



**SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON COVID-19  
SUBMISSION BY THE FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETIES**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19.

FAHS is the umbrella body for Australia's community history and heritage associations which number over 1000 and have approximately 100,000 members. Our volunteer members are deeply involved in working towards the best preservation and presentation of Australian history, heritage and culture. They undertake a very large volume of historical research and collection, and the transmission of our national stories in numerous forms of publication, exhibition and speaking. They are increasingly involved in the protection of our site heritage.

The Terms of Reference of the Select Committee are:

- a. the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- b. any related matters.

In this submission the Federation will briefly address the former, and focus more on the latter.

In general terms the FAHS agrees that the responses of the Australian (and State and Territory) government have been appropriate and measured, with the impact/s on communities varying somewhat according to place.

Like the broader economy and social/cultural communities, the lockdown and social distancing have impacted heavily on heritage organisations, most of which exist on limited budgets and the ability of volunteers to carry out their work.

FAHS has undertaken a light survey across the nation of how community historical and heritage societies have been impacted and have responded to the lockdown. The following is a broad summary of the main results.

## **NEGATIVE IMPACTS**

- Closing of doors to members, volunteers and visitors so that meetings, lectures, exhibition and museum visitations, etc, were cancelled.
- Research was largely suspended because collections were either not accessible or only in a limited way.
- Loss of sales income of books, etc.
- Loss of entry income to events, exhibitions and museums.
- Loss of research fee income.
- Something that is very important for the demographic in most societies, but is often overlooked, is the loss of social interaction which is often one of the appeals for the older people who belong to and volunteer in societies.
- Connected to this is that a high proportion of societies are in regional areas where the social interaction and its physical and mental health benefits are of particular social and community importance. Such communities are also less likely to be well connected digitally.

## **ADAPTATIONS AND RESPONSES**

- Society executives operated through phone, email and online video conferencing.
- In many cases meetings of administration committees were held online.
- A limited number of societies were able to hold talks and seminars online.
- A limited amount of 'working at home' took place where possible on tasks such as digitising and cataloguing of collections.
- In some cases, there was an increase of hits on websites and social media, perhaps as a response to people having more leisure time. This resulted in some societies in a marginal increase in membership.
- Volunteer rosters were required for a wide range of activities depending on the nature of the organisation. These included feeding animals on historic farms, maintaining gardens at historic properties, and checking upon and airing out exhibition and collection spaces.

A good example of an individual organisation is the Kew Historical Society in Melbourne, whose President noted:

In response to the restrictions imposed under COVID-19, the Boroondara City Council has implemented lockdown to their premises that have prevented us from accessing our office, the Kew Courthouse, Phyllis Hore room in the Kew Library and the Hawthorn Arts Centre. As a consequence, we have been unable to hold face to face meetings, activities, and exhibitions. In fact we had just financed an exhibition and opened it when we had to close it to the public. Additionally, we have lost income from not being able to hold our quarterly book sales. Of course there have been no working groups' activities and we are limited in the exchange of collection items.

However, we have continued to provide newsletters to our Members, apply for grants, and hold our Committee of Management meetings using Zoom. We have continued to communicate on various issues via email and also respond to research queries. In addition, we have participated in online training, provided an online link to our current exhibition for public viewing, and are rewriting our records on the Collections database.

In summary, we have lost income as a result of the restrictions; we are conscious of maintaining regular contact with our Members to keep them informed and socially engaged as best we can electronically; importantly we want to maintain our membership and the interest of Members in the KHS; and continue to plan for the future return of face to face activities.

### **FAHS IMPACTS AND RESPONSES**

FAHS was forced to suspend two recently launched initiatives.

- A public appeal for donations and subscription memberships.
- The Local History Backup, which was a post-bushfire campaign to sensitise societies and communities to the need to ensure protection of their collections in the face of increasing disasters.

FAHS was also forced to suspend work on the BeConnected project it has contracted with the Commonwealth, to facilitate the development of digital skills within the community, particularly older people. The programme depends heavily on face-to-face meetings with communities. An online seminar has been developed, but so far there have been limited opportunities to use it.

FAHS has published and updated advice and guidance materials via eBulletins, Facebook and the FAHS website. For the website, see <https://www.history.org.au/covid-19/>

FAHS responded by email and phone to queries about maintaining services and activities during the lockdown, and how to prepare for reopening when it occurs.

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