four targets, including Indigenous languages and digital inclusion. The Commission itself reports that significant data gaps remain despite Australia being past the halfway point towards most target deadlines.

This submission proposes that cultural infrastructure is itself one of the gaps that has not been adequately measured. Without it we can not hope to improve the Gap in every other measure.

1. Cultural assets without cultural infrastructure

The cultural assets include language and oral knowledge held by communities; archaeological evidence; objects held in keeping places and community collections; photographs, film and records; material in regional museums, galleries, libraries and archives; digital collections; and the major holdings of state and national institutions.

The capability to preserve and use these assets varies substantially. Some communities have developed sophisticated digital resources recording language, oral history and cultural knowledge. Others may hold equally significant knowledge but lack recording equipment, digitisation capability, digital preservation systems or technical support. The difference is not necessarily cultural knowledge. It is the capacity to capture, preserve, control and transmit it.

Value is not inherent, value is maintained.

This is particularly urgent where knowledge is held by Elders. An object or document awaiting digitisation may remain available later. Unrecorded oral knowledge may not.

The 2026 Closing the Gap data identifies 177 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages currently spoken or used, but progress against the language target cannot yet be assessed. Digital inclusion is likewise one of the four targets for which progress cannot currently be assessed.

Physical and digital cultural infrastructure should therefore be considered together.

2. Archaeological assessment is generating records without equivalent repository infrastructure

Australia has extensive regulatory processes for identifying, assessing and documenting Aboriginal archaeological heritage in advance of development. What has not been established at equivalent scale is a geographically distributed, properly resourced system of on-Country or regional repositories capable of preserving the physical and digital evidence generated through those processes.

NSW illustrates the scale. The Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System currently contains more than 126,000 records relating to Aboriginal sites and other heritage information. It is used by developers, consultants, government agencies and landholders in planning, development applications and Aboriginal heritage assessment.

AHIMS is an information system. It is not a network of physical repositories, conservation facilities or community cultural centres. Archaeological compliance can generate site records, reports, photographs, spatial information, artefact catalogues and datasets while the development itself subsequently alters or destroys the physical context from which that information was derived.

The Commonwealth's recent Indigenous heritage work identifies the other side of this problem. First Nations participants reported different preferences for artefact storage, including retaining material on Country, while also identifying inadequate funding for appropriate storage. The same consultation reported concerns about how cultural information is stored and accessed, with some communities maintaining their own registers rather than placing information on government systems.

The structural problem is therefore larger than archaeological procedure. Australia has developed infrastructure for identifying and documenting archaeological heritage affected by development without developing equivalent infrastructure for retaining and using the resulting cultural evidence. Material can consequently become fragmented between physical storage, consultant reports, databases and administrative records rather than retained as an integrated cultural resource available to the communities to which it relates.

This risks creating a form of historical clearing house: the development process records cultural evidence sufficiently to proceed, but the country does not provide equivalent infrastructure to

preserve that evidence physically and digitally as an accessible cultural asset and little obligation exists to maintain found material and there is no funding for policing of that responsibility.

A cultural infrastructure strategy should therefore consider what happens after archaeological compliance is completed: where collections and records reside, who maintains them, whether they remain viable and discoverable, and whether communities can reconnect related material and knowledge over time.

3. The infrastructure already exists — but it is under-resourced

Australia does not need to construct a parallel national network to address this gap. Much of the physical network already exists in regional and rural Australia through museums, galleries, libraries, archives, historical societies and other collecting organisations. Alongside them are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, keeping places, cultural centres and community collections.

The opportunity is to fund and connect both simultaneously. Regional GLAM organisations already have buildings, collections, local audiences, volunteers, community relationships and geographic reach. What many lack is sufficient professional capability in conservation, collections management, digitisation, interpretation, cultural protocols and sustained Indigenous engagement. Community-controlled organisations and keeping places provide something different and equally necessary: cultural authority, community ownership, appropriate access and the ability to determine how knowledge and material should be retained, interpreted, restricted or shared.

Investment should build the capacity for these organisations to work together: strengthening Indigenous-controlled cultural infrastructure while increasing the capability of existing regional GLAM institutions to preserve, represent and provide appropriate access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories within the mainstream account of their regions.

This is important because separate infrastructure alone will not transform mainstream representation but likely make it harder to fund.

If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories are increasingly well represented within Indigenous-specific institutions while the local museum, historical society, library or gallery continues to tell a predominantly colonial history, the wider community can remain largely untouched by that investment. This is not advancing our cultural integration, tolerance appreciation and offers little to tourists both internal and external.

Priority Reform Three requires transformation of mainstream institutions. Existing regional cultural infrastructure provides a practical mechanism through which that transformation can occur. The objective should therefore be community authority combined with shared cultural infrastructure and visibility. Grant funding to create collaborative interpretation and a more sophisticated national narrative.

4. Archaeology exposes the missing link

The weakness of the current system is particularly apparent in archaeology. Australia has extensive processes for locating, assessing and documenting Aboriginal archaeological heritage where development is proposed. NSW alone holds more than 126,000 Aboriginal site and heritage records within AHIMS.

Yet there is no equivalent, adequately funded network of regional and on-Country repositories capable of receiving, conserving, documenting and making appropriate continuing use of the physical and digital material generated through this process.

This does not necessarily require construction of new repositories everywhere.

Existing regional museums, archives and other collecting institutions could form part of the solution where communities determine this is appropriate and where those institutions are properly resourced to meet conservation, storage, governance and cultural requirements. Keeping places and community-controlled repositories should be strengthened simultaneously where community custody is preferred.

This would turn existing infrastructure into useful cultural infrastructure rather than create another disconnected system. At present, archaeological compliance can produce artefacts, reports, photographs, spatial data, catalogues and digital datasets while the site itself is subsequently altered or destroyed. Documentation can satisfy the regulatory process without creating an enduring, accessible cultural resource.

The result risks becoming a form of historical clearing: cultural evidence is identified sufficiently for development to proceed, while the infrastructure required to preserve and reconnect that evidence with Country, community and the wider historical record remains inadequate. 5Regional GLAM institutions could help close this gap, but only if repository responsibility is accompanied by funding, professional conservation capability, digital infrastructure and appropriate Indigenous governance. Unfunded transfer of archaeological collections to already under-resourced regional museums would merely relocate the problem.

5. Ngurra can connect the network rather than duplicate it

The Commonwealth's \$316.5 million investment in Ngurra creates an opportunity to connect this existing national network.

AIATSIS already holds more than one million items relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories. Ngurra will substantially increase national capability. The question is how that investment reaches beyond Canberra. Rather than creating a parallel network, Ngurra should operate as a national hub connected to existing regional GLAM institutions, community-controlled organisations, keeping places and digital cultural resources. That creates movement in both directions and also makes the future proofing of space and funding for Ngurra more efficient.

Value is not inherent, value is maintained.

Communities could reconnect with appropriate material held nationally. Regional institutions could access national expertise and collections. Knowledge held locally could improve the documentation and interpretation of national collections. Archaeological material and associated records could be connected with related collections and community knowledge. Digital infrastructure could provide access where physical movement is inappropriate.

The same network could support regional exhibitions, education, research and, where communities choose, cultural tourism. The Commonwealth's investment is physically concentrated in Canberra, while the cultures represented by Ngurra originate across Australia. Connecting Ngurra to existing regional infrastructure provides a mechanism through which some of the cultural, educational, tourism and employment benefits of national investment can extend into those regions. This would strengthen rather than compete with Ngurra preventing a boom and bust funding cycle of funded project without economic investment for growth return and capacity building culturally. This mirrors the issue with the closing the GAP matrix fundamentally.

The objective is not another cultural network. It is to make Australia's existing cultural network function nationally to contribute Nationally to closing the gap.

6. Fund from both sides of the relationship

The infrastructure investment must therefore occur simultaneously. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations require resources to maintain cultural authority, preserve knowledge, develop digital capability and determine how material is accessed and represented.

Regional and rural GLAM organisations require professional capacity, conservation and storage infrastructure, digitisation, interpretation capability and resources to establish sustained relationships with those communities.

Funding only the mainstream institution risks repeating extractive models in which Indigenous communities provide knowledge without equivalent authority or resources or support.

Funding only separate Indigenous cultural infrastructure risks leaving the mainstream historical narrative unchanged, which has deeply concerning, extremist political usage emerging.

This approach also makes better use of existing public and community assets. Australia has already invested over generations in museums, libraries, galleries, archives and collections distributed throughout regional Australia. Many are underutilised because their professional and financial capacity has declined or failed to keep pace with contemporary expectations.

Investment in their capability can therefore achieve two outcomes simultaneously: strengthening regional cultural infrastructure generally while increasing the capacity of those institutions to participate meaningfully in Closing the Gap.

Strengthen Indigenous cultural authority; strengthen existing regional cultural infrastructure; and fund the connection between them.

Recommendation

Endangered Heritage recommends that the Productivity Commission examine the absence of a coherent national cultural infrastructure framework as a structural gap in Closing the Gap.

The Commission should consider how existing regional and rural museums, galleries, libraries, archives and other collecting institutions can be strengthened **alongside** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, keeping places and cultural centres, rather than creating parallel infrastructure.

The Review should examine the physical, professional and digital capability required to connect these institutions with archaeological collections and records, community-held knowledge, state and national collections, AIATSIS and Ngurra.

This should include the infrastructure required for conservation, repositories, digitisation, knowledge exchange, appropriate loans, community access and mainstream representation, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities retaining authority over their cultural knowledge and determining appropriate access and use.

This approach would make use of an existing geographically distributed national asset while directing investment into regional and rural communities. The Commonwealth is already investing substantially in national Indigenous cultural infrastructure. The opportunity now is to ensure that national investment does not terminate at the doors of a Canberra institution. There is an opportunity for the return to be improved and longer stay tourism, greater improvement in other Gap measures with pride, well-being and purpose. It fosters a process of reducing racism and increasing reconciliation.

Fund Indigenous cultural capability. Fund regional GLAM capability. Fund the connection between them.

That would turn existing institutions, collections and knowledge into a genuinely national cultural infrastructure capable of contributing to identity, belonging, knowledge transmission, truth-telling, regional economic activity and the objectives of Closing the Gap.