

Australia's cultural future must include meaningful investment in regional and remote communities. While the National Cultural Policy acknowledges the importance of arts and culture across the nation, there remains a significant gap between metropolitan and regional access, funding and opportunity. Communities like Cessnock in regional New South Wales continue to fall through the cracks close enough to major centres to be overlooked for regional support, yet without the infrastructure, resources and philanthropic networks available in metropolitan areas.

Regional communities are not secondary audiences for arts and culture; they are essential contributors to Australia's cultural identity. Places like Cessnock have thriving creative communities, passionate audiences and a strong appetite for cultural participation. However, local institutions are constantly stretched trying to meet demand with limited funding and increasing operational costs. If the National Cultural Policy is to truly represent all Australians, regional and remote communities must be embedded as a core pillar of the policy rather than an afterthought.

One of the most pressing issues is accessibility for young people. Across our region there is enormous demand for workshops, creative programs and youth engagement activities. Families want their children involved in the arts, and young people are actively seeking creative outlets and opportunities to connect. Yet the reality is that workshop fees are becoming unaffordable for many households, while organisations simultaneously struggle to pay artists and facilitators a fair wage. The current model forces community organisations to choose between accessibility and fair compensation. Sustainable funding models are needed to subsidise youth arts participation while ensuring artists are properly valued for their skills and labour.

The benefits of arts participation extend far beyond creativity alone. We have witnessed firsthand the positive impact arts programs have on mental health, wellbeing and community connection. Art creates safe spaces for expression, confidence building and social inclusion. In regional areas where access to mental health and social services can be limited, creative programs often become an essential support mechanism for people of all ages. Investment in the arts should therefore also be recognised as an investment in public health and community wellbeing.

Education must also play a stronger role in connecting young people with arts and culture. Schools need greater support and flexibility to engage with local galleries, exhibitions and cultural institutions. Excursions to galleries and creative workshops should not be viewed as optional extras but as an important part of a child's education. Increased funding for transport, curriculum integration and school partnerships with local arts organisations would significantly improve access for regional students. Supporting local institutions ensures young people can experience high-quality arts programming within their own communities rather than needing to travel to metropolitan centres.

Finally, the policy must prioritise support for local artists. Regional artists need affordable studio spaces, professional development opportunities and sustainable funding pathways to continue creating work within their communities. Too often artists are forced to relocate to cities in search of opportunity, resulting in cultural drain from regional Australia. Investing in local artists strengthens communities, stimulates local economies and preserves unique regional voices and stories.