



# Submission to the Revive National Cultural Policy 2026 Consultation

## From: Milk Crate Theatre

Milk Crate Theatre welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next National Cultural Policy. *Revive: A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place* affirmed values that have long been central to our work and to the broader Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) sector: inclusion, participation, artist leadership and the importance of place-based practice.

This submission reflects both our strong support for the vision of *Revive* and our concern that many of its ambitions have not yet translated into practice—particularly through current funding settings, assessment processes and implementation through Creative Australia.

## Key Recommendations

1. **Explicitly recognise Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD)** in the next National Cultural Policy as essential cultural and social infrastructure.
2. **Increase long-term investment in CACD organisations, projects and artists** to support sustainable, community-led cultural practice across Australia.
3. **Invest in workforce and practice sustainability** through both formal education pathways and sector-led capacity building, including leadership development, artist pathways and cross-sector skills development.
4. **Align funding decisions and assessment settings with the policy's commitments** to equity, participation, access and place-based practice.
5. **Redesign funding processes so they are genuinely accessible** for artists and organisations led by lived experience, disability, cultural diversity and small community-based structures.
6. **Strengthen investment in research, evaluation and impact measurement**, including supporting organisations to develop and implement their own evaluation, reporting and evidence-building frameworks.
7. **Ensure equity of access across funding, participation and cultural infrastructure**, particularly for communities experiencing systemic disadvantage and exclusion.
8. **Invest in implementation, not just policy architecture**, so the five pillars are realised across communities and places.
9. **Strengthen cross-portfolio and cross-government collaboration** to support long-term investment in arts-led social and cultural outcomes.



To truly deliver on the vision of “a place for every story”, government must invest not only in cultural policy, but in the people, organisations, workforce capacity and community infrastructure that make participation possible. This includes sustained investment in Community Arts and Cultural Development practice, equitable funding access, sector capacity building, and the research and evaluation systems needed to demonstrate long-term cultural and social impact.

## **Milk Crate Theatre’s Role in the Cultural Ecosystem**

Milk Crate Theatre works with artists and participants who are too often excluded from cultural participation and representation, including people with lived experience of homelessness, mental ill-health, disability, trauma and systemic marginalisation. Our work is grounded in best-practice Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) methodology.

Our work directly advances the ambitions of the five pillars by:

- Centring lived experience and community voice
- Positioning artists as workers and leaders
- Creating strong place-based cultural infrastructure in non-traditional settings
- Engaging audiences and participants who are often excluded from cultural life

At the same time, our experience reflects a broader sector reality: the small-medium CACD organisations best placed to deliver on these policy ambitions are often those with the least access to stable funding and decision-making power.

## **What Worked Well for Milk Crate Theatre and Our Communities**

For Milk Crate Theatre, Revive publicly affirmed that artists, cultural workers and community-based practice matter.

The policy:

- Recognised artists as workers, aligning with our model of long-term employment, skills development and ethical collaboration
- Reflected the reality that culture is essential to wellbeing, belonging and civic participation
- Reaffirmed that every story matters, including those rarely centred in mainstream cultural production

The five pillars are conceptually strong. If fully realised, they could help create a cultural ecosystem that is more inclusive, resilient and reflective of contemporary Australia.

## **What is CACD?**

Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) is a nationally embedded field of arts and cultural practice that strengthens social cohesion, resilience and collective wellbeing.



Through long-term, place-based and relational arts practice, CACD enables communities to:

- Build connection, trust and belonging
- Participate in meaningful creative experiences
- Engage with diverse cultural perspectives and stories
- Challenge prejudice and social isolation
- Respond to complex social, environmental and economic challenges
- Process lived experience through creativity
- Develop new audiences for Australia's arts and cultural sector

CACD also creates opportunities for audiences to encounter voices and experiences rarely represented on mainstream stages or in major cultural institutions.

Importantly, CACD already operates across health, education, justice, disability, housing, disaster recovery, climate adaptation and community services. Its impact extends well beyond traditional cultural outcomes.

## **The Gap in Revive**

Despite its national reach, impact and ability to deliver on the core pillars, CACD is not explicitly recognised within the current Revive policy framework.

This limits:

- The visibility of an important cross-sector creative practice
- The effectiveness of policy outcomes relating to inclusion, participation and access
- The sector's capacity to respond creatively to major national challenges including social fragmentation, inequality and climate-related disruption

Without CACD, Revive risks overlooking one of the primary ways many Australians meaningfully engage with arts and culture.

This gap is particularly significant given broader national priorities around:

- Equity and disability access
- Cultural diversity and representation
- Audience participation and engagement
- Youth engagement
- Multicultural participation
- Community-led climate adaptation and recovery

Collectively, these priorities identify participation, representation and access as central policy challenges—all areas where CACD already delivers strong outcomes in practice.

## **Alignment with the Revive Pillars**

CACD strengthens all five pillars of Revive.



### **1. First Nations First**

- Supports self-determined cultural activity and storytelling
- Builds long-term relationships with First Nations communities and organisations

### **2. A Place for Every Story**

- Ensures underrepresented voices are visible and valued
- Uses storytelling as a tool for inclusion and equity

### **3. Centrality of the Artist**

- Recognises community artists as essential cultural workers
- Supports collaborative, relational and socially embedded practice
- Invests in pathways for emerging artists and arts workers from diverse backgrounds

### **4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure**

- Positions CACD as essential social and cultural infrastructure

### **5. Engaging the Audience**

- Moves beyond audiences to participation and co-creation
- Reaches communities that face barriers to arts participation
- Builds lifelong cultural engagement through belonging and agency

## **Priority Communities**

CACD plays a critical role in engaging communities often excluded from mainstream arts and cultural spaces. It creates places where people can be seen, heard and connected, and where different experiences and perspectives can be shared with respect. This is how social cohesion is built in practice.

Priority communities include First Nations communities, children and young people, refugee and migrant communities, d/Deaf and disabled communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, Culturally and linguistically diverse communities, Regional and remote communities, Disaster-impacted communities, Communities experiencing racism, exclusion and marginalisation, Communities living with systemic socio-economic disadvantage and older Australians.

These communities should not simply be included in cultural life—they should be actively shaping it.

## **From Australia Council to Creative Australia: Structural Change Without Cultural Change**

The transition from the Australia Council to Creative Australia has often felt more like a structural rebrand than a meaningful shift in culture or decision-making.

While new bodies and initiatives have been introduced:



- Funding still largely favours established and well-resourced organisations
- Community-engaged and place-based practice remains underrepresented in multi-year investment
- There continues to be a disconnect between policy ambition and funding outcomes

This has created a significant contradiction: strong policy language alongside inconsistent implementation.

There have been genuine successes under Creative Australia, particularly in workforce support and crisis response. However, there have also been major gaps in how policy vision translates into funding, assessment and power-sharing across the sector.

Many of the first-phase deliverables under *Revive* focused on establishing structures, bodies and frameworks intended to “set up for success”. That work was important and necessary.

However, from the perspective of the sector, the work of bringing the five pillars to life across organisations, communities and places does not yet feel fully realised.

There is now a need for:

- Investment in implementation, not only policy architecture
- Clearer sector-wide strategies that move beyond internal reform
- Mechanisms that actively redistribute power, not just consult

Without this next step, there is a risk that *Revive* remains a strong vision without becoming meaningful cultural change in practice.

## **Policy and Funding Are Still Not Aligned**

One of the biggest challenges is the ongoing misalignment between policy intent, funding outcomes and funding processes.

The pillars of *Revive* clearly champion:

- Community participation
- Diverse stories and perspectives
- Place-based and culturally embedded practice
- Equity and access
- The central role of artists

Yet community-engaged arts organisations—many of the organisations best positioned to deliver these outcomes—remain chronically underfunded, particularly across the small-to-medium organisations that are often embedded within community.

At the same time, funding processes continue to exclude many of the voices the policy aims to centre.

Current application models often favour organisations and individuals who:

- Have high levels of written English proficiency



- Are familiar with bureaucratic language and funding terminology
- Can dedicate significant staff time to applications and reporting
- Have access to experienced grant writers

This disproportionately advantages larger organisations while creating barriers for:

- Artists and organisations led by people with disability
- First Nations practitioners
- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- Educationally diverse artists and leaders
- Small organisations led by lived experience

Too often, funding success reflects writing capacity rather than artistic quality, community trust or cultural impact.

For organisations like Milk Crate Theatre, this creates a systemic contradiction: we are encouraged to centre equity in our work while operating within systems that are not equitable by design.

If the next National Cultural Policy is to succeed, funding decisions must better reflect policy priorities—and funding processes themselves must become more accessible, inclusive and reflective of the diversity of practice across the sector.

## **Cross-Portfolio and Cross-Government Alignment**

Milk Crate Theatre strongly supports the ambition within Revive for cross-portfolio collaboration and investment. However, this potential has not yet been fully realised.

Many community-engaged arts organisations already work across health, justice, housing, disability and education. There is huge potential for the arts to support key priorities across a range of portfolios and there is an increasing evidence base to support this work.

Milk Crate Theatre's Impact Framework demonstrates the outcomes that can be achieved through engagement in CACD projects.

In 2025, our community reported:

- 94% gained life skills that help them in everyday life
- 87% felt more confident
- 71% have improved mental health
- 71% felt more hopeful about their future

Participant & community feedback highlights the importance of safe, consistent creative spaces:

“My confidence has increased my sense of self, and that is important to speak out when others do not value my boundaries and concerns.”



"The WEAVE program was such a beautiful program because I was able to see young children grow and gain confidence over the week. This made me feel proud of my work because I could see the impact."

"Everyone's focused on creation, but you've also got all these unique individuals with really different lived experiences. It becomes this incredible mix of people and stories."

"This workshop has given confidence, reassurance and direction at a time when I needed it."

A considered and supported approach to work across government portfolios to deliver on key priorities would be welcomed.

## **Evaluation & Impact**

Our leadership of the Creating Impact project reflects our commitment to demonstrating the value of community-engaged arts practice within cross-portfolio funding environments and creating stronger alignment between local, state and federal funding systems.

The *Creating Impact* project group is a sector-led and highly collaborative initiative, bringing together arts organisations, impact measurement specialists (Huber Social), and government and philanthropic funders. Together, the group is working to co-design and test a shared impact framework that reflects the realities of community-engaged arts practice and strengthens how the sector measures, communicates, and advocates for its social outcomes.

By bringing funders and organisations together, the project is helping build:

- Greater coordination and shared understanding
- Better evidence for arts-led social outcomes
- More integrated approaches to funding and evaluation

It also highlights the burden fragmented systems place on small-to-medium organisations through duplicated reporting, disconnected priorities and short-term funding structures.

Better alignment of evaluation and impact measurement practices would allow cultural outcomes to be planned, funded and measured more effectively, rather than through fragmented and duplicative systems.

A more integrated approach could:

- Reduce administrative burden
- Enable coordinated or pooled funding
- Support longer-term planning and sustainability
- Recognise arts organisations as legitimate partners in social and civic outcomes

This would significantly strengthen the sustainability and impact of organisations already delivering cultural, social and community value.



## Capacity Building

Milk Crate Theatre commends the focus of *Revive* on capacity building and highlights its importance as an enabler of a thriving sector. Capacity building must be understood as more than professional development. It requires sustained investment in organisations, artists and community leaders so they can participate equitably in cultural life and build long-term impact.

For community-engaged arts organisations, this includes investment in:


- Evaluation and evidence-building
- Leadership development
- Organisational sustainability
- Infrastructure that supports long-term cross-sector partnerships

These are not optional extras. They are essential enablers of impact.

## Conclusion

A strengthened and fully realised *Revive* policy would create significant opportunities for Milk Crate Theatre and the broader CACD sector to deepen impact, expand participation and build long-term creative pathways for communities too often excluded from cultural life. It would enable organisations like ours to move beyond short-term project cycles and invest more deeply in artist employment, leadership development, evaluation, community relationships and cross-sector collaboration.

More broadly, this is an opportunity to build a cultural ecosystem that is more connected, inclusive and reflective of contemporary Australia. Community Arts and Cultural Development is already generating powerful cultural, social and civic outcomes across the country. With equitable investment, accessible systems and a genuine commitment to implementation, the next National Cultural Policy has the potential to unlock a more ambitious vision for Australia's cultural future—one where participation, belonging and creative voice are recognised as essential to a resilient and socially healthy nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. If further clarification would be helpful, or if you would like to discuss our feedback, please contact our CEO, Jodie Wainwright, .

Kindest regards,



Jodie Wainwright, CEO Milk Crate Theatre