

AFN SUBMISSION to National Cultural Policy Review 2026

INTRODUCTION

This submission is from the Australian Folklore Network (AFN), an organisation dedicated to the collection, preservation and dissemination of Australia's rich folk culture.

FOLK LORE AND LIFE IN CULTURE

Culture is the sum-total of all the things that humans make, do and believe. It may vary between different groups of people, who may be united by ethnicity, occupation or location. It can take numerous forms, such as music, literature, fine art and technology. *Folk culture* is often defined as 'the culture of everyday life', and may include customs, belief and children's games. Usually learned by mouth or by imitation, Folklife is the living culture of the many peoples of Australia. It is our expression of who we are as individuals, as communities, as a nation. As we change, so too does our culture.

THE AUSTRALIAN FOLKLORE NETWORK

The Australian Folklore Network (AFN) was established in 2002 as a national coalition of individuals and organisations with an interest in one or more aspects of folklore collection, archiving, research, teaching, administration and performing. In partnership with the National Folk Festival and Curtin University, the Australian Folklore Network hosts an annual conference, publishes *Transmissions* quarterly, reports on member projects, provides advice on folklore as requested and generally promotes Australian folklore in all its varieties throughout the national community.

Aims of the Australian Folklore Network

- To bring together the organisations, associations and individuals involved with the collection, research, archiving, dissemination, teaching and performance of Australian folklore, in all its varieties.
- To provide means and methods of communication, dialogue, interaction, debate and access to resources and facilities, etc. that will further the development of Australian folklore collection, research and dissemination.
- To promote the activities and importance of Australian folklore as widely as possible, including to the general public, education, government, private sector and media.
- To further the establishment of a national folklore capability.

- To maintain contacts, interchange and dialogue with those pursuing folklore-related activities around the world.

AUSTRALIA'S FOLK COMMUNITY

The AFN is part of a national community of interacting artistic, social and research organisations, activities and individuals interested in Australian folk culture. Often described as 'the folk revival', this culture has been evolving since the 1950s and today is a vibrant national community of folklore collectors, performers, dancers, archivists, researchers and engaged audiences. These individuals and organisations support an array of folk festivals, clubs, concerts, dances, teaching, research, publications, recordings and social media activities related to folk.

While the AFN is focused on collection, archiving and research, many of its over 200 members are also actively engaged in one or more of the aspects mentioned above and see their involvement as a contemporary continuation of Australia's diverse folk traditions, past and present. These are characterised by hands on, human interactions and connecting people and their stories, in whatever expressive form they come – narrative, song, poetry – and through inherited cultural practices including folk art, crafts, foodways, speech, beliefs, and customs.

The nature of this community is uniquely Australian, derived from the First Nations, settler and multicultural past and present. These traditions are at the base of the shared identities of each cultural group, yet folklore is also a universal form of human expression and practice. It can cross barriers of language, culture and age, inspiring interaction and understanding between the many different groups that characterise modern Australia.

THE 5 PILLARS AND THE NEXT NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

As a volunteer organisation the Network seeks to connect fieldworkers, researchers, archivists, performers and others within the broader folk sphere and to disseminate the results of that work through the folk constituency – and beyond. Our conferences, publications and online resources have featured First Nations presenters and others working with First Nations people. Many of our members are folklore collectors and work frequently with First Nations and multicultural communities to document and preserve their traditions in archives such as the Oral History and Folklore section of the National Library of Australia, the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria and the Western Australian Folklore Archive in the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library at Curtin University.

Our membership also includes community organisations such as the Bush Music Club (since 1954) and the Victorian Folk Music Club (since 1959) that each curate extensive archives of

folklore. From these collections and the stories within them, musicians, poets, writers and storytellers draw materials for performance, publication and recording.

We value story in all its forms and advocate strongly for archives and libraries to preserve them for dissemination through artistic performance, publication, recording and other media. As mentioned, the folk infrastructure is a vibrant national ecology with an ethos of connecting both live and distributed audiences.

The five pillars of the *Revive* cultural policy of 2023-2024 have endeavoured to create a framework for defining culture, and they have been readdressed in the National Policy Documents of 2026. Pillars one (First Nations First), two (A Plan For Every Story) and four (Strong Cultural Infrastructure) are a valuable contribution to the framework for defining culture. However, Pillars three and five (Centrality of The Artist and Engaging the Audience) are too heavily focused on performance alone. Culture belongs to everyone, not only to performing artists. Its folkloric aspects are of particular importance, as this is truly the culture of everyday life. The folk community celebrates all these elements, encouraging participation in the telling and hearing of stories in all expressive forms.

While there have been several attempts to establish folk lore and life as essential elements of Australian cultural policy, these remain underrepresented and under supported. Many countries have extensive arrangements for supporting their folk arts and related traditions, notably Scandinavia, the USA, most European nations, Britain and Ireland. Despite a history of previous funding through the Australia Council and an extensive *National Inquiry into Folklife in Australia* in 1986-7 and subsequent publication of its report, we stand out as a country that fails to acknowledge and support these activities. We recommend that the next cultural policy incorporates the findings of the report of *National Inquiry into Folklife in Australia* and institute its recommendations.

REFERENCES

AFN website <https://sites.google.com/view/ausfolklore>

The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore (edited by Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal)

Our Living Heritage: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia (Hugh Anderson, Gwenda Beed Davey and Keith McKenry)