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Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery is one of the NSW galleries that will no longer receive four-year funding from the state government. Photograph: Bjanka Kadic/Alamy

Kelly Burke

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‘Shock to creative ecology’: NSW regional art galleries face funding crisis after state pulls financial support

Peak arts bodies urge review of decision that jeopardises institutions which are the ‘lifeblood’ of regional Australian cultural life

Three out of four regional public art galleries in [New South Wales](#) are facing a funding crisis after the state government pulled its financial support as a result of a massive restructure of its cultural funding arm, Create NSW.

Wagga Wagga, Orange, Armidale, Broken Hill and Tamworth are among 18 regional centres in NSW with major public art galleries that will no longer receive four-year funding from the state government, worth between about \$70,000 and \$200,000 a year.

The decision has prompted two of the state’s peak arts bodies to call on the government to conduct an urgent review, warning in a letter to NSW arts minister John Graham in June that the defunding would “devastate our region’s creative life” and significantly weaken cultural tourism, which sees about 3.5 million people visiting regional galleries and museums each year.

“Put simply, it is a shock to the creative ecology that we have worked so hard to establish together,” the letter said.

I suppose there’s not that many votes in the regions for Labor
Dr Tracy Callinan

Co-signee of the letter, Regional Arts NSW chief executive Dr Tracy Callinan, told Guardian Australia there was a real risk some galleries could close their doors if local councils are unable to pick up the funding shortfalls.

“I’ve already been on the phone this morning with at least one, and possibly another, that if they’re not ... funded, they may have to fold,” she said.

“It seems this minister is very busy looking after the 24-hour economy ... there’s \$100m in this budget just trying to find a venue for a new film studio, but in the process, he has abandoned the small and medium arts sector.

“I suppose there’s not that many votes in the regions for Labor.”

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Co-signee Brett Adlington, chief executive of Museums & Galleries of NSW, said the success rate for regionally based public galleries applying for recurrent funding had

now sunk below 18%, well below the overall success rate of 52%. Only three public galleries in regional NSW were successful in the latest funding round.

He said many in the arts sector saw the decision as a way of shifting costs on to local government. Many of the 18 galleries affected by the cuts rely on local councils to fund infrastructure and core staffing costs.

However, the galleries rely on state government funding to deliver what Adlington described as the “lifeblood” of regional cultural life, delivering programs to audiences, and providing employment and commissions to artists and arts workers that are locally relevant, including myriad Indigenous cultural projects.

Adlington said regional gallery directors had been advised to lodge fresh applications for two-year funding, scheduled for determination in September.

“But what we’re hearing is that’s probably going to be just as tight, if not tighter, than the last round,” he said.

Guardian Australia has sought a response from the minister and Create NSW.

The director of the Maitland Regional Art Gallery, Gerry Bobsien, said the state government’s rejection of its application for \$110k a year for the next four years had been “devastating”.

“It’s something that I can’t keep going back to council for,” she said.

“Funding for these cultural programs, particularly in regional areas, is so critical, and the defunding of it appears to be very widespread, spread throughout regional NSW.”

Bobsien has already lodged a last-ditch application for two-year funding.

“[We] are sweating on this outcome due in September,” she said.

“This process to turn around and reapply for two-year funding was very difficult as the feedback we received on our multi-year application [has] made it difficult to try and address any shortcomings – we were informed our application was strong, with no suggestions for improvement.”

Dr Lee-Anne Hall, director of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery and the National Art Glass Gallery, said her institutions were now facing a shortfall of about \$95,000 per annum, after being informed in June of their unsuccessful grant applications.

“We will not be closing our doors, we are here in the service of the public,” she said.

“However, here in the Riverina, there will be impacts across the board in terms of equity and access for artists, students and community.”

Art galleries in urban centres have also been affected by funding cuts. Mosman Art Gallery and Penrith Regional Gallery are among those rejected for four-year funding, and the future of Darlinghurst’s Australian Design Centre, which had been reliant on

\$200,000 in recurrent state government funding, is now uncertain. In January, it also lost \$300,000 in federal government funding.

“If we’re not funded, NSW will have the distinction of being the only state in Australia without a craft and design organisation,” said the centre’s director, Lisa Cahill, referring to Craft Victoria, South Australia’s Jam Factory, Craft + Design Canberra, Brisbane’s Artisan, and Design Tasmania.

The centre has now issued a public appeal to keep its doors open. The board would make a decision on its future towards the end of the year, Cahill said.

A spokesperson for Create NSW said the funding decision was unrelated to its recently announced restructure.

The multi-year funding program had been highly competitive and received 158 eligible applications, the spokesperson said in a statement provided to the Guardian.

Only nine visual arts organisations were successful in their funding applications, with three of those being regional galleries - Albury’s Murray Art Museum, the Ngununggula regional art gallery in the Southern Highlands, and Lismore Regional Gallery.

In total 82 applications were approved for four-year funding across all art forms.

“Investment in successful organisations was higher than in previous years,” the spokesperson said.

“The NSW government recognise[s] the significant contributions made by regional art galleries to the arts and culture ecology across regional NSW.”