

Submission to the Australian Government

National Cultural Policy Consultation (2026)

Submitted by:



1. Introduction

As the Manager of one of Australia's longest-running Arts in Health programs, recognised for its leadership in integrating arts into healthcare.

Every day, our team of Art Therapists, Music Therapists and Art Facilitators consult with people in hospital who are disconnected from themselves, from others and nature, from meaning, and their life beyond illness.

We also experience what happens when that connection is restored through creativity and culture. In wards, waiting rooms, and the quiet moments where creativity shifts something that clinical care alone cannot.

We are shaping more than a policy. We are shaping the conditions for how people make meaning, connect, cope and adapt.

2. Arts and culture across all policy

One of the strongest ideas already indicated inside the current policy is that culture needs to be integrated across government and not limited to one portfolio alone.

This is our opportunity to take that seriously.

Suggestion

Develop an Arts and Culture in all Policy national approach, perhaps entitled *Healthy Arts, Healthy People*, that embeds arts and culture across:

- health
- education
- justice / corrections
- social services
- environment
- urban planning
- local government
- child protection

Why this matters

When people don't have ways to communicate and express themselves, to feel meaning and to belong – it is not neutral, but it shows up as violence or languishing impacting:

- mental health admissions/ repeat presentations
- justice and child protection

If we are serious about prevention, we need to look upstream - at whether people have meaningful, creative ways to be human in everyday life.

3. Expression, emotion and violence

This is a harder point, but an important one. There is a gap in how we understand domestic and other violence.

When people don't have ways to express big feelings, emotions and trauma including grief, anger, shame, fear, those feeling sometimes come out sideways.

Suggestion

Explore the role of creative expression in schools, youth justice, corrections and mental health services. Including, arts-based work with perpetrators and target high risk groups (e.g. male dominated industries).

Why this matters

This approach recognises that processing and expressing emotions are essential parts of self-regulation, and that without them, things escalate.

Arts-based approaches offer reflection, perspective, distance, alternative ways of seeing self and others and invitations to process complex emotions (including trauma) non-verbally.

This is currently a blind spot.

4. A life-centric lens

We tend to design policy as if humans sit at the centre of everything.

It's increasingly clear that disconnection from our natural world is driving both personal, social and planetary distress.

The climate crisis is not only environmental, it's a cultural crisis.

Suggestion

Bring a more *life-centric* lens into cultural policy.

Practically, that could look like:

- seasonal festivals tied to solstices and equinoxes and other patterns in nature
- local cultural calendars shaped by place and ecology
- shared civic celebrations that are open to all

Why this matters

We need shared points of meaning that:

- transcend difference
- connect us to place
- honour that we belong to something larger than ourselves.

5. The role of local governments

Culture is mostly lived locally.

Local Governments play a unique role in cultivating the conditions for people to live rich creative and cultural lives.

Suggestion

Incentivise and support local governments with:

- simple cultural impact tools
- making cultural indicators practical and easy to use
- ways to consider culture in everyday decisions

Why this matters

At the moment, decision making is often industry centric. Culture is often invisible in decision-making. Making culture visible changes what is prioritised.

6. Culture and AI

We are at a similar moment with AI as we once were with television.

Back then, people like Joan Ganz Cooney asked a simple but powerful question:
what if this technology (television) could support child and human development?

And created *Sesame Street* – which changed what was possible and still does.

It was a deliberate decision to shape a new technology in service of human development.

Suggestion

Take a similar approach with AI:

- bring artists, technologists, educators and communities together
- explore how AI can support creativity, expression, wellbeing and connection
- shape it intentionally, not just reactively

Why this matters

If we don't proactively shape it, it will shape us – it already is.

7. Off-screen lives for children, young people

There's a lot of concern about screen time for children and young people.

Most responses focus on limiting it and while this is important, it is incomplete.

Suggestion

Invest in making off-screen life so engaging that it becomes the better option.

This could include using Federal Government instruments to contribute to engage children and young people in:

- activating public spaces with arts and culture
- amplifying participatory festivals and creative programs
- intergenerational storytelling and making
- everyday access to creativity, not just special events
- explore ways for children and young people to feel welcome and worthy in all publicly funded arts and cultural institutions

Why this matters

Young people need to feel welcome and worthy – have places to go, things to do and ways to belong. And have fun! If opportunities don't exist, screens will fill the gap. This shifts policy from restriction to invitation, making life compelling enough that screens feel like the compromise.

Conclusion

At its core, everything we do is shaped by culture - how we make meaning, relate to one another, and understand our place in the world, towards futures worthy of the best of us.

Culture may not be a panacea, but an important system-wide lever and a practical instrument of government, shaping how policies are experienced, and whether they ultimately succeed.

Thank you for you care.

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5 May 2026