

22 May 2026

Secretary

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 594,
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Secretary,

The Healing Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the review of **Revive** and development of a new **National Cultural Policy**. This submission draws on crucial discussions from a National Records Symposium held in 2025, and our recent report, *Are you waiting for us to die? The unfinished business of Bringing Them Home (Are you waiting for us to die?)*, which highlights the ongoing impacts of systemic failures to implement the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* report.¹

The Healing Foundation is the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that elevates the voices and lived experiences of Stolen Generations survivors, their families, and communities. Governed by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board and executive and guided in our work by a Stolen Generations and Youth Reference Groups, we lead engagement across governments, policy makers, and workforces to promote understanding and accountability in meeting survivor needs. We work closely with Stolen Generations organisations, and support initiatives to address the ongoing intergenerational trauma resulting from past government policies of forced removals.

As the 30th anniversary of *Bringing Them Home* approaches, there is still no nationally coordinated response to monitor the implementation of crucial recommendations. Access to collections is essential for individual, collective, and societal healing, but there is an **ongoing failure to implement nearly half of the *Bringing Them Home* recommendations relating to records, family tracing, and reunions**. Our 2025 report, *Are you waiting for us to die?*, found only six percent of all recommendations had been clearly implemented.² We continue to advocate for these recommendations to be actioned to support intergenerational healing for survivors and their families.³

As memory and collecting institutions, **archives, museums, libraries, and galleries** hold information that is critical for survivors. Collections, particularly those in archives and libraries, can hold personal, family, and community histories, along with stories, and vital connections to family, culture, and identity. These connections were disrupted or lost due to policies of forced removal.

Stolen Generations survivors must be recognised as a key audience and critical stakeholder of these institutions and the policies which govern them. The current review offers an opportunity to embed this alignment and strengthen responsive, survivor centred practice.

¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (1997). *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/?a=51037>

² The Healing Foundation. (2025). *Are you waiting for us to die? The unfinished business of Bringing Them Home*. https://healingfoundation.org.au/media/ak5niup3/bth_report_are-you-waiting-for-us-to-die-final-2025-1.pdf

³ Ibid. Recommendations 9 and 10.

The new National Cultural Policy provides a critical opportunity for the government to acknowledge their responsibility to meet the urgent needs of survivors, address long outstanding recommendations, and meet responsibilities under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (priority reforms 3 and 4). **Now is the time to act.** Stolen Generation survivors are ageing, and many are passing away before finding the information that tells the stories of their removal, their families, culture, and Country. This continues to exacerbate intergenerational trauma by creating lasting impacts for their families and descendants and undermines the broader collective responsibility for truth-telling, justice, reconciliation, and healing.⁴

This submission highlights key issues related to the Pillars and Principles of Revive by drawing on findings from the National Records Symposium and key priorities identified in *Are you waiting for us to die?*. It outlines key considerations for the new National Cultural Policy, with a specific focus on the urgent need for trauma-informed and prioritised access to collections.

We recognise the successes of the previous Revive policy and acknowledge the significant efforts made to implement the majority of actions. This achievement highlights the opportunities in this review to go even further by strengthening and embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and survivor needs, stories, engagement, and collaboration across the sector.

Addressing barriers is essential to ‘First Nations First’

Drawing on the outcomes of a National Records Symposium, the information below summarises current barriers and demonstrates why ensuring trauma-informed and survivor centred prioritised access to collections is essential to realising the commitment to ‘First Nations First’ and strengthening a new National Cultural Policy.

The overarching message Stolen Generations survivors have told us is that **‘without access [to records] we can’t heal’.**

- There is a lack of monitoring, accountability, and policy leadership in implementing the *Bringing Them Home* recommendations. Without this, administrative, legal, cultural, financial, and systemic barriers persist, and prevent survivors and their descendants from accessing their information and stories.⁵
- *Bringing Them Home* recommended minimum standards for survivors and descendants to access records.⁶ The Healing Foundation’s former Historical Records Taskforce took action to develop *Principles for Nationally Consistent Access to Stolen Generations Records* which were endorsed by archivists and Information and Privacy Commissioners nationwide. While some collecting agencies have taken steps, there has been no coordinated response or commitment to address these gaps.⁷

⁴The Healing Foundation. 2025. “Without access, we can’t heal” Stolen Generations Records Symposium. <https://healingfoundation.org.au/media/2fahue4m/thf-records-symposium-final-report_mar26.pdf> p.4.

⁵ Ibid p.7

⁶ n1, Recommendation 25

⁷ The Healing Foundation. 2022. Principles for nationally consistent approaches to accessing Stolen Generations records <https://healingfoundation.org.au/media/t0abjpxb/principles-for-nationally-consistent-approaches-to-accessing-records_final.pdf>; Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities (CAARA). Policy 16 – Statement of Principle – Providing public access to records in Australian government archives. Adopted 2007.

- Current processes for seeking access to collections are fragmented, piecemeal, culturally unsafe, complex, time-consuming, and misaligned with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.⁸
- In the absence of nationally consistent prioritised access, access to government-controlled records varies across jurisdictions and agencies – including differences in wait times, application forms, fees, redactions, refusals, and outcomes. Where processes do work, they typically rely on gestures of goodwill and individual workers’ willingness to help rather than survivor-led policies and practices.⁹
- Application fees vary, with reports of some being prohibitively high – sometimes required before even confirming if an agency hold relevant records – further compounding financial burden and trauma.¹⁰
- Privacy and confidentiality laws mean that even when access to government-controlled collections is granted, they are often heavily redacted and provided without explanation, often causing additional stress and retraumatisation.¹¹
- The lack of standardised collection management practices for descriptions, indexing, and metadata directly impacts on survivors’ ability to identify and access records. Further, there is also no central information point or directory to guide survivors through navigating the complex and fragmented records repository systems.¹²
- There is no standard “Right of Reply” – the right to update, correct, critique, or enhance the recorded knowledge.
- **To align with Pillar 1 of the National Cultural Policy - First Nations art and culture are First Nations led - survivors must have prioritised trauma-informed access to collections grounded in consistent, survivor-centred policy and practice.**

Storytelling and accessibility

A core principle of Revive was that Australian **stories are seen and heard**, regardless of their platform. For Stolen Generations survivors, story reclamation, knowing, and telling are all dependent on the ability to access records. **For survivors’ stories to be seen and heard, they must first be accessible.**

- Storytelling is a key cultural practice and protective factor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and is directly connected to the wellbeing and healing of Stolen Generations survivors. It serves as a primary system for transmitting knowledge, maintaining cultural authority and protecting identity. For over 60,000 years, storytelling has maintained distinct cultures by recording histories, passing down knowledge, and ensuring cultural continuity across many generations.
- For survivors, access to records is intrinsically linked to the ability to restore and reconnect these storytelling practices. Records held within archives, libraries and other institutions often contain fragments of disrupted stories, personal histories, family connections, language and cultural

<<https://www.caara.org.au/policies/statement-of-principle-providing-public-access-to-records-in-australian-government-archives/>>.

⁸ Ibid p.6

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid p.9

¹² Ibid p.8

knowledge. Access to these records enables survivors and their descendants to reclaim, reconstruct and reassert their narratives, supporting both cultural continuity and individual and collective healing.

- Oral storytelling traditions encompass song, dance, and art and constitute an interconnected knowledge system that links the past, present, and future while reinforcing relationships to Country, kin and community. Where these systems have been disrupted through policies of forced removal, access to records becomes a critical pathway for restoring these connections. In this sense, equitable, trauma-informed access to records is not only an administrative or archival issue but a cultural and protective one.
- Given the nature of these records and the histories they contain, access must be trauma-informed, culturally safe, and survivor-centred. Engagement with records can surface experiences of loss, separation, and institutional harm. Without appropriate safeguards, access processes risk causing further distress and re-traumatisation. Trauma-informed access ensures that systems, policies, and practices prioritise emotional safety, cultural authority, and the agency of survivors in how their stories are accessed, interpreted, and shared.
- Storytelling is also an expression of sovereignty, asserting ownership and authority over culture, history, and knowledge systems. Ensuring that survivors can access, interpret and contribute to records is fundamental to upholding this authority. It supports the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to control, maintain and share their narratives and cultural inheritance, consistent with principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and survivor-led practice¹³
- Collecting institutions hold vital information about personal and family histories. Without access to those collections, survivors are denied the ability to (re)claim identity and to know, hold, and tell their own stories.
- Truth-telling is a critical process for individual and collective and national healing.¹⁴ Confronting the full, often suppressed history of colonisation, dispossession, violence, injustices, and past policies of forced removals is essential to reconciliation. Without ownership of, and access to their personal histories, many survivors are excluded from participating in truth-telling processes.
- The recording of survivor stories is an urgent priority. It contributes to individual healing while deepening national understanding of Australia's recent past. Many survivors want to have their story recorded, either for themselves, their families, their communities, or the nation, to support recognition acknowledgement, and healing. Access to records about themselves and their families is critical to supporting survivors to enable this.
- The National Library of Australia has led important work to collect stories and oral testimonies of survivors through the *Bringing Them Home* oral history project, which was developed in response to a recommendation of the original report. This nationally significant collection demonstrates the value of survivor testimony, and there is a clear opportunity to embed survivor led story collection and governance into the new National Cultural Policy.

¹³ Dradso, T. 2018. *The importance of storytelling within Indigenous culture*. <<https://www.yarn.com.au/blogs/yarn-in-the-community/the-importance-of-storytelling-within-indigenous-culture>>.

¹⁴ Vines, E. 2022. *Voice, Treaty, Truth? The role of truth-telling in Australian, state and territory governments' reconciliation processes: a chronology from 2015*. Parliament of Australia.

<https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Chronologies/2022-23/VoiceTreatyTruth>.

- **The new National Cultural Policy must prioritise survivors' rights to access, ownership of, and authority over their histories. This is essential to enabling healing and truth-telling, and to address longstanding inequities that have denied these rights for far too long.**

From Sorry to Action: A plan to act on Bringing them home

The Healing Foundation will shortly release a new Action Plan that builds on the findings of *Are you waiting for us to die?* and the unfinished recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home* report. This Action Plan sets out practical, survivor-informed actions to address long-standing gaps in access to records, accountability, and coordinated national implementation.

It reflects what we know Stolen Generations survivors have consistently called for and provides a clear pathway for governments and institutions to deliver trauma-informed, consistent, and equitable access to records, alongside broader supports for healing, truth-telling, and reconnection.

The new Action Plan should be considered in the development of the new National Cultural Policy to ensure alignment with survivor priorities and existing evidence.

Incorporating the priorities and actions outline in the Action Plan will strengthen the government's ability to respond in a coordinated and accountable way to the unfinished business of *Bringing Them Home* and ensure that policy settings are informed by the voices, rights, and needs of Stolen Generations survivors.

Opportunity for a rights-based approach

Collecting institutions must be resourced to appropriately support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to access their stories. Policies, practices, and processes must understand and recognise the right of survivors to control data about them. Parallel to ensuring survivors have access to information to tell their stories is an invaluable opportunity to invest in support for them to do so at the individual, community, and national levels while meeting commitments under the National Agreement to Closing the Gap. To embrace this opportunity, the new National Cultural Policy should consider:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be the primary guardians of **Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)** – their traditional knowledges, cultural heritage, and creative expressions of the past, present, and future.¹⁵
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be empowered to manage the collection, ownership, and use of data that is about them, their Country, knowledge, and resources. **Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDSov)** and **Governance (IDGov)** build on the United Nations recognition of Indigenous Sovereignty and Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).¹⁶ **IDSov and IDGov cannot be seen as optional.**

¹⁵ National Library of Australia. 2024. *What is and what isn't Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)?* <<https://www.library.gov.au/first-australians/indigenous-cultural-and-intellectual-property/what-and-what-isnt-indigenous>>.

¹⁶ United Nations. 2007. 61/295. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf>.

- The **Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration** called on public archives across the world to commit to immediate action across five key areas which acknowledge Indigenous concerns in archives.¹⁷ We recommend that these are embedded in the new National Cultural Policy, strengthening First Nations First.
- **Australia has international obligations** under Article 10 of the *United Nations Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law* **to ensure survivors have the right to access information about the causes and conditions of their victimisation – including records of their forced removal.**¹⁸
- There is great opportunity within this review to not only ensure Australia is meeting its international obligations, the commitments made under various principles, and the commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to protect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to access, own, and control their records – but to elevate them further.
- **Pillar 2: Strong Cultural Infrastructure** must continue to be a primary focus of the new National Cultural Policy, supported by the principle that **cultural infrastructure must be restored, built, and maintained**, while embedding a rights-based approach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Stolen Generations survivors and descendants continue to experience the impacts of past and ongoing disconnection from culture, community, and identity, exacerbated by the failure to fully implement the recommendations of *Bringing Them Home*. Across more than 20 inquiries, survivors have told their stories and given evidence of the same issues and survivor-led solutions.

We acknowledge the progress of *Revive*, but there is more work to be done. Without full implementation of *Bringing Them Home*, it's not enough. The risk is not a lack of evidence or opportunity; it is a failure to act.

The Healing Foundation welcomes the opportunity to discuss our submission further. For additional information, please contact Sarah Davidson via phone 0492 329 558 or email Sarah.Davidson@healingfoundation.org.au.

Yours sincerely



Shannan Dodson
Chief Executive Officer
The Healing Foundation

¹⁷ International Council on Archives Expert Matters Indigenous Group. 2019. *Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration*. <<https://www.naa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Tandanya-Adelaide-Declaration.pdf>>.

¹⁸ United Nations. 2005. *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law*. Article 10. <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-principles-and-guidelines-right-remedy-and-reparation>>.

Attachments:

- [Executive Summary: 'Are you waiting for us to die?' The unfinished business of Bringing Them Home](#)
- ['Without access, we can't heal': Stolen Generations Records Symposium Report](#)
- [Principles for a nationally consistent approach to accessing Stolen Generations Records](#)