

January 2018

Response to the National Museum of Australia Draft Disability Action Plan 2018-22

Advocacy for Inclusion provides independent individual, self and systemic advocacy for people with disabilities.

Advocacy for Inclusion is a Disabled Peoples Organisation which means our board, members and staff are a majority of people with disabilities. We represent Canberra's most marginalised and isolated people with disabilities, those with cognitive disabilities and/or significant communication barriers.

We act with and on behalf of individuals in a supportive manner, or assist individuals to act on their own behalf, to obtain a fair and just outcome for the individual concerned. Advocacy for Inclusion works within a human rights framework and acknowledges the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, and is signed onto the *ACT Human Rights Act*.

Advocacy for Inclusion hopes this submission will result in more accessible and equitable protections for people with disabilities, and bring us closer to Article 9 the right to accessibility, and Article 30 the right to participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport, of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

improving life for people with disabilities

Foundations of access

The enactment of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* some twenty-five years ago has shifted the expectations of people with disabilities to enjoy equitable access to public institutions or sections of their premises which are enjoyed by other community members.¹ Commonwealth ratification of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2008 further afforded people with disabilities the confidence that they, like other community members, are endowed with the human right to participate in the cultural life of the nation by enjoying access to cultural activities, places of cultural services such as museums as well access to sites of national cultural importance.²

The International Council of Museum also emplaces the ethical obligation on its museum members to provide people with disabilities, in particular, access to its premises³ and by default programs and services. The *National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries 2016* also calls for Australian museums to consult access advocacy organizations to “contribute their knowledge, insights and expertise”⁴ in the space of museum planning.

The National Museum of Australia therefore has the opportunity to seek out the knowledge and expertise of disability advocacy organisations such as Advocacy for Inclusion to ensure its access plans accommodate the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities.

¹ Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cwth)

² *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2009, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, viewed 11 January 2018, <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>>

³ International Council of Museums 2017, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, p. 3, viewed 11 January 2018, <http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Codes/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>

⁴ National Standards Taskforce 2016, *The National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries, version 1.5', September 2015*, p. 40, viewed 10 January 2018, <http://www.magsq.com.au/dbase_upl/NSFAMG_v1.5_2016.pdf>

Museums as sites of inclusion

Museums, as sites of public memory, are political^{5 6} and the touchstones of inclusion – equity, equality, social, justice, human rights and inalienable freedoms⁷ - reflect the political principles of social activism⁸. The International Council of Museums (ICOM), of which the National Museum of Australia is a member via affiliation with ICOM Australia⁹, obligates social activism upon its member museums by declaring that museums act “in the *service of society and of its development*”¹⁰ (our emphasis). Modern museums are therefore sites of “cultural action”¹¹ which exist for “somebody rather than [being] about something”¹² where “people can experience the power to change”¹³. Edmund Barry Gaither speaks to the core purpose of the museum program:

⁵ Hooper-Greenhill, E 2002, 'Museums and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibilities, resistance', pp. 3-23, In R Sandell (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*, Routledge: London; New York

⁶ Nora, P 1989, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', pp. 7-24, *Representations*, no. 26,

⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2012, Consultations of the Director-General with Member States. *Social Inclusion, Social Transformations, Social Innovation: What role for UNESCO in 2014-2021?*, 23 November 2012

⁸ Stone, K 2002, *To Stand Beside: The Advocacy for Inclusion Training Manual – Empowering people who support, assist or represent people with intellectual disability*. Stone & Associates: Fyshwick (Australian Capital Territory)

⁹ International Council of Museums Australia, *Institutional Members*, viewed 9 January 2018, <<http://icom.org.au/site/membersinstitutions.php>>

¹⁰ International Council of Museums 2017, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, viewed 11 January 2018, <http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Codes/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>

¹¹ van Mensch, P 1992, 'Towards a methodology of museology, PhD thesis, pp. 6-7

¹² Weil, R 1999, 'From being about something to being for somebody: the ongoing transformation of the American museum', p. n.p., *Daedalus*, vol. 128, no. 3

¹³ Silverman, L 2010, *The Social Work of Museums*, Routledge: London; New York.

Museums have obligations as both educational and social institutions to participate in and contribute towards the restoration of wholeness in the communities of our country. They ought to increase understanding within and between cultural groups in the matrix of lives in which we exist.¹⁴

Discrete communities are formed through a practice that identifies who is *in* and who is *out*. In other words, “some communities are ours by choice...[and]... some are ours because of the ways that others see us”¹⁵. People with disabilities, as a heterogeneous *community* of people, are marginalised, stigmatised, and isolated from wider society - and public museums have a clear ethical responsibility to promote social inclusion through social activism.

A beacon for access

The buildings of the National Museum of Australia are adorned with the powerful and enduring political symbol of disability – the tactile writing system of Braille. Writ large upon the skin of the public institution, the National Museum of Australia makes a bold declaration to people with disabilities that its premises, programs and services are ready to accommodate aspirations rather than needs. That same community of people and their supporters therefore anticipate the museum to deliver on that capital of expectation by exceeding the minimum benchmarks set in building codes, national standards and international guidelines.

¹⁴ Heijnen, W 2010, 'The new professional: underdog or expert? New Museology in the 21st century', pp. 15-16, In P Assunção & J Primo (eds.), *Sociomuseology 3: To understand New Museology in the XXI century*,

¹⁵ Bessant, J & Watts, R 2007, *Sociology Australia, 3rd edn*, p. 4, Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, NSW

The National Museum of Australia has a golden opportunity to position itself as a beacon of accessibility public institutions Australia-wide as well as to public museums worldwide. Advocacy for Inclusion is encouraged that the pre-eminent social history of Australia is committed to eliminating barriers to access in all guises.

Recommendations

Physical access

Recommendation 1:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to reframe the concept of physical access as a regulatory compliance program that seeks to meet minimum benchmarks of Australian building codes, national standards and guidelines for accessibility. Instead, Advocacy for Inclusion encourages a human rights approach to physical access based on the principles of equity, dignity and mutual respect where the museum body collaborates with people with disabilities and their supporters.

Recommendation 2:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to consider and mitigate financial costs to people of disabilities - such as ownership of a smart phone - regarding user-centred technologies that promote wayfinding within premises.

Recommendation 3:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to maintain, in good working, its existing tactile maps of premises and to provide large print informational text relating to temporary and permanent exhibitions which should be located at both the museum's Information Desk, said exhibitions as well as online.

Exhibition access

Recommendation 1:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to mitigate attitudinal barriers against people with disabilities by promoting and prioritising accessibility as an equal to aesthetics at the research and design phase of exhibitions and any other public program or service.

Recommendation 2:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to embrace a multisensory ethic to exhibitions that engage people with disabilities rather than prioritise visual and tactile sensory modalities that serve to perpetuate an outdated Eurocentric hierarchy of sensory experience of sight first then touch, sound, smell and finally taste.

Recommendation 3:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to facilitate encounters with accessioned objects wherever possible followed by handling collections and replicas as a means for people with disabilities to engage with the cultural heritage of the nation.

Recommendation 4:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to position artefacts closer to the edges of display cabinets to increase their visibility, particular for people who experience low vision.

Public and education access

Recommendation 1:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to establish a Disability Reference Group to provide input in developing equitable public as well as educational programs. The aforementioned group should be comprised of disability advocacy organisations, disability peak bodies, disability service providers, community-based disability organisations as well as people with disabilities and their supporters.

Recommendation 2:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to expand their community outreach program by hosting public and education programs offsite at disability organisations and community centres in metropolitan and regional locations.

Recommendation 3:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to also host public and education programs on weekends as people with disabilities work, volunteer and study on weekdays.

Collections access

Recommendation 1:

Advocacy for Inclusions encourages the National Museum of Australia to consider a holistic sensorial approach regarding physical access to artefacts within collections to better engage people with disabilities.

Digital access

Recommendation 1:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to initiate a campaign that informs people with disabilities and their supporters as well as disability-focussed organisations about the accessibility and functionality of its online systems.

Stakeholder engagement

Recommendation 1:

Advocacy for Inclusion encourages the National Museum of Australia to engage with stakeholders by establishing a Disability Reference Group comprised of disability advocacy organisations, disability peak bodies, disability service providers, community-based disability organisations as well as people with disabilities and their supporters.

Conclusion

It is imperative that people with disabilities inalienable human right to equity is considered when determining plans which govern access to cultural programs and services at public premises. While the principle of equality focusses on everyone getting the same resources to reach a goal, equity instead:

involves ensuring that everyone has access to the resources, opportunities, power and responsibility they need to reach their full, healthy potential as well as making changes so that unfair differences may be understood and addressed.¹⁶

¹⁶ Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health & Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, *Define Equity*, viewed 10 January 2018, <<http://sgba-resource.ca/en/concepts/equity/define-equity/>>

Advocacy for Inclusion, as a Disabled Persons Organisation that stands behind, alongside and in front of people with disabilities, therefore welcomes the opportunity to offer this submission in the spirit of both equity and reciprocity. We look forward to developing a collaborative partnership with the National Museum of Australia beyond contributing to the institution's Disability Action Plan.