



The operating name of the Western Australian Genealogical Society Inc. (WAGS)

6/48 May Street, Bayswater Western Australia 6053 ■ + 61 8 9271 4311 ■ [secretary@fhwa.org.au](mailto:secretary@fhwa.org.au) ■ [www.fhwa.org.au](http://www.fhwa.org.au)

Mr David Tune AO PSM  
Independent Reviewer  
c/o Tune Review Secretariat  
National Archives of Australia  
Queen Victoria Terrace  
Parkes ACT 2600

FamilyHistoryWA (the operating name of the Western Australian Genealogical Society Inc.) is the largest family history group in Western Australia and has approximately 1700 members.

The Society has been in operation for forty years and its aims are to promote, encourage and foster the study, science and knowledge of genealogy. Our members are passionate about collecting and telling the stories of their ancestors and their experiences of life in Australia and the impact these experiences have on our sense of National Identity.

Our members regularly consult both state and federal government archival records when undertaking family history research and have expressed serious concerns about what appears to be ongoing substantial budgetary cuts to the National Archives.

In this submission we highlight what we see as two escalating problems that are very relevant to researchers in Western Australia

#### PRESERVATION

Western Australians were advised in December 2018 that the National Archives (Western Australia Office) had relocated to new premises in Perth's Cultural precinct in Northbridge. This announcement also advised that the archival records, which had previously been housed in the same building as the research room and administration offices, had been moved to a privately managed storage facility in an industrial area on the outskirts of Perth.

We believe storage to be one of the critical elements in ensuring the preservation of archival material and our members are of the view that the privatisation of storage here in Western Australia will, over time, put such records at risk. Privatisation ignores in-house expertise and unless contracts are written well and monitored closely, conditions over time may not be optimal and lead to the deterioration of material, ultimately requiring expensive remediation treatment or at worst, loss through mould damage or insect infestation, etc. There are numerous reports in the media about the failure of private sector to provide the same standard of service as previously offered by in house staff. This reduction in standards is inevitable when the primary focus of private contractors is profit at the expense of quality



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Member Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations and Federation of Family History Societies (UK)

control. Outsourcing will always look cheaper because the true cost across all elements and over time is never calculated. We are also concerned that when records are moved off site, archival staff no longer have unfettered access which was previously the case. It has been our experience that when records were easily accessible, helpful archivists would often physically search uncatalogued material to assist our members. This is no longer possible.

We recommend that this 'out of sight, out of mind' policy is rescinded and the storage of archival records in all states is returned to the control of Archives staff as soon as possible.

## ACCESS

The National Archives website states

*Our collection traces events and decisions that have shaped the nation and the lives of Australians. Visitors are welcome to explore our collection, online or in person, to learn more.*

Exploring the collection, online or in person is, in the opinion of our members, becoming increasingly difficult.

We, in Western Australia, live with the 'tyranny of distance' and have serious concerns about equitable access to material. Many collections are housed in Canberra, Sydney or Melbourne and the costs borne by Western Australians to access these records are considerable. To highlight this concern, we have been advised that the Western Australian WWII DVA files have recently been relocated to the Sydney Office and, as they are not fully listed on RecordSearch, cannot be requested for access examination or digitisation.

This was done without any consultation with organisations such as ours who have an ongoing interest in this material and is at best, discriminatory. There appears to be an historic and current perception that we here in Western Australia can be ignored - that is, of course, until elections are announced.

In addition, we are concerned about staff redundancies and the flow on effect of reduced service delivery. Detailed description of records should be a high priority for the NAA. The benefits of a detailed or enhanced series description written by skilled archival staff should improve access to the records as the file / item titles do not often reflect the true contents. We, in Western Australia are particularly disadvantaged by this lack of detailed description. Unlike our Eastern States counterparts, we cannot, without considerable expense, visit research rooms in other states to search through collections for material which might be useful in our research. In addition the cost of digitisation of records is very high, especially for our members who are largely in the over 60s demographic. When this cost is added the uncertainty as to whether a file is relevant, the decision is inevitably against purchase.

Increasingly, digitisation is seen as a solution to access. We have observed that this perception, coupled with reduced funding leads to collaborative projects with commercial organisations which may result in data ownership issues and the denial of access to records unless our members can afford the cost of a subscription. There have also been instances

where digital images have been unable to record faint pencil annotations, etc. which we know are often crucial to an understanding of a situation.

Digitisation and Internet access to records have their benefits but the intrinsic nature of archives requires the need for skilled reference staff to assist clients. This will not diminish - service standards must match client's needs. When an organisation reduces its skilled staff, a reduction in the ability of the organisation to achieve quality outcomes is inevitable.

Collectively, our members do not have the specialist knowledge required to make appropriate recommendations other than to state unequivocally that the importance of our Nation's memory as revealed through its archival records requires the Government to fund our State and National bodies to a level that ensures continuing excellence of practice. That means retaining skilled and committed personnel whose primary objects are preservation, access and service delivery. We are concerned that these cuts are leading to the dimming of our Nation's memory.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ian Simon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'I' and a distinct 'S'.

Ian Simon  
President  
Western Australian Genealogical Society Inc.

30 June 2019