

# Warakurna Artists Aboriginal Corporation

## Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation 2026

Warakurna Artists Aboriginal Corporation welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the new National Cultural Policy.

Warakurna Artists Aboriginal Corporation is an art centre based in Warakurna Community on Ngaanyatjarra Country, near the Western Australian / Northern Territory border. The organisation supports artists and arts workers across Warakurna and surrounding communities, including Wanarn and Patjarr communities and the broader Western Desert cultural region.

Warakurna Artists is part of a nationally significant network of Aboriginal community-controlled art centres that has developed over more than fifty years into one of Australia's most important cultural sectors. Remote art centres are not simply commercial enterprises; they are living cultural institutions, places of governance, language, teaching, intergenerational exchange, and economic participation.

For communities like Warakurna, the art centre is often one of the only locally governed and culturally grounded organisations operating continuously in community. It is a place where senior people maintain and continue cultural authority, where young people learn through participation, and where cultural knowledge is translated into contemporary economic and creative opportunity.

The current policy framework does not adequately recognise the scale of responsibility carried by Aboriginal art centres, particularly in remote Australia. Across the sector, art centres provide cultural, social and economic infrastructure simultaneously, often while operating with minimal staffing, fragile infrastructure, high freight costs, housing shortages and limited access to basic services.

The themes emerging through the Desert Conference and Sector Strengthening Summit strongly reflect the lived experience of Warakurna Artists and many similar organisations across the Western Desert region:

- Strong culture creates strong business.
- Art centres are safe cultural spaces.
- Language and cultural authority are central to governance.
- Art centres provide intergenerational knowledge exchange.
- Art centres support social wellbeing, leadership and community cohesion.
- Long-term continuity and succession planning are critical.
- Core infrastructure and operational funding remain inadequate for the realities of remote practice.

# **The Role of Warakurna Artists in Community**

Warakurna Artists operates as both a cultural and community institution.

The art centre supports artists to maintain and develop painting practices connected to Tjukurrpa, cultural knowledge and Country. Many artists paint stories connected to significant cultural sites throughout the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and broader Western Desert cultural region, including Mina Mina, Karrku, Wanarn, Lapaku, Lungkata country and important Tingarri sites.

The organisation also supports:

- employment and paid participation for local arts workers;
- intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge;
- language retention and continued use of Ngaanyatjarra language;
- access to exhibitions, collections and national audiences;
- artist travel and representation;
- administrative support for artists and families;
- community engagement and social wellbeing;
- safe spaces for senior people to gather and work.

In remote communities where many forms of employment are limited or inconsistent, art centres provide meaningful and culturally appropriate economic participation. Importantly, this work is flexible and adaptable around ceremony, sorry business, family obligations and seasonal conditions.

The value generated by art centres cannot be measured purely through sales turnover. The sector contributes to:

- cultural continuity;
- preventative health and wellbeing outcomes;
- reduced social isolation for elders;
- youth engagement;
- community stability;
- tourism and regional identity;
- international cultural diplomacy;
- preservation of language and cultural knowledge.

This broader value remains poorly understood within mainstream funding structures.

## **Cultural Authority, Language and Governance**

For Warakurna Artists, cultural authority sits at the centre of governance.

The most effective Aboriginal art centres are not organisations where culture is added onto a business model. They are organisations where business structures exist in service to culture.

Board leadership, senior law people and cultural protocols guide decision-making within the organisation. This structure must be recognised as a legitimate and sophisticated governance framework in its own right.

Many mainstream compliance and reporting systems remain inaccessible to remote communities because they are designed around assumptions of English language fluency, digital literacy, stable staffing and urban infrastructure.

The sector requires:

- more accessible reporting systems;
- stronger language interpretation and translation support;
- culturally informed governance training;
- long-term succession planning for boards and arts workers;
- governance models that recognise Indigenous decision-making structures rather than forcing communities into inappropriate corporate frameworks.

The principle repeatedly raised across the Desert Conference — “For us, by us” — is essential. Aboriginal art centres function best when cultural authority is not sidelined by external administrative pressure.

## **Infrastructure and Operational Reality in Remote Communities**

A major issue facing Warakurna Artists, and many remote art centres nationally, is the severe gap between operational expectations and actual infrastructure support.

Remote art centres are expected to deliver outcomes equivalent to metropolitan arts organisations while operating in conditions that are fundamentally different.

At present, Warakurna Artists is operating through a period of significant infrastructure instability, including:

- degraded buildings and accommodation;
- vandalism and break-ins;
- limited secure storage;
- insufficient staff housing;
- major vehicle shortages and transport limitations;
- unreliable operational infrastructure;
- difficulty attracting and retaining long-term staff due to remote conditions.

These issues are not unique to Warakurna. Across the remote sector, organisations are attempting to deliver nationally significant cultural outcomes while lacking access to safe housing, functioning vehicles, workshop facilities and basic maintenance support.

Infrastructure funding for the sector is often fragmented, short-term or reactive. Art centres require sustained operational investment, not only project-based funding.

Critical areas requiring national policy attention include:

- long-term infrastructure investment;
- staff housing and accommodation;
- transport and vehicle replacement funding;
- workshop and studio upgrades;
- digital infrastructure;
- collections storage and archival systems;
- maintenance funding for remote facilities;
- flexible operational funding responsive to remote realities.

Without this support, many art centres remain structurally vulnerable despite delivering nationally significant cultural outcomes.

## **Workforce Sustainability and Burnout**

The current funding environment often assumes a year-round operational model that is increasingly unsustainable for many remote organisations.

At Warakurna Artists, recent operational experience has reinforced the need for more flexible and adaptive staffing models that respond to climate, remoteness, infrastructure limitations and workforce realities.

The sector experiences extremely high staff turnover due to:

- burnout;
- isolation;
- unrealistic administrative workloads;
- housing shortages;
- increasing compliance expectations;
- lack of succession planning;
- insufficient operational support.

This instability directly impacts artists and communities.

Remote art centre management requires a highly specialised combination of cultural competency, governance facilitation, logistics coordination, financial administration, community engagement and arts industry knowledge. Despite this, operational funding rarely reflects the complexity of the role.

The National Cultural Policy should recognise remote Aboriginal art centre management and arts worker development as a specialist professional field requiring long-term investment.

The sector requires:

- better resourced arts worker pathways;
- long-term leadership development;
- paid training opportunities;
- succession planning;
- remote workforce retention strategies;
- flexible employment structures;

- recognition of seasonal and project-based operational realities.

## **Art Centres as Places of Healing, Continuity and Community Wellbeing**

One of the strongest themes emerging from the Desert Conference was the idea of art centres as places of healing and succession of culture. This reflects an important truth across remote communities.

Art centres are places of joy, laughter, cultural strength and emotional wellbeing.

They provide:

- social connection for elders;
- spaces for cultural teaching;
- positive environments for young people;
- opportunities for families to work together;
- routine, purpose and identity;
- culturally safe places during periods of grief or instability.

For many senior artists, painting is not simply an economic activity. It is a way of remaining connected to Country, memory, family and cultural responsibility.

This contribution should be recognised within broader national conversations around health, ageing, disability support and community wellbeing.

Art centres regularly fill gaps left by other services, often without formal recognition or funding for this work.

## **Market Access and Cultural Integrity**

Remote art centres play a critical role in ensuring ethical market participation for Aboriginal artists.

Community-controlled art centres provide:

- transparent payment systems;
- artist advocacy;
- ethical representation;
- provenance and documentation;
- protection against exploitation;
- long-term career development.

They also create pathways for artists to engage nationally and internationally while remaining connected to community and cultural authority.

Warakurna Artists, like many organisations across the sector, is working toward sustainable long-term market positioning rather than high-volume production. This includes:

- focused exhibition development;
- strengthening relationships with ethical galleries and institutions;
- supporting artists into major exhibitions and awards;
- building long-term cultural and market value;
- supporting senior artists to continue working safely and sustainably.

National policy settings should support slower, culturally appropriate and artist-led models of practice rather than purely output-driven funding frameworks and acknowledge the nature of the fine art market when considering economic modelling.

## **Climate, Country and Mobility**

Remote Aboriginal art centres operate directly within changing environmental conditions.

Climate impacts increasingly affect:

- road access;
- freight;
- travel safety;
- staff retention;
- community infrastructure;
- cultural activities on Country.

At the same time, cultural maintenance often requires mobility.

Bush trips, camps and return-to-Country activities are essential cultural practices and should be recognised as core cultural infrastructure, not optional extras.

For Warakurna Artists, future planning includes greater emphasis on artist-led camps and cultural production on Country, enabling senior people to work in culturally significant locations while supporting intergenerational learning and major artistic outcomes.

These forms of practice are central to cultural continuity and should be directly supported through national policy.

## **What the National Cultural Policy Should Recognise**

The next National Cultural Policy should explicitly recognise Aboriginal community-controlled art centres as:

- essential national cultural infrastructure;
- centres of living language and cultural knowledge;
- major contributors to regional economies;
- providers of social and community wellbeing outcomes;
- places of Indigenous governance and leadership;
- nationally and internationally significant cultural producers.

The policy should move beyond symbolic recognition and commit to structural investment.

# Key Recommendations

Warakurna Artists supports the development of a long-term national strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled art and culture centres.

We recommend:

## 1. Long-Term Core Operational Funding

Provide stable multi-year operational funding that reflects the true cost of remote delivery, including administration, governance, freight, transport, infrastructure and staffing.

## 2. Infrastructure Investment

Establish a dedicated national infrastructure and maintenance fund for Aboriginal art centres, including:

- staff housing;
- studio facilities;
- storage;
- vehicles;
- digital systems;
- workshop upgrades;
- collections care.

## 3. Workforce Development and Retention

Support long-term pathways for:

- Aboriginal arts workers;
- board leadership;
- remote arts administration;
- governance training;
- language-accessible professional development;
- succession planning.

## 4. Recognition of Cultural Governance

Ensure policy frameworks recognise Indigenous cultural authority and governance structures as legitimate and central to organisational decision-making.

## 5. Language Accessibility

Increase translation, interpretation and plain-language support across funding, reporting and governance systems.

## 6. Flexible and Remote-Responsive Funding Models

Allow operational flexibility acknowledging:

- climate;
- cultural obligations;
- ceremony;
- sorry business;
- workforce limitations;
- seasonal operational realities.

## **7. Support for On-Country Cultural Practice**

Recognise camps, return-to-Country activities and cultural production on Country as essential forms of cultural infrastructure and artistic practice.

## **8. Cross-Sector Recognition**

Acknowledge the role art centres play across health, wellbeing, education, language maintenance and community development.

## **Conclusion**

Aboriginal community governed art centres are among the most important cultural institutions in Australia.

They are places where language survives, where Tjukurrpa is maintained, where senior people teach younger generations, where communities gather, and where nationally significant art is produced.

They are also carrying increasing responsibility with increasingly fragile support structures.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to move beyond symbolic recognition and invest seriously in the long-term sustainability of the sector.

For Warakurna Artists, and many organisations like it, the future depends not only on supporting art production, but in recognising that art centres are foundational community infrastructure.

Strong culture creates strong communities. Strong communities create strong art.

Submitted on behalf of Warakurna Artists Aboriginal Corporation.