

The Emerging Writers' Festival (EWF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Australia's new National Cultural Policy. For over 20 years, EWF has operated as Australia's only independent literary festival by and for emerging writers. We are not just a festival — we are a pipeline. Writers enter our community as volunteers, apply to our Open Artist Callout, develop their craft through our residencies and prizes, and go on to shape the country's literary and cultural landscape. Many of the alumni who first appeared on our stage are now the established voices defining Australian literature.

That pipeline matters because the literary sector in Australia remains structurally inaccessible. The evidence is clear: socio-economic inequality, geographic isolation, and the sheer opacity of the publishing industry continue to lock out the very people whose stories most need to be heard. Our own data shows that between 2020 and 2025, 61% of EWF attendees identified as queer, 33% as disabled, and 18% as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. These are not marginal audiences. They are the communities that Australian literature has historically failed to reflect and support. A national cultural policy that does not centre their participation will not serve a contemporary Australia.

We make four specific calls to policymakers:

Fund the infrastructure of access, not just the output. Arts organisations like EWF are frequently funded to deliver programs but rarely to build the capacity that makes those programs possible. The staffing, governance, community consultation, and data infrastructure behind our work is invisible in most grant frameworks, yet it is what makes our programming responsive and sustainable. Multi-year operational funding — not just project funding — is essential for small organisations to build the kind of trust and consistency that genuinely serves underrepresented communities.

Recognise that emerging practitioners need more than platforms. Putting new writers on a stage is one thing. Paying them properly, connecting them to industry pathways, and ensuring they have the professional development to sustain a career is another. Our Richell Prize, Speculate Prize, residencies, and Board Capacity Building Program exist because we know that exposure without infrastructure leads nowhere. A national policy that takes writer development seriously must address rates of pay, mentorship access, and the chronic underinvestment in early-career practitioners across the country.

Treat regional access as a structural problem, not a program add-on. In 2025, EWF convened a Regional Working Group in collaboration with the Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature Office and fellow resident organisations of the Wheeler Centre. Our initial mapping revealed how patchy literary infrastructure is outside metropolitan centres. Travel bursaries, online

programming, and regional partnerships are not luxuries — they are the minimum required to make national cultural life genuinely national. Policy must address this with dedicated resourcing, not aspirational language.

Invest in First Nations self-determination within the literary sector. EWF is currently developing a long-term Reconciliation Plan and expanding our First Nations Guest Curator program, which reserves co-curation roles for First Nations emerging programmers. But EWF's efforts operate within a sector-wide context of underinvestment. Any national cultural policy must go beyond acknowledgment to structural change: adequate remuneration for First Nations cultural knowledge, genuine co-design with First Nations communities, and funding that respects Aboriginal self-determination as outlined in Creative Victoria's own *Creative State 2026-2029* strategy.

Australia's cultural strength depends on who gets to contribute to it. The Emerging Writers' Festival exists because the answer to that question has historically been too narrow. A national cultural policy has the opportunity to change that — not by adding new categories to existing frameworks, but by rebuilding those frameworks around genuine equity of participation.

We are happy to discuss any aspect of this submission further.