

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation

Introduction

I work in Aboriginal community-controlled health and wellbeing, coordinating Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) initiatives that centre culture, community authority, and self-determination. My role involves working closely with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services across Western Australia, supporting the delivery of SEWB and Traditional Healing initiatives that are grounded in local cultural governance, Elders' leadership, and place-based practice. I am making this submission based on my direct experience working at the intersection of culture, health systems, policy, and community-led innovation.

Challenges I See in the Cultural Sector

One of the biggest challenges I see is that culture is still too often treated as complementary rather than fundamental. In practice, this means cultural work is under-resourced, funded short-term, and expected to fit into systems that were never designed to recognise cultural authority, lore, or Indigenous ways of decision-making.

In SEWB and Traditional Healing spaces, this creates very real risks. Cultural knowledge, language, healing practices, and On-Country activities are essential to wellbeing, yet they are frequently managed through western governance, reporting, and evaluation frameworks that do not adequately protect cultural integrity. Without strong cultural governance, there is a risk of cultural harm, inappropriate documentation, and the dilution or extraction of sacred knowledge.

I also see ongoing challenges with workforce sustainability. Elders, healers, cultural leads, and emerging practitioners carry significant responsibility, yet there are limited pathways for succession, fair remuneration, and long-term support. When cultural labour is not valued properly, the system relies on goodwill rather than strength.

Opportunities and How We Can Respond

I have also seen what works when culture truly leads. Community-controlled governance models show that when Elders and recognised cultural authorities hold decision-making power, services are safer, stronger, and more effective. Cultural governance groups provide accountability that is grounded in community law and protocol, not just organisational policy.

The National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to recognise culture as essential infrastructure across health, education, justice, and wellbeing not as an optional extra. This includes recognising cultural governance bodies as legitimate authorities, embedding Indigenous data sovereignty, and ensuring that sacred knowledge is never recorded or mishandled.

Long-term, flexible funding is critical. Cultural work does not align with short funding cycles or rigid outputs. Investment must support place-based leadership, workforce development, and culturally defined measures of success.

What Matters to Me and My Practice

What matters most to me is cultural legitimacy. The work I support is strongest when it is led by Elders, recognised healers, and community-endorsed governance structures. Culture is not static or historical it is living, relational, and connected to language, Country, identity, and healing. When culture is respected on its own terms, it strengthens individuals, families, services, and systems.

What I Would Like to See in the New National Cultural Policy

I would like the policy to:

- Recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as foundational to Australia's identity and wellbeing
- Embed cultural authority and governance not just consultation across policy and funding decisions
- Commit to long-term investment in community-controlled, place-based cultural initiatives
- Support cultural workforce pathways, including Elders, healers, and emerging leaders
- Uphold Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights and data sovereignty

A strong National Cultural Policy has the potential to create lasting change, but only if it moves beyond symbolism and invests in the people, governance, and systems that keep culture strong.