

Next Generation Now:

Embedding Children and Young People
in Australia's Next National Cultural Policy

Executive Summary

Australia is home to more than 8 million people under the age of 25, representing about a third of the population. These young Australians are not just the audiences of tomorrow – they are audiences and creators today.

Children and young people have fundamental human rights to play, to access culture, and to engage with complex art. This benefits their holistic wellbeing and contributes significantly to our cultural fabric, community cohesion, and national identity.

Yet, there is a strategic blindspot for children and young people's arts, resulting in limited access and underfunding, reinforcing systemic disadvantage.

The next iteration of the National Cultural Policy must embed children and young people through a stand-alone pillar – **Next Generation Now**. This pillar would not just signal their value, but strengthen inclusion, result in increased mental health, wellbeing, social and educational outcomes for children and young people and ensure the sustainability of Australia's cultural life.

Why a pillar for children and young people?

The Australian Government's national cultural policy Revive demonstrates a strong commitment to children and young people through pillars two and four. However, the policy's articulation of children and young people as creators or participants in the arts outside of education is limited, and it contains few specific actions related to this cohort.

Revive already recognises the particular needs of one cultural group through its First Nations First pillar. Given children and young people are also a marginalised group within other cultural and social marginalisations, a similar approach is required in the next policy to ensure the sustained and targeted support required for children and young people.

The inclusion of children and young people as a stand-alone pillar in the new National Cultural Policy is not simply about equity of access – it is a strategic opportunity for the future sustainability and renewal of the Australian cultural sector.

- **Early cultural engagement predicts lifelong participation**
Decades of research show that lifelong museum, gallery, and arts attendance is strongly predicted by exposure before age nine – particularly when experiences are child-led, not just school-based. Without deliberate investment, the sector risks losing future audiences.
- **Children and young people are cultural citizens now, not just “future audiences”**
They create, produce, and participate in art today. Their work shapes new practices, from digital storytelling to youth-driven performance festivals. Recognising them as cultural citizens honours their rights and agency.
- **A strategic investment in Australia's future workforce**
Arts participation builds workplace readiness via collaboration, communication, creativity, and problem-solving – the human capabilities flagged as essential in the Employment White Paper (2023).
- **Strengthening wellbeing and resilience**
Arts engagement reduces anxiety and depression, strengthens parent–infant attachment, and builds resilience. At a time of rising youth mental ill-health

and loneliness, the arts are a low-stigma, community-based prevention tool. Arts and cultural programs provide safe spaces for expression, community, and hope.

- **Equity and access cannot be left to chance**
Without clear policy, arts access remains concentrated among privileged, inner-urban families. A stand-alone pillar ensures national reach – across regional, remote, and under resourced communities – preventing the entrenchment of inequality.
- **Parents and carers need support to unlock opportunities**
Parents are cultural gatekeepers. Policy must enable all parents and carers to access child centred cultural experiences, not just the privileged in metropolitan areas.
- **Children's arts experiences drive literacy and learning**
Storytelling, music, drama, and visual arts build “first literacies” and learning dispositions like curiosity and persistence. Research shows three-year-olds who can name a favourite book are stronger readers at seven, and reading influences teenage intellectual development more than parental education.
- **Whole-of-government alignment**
A dedicated pillar reinforces national strategies – from the Early Years Strategy to Better and Fairer Schools, Closing the Gap, and Measuring What Matters. Cultural policy becomes a driver of wellbeing, education, equity, and social cohesion.
- **Accountability**
The cultural rights and contributions of children and young people are not optional, but central to national policy with accountability.
- **Visibility and priority**
Children and young people must be seen and heard in our new National Cultural Policy. Arts for children and young people are undervalued due to societal perceptions that prioritise adult cultural participation. This bias often relegates children and young people's participation to education rather than acknowledging the need for diverse, rigorous, and meaningful artistic experiences.

Why does it matter?

Art for and by children and young people is important for its individual, public, intrinsic and artistic value:

- Participation in the arts enhances mental and emotional wellbeing, fosters resilience, supports community development, strengthens community cohesion, and develops valuable skills.
- However, there are significant barriers to accessing the arts for children and young people, including attitudinal, socio-economic, geographical, cultural and identity-based barriers which need strong and deliberate policy to overcome.
- The intrinsic value of the arts for infants is as valid as it is for an adult; it is vital to recognise that all human beings can be affected by art and what it offers, no matter their age.
- Children and young people have unique cultural needs, including safe spaces for belonging, agency in co-creation, cultural safety, opportunities for challenge and risk, and support for their health and wellbeing.
- Participation by children and young people contributes to the creation of unique artistic experiences. Placing children and young people at the centre of artistic exploration opens up new forms of art and participatory experiences.

What are the current challenges?

Barriers to access and participation

- ABS data shows children's attendance at cultural venues dropped from 94% in 2017–18 to 80% in 2021–22 (ABS, 2023).
- Liquor licensing rules and the sector's dependence on alcohol sales create systemic barriers to under-18 participation
- Only 35% of regional young people report adequate access to arts and cultural opportunities compared to 75% in metro areas (Audience Outlook Monitor, 2022).

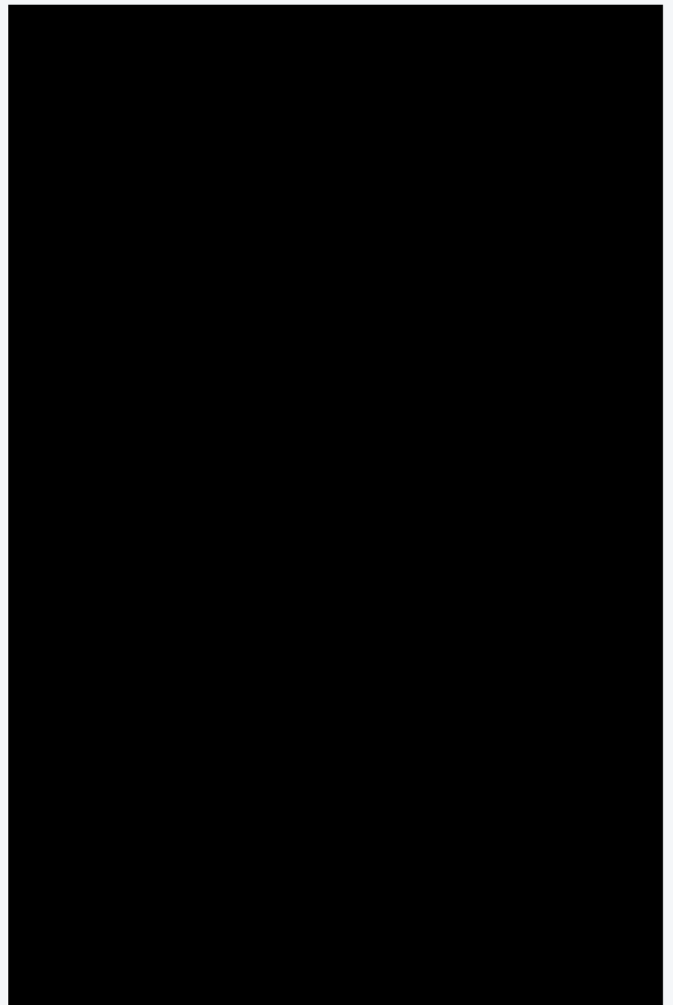
Rising loneliness and mental health pressures

- 2 in 5 young Australians report feeling lonely, and one in seven experience persistent loneliness (The Conversation, 2024; Monash Education, 2023).
- The 2022 National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing shows the highest rates of psychological distress are among 16–24 year-olds (AIHW National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2022).

Investment gap

- Youth arts defunding: Many youth-focused companies lost federal funding in the 2010s–20s, leaving "as few as five federally funded youth arts companies" nationally (Creative Australia, 2023).

Revive did not repair the problems facing children and young people's arts and an urgent intervention is required. Youth-specific cultural funding measures since 2023 – \$3.4m (youth engagement) and \$450k (youth arts) – are minimal compared with new *Revive* measures (~\$286m total).



What will the outcomes be?

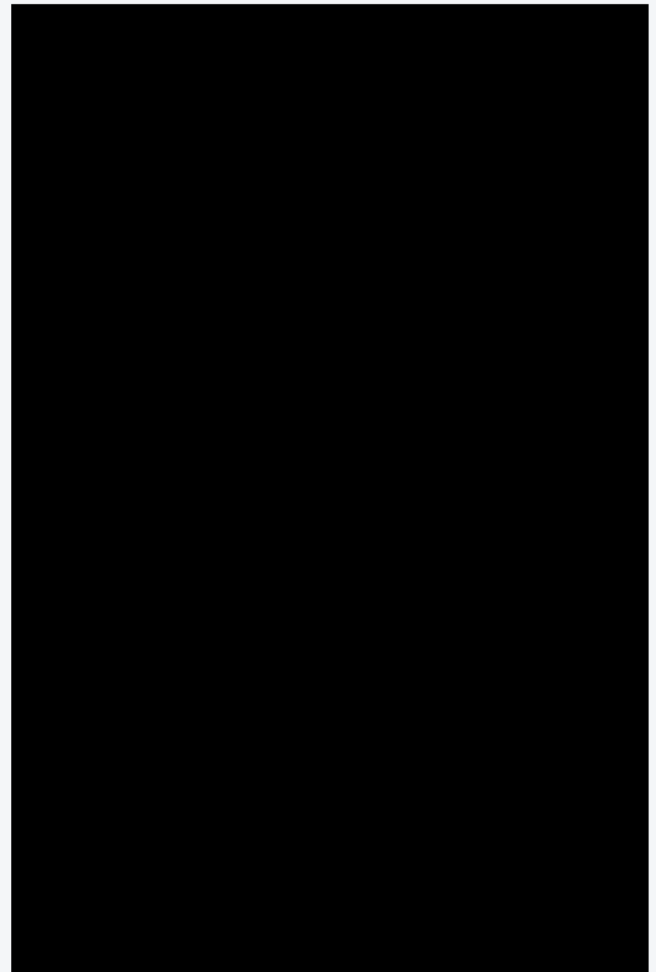
- International studies confirm that arts engagement strengthens wellbeing, social identity, and resilience (Perkins, R. et al. *Arts engagement supports social connectedness in adulthood*. BMC Public Health 21, 1208, 2021). For example, children and young people who participate in music programs are more likely to be in good health, continue education, volunteer, and contribute to their communities (Creative Australia, 2025).

Centralising a commitment to children and young people in the national cultural policy will:

- Embed a focus on children and young people in its DNA.
- Ensure that the policy directly addresses 30% of Australia's population.
- Secure the future of our culture.
- Avoid a generational gap for workers, creators and audiences.
- Support a whole-of-government approach to community wellbeing now and into the future, by embedding arts in the lives of children and young people.

This will lead to:

- Improved mental health and wellbeing including through reduced loneliness and greater social connection.
- Stronger social cohesion as young people access diverse and inclusive cultural spaces.
- Future workforce development, with young Australians gaining the skills and confidence to participate in the creative economy.
- A sustainable cultural sector, with a new generation of audiences and practitioners.
- Greater regional equity, with more young people in rural and regional communities able to participate in and lead cultural life.



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