

SUBMISSION

National Cultural Policy Public Consultation 2026

Submitted by Sophie Lieberman PhD, GAICD | On behalf of the REGENERATE initiative | April 2026

Executive Summary

This submission argues that the next National Cultural Policy should include, for the first time, an explicit framework for supporting organisational transition in the arts and cultural sector. By transition, we mean the full range of structural changes that cultural organisations navigate: endings that honour what has been built, mergers that are genuinely generative, recombinations that preserve knowledge, and the emergence of new forms of cultural life from the spaces that transitions create.

This is not an argument against increased arts funding. It addresses what happens in the gap between where funding currently is and where it needs to be. A sector with more money will still need the capacity to navigate structural change with intelligence and care.

The submission draws on *REGENERATE: Arts and Cultural Sector Renewal in Australia* (March 2026), a white paper that analyses the structural pressures facing the Australian arts and cultural sector, reviews international practice in transition support, and proposes a framework for building transition infrastructure in Australia. It also draws on sector intelligence and on the growing international evidence base on arts sector transition.

Context: The Structural Moment

The Australian arts and cultural sector is experiencing a structural inflection point. The pressures converging in the mid-2020s are qualitatively different from previous cycles of austerity:

- **Federal funding decline:** Government investment in arts and culture has not kept pace with population growth. Per capita spending in real terms is lower now than in 2007–08. No new funding was announced in the 2025–26 Budget for small-to-medium organisations, independent artists, or the ecological challenges facing the broader sector.
- **State-level disruption:** Victoria's recent funding decisions have shattered basic assumptions about government support. Other states face varied but similarly concerning trends.
- **Artist income crisis:** The average practising professional artist earns \$23,200 per year from their creative work - half the minimum wage.
- **Post-pandemic audience contraction:** Audiences have not fully returned, and recovery is concentrated among existing attenders spending more, not new participation.

- **Structural fragility:** These pressures are concentrated in the small-to-medium and independent organisations, and the artists and cultural workers who sustain them, that form the generative core of Australian cultural life.

Every month, organisations across Australia are making existential decisions in private. When these decisions go badly, the consequences are severe: decades of expertise lost overnight, workers and communities harmed, and opportunities for genuine renewal missed. When organisations do not make these decisions at all, the consequences are slower but equally serious: exhausted leaders, demoralised workforces, and organisations that become progressively less able to serve the communities they exist for.

The Gap: Why Current Policy Cannot Respond

Revive was a significant and welcome recommitment to Australian arts and culture. However, like every previous national cultural policy, it was designed to create and sustain. It contains no framework for what happens when organisations need to change form. This is not a criticism of *Revive*'s intent but a description of a structural gap that has become urgent.

The silence around transition

Organisations considering whether to close, merge, or fundamentally restructure face an almost impossible communicative dilemma. To speak publicly about their situation is to risk the very outcomes they are trying to manage. Funders may withdraw remaining support. Philanthropic donors may redirect their giving. Staff may begin looking for other employment. The rational response is silence.

This silence is reinforced by the current policy environment:

- Operational funding is contingent on ongoing delivery of programming outcomes. The moment an organisation signals it may not continue in its current form, its eligibility becomes uncertain.
- There are no standard mechanisms for transition grants — funding specifically designed to support the time, expertise, and process costs of a well-managed ending, merger, or reconfiguration.
- Government arts officers lack the frameworks, training, or mandate to have transition conversations with funded organisations.
- Grant conditions frequently restrict the use of reserves for transition purposes, meaning organisations must choose between using remaining resources to fund transition or ending without the resources to do it well.

The costs of this gap

The absence of transition infrastructure produces cumulative and largely invisible harm: irreversible loss of institutional knowledge held in relationships and practices rather than

documents; severing of deep community relationships, disproportionately affecting regional, remote, and culturally diverse communities with few alternative sources of cultural engagement; significant financial, professional, and psychological harm to workers; and missed opportunities for genuine renewal through recombination and emergence.

International Context

Internationally, transition infrastructure is an emerging and increasingly well-evidenced field of practice:

- **United Kingdom:** The Decelerator has pioneered a model for supporting civil society endings that preserves knowledge, protects communities, and creates conditions for emergence. The Association of Independent Museums has developed comprehensive guidance for museums at risk of closure and for local authority museums considering different operating models.
- **Europe:** IETM and other networks are producing foundational research on the relational and temporal fabric that sustains artistic work, arguing for investment in that fabric alongside investment in outputs.
- **North America:** Organisations including Springboard for the Arts are developing models of creativity as social infrastructure, with community land trusts and stabilisation models demonstrating measurable impact.

Australia is currently absent from this international conversation. The next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity to change that.

Recommendations

This submission makes six recommendations for inclusion in the next National Cultural Policy. They are designed to be complementary to, not competitive with, increased investment in the sector.

Recommendation 1: Establish dedicated transition funding mechanisms

Creative Australia, state and territory arts bodies, and relevant government departments should establish explicit, accessible funding mechanisms for organisational transition. These should include end-of-life grants, merger support funding, recombination facilitation, and emergence support for new organisations. Transition grants should be available without requiring the public disclosure of difficulties and should be structured to support the time, expertise, and process costs of transitions rather than simply providing bridge funding to extend unsustainable operations.

Recommendation 2: Develop explicit policy frameworks for transition support

Creative Australia and state and territory arts bodies should develop and publish explicit policy frameworks for how they engage with organisations navigating structural transition. These frameworks should address: what transition funding is available, how organisations can access it without triggering premature withdrawal of operational support, and what government's role is in facilitating (rather than simply witnessing) well-managed transitions.

Recommendation 3: Train arts officers in transition engagement

Arts officers at all levels of government should receive training in how to engage helpfully with organisations navigating transition — how to raise the topic, how to listen without judgement, how to offer support without creating panic, and how to connect organisations with peer support and practical resources. This training should be developed in consultation with organisations that have navigated transitions and with international practitioners who have developed expertise in this area.

Recommendation 4: Reform grant conditions that prevent well-managed transitions

Government arts agencies should advocate within government for structural changes to funding frameworks that currently make good transitions impossible. This includes the reform of operational grant conditions that restrict the use of reserves for transition purposes, the establishment of sector-wide transition funds, and the explicit recognition of transition planning as a legitimate and fundable activity.

Recommendation 5: Name transition as a normal part of sector health

The next National Cultural Policy should explicitly name transition — including endings, mergers, recombination, and the emergence of new forms — as a normal and expected part of how a healthy cultural ecology functions. This is a narrative act as much as a policy one. As long as national cultural policy treats institutional permanence as the default expectation, organisations will continue to experience transition as failure rather than as a skilled act of cultural stewardship.

Recommendation 6: Invest in transition infrastructure as a sector-wide capability

The policy should support the development of national transition infrastructure — including peer networks for leaders navigating transition, freely available legal and financial guidance adapted to the conditions of Australian arts organisations, frameworks for community engagement during organisational change, and templates for capturing institutional knowledge before it is lost. This infrastructure should be modelled on international precedents such as the UK's Decelerator and designed to be genuinely independent of funder interests, structurally protected from capture, and focused on the needs of organisations and communities.

Addressing Foreseeable Concerns

This is not an argument against increased arts funding. The sector needs more money. Transition infrastructure does not compete with increased operational funding; it addresses what happens in the gap between where funding currently is and where it needs to be. Initial funding for transition infrastructure should be sought primarily from philanthropic and research sources rather than from existing government arts funding pools.

This is not a managed contraction strategy. There is a legitimate fear that building infrastructure for endings will give funders permission to withdraw. This submission takes that concern seriously: the response is not to avoid the subject but to build infrastructure that is genuinely independent of funder interests and explicitly focused on the needs of organisations and communities rather than on the comfort of those with power.

This is not a claim that good endings erase community harm. For communities that have relied on a particular organisation, a well-managed ending is still an ending. The argument is that where transitions happen, communities deserve to be active participants rather than recipients of bad news, and that the knowledge and relationships held by closing organisations belong to communities, not to institutions.

Conclusion

Australia's arts and cultural sector is not in decline. It is in transition. The question is not whether this transition will happen — it is already happening, everywhere, every day. The question is whether it will happen well or badly. Whether the knowledge embedded in our institutions will be preserved or lost. Whether community relationships will be honoured or severed. Whether workers will be supported or abandoned. Whether new forms of cultural life will be able to emerge, or whether the resources, relationships, and trust that could support their emergence will dissipate before they can be organised.

The next National Cultural Policy has the opportunity to be the first that treats the full lifecycle of cultural institutions as a legitimate policy concern. We urge those developing the policy to seize that opportunity.

About this submission

This submission is lodged by Dr Sophie Lieberman, author of *REGENERATE: Arts and Cultural Sector Renewal in Australia* (March 2026), a white paper on transition infrastructure for the Australian arts and cultural sector. The full white paper, including detailed evidence, international case studies, and recommendations for all parts of the sector, is available on request.

