

Submission to the Australian Government Towards a New National Cultural Policy 2026

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Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy. As an Aboriginal person working across health, Alcohol and Other Drug services, community engagement, cultural healing initiatives, workforce development and systems reform, I have seen firsthand the critical role that culture plays in strengthening identity, belonging, healing, resilience and long term community wellbeing.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture is not separate from everyday life. Culture is deeply connected to language, kinship, Country, ceremony, storytelling, humour, art, music, dance, spirituality, collective identity, community obligations and intergenerational knowledge transfer. It is also deeply connected to healing from the ongoing impacts of colonisation, dispossession, forced removal policies, intergenerational trauma and systemic exclusion that continue to affect many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities today.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are the oldest continuing living cultures in the world and should be recognised not only as foundational to Australia's national identity, but also as living systems of knowledge, governance, education, healing and community resilience. Despite this, Aboriginal cultures and cultural leadership have historically been marginalised within many national systems, including funding structures, policy development processes, institutional governance and economic investment opportunities.

While there have been positive developments under the current Revive framework, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to experience significant barriers in accessing long term cultural investment, decision making authority, infrastructure, workforce pathways, digital capability and sustainable opportunities that genuinely place First Nations peoples at the centre of cultural leadership and cultural development.

Many Aboriginal organisations continue to operate within short term and highly competitive funding environments that limit long term planning, workforce growth and sustainable community led cultural initiatives. In many cases, Aboriginal organisations are also required to compete directly with much larger mainstream organisations for limited funding opportunities intended to support Aboriginal

cultural outcomes. This continues to create structural inequities that can unintentionally limit the growth and long term sustainability of the Aboriginal cultural sector.

At the same time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to demonstrate extraordinary cultural resilience, innovation and leadership across traditional and contemporary cultural spaces. Across communities, Aboriginal people are leading language revitalisation programs, digital storytelling initiatives, cultural healing responses, youth engagement activities, creative enterprises, online education platforms, music, film, visual arts, comedy, fashion and emerging digital industries. Younger generations are also finding new ways to carry culture forward through technology, social media, gaming, podcasting and digital creative environments.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to move beyond symbolic recognition toward genuine structural reform that supports Aboriginal self determination, long term cultural sustainability and community led decision making. This includes recognising culture not simply as entertainment or artistic expression, but as a determinant of wellbeing, a contributor to social cohesion, a workforce and economic driver, and a critical foundation for healing, resilience and future community strength.

This submission strongly supports the continuation of the five pillars identified within the consultation paper, particularly the commitment to First Nations First. However, there is a need for much stronger structural reform, long term investment, cultural authority, Aboriginal led governance and accountability mechanisms if the next National Cultural Policy is to create meaningful and lasting change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Importantly, this policy should not simply focus on preserving culture. It should actively support the growth, evolution and future leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across all areas of Australian society, including education, health, digital innovation, workforce participation, economic development, creative industries and international cultural engagement. The next National Cultural Policy provides an opportunity to help ensure that future generations are empowered to carry culture forward with strength, pride, self determination and cultural integrity.

Culture as a Protective Factor and Determinant of Wellbeing

The current policy discussion appropriately recognises culture as central to identity and national storytelling; however, there needs to be much stronger recognition that culture is also a protective factor and determinant of wellbeing that directly contributes to social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, community cohesion, resilience and long term life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For Aboriginal communities, culture is not an optional or separate component of life. Culture is deeply connected to identity, kinship, spirituality, belonging, language, ceremony, connection to Country, collective responsibility and intergenerational knowledge systems. Strong cultural connection provides a foundation for confidence, self worth, resilience and community stability. It also plays a critical role in strengthening protective factors for individuals, families and communities experiencing adversity.

Across many Aboriginal communities, cultural disconnection has been closely linked to poorer outcomes in health, mental health, Alcohol and Other Drug use, justice involvement, suicide, family violence, homelessness and disengagement from education and employment. The impacts of colonisation forced removal policies, language suppression, racism and intergenerational trauma have significantly disrupted cultural continuity across generations. These impacts continue to influence many of the social and health inequities experienced today.

Conversely, stronger cultural identity and connection have consistently demonstrated positive impacts on confidence, belonging, healing, self determination, educational engagement, community participation and overall wellbeing. Aboriginal people who are supported to engage with culture, language, Elders, Country and community often demonstrate stronger resilience and improved social and emotional wellbeing outcomes. This is particularly important for younger Aboriginal people navigating identity, systemic disadvantage and rapidly changing social environments.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore move beyond viewing culture solely through an arts funding or entertainment lens and instead recognise culture as a core contributor to broader national wellbeing outcomes. Cultural strengthening initiatives should be recognised as legitimate preventative and early intervention strategies that contribute to long term social, cultural and economic benefits across multiple sectors.

This includes recognising and supporting the role of cultural activities within health services, schools, early childhood programs, youth engagement initiatives, justice reinvestment responses, healing programs, suicide prevention initiatives, family support services, community development activities and preventative wellbeing approaches. There is significant opportunity for stronger collaboration between the cultural sector and sectors such as health, mental health, Alcohol and Other Drugs, education, youth justice and social services.

The policy should also support greater integration of Aboriginal cultural healing frameworks into mainstream service systems. Many western systems continue to focus primarily on crisis response models without adequately recognising the importance of cultural reconnection, identity strengthening and community led healing approaches. Aboriginal led cultural healing initiatives should be viewed as essential contributors to long term wellbeing and recovery.

Importantly, cultural investment should not be treated as symbolic, ceremonial or secondary to other policy priorities. Investment into culture should be recognised as an evidence informed strategy that contributes directly to stronger communities, improved wellbeing outcomes, reduced long term service demand and greater social cohesion.

There is also a need for stronger evaluation frameworks that appropriately measure the broader impacts of cultural participation and cultural strengthening. Current funding and evaluation systems often focus narrowly on attendance numbers or short term outputs rather than capturing the long term social, emotional, cultural and community benefits generated through cultural programs and activities.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to reposition culture as a central pillar of national wellbeing, healing and resilience. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, strengthening culture is not simply about preserving history. It is about strengthening future generations, restoring identity, rebuilding community connection and creating pathways toward long term social, emotional and cultural wellbeing.

Long Term Investment and Funding Reform

One of the major ongoing issues impacting Aboriginal cultural development is the prevalence of short term, fragmented and highly competitive funding approaches. Many Aboriginal organisations and communities continue to spend significant time applying for small grant programs that provide limited continuity and little opportunity to establish sustainable cultural systems, workforce pathways or long-term community led outcomes.

The next National Cultural Policy should prioritise longer term funding agreements that support Aboriginal community control, self-determination and locally driven cultural priorities. Funding models should support ongoing workforce development, cultural infrastructure, mentoring pathways, language revitalisation, digital storytelling, community festivals, creative enterprise development and intergenerational cultural learning.

There is also a need for funding reform that better protects and strengthens the Aboriginal community controlled cultural sector. Currently, Aboriginal organisations are often required to compete directly against large mainstream organisations for limited cultural funding opportunities. This creates an uneven playing field, particularly where mainstream organisations have substantially greater administrative capacity, grant writing resources and existing infrastructure. If this approach continues, the Aboriginal cultural sector will continue to face barriers in achieving sustainable growth, workforce expansion and long term cultural leadership.

Consideration should be given to quarantining specific funding streams exclusively for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, particularly where the primary purpose relates to Aboriginal cultural development, language preservation, cultural healing, community engagement or First Nations storytelling. A staged funding model could also be implemented whereby the initial funding round is only open to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and Aboriginal led entities. If funding remains unallocated due to a lack of applications, secondary rounds could then be opened more broadly to other organisations where appropriate. This approach would better align with the principle of self-determination and help strengthen the long term sustainability and capability of the Aboriginal cultural sector.

There is also a need to improve equity in funding access between metropolitan, regional and remote communities. Many remote communities continue to face major barriers relating to infrastructure, internet connectivity, transport, equipment, training and workforce retention. Despite this, these communities hold some of the strongest living cultural knowledge systems in Australia.

Funding frameworks should recognise the additional operational realities experienced by regional and remote Aboriginal communities rather than applying one size fits all models. Greater flexibility in funding timelines, reporting requirements and workforce expectations may also improve participation and long-term sustainability for smaller Aboriginal organisations and communities.

First Nations Leadership and Decision Making

The continued commitment to the First Nations First pillar is critically important and should remain central within the next National Cultural Policy. However, meaningful implementation requires far more than consultation processes or symbolic representation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be involved in genuine decision making roles across all levels of cultural policy development, investment allocation, governance, implementation and evaluation.

For many years, Aboriginal communities have frequently been consulted on policies, programs and cultural initiatives without having genuine authority over final decisions, funding priorities or long term strategic direction. This has often resulted in policies and investment approaches that do not fully align with local cultural priorities, community realities or self-determined aspirations. Moving forward, the policy framework should actively shift from consultation based engagement toward Aboriginal led governance and shared decision making authority.

Aboriginal communities should be supported to determine what cultural investment looks like within their own contexts. The diversity between Aboriginal nations, language groups, kinship systems, regional settings and urban communities means there cannot be a single national approach imposed

uniformly across communities. What cultural strengthening looks like in a remote language speaking community may be very different to the priorities of urban Aboriginal communities or Stolen Generations organisations. The policy must therefore support flexible, community driven approaches that respect local leadership, cultural authority and regional diversity.

There is also a need for stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that Aboriginal leadership is embedded meaningfully within funded systems and institutions. Too often, Aboriginal representation is limited to advisory positions without decision making authority, while major investment, governance and strategic decisions remain controlled externally. Genuine self-determination requires Aboriginal people to hold leadership positions that influence policy direction, resource allocation, workforce development and institutional priorities.

The next National Cultural Policy should encourage stronger Aboriginal governance representation across mainstream cultural institutions, universities, galleries, museums, screen organisations, festivals, collecting institutions, funding bodies and digital creative industries. Representation should extend beyond advisory roles and include executive leadership, board positions, governance authority and long term succession planning pathways.

There is also a need to strengthen investment into Aboriginal leadership development itself. This includes mentoring programs, executive development opportunities, governance training, cultural leadership pathways, creative industry fellowships and support for emerging Aboriginal leaders across arts, culture, digital innovation and community development sectors. Leadership development should not only focus on individual advancement but also on strengthening collective cultural leadership capacity within communities.

Importantly, Aboriginal leadership should not be limited to mainstream institutional settings. Community controlled organisations, Elders groups, cultural authorities, language groups and local cultural practitioners must also be recognised as legitimate and critical forms of leadership within Australia's cultural landscape. Policy frameworks should actively support these community led structures rather than unintentionally prioritising only large mainstream institutions.

The policy should also recognise the importance of cultural authority and cultural governance. In many Aboriginal communities, cultural leadership responsibilities are connected to kinship systems, Elders, traditional knowledge holders and cultural obligations that may differ from western governance structures. Respecting these systems is essential to ensuring culturally safe and culturally legitimate decision making processes.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen Aboriginal participation in emerging areas of cultural leadership including artificial intelligence governance, digital

cultural protection, online content systems, gaming, immersive technologies and international cultural engagement. Aboriginal voices must be involved early in shaping these rapidly evolving sectors to ensure that future cultural systems are ethical, culturally safe and inclusive.

Ultimately, First Nations leadership should not be viewed as a separate or isolated component of cultural policy. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the holders of the world's oldest continuing living cultures and should be recognised as central contributors to Australia's cultural identity, future cultural development and international cultural standing. A genuinely transformative National Cultural Policy must therefore place Aboriginal leadership, cultural authority and self-determination at the centre of both policy intent and practical implementation.

Language, Storytelling and Cultural Continuity

Language is one of the strongest foundations of cultural identity, cultural continuity and intergenerational knowledge transfer. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, language is far more than communication alone. Language carries cultural authority, kinship systems, spirituality, ecological knowledge, history, humour, identity and deep connections to Country. The loss or weakening of language through the impacts of colonisation, forced removal policies and historical suppression has had profound impacts on cultural continuity and community wellbeing across many Aboriginal communities.

The consultation paper appropriately recognises the centrality of language to culture; however, significantly greater national investment and structural support is required if Australia is serious about protecting and revitalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Many language groups continue to face critical risks associated with ageing language speakers, limited workforce capacity, inconsistent funding arrangements and insufficient long term preservation infrastructure.

The next National Cultural Policy should support sustained investment into community led language revitalisation, on Country language learning, school based language education, digital language preservation, translation projects, interpreter pathways, language recording initiatives and intergenerational teaching opportunities. Investment should also support the training and employment of Aboriginal language workers, educators, linguists, translators and cultural teachers to ensure long term sustainability and workforce growth.

There is also a significant opportunity to utilise modern technology to support language preservation and accessibility. Digital platforms, mobile applications, online learning systems, artificial intelligence tools, virtual reality environments and interactive educational resources all provide opportunities to strengthen language learning and cultural engagement, particularly for younger generations

and geographically dispersed communities. However, Aboriginal communities must retain ownership, control and governance over how language data and cultural knowledge are collected, stored and used within digital systems.

Storytelling also remains central to Aboriginal culture and cultural continuity. Storytelling has always been one of the primary ways knowledge, history, values, laws, identity and lived experiences have been transferred across generations. This includes oral storytelling, music, visual arts, dance, ceremony, film, comedy, literature, fashion, digital content creation and contemporary multimedia expression.

The next National Cultural Policy should support contemporary Aboriginal storytelling in all forms, recognising that culture is not static and continues to evolve across generations. Younger Aboriginal people are increasingly engaging through online platforms, gaming, podcasting, streaming services, social media, digital media environments and emerging immersive technologies. These platforms should not be viewed as separate from culture, but rather as modern extensions of storytelling and cultural expression.

There is also an important opportunity to support Aboriginal storytelling that reflects the full diversity of Aboriginal experiences, including urban, regional and remote perspectives. Too often, Aboriginal storytelling has been filtered through externally controlled systems that prioritise deficit narratives or limited representations of Aboriginal identity. Greater support is needed for Aboriginal people to tell their own stories in their own voices and through their own creative and cultural frameworks.

Australia also has a significant opportunity to become a global leader in contemporary First Nations storytelling and digital cultural innovation if appropriate investment, infrastructure and governance frameworks are provided. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are internationally recognised for their depth, resilience and uniqueness. With the right support, Australia could strengthen international cultural engagement, digital creative industries, tourism, education and global cultural exchange through authentic First Nations storytelling and innovation.

Importantly, this growth must occur in ways that protect cultural integrity and cultural intellectual property. The next National Cultural Policy should support stronger protections against the misuse, exploitation or unauthorised commercialisation of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, imagery, language and stories, particularly within rapidly evolving digital and artificial intelligence environments.

Ultimately, protecting and strengthening language and storytelling is not only about preserving the past. It is about ensuring that future generations of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to carry culture forward with strength, pride, identity and self-determination.

Culture, Workforce Development and Economic Participation

Aboriginal artists, cultural practitioners, educators, language workers, storytellers and cultural leaders make substantial social, cultural and economic contributions to Australia. However, cultural work is still frequently undervalued, underfunded and insecure despite the significant role it plays in strengthening identity, preserving cultural knowledge, supporting community wellbeing and contributing to Australia's broader cultural economy.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultural work extends well beyond traditional employment definitions. Cultural practitioners are often expected to undertake community leadership, mentoring, cultural education, ceremony responsibilities, language preservation, conflict resolution, cultural safety advice and intergenerational teaching, frequently without sustainable financial recognition or workforce protections. This creates significant pressure on individuals and communities while limiting long term workforce sustainability.

The next National Cultural Policy should strengthen recognition of cultural work as legitimate workforce participation and economic activity. This includes developing stronger career pathways, traineeships, mentoring opportunities, business support, digital enterprise development and procurement opportunities for Aboriginal creatives and cultural organisations. There should also be greater recognition of informal cultural knowledge holders and Elders who continue to provide critical cultural leadership and teaching within communities.

A stronger Aboriginal cultural workforce strategy should also be considered as part of the broader policy framework. This could include dedicated scholarship programs, paid cultural traineeships, creative industry apprenticeships, leadership development programs, digital skills training, business mentoring and pathways into emerging creative sectors. Partnerships between schools, universities, TAFEs, community-controlled organisations and industry should be strengthened to support long term workforce participation and career development.

There is also an opportunity to better integrate cultural workforce development into other sectors including health, mental health, education, justice, tourism, youth development and community services. Cultural practitioners and creatives should be recognised as contributing to preventative wellbeing, healing, community engagement and social cohesion, rather than being viewed solely within an entertainment or arts context.

The policy should also encourage stronger procurement and commissioning opportunities for Aboriginal creatives and community-controlled organisations.

Governments, institutions and funded organisations should be encouraged to invest directly into Aboriginal owned creative businesses, cultural consultants, language workers, designers, filmmakers, performers and digital creators. Greater procurement targets and culturally informed commissioning processes may assist in building long term economic sustainability within the Aboriginal cultural sector.

There is also a significant opportunity to build stronger connections between culture and emerging industries including digital content creation, artificial intelligence, immersive technologies, gaming, online education and virtual cultural experiences. Younger Aboriginal people are increasingly engaging with culture through digital environments and contemporary storytelling platforms. These emerging industries provide opportunities for cultural preservation, creative expression, entrepreneurship and global engagement.

Investment is needed to ensure Aboriginal communities are not left behind in the rapidly evolving digital economy. This includes improving digital infrastructure, internet access, equipment availability, digital literacy and access to emerging technologies across regional and remote communities. Without equitable access to digital systems and training opportunities, there is a risk that existing inequities will continue to widen.

There is also a need to ensure that the growth of artificial intelligence and digital content systems does not result in the exploitation, misappropriation or unauthorised use of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, imagery, language and stories. The next National Cultural Policy should support the development of stronger cultural intellectual property protections, ethical AI frameworks and Aboriginal led governance approaches relating to digital cultural content.

Importantly, younger Aboriginal people should be supported to participate in these emerging sectors while maintaining cultural integrity, cultural safety and community connection. Cultural innovation and digital participation should strengthen culture, not disconnect people from it. The next National Cultural Policy has an important opportunity to position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples not only as contributors to Australia's cultural future, but as leaders in shaping the future of digital cultural innovation nationally and internationally.

Regional, Remote and Community Based Cultural Infrastructure

Strong cultural infrastructure is essential for long term cultural sustainability, community wellbeing and intergenerational knowledge transfer. However, many Aboriginal communities continue to operate without access to dedicated cultural spaces, recording facilities, creative hubs, performance venues, digital production resources, language centres or culturally safe community infrastructure that supports ongoing cultural practice and development.

In many regional and remote communities, cultural activities are often delivered within overcrowded or shared facilities that were not designed to support cultural learning, creative development, community gatherings or contemporary digital cultural production. This creates ongoing limitations for communities seeking to strengthen language preservation, storytelling, youth engagement, cultural healing activities and local creative industries.

Investment into community based cultural infrastructure should therefore be prioritised, particularly across regional and remote Australia where many communities continue to experience significant infrastructure inequities despite holding some of the strongest living cultural knowledge systems in the country. Cultural infrastructure should be viewed as a long term investment in cultural continuity, wellbeing, social cohesion and economic participation rather than simply as an arts related expense.

Infrastructure investment should include culturally safe multi purpose spaces that support arts, language revitalisation, community gatherings, ceremony, healing activities, youth engagement, digital storytelling, intergenerational cultural learning and workforce development. Community infrastructure should also support flexible use across multiple functions, recognising that many Aboriginal communities require spaces that can respond to local priorities and evolving community needs.

Importantly, infrastructure investment should not be limited to large metropolitan institutions or major national organisations. Smaller community controlled cultural hubs can often deliver significant social, cultural and wellbeing outcomes when adequately resourced. Local Aboriginal organisations and communities are frequently best placed to determine what infrastructure is required within their own settings and how those spaces should operate culturally and practically.

There is also a need to recognise the importance of digital cultural infrastructure. Increasingly, culture is being shared, preserved and expressed through digital platforms including film, podcasting, online education, gaming, music production, social media, virtual experiences and digital archives. Many regional and remote Aboriginal communities continue to face major barriers relating to internet connectivity, access to technology, recording equipment, editing software, digital training and technical workforce support.

Without targeted investment into digital infrastructure, there is a risk that many Aboriginal communities may be excluded from participating fully in emerging cultural and creative economies. Digital inequity also creates risks for language preservation, cultural archiving and the ability for younger generations to engage with and carry culture forward using contemporary platforms.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore support a coordinated approach to strengthening both physical and digital cultural infrastructure across

Aboriginal communities. This could include investment into community recording studios, digital media hubs, mobile cultural production units, language centres, multimedia learning spaces, online cultural education platforms and culturally safe innovation hubs that support both traditional and contemporary forms of cultural expression.

There is also significant opportunity for infrastructure investment to support broader community outcomes beyond the cultural sector alone. Community based cultural hubs can contribute to youth engagement, diversion from justice systems, improved social and emotional wellbeing, workforce participation, local enterprise development, tourism opportunities and stronger community cohesion. In many communities, cultural spaces also become safe environments where Elders, young people and families can reconnect, share knowledge and strengthen community identity.

Funding models should also recognise the higher operational and maintenance costs often experienced within regional and remote settings. Infrastructure investment without ongoing operational support can create unsustainable expectations for communities already experiencing workforce shortages and limited local resources. Long term infrastructure planning should therefore include operational sustainability, workforce support, training pathways and digital maintenance considerations.

Ultimately, strong cultural infrastructure creates the foundation upon which culture can continue to thrive across future generations. The next National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are supported not only to preserve culture, but also to grow, innovate and lead within Australia's evolving cultural landscape.

Recommendations

- Establish long term Aboriginal led cultural investment models that move beyond fragmented short term grant approaches and provide sustainable funding pathways for community controlled cultural development, workforce growth and intergenerational cultural continuity.
- Introduce quarantined and staged Aboriginal cultural funding streams that prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in initial funding rounds before opening remaining funding more broadly where required. This would strengthen self determination, improve equity and support the long term sustainability of the Aboriginal cultural sector.
- Recognise culture as a protective factor and determinant of wellbeing across health, mental health, Alcohol and Other Drugs, education, justice, child protection and broader community wellbeing systems.

- Embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, cultural authority and genuine decision making power across all levels of cultural policy governance, funding allocation, implementation and evaluation processes.
- Increase long term investment into regional, remote and community controlled cultural infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, recording facilities, language centres, multimedia hubs and culturally safe multi purpose community spaces.
- Expand investment into Aboriginal language revitalisation, interpreter pathways, digital language preservation, community led language education and intergenerational storytelling initiatives.
- Strengthen legal, policy and ethical protections relating to Aboriginal cultural intellectual property, including protections against the misuse or unauthorised use of cultural knowledge, language, imagery and stories within digital and artificial intelligence systems.
- Develop a national Aboriginal cultural workforce strategy that supports traineeships, scholarships, mentoring, leadership development, business support, procurement opportunities and long term workforce pathways for Aboriginal creatives, language workers, cultural practitioners and storytellers.
- Support emerging Aboriginal creatives and entrepreneurs through stronger investment in digital innovation, online education, gaming, immersive technologies, podcasting, film, music, artificial intelligence and contemporary cultural enterprise development.
- Improve digital access, connectivity, equipment and technical training opportunities across regional and remote Aboriginal communities to reduce digital inequity and strengthen participation in emerging creative industries.
- Develop stronger cross sector partnerships between culture, health, education, youth justice, community wellbeing, tourism and economic development sectors to support integrated and preventative community outcomes.
- Support Aboriginal led cultural healing initiatives as legitimate, and evidence informed contributors to social and emotional wellbeing, recovery, resilience and community strengthening.
- Increase support for Aboriginal youth engagement initiatives that strengthen cultural identity, leadership development, creative participation and intergenerational cultural learning.
- Strengthen pathways for Aboriginal leadership within mainstream cultural institutions, galleries, museums, universities, festivals, screen organisations,

collecting institutions and digital creative industries, including executive and governance level representation.

- Ensure evaluation frameworks move beyond narrow output measures and appropriately capture the broader social, emotional, cultural, educational and economic outcomes generated through cultural participation and cultural strengthening initiatives.
- Recognise and support Aboriginal cultural practitioners, Elders, educators, storytellers and creatives as a significant workforce contributing to Australia's cultural identity, social cohesion, economic participation and international cultural standing.

Closing Statement

Australia's cultural identity cannot be separated from the world's oldest continuing living cultures. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are not only foundational to Australia's history; they are central to Australia's future. They continue to shape Australia's identity, strengthen communities, contribute to social cohesion and provide enduring systems of knowledge, resilience and cultural continuity that have existed for tens of thousands of years.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to move beyond symbolic recognition toward genuine structural reform that supports self determination, cultural continuity, community leadership and long term investment. If implemented meaningfully, this policy can help strengthen cultural resilience, improve wellbeing outcomes, create sustainable economic opportunities and ensure that future generations continue to carry culture forward with strength, pride and cultural integrity.

Importantly, this policy should recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are living, evolving and innovative. Culture is not confined to museums, galleries or historical narratives alone. It exists within communities, languages, healing practices, creative industries, digital environments, education systems and emerging technologies. The future of culture must therefore support both the protection of cultural knowledge and the growth of new forms of cultural expression led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves.

This submission also strongly encourages the Australian Government to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not simply consulted within the development of the next National Cultural Policy, but are genuine leaders in

shaping, implementing and evaluating its future direction. Long term cultural sustainability cannot be achieved without long term Aboriginal leadership, community control, equitable investment and accountability.

There is also a significant opportunity for Australia to become a global leader in First Nations cultural innovation, storytelling, language revitalisation and digital cultural development. With appropriate investment, governance and infrastructure, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can continue to make substantial contributions not only to Australia's cultural identity and economy, but also to international conversations regarding culture, wellbeing, resilience, sustainability and human connection.

Ultimately, culture should not be viewed as a secondary policy consideration or an optional social investment. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture is deeply connected to identity, healing, belonging, wellbeing, resilience and future opportunity. Investment into culture is therefore an investment into stronger individuals, stronger families, stronger communities and a stronger Australia.

The next National Cultural Policy provides an opportunity to help reset the relationship between government, culture and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through approaches grounded in respect, equity, self determination and genuine partnership. If approached with commitment and accountability, this policy has the potential to create meaningful long term change and leave a lasting legacy for future generations.

*Submission prepared in response to the Towards a New National Cultural Policy
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