

SUBMISSION TO THE NEXT NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY FROM WRITING NSW

About Writing NSW

Writing NSW is the peak body for writers in New South Wales. For more than thirty-five years we have supported the development, livelihood and recognition of writers across the state, working with thousands of writers each year through courses, mentorships, fellowships, residencies, festivals, professional development and advocacy. We are based at Callan Park in Lilyfield on Gadigal and Wangal Country, and are members of the National Writers' Centre Network (NWCN), a federated network connecting state and territory writers' centres in every Australian jurisdiction. This submission draws on our daily work with writers and on consultation with our members, constituents and sector partners.

Executive summary

Writing is one of the ways a society tells the truth to itself, builds empathy across difference, repairs and renews its social fabric, gives individuals a means of creative fulfilment and meaning-making, and helps a country make sense of its largest challenges, including the climate changes already reshaping Australian life. The conditions under which writing happens in Australia (who can afford to write, who is supported to write, whose stories are heard) are therefore questions of cultural and democratic significance, not only economic ones. The next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity to take those questions seriously.

Writing NSW supports the continuation of the five-pillar framework first established under *Revive*. We endorse the call from across the books and reading sector for the next National Cultural Policy to include a coordinated National Plan for Books and Reading, and we believe Writing NSW and the National Writers' Centre Network are essential to its delivery. The NWCN is cultural infrastructure: a federated network of writers' centres in every Australian state and territory through which emerging writers find their way into a national literary culture.

The next policy must reckon with a hard truth at the heart of our sector. The writers most vulnerable to being pushed out of literary practice are often those already facing structural barriers through income, geography, disability, caring responsibilities or cultural exclusion. The infrastructure that catches them and gives them a literary career, including writers' centres, mentorships, fellowships, residencies and online and regional programs, is the same infrastructure this submission asks the next policy to recognise and resource.

Our recommendations, in summary, are that the next National Cultural Policy should:

1. Develop a coordinated National Plan for Books and Reading, and resource Writing Australia at a level commensurate with its remit, ensuring that larger national books-

and-reading measures are funded separately, rather than from Writing Australia's existing budget.

2. Recognise state and territory writers' centres, together with the National Writers' Centre Network through which they connect nationally, as cultural infrastructure of national significance, and establish through Writing Australia a dedicated multi-year investment stream for services to writers delivered in partnership with the network.
3. Establish enforceable consent, transparency and remuneration standards for the use of Australian writers' work in the training and operation of generative AI systems.
4. Address the ongoing decline in writers' incomes through a coordinated package of measures, including uplift to the Public Lending Right and Educational Lending Right schemes, fair pay frameworks for literary work, and tax-free treatment of grants and prizes.
5. Establish a First Nations-led framework for writing and publishing, with dedicated investment, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protocols and data sovereignty embedded across the systems that touch First Nations writing.
6. Strengthen the wider literary infrastructure that connects writers and readers, including literary magazines, small and independent publishers, bookshops, and public and school libraries, and invest in reading culture and the discoverability of Australian books.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

First Nations storytelling is the oldest continuing literary tradition. First Nations writers, languages and cultural knowledge should be central to the next National Cultural Policy, not only through recognition but through First Nations leadership across the systems that govern writing, publishing, education and reading. Sustained developmental investment in First Nations writers demonstrably works: more than half of participants in Writing NSW's long-running First Nations mentorship program have gone on to achieve publication. Current publishing, metadata, AI and rights systems do not yet adequately recognise the cultural authority of First Nations peoples, and the next policy is an opportunity to address this.

Writing NSW welcomes the establishment of First Nations Arts within Creative Australia as a structural commitment to self-determination, and recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Establish a First Nations-led framework for writing and publishing, with sustained, multi-year investment in First Nations authors, publishers, literary organisations and First Nations-led writing, publishing and reading programs, including in First Nations languages and communities. The framework should resource First Nations leadership pathways across the literary sector, including in publishing houses, festivals, prize juries and editorial roles, so that decision-making power continues to shift in line with the principles of self-determination.

- Embed ICIP protocols and data sovereignty across the systems that touch First Nations writing, including Writing Australia, festivals, education, libraries, digital infrastructure, AI training, metadata and rights management. Such requirements should cover consent, attribution, rights management and benefit-sharing.
- Lift the visibility of contemporary First Nations books in schools, public libraries, bookshops, prize culture, author touring and reading campaigns.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Our literature needs to reflect the breadth of our country: its languages, its regions, its histories, its disagreements, its humour and its hopes.

Across our programs we see this breadth taking shape: regional and remote writers, d/Deaf and disabled writers, LGBTQIA+ writers, and writers working across multiple genres, children's and young adult writing, and emerging publication models and forms. In our most recent member survey, 19% of our writers were based in regional NSW and 58% engaged with our programs solely online. For three years running, the clearest message from our constituency has been the need for stronger regional and remote access to literary opportunities, professional development and literary community.

A Place for Every Story is best served by:

- Continued investment in place-based literary practice: programs that support writers living and working outside metropolitan centres, delivered through writers' centres in partnership with regional councils, libraries and arts organisations.
- Specific support for community-led literary practice by writers from communities whose stories have been historically under-represented, including LGBTQIA+ writers, writers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and d/Deaf and disabled writers. The *Equity: The Arts and Disability Plan 2022–2026* demonstrates how a structured, sector-wide approach to inclusion can be effective and should be extended to support other communities experiencing systemic barriers to participation and representation.
- Support for literary magazines, small publishers and children's and young adult literature: the principal venues in which new and diverse Australian writing first appears in print, and the work through which the readers and writers of the future are formed.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Writing NSW's view is that this pillar is the most consequential of the five. A cultural policy is, in the end, a system of supports for the people who make culture. If those people cannot make a living, the rest of the architecture will collapse.

The conditions of writers' work in Australia are not yet acceptable. Successive surveys of Australian author incomes have shown writers cannot make a sustainable living from their writing, with most authors earning only a small fraction of their income from creative practice. Our own member survey reflects this reality: only 8% of Writing NSW writers earn

the majority of their income from writing; 33% earn under \$50,000 a year overall; 41% spend eleven or more hours each week on their writing in addition to their paid work; and the two most-cited barriers to writing are time pressure from family and caring responsibilities, and time pressure from paid work. Financial reasons are also the most common cause of membership lapse, telling us that even modest costs are pushing writers out of the development pipeline.

The writers Australia is most likely to lose to these pressures are the writers a national cultural policy most needs to support: early-career writers, writers from low-income backgrounds, writers from regional Australia, writers with caring responsibilities, and writers from communities whose stories have been historically under-represented. These are the writers Writing NSW's programs are built around. 71% of our members are emerging or early-career writers, and the development pipeline we run, including fellowships, mentorships, courses, residencies, regional outreach and online access, exists to keep them in the work. The next National Cultural Policy can either consolidate that pipeline or watch it narrow.

Writing NSW recommends:

Fair pay and income

- Continue and expand the work of Creative Workplaces in establishing fair pay benchmarks and minimum standards across the cultural sector, with literature-specific schedules developed in consultation with Writing Australia, the National Writers' Centre Network, the Australian Society of Authors and the broader literary sector.
- Strengthen Public Lending Right and Educational Lending Right schemes, including indexation that reflects real movements in the cost of living and an extension of eligibility to digital and audio formats where this has not already occurred.
- Make grants, fellowship payments and literary prizes tax-free. Grants and prizes are typically modest and irregular. Taxing them as income reduces their value to writers in precisely the situations where they make the most difference.

Creative rights in the digital environment

The unauthorised use of Australian writers' work to train generative AI systems is the most significant rights issue facing our sector. Writing NSW recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Establish enforceable consent, transparency and remuneration requirements for the use of copyright works in AI training, and reject any new copyright exception that would permit the commercial use of Australian writers' work for AI training without consent or compensation.
- Resource the enforcement and dispute-resolution mechanisms that writers and their representative organisations rely on, recognising that individual writers cannot bear the cost of enforcement on their own.

Beyond these immediate measures, the next policy should ensure that writers are explicitly visible in workforce data, vocational frameworks and the broader economic policy settings



that shape Australian working life, including superannuation, parental leave, mental health support and access to income support between projects. It should also continue investment in arts education in schools and in writer skills development at every career stage, delivered through the National Writers' Centre Network in partnership with Writing Australia.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The literary sector's infrastructure is structurally underfunded relative to its national footprint. The next National Cultural Policy is the right place to address this.

A National Plan for Books and Reading, led by Writing Australia

Writing NSW endorses the call from across the books and reading sector, including the Books Create Australia coalition, for the next National Cultural Policy to include a coordinated National Plan for Books and Reading. Books and reading depend on a connected ecosystem: writers, writers' centres, editors, agents, publishers, booksellers, libraries, festivals, schools and readers. A national plan would make that ecosystem legible to government, identify shared priorities across portfolios, and give the literary sector a single coordinated framework. It should be developed in partnership with the sector and led by Writing Australia, with appropriate cross-portfolio engagement.

The establishment of Writing Australia as a council within Creative Australia is the most significant structural change for the literary sector in a generation. For Writing Australia to fulfil its remit, it requires multi-year funding certainty, scope to act strategically (including the ability to commission research and deliver national programs in partnership with state-based organisations), and genuine partnership with the existing literary infrastructure.

Given the scale of the literary ecosystem, Writing Australia cannot reasonably be expected to absorb the cost of a National Plan for Books and Reading from within its existing budget. Larger national investments, including reading promotion, books-and-reading data and metadata infrastructure, export and translation support, and any new sector-wide funding instruments, should be resourced separately. Writing Australia's own funding should remain available to support the literary organisations, programs and people that are its core constituency.

The National Writers' Centre Network as cultural infrastructure

The NWCN is cultural infrastructure. It is a federated network of eight writers' centres, one in every Australian state and territory, that together reach tens of thousands of writers each year through courses, mentorships, fellowships, festivals, professional development, advice and community. The NWCN is the system through which an emerging writer in Wagga Wagga, Broome, Mount Isa, Hobart, Western Sydney, Geelong or Darwin can find their first sustained pathway into a literary life. It is the connective tissue between local literary communities and the national literary culture they feed.

This is not a network that needs to be built. It already exists, built over decades through state-level investment and connected nationally through the NWCN. But state-level support is now uneven and increasingly precarious, varying between jurisdictions,

vulnerable to changes of government, and in several states contingent on Commonwealth example. Without Commonwealth recognition and investment, the network's capacity to serve writers consistently across the country cannot be assumed.

The next National Cultural Policy is the right place to remedy this. Writing NSW recommends that it:

- Formally recognise state and territory writers' centres, together with the National Writers' Centre Network through which they connect nationally, as cultural infrastructure of national significance, in the same way the policy framework already supports other federated systems such as national collecting institutions and national arts training organisations.
- Establish a dedicated multi-year Commonwealth investment stream for emerging writer development services, administered by Writing Australia and delivered through the writers' centre network, complementing existing state-level investment.

Wider literary infrastructure

Writing NSW also urges the next policy to recognise the wider literary infrastructure that connects writers and readers. Literary magazines and small presses are where new Australian writing first reaches readers. Independent bookshops are cultural infrastructure that connects writers with readers and surfaces Australian titles through skilled curation, and they face significant cost pressures that warrant policy support. Public and school libraries are essential reading and community support infrastructure, particularly for Australians in regional and remote areas; access to a properly resourced school library remains uneven across the country, and Writing NSW supports a national framework for school library provision.

Across this infrastructure, climate change is increasingly testing sector resilience. Major Australian literary festivals have been cancelled or rescheduled due to extreme weather, and climate-driven cost pressures on venues, touring and insurance fall hardest on the smallest operators. Multi-year funding with proper indexation, accounting for these pressures, would significantly strengthen sector resilience without large new programs.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

A flourishing literary culture requires not only writers and infrastructure but readers, and the discovery pathways, formats and habits that connect the two. Australian books face significant discoverability challenges in an environment dominated by global digital platforms.

Reading builds connection, understanding and individual wellbeing, and audiences for Australian writing deserve the same policy attention as audiences for any other art form. That attention must extend to all communities, ensuring they can access Australian writing and see themselves reflected in it.

The next policy should:

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- Support the promotion and discovery of Australian books through partnerships with libraries, retailers, schools and digital platforms, and invest in reading promotion across all ages, recognising that reading culture is formed early and that exposure to Australian writing builds lifelong audiences.
- Support export pathways for Australian writing, recognising both the global appetite for Australian stories and that a substantial share of Australian screen, stage, audio and games content originates in or adapts Australian writing.
- Continue and extend the work of *Equity: The Arts and Disability Plan*, and support broader accessibility and inclusion measures across the literary sector, so that d/Deaf and disabled audiences can engage with Australian literature in formats that suit them, and readers from communities historically under-represented in Australian literary culture can see themselves reflected in the nation's stories.

Conclusion

The test of the next policy will be the writers it keeps in the work. To meet that test, it should:

- Include a coordinated National Plan for Books and Reading
- Properly resource Writing Australia
- Recognise the National Writers' Centre Network as cultural infrastructure, and provide for national writer development services through it
- Address the rights and income pressures on writers
- Embed First Nations leadership and Australian readership at its centre

A policy that does these things will leave the writers who most need it measurably stronger than it found them. This is how a national cultural policy ensures that Australian writing remains not only visible, but also viable.

Writing NSW would welcome the opportunity to work with the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia and Writing Australia on its implementation.

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