



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL (INC)

Select Committee on COVID-19
Department of the Senate
via: Committee Secretary covid.sen@aph.gov.au

28 May 2020

To whom it may concern,

Re: AICCM Submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

This is a submission by the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 in response to the Committee's Terms of Reference (b) 'any related matters'. It outlines the measures the AICCM took to respond to the pandemic and to contribute to the broader Arts sector response.

About the AICCM

The AICCM is a not-for-profit organisation concerned with the conservation, preservation, research of, and access to Australia's tangible and intangible cultural, historical and scientific heritage. Since 1973, the AICCM has actively worked to promote the long-term care of Australia's heritage in recognition of the role that it plays in developing and enhancing our national, community and familial identities.

The AICCM is committed to preserving Australia's heritage as a resource for present and future generations. We recognise the knowledge, skills and stories that our heritage embodies, and its role in creating a vibrant, rich and resilient society. We research and care for objects, artworks, documents and digital media of cultural, social, scientific and personal significance from the past and present and acknowledge these as agents of memory, inspiration, information, evidence and discovery through which personal and collective stories are told through time.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the AICCM led the sector in advice on caring for collections and engaged with members to assess the initial financial impacts.

COVID-19 Resource: Practice Guide for managers of heritage collections

In the final week of March 2020, AICCM member Margaret Birtley AM led a small team in preparing 'Closed by COVID-19? A Practice Guide for managers of heritage collections that are closed at short notice because of an epidemic or pandemic'. Version 1.1 was endorsed by AICCM and [Blue Shield Australia](#) and published simultaneously on

P.O BOX 239 MOONAH TAS 7009



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL (INC)

the websites of both organisations on 27 March 2020. At that time, no similar resource could be found, worldwide.

Our Practice Guide was quickly included as a resource in training courses and referenced by international and Australian authorities including the prestigious International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome (see: <https://www.iccrom.org/preparing-closure-heritage-sites-and-institutions>).

During April, the text was translated into Dutch and German by specialists in Belgium and Germany, and published online for their members and networks. As additional information emerged about COVID-19 and management of collections during a pandemic, Ms Birtley coordinated a worldwide consultation process with a range of specialists (including three AICCM members who volunteered their assistance and technical expertise). This process resulted in Version 1.2 of the Practice Guide being published online by AICCM and [Blue Shield Australia](https://aicc.org.au/disaster/disaster-response) on 29 April 2020 (see: <https://aicc.org.au/disaster/disaster-response>). The Dutch and German experts have subsequently updated their translations.

Feedback on the publication from collection managers has been positive, especially from those in small and medium-sized organisations that lack an in-house conservator. A typical respondent is the sole professional staff member for a community historical society who writes: ‘I used the guide to develop a policy for our collections under a Lockdown regime. I am now planning to use the entire document in a new policy for similar situations in the future. The guide is a huge help, thankyou. These sorts of professional resources, prepared by recognised leaders in the field, provide invaluable support to museum workers who need to explain the context of their work.’ Other respondents have praised the publication as ‘timely’, ‘essential’, and ‘valuable’.¹

The impact of the Practice Guide can be inferred from data gathered by AICCM about responses via the website and social media. Within the first week, the tweet sharing the Practice Guide had almost 6200 impressions (a typical AICCM tweet receives 200 - 300) and the Facebook post had a reach of over 1500. The webpage that hosts the guide received 1,789 pageviews in the week it was posted.

The Practice Guide for dealing with unexpected closure was widely shared and accessed through our social media channels and was included in the Museum Study organisation’s

¹ Birtley, M, Heidelberg Historical Society, personal communication, May 2020.



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL (INC)

online course ‘Cultural Institution Crisis Response’
(<http://www.museumstudy.com/courses/course-list/cultural-institution-crisis-response/>).

Webinar

On 1 May 2020, members of AICCM contributed to ‘Caring for Collections during Closure’, a webinar organised by the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA), facilitated by its Victorian Branch, and endorsed by AICCM. The panellists, some of whom are Professional Members of AICCM, included four members of staff from the University of Melbourne’s Grimwade Conservation Services (Penny Tripp, Noni Zachri, Evan Tindal and Cushla Hill) and Margaret Birtley AM.

Presentations focussed on how to care for collections during times of limited access and also looked ahead to issues relating to returning to work, preparing for reopening and the ongoing ramifications of COVID-19 on collection care. A special focus of the webinar was AICCM’s publication, ‘Closed by COVID-19? A Practice Guide for managers of heritage collections that are closed at short notice because of an epidemic or pandemic’.

The webinar attracted 113 registered attendees from every state and territory of Australia, and also from New Zealand. It contributed to the MayDay 2020 program of Blue Shield Australia. The webinar was recorded and is available to view via:

<https://www.amaga.org.au/resources/caring-collections-during-closure-webinar-recording>

Information on website

In late April, AICCM Member Noni Zachri compiled a list of resources relating to the treatment of collection and non-collection areas. This list is an essential complement to the ‘Closed by COVID-19? Practice Guide’, is updated regularly and is available to the public on the AICCM website: <https://aiccm.org.au/disaster/disaster-response/>.

COVID-19 Member Survey

On 7 April 2020, AICCM surveyed members on the financial implications of COVID-19. Nearly sixty percent of surveyed members confirmed that they had suffered loss of income due to COVID-19. A third of this group’s loss of income related to reduced clientele, rather than a reduction in salary. Many AICCM members own small businesses or are sole traders.

At the time of the survey, the full financial impact may not yet have been apparent and this was evident in that over fifty percent of respondents were not yet sure if the government assistance offered was going to be sufficient.



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL (INC)

For instance, when asked, ‘do you require economic support at this time as a result of COVID-19?’ Nearly 50% said this was likely, 30% said they were not sure yet and 60% said that JobKeeper was not available to them. On the other hand, nearly 30% said that business incentives were helpful, for instance, the instant asset write-off.

In summary the government assistance was either not available or not sufficient to support members suffering from loss of income. The AICCM is planning to follow up this survey later in the year to gauge how members are faring.

Support for members

In response to the pandemic, the AICCM ensured to continue engaging its contractors - the Secretariat, bookkeeper and web editor at their standard hours. Furthermore, the AICCM National Executive undertook budget modelling for different economic scenarios over an 18 to 24 month period to assist with decision making and planning. Following this, it was decided to pause membership renewal for six months.

Other measures introduced to assist members and the community were to;

- Start hosting conservation related webinars for members and the public,
- Promote conservation businesses and suppliers through social media (particularly advertising available client services during shutdown),
- Provide free job postings to employers to 30 June 2020,
- Continue publication of the biannual peer reviewed *AICCM Bulletin*, and
- Continue bimonthly National Council teleconferences.

The major change to the AICCM activities due to the pandemic is that in-person events (symposia, conferences and workshops) and meetings have been paused. This has resulted in a nearly 30% loss of income to the not-for-profit organisation. It is still not clear as to when these will resume and in what format.

Recommendations

To assist conservators, allied professionals and the wider arts sector, the AICCM recommends that the Australian Government considers the following recommendations (outlined by the AICCM in previous enquiries):

- Permanently removing the Efficiency Dividend on Australia’s National Cultural Institutions,² and

² Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories inquiry into Canberra’s national institutions, Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material. Available online: <https://aiccm.org.au/about/aiccm-advocacy/submissions-and-statements/>



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL MATERIAL (INC)

- Implement digitisation strategies of cultural collections to ensure access when institutions are closed.³

In addition, the Australian Government could provide funding for the resources created during this pandemic (eg the Practice Guide and webinar), to ensure that they are maintained and distributed for future use and reach a wider audience.

Conclusion

AICCM has demonstrated its ability to respond efficiently and effectively to a rapidly-changing situation. Our staff have maintained services under unprecedented circumstances. Our members have volunteered their time and expertise for the benefit of the heritage collections community, worldwide. The AICCM has also worked closely with other organisations and endorses the submissions of:

- Australian Library and Information Association
- Australian Museums & Galleries Association
- National Association for the Visual Arts

As noted in the submission upload process, I consent to making this document publicly available. To fully consider submissions and recommendations made by the arts and culture sector, we believe that it is important to devote at least one full day of hearings to the arts and culture sector. Please contact me at president@aiccm.org.au if you would like to discuss further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'J O'Connell'.

Jennifer O'Connell
AICCM National President

³ Submission into the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and Submission to The Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications' Enquiry into recent trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events. Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM), Victorian Division. Available online:

<https://aiccm.org.au/about/aiccm-advocacy/submissions-and-statements/>

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