

ARTRAGE Submission to Australia's National Cultural Policy Consultation 2026

Building a Stronger National Creative Ecosystem Through Independent Cultural Infrastructure

Founded in 1983, ARTRAGE is one of Western Australia's longest-running not-for-profit cultural organisations and the producer of FRINGE WORLD Festival — the largest arts Festival in Western Australia and winner of the 2025 Gold tourism award for Best Major Festival — alongside year-round cultural programs. For more than four decades, ARTRAGE has played a central role in connecting artists and audiences through accessible, contemporary and large-scale cultural experiences that activate Perth and contribute significantly to the State's creative economy, tourism industry and cultural identity. Through its open-access festival model, artist development initiatives and broad network of venue, community and industry partnerships, ARTRAGE supports thousands of artists and arts workers annually while creating opportunities for cultural participation across metropolitan and suburban communities. ARTRAGE believes creativity is essential civic infrastructure and that investment in arts and culture delivers lasting social, cultural and economic value for communities locally, nationally and internationally.

ARTRAGE welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy and strongly supports a long-term, coordinated national approach that recognises arts and culture as essential social, economic and civic infrastructure.

As the producer of **FRINGE WORLD Festival** — the third largest Fringe festival in the world — and operator of year-round cultural programs including Rooftop Movies, ARTRAGE works at the intersection of artistic development, tourism, hospitality, audience engagement, creative workforce development and city activation. Our experience demonstrates that independent cultural organisations and open-access festivals deliver extraordinary public value, broad participation and substantial economic outcomes, often with comparatively modest levels of government investment.

ARTRAGE supports the overarching principles outlined across the sector, including the need for long-term investment frameworks (10 years+), stronger support for artists and arts workers, greater national coordination across portfolios, and recognition of culture as central to Australia's future social and economic resilience.

Independent Festivals as National Cultural Infrastructure

Australia has developed one of the largest independent festival ecosystems in the world, yet open-access and independent festivals remain unrecognised within national cultural policy settings. ARTRAGE strongly supports the establishment of a National Independent Festivals Framework through the next phase of REVIVE, recognising independent festivals as a distinct category of national cultural infrastructure.

Independent festivals:

- create pathways for artists and creative workers;
- generate significant visitor economy outcomes;
- support seasonal and long-term employment;
- provide accessible entry points for audiences and artists;
- activate urban, suburban and regional centres;
- and foster experimentation, entrepreneurship and creative risk-taking.

Importantly, the open-access festival model reduces gatekeeping and enables artists to directly engage audiences, develop careers and test new work within a live marketplace environment. This model is especially important for independent and emerging artists, multidisciplinary practice and culturally diverse voices.

FRINGE WORLD alone contributes approximately **\$119 million in economic impact annually**, attracts **close to 500,000 attendances** and has distributed more than **\$8.34 million** directly to artists and venues (2026 figure). These outcomes demonstrate the significant leverage and public value generated through independent cultural infrastructure.

ARTRAGE supports the proposed establishment of:

- a National Independent Festivals Framework;
- a National Independent Festivals Council under Creative Australia;
- and dedicated funding streams supporting artist creation, touring, mobility, sector capacity and international exchange.

Long-Term Funding and Reduced Administrative Burden

A major challenge facing the sector is the continued reliance on short-term funding cycles and administratively burdensome reporting requirements. ARTRAGE strongly supports:

- multi-year (10+ years) indexed funding agreements;
- streamlined reporting frameworks;
- improved coordination across government agencies;
- and greater alignment between funding cycles and producing/presentation timelines.

Long-term investment enables organisations to:

- build operational resilience;
- diversify revenue;
- invest in workforce capability;
- undertake strategic planning;
- and leverage greater private sector and philanthropic support.

Stable government investment has been critical to ARTRAGE's ability to build earned income streams that now comprise more than 70% of organisational revenue, demonstrating how sustained public investment can support long-term financial resilience and reduced dependence on government funding over time.

ARTRAGE also advocates for **annual CPI indexation** of government investment to ensure organisations can respond to increasing operational and workforce costs without reducing artistic outcomes or public accessibility.

Centrality of the Artist and Arts Worker

Artists and arts workers must remain central to national cultural policy.

Independent festivals operate as artist incubators, workforce development systems and national touring networks. They **provide practical, real-world opportunities for artists** to develop work, build audiences, generate income and connect to national and international presenters. In 2026 our FRINGE WORLD Festival worked with more than 3000 artists; and directly engaged 337 full time employees, 253 contractors and 86 volunteers (volunteers participate for community connection, not to take the place of essential workers).

In 2026, 48% of all works presented at FRINGE WORLD were created in Western Australia, demonstrating the vital role independent festivals play in **sustaining local creative ecosystems** and **supporting artist career progression**. However the other 52% of artists were national and international reinforcing the value of the connected touring network across Australia and the world.

ARTRAGE supports:

- **nation-wide industry-led skills and training initiatives;**
- **portable long service leave mechanisms for freelance arts workers;**
- **professional development opportunities for independent artists;**
- **and stronger support for touring and export pathways.**

ARTRAGE also supports stronger national and international exchange opportunities to ensure Australian artists can access broader markets, networks and audiences.

FRINGE WORLD regularly hosts national and international delegates and maintains reciprocal relationships with festivals and presenting organisations nationally and internationally to support artist mobility and export opportunities.

Audience Access, Participation and Cultural Inclusion

National cultural policy must prioritise **broad participation and audience development**.

Independent festivals are among the most accessible forms of cultural participation in Australia, reaching audiences across demographics, locations and levels of arts engagement. Open-access festivals encourage discovery, experimentation and low-barrier participation while activating civic and public spaces in highly visible ways. In 2026 our Festival featured works by 55 First Nations artists which is an important contribution to First Nations artists participation and artistic economy.

ARTRAGE supports:

- a national arts and music education strategy;
- increased investment in arts access programs for schools;
- ticket subsidy initiatives to encourage participation;
- and policies that recognise young people as both audiences and future creative contributors.

Children's programming and family participation continue to be a major priority within FRINGE WORLD, supporting lifelong engagement with arts and culture from an early age.

National policy should also recognise the important role festivals play in activating non-traditional and suburban spaces, supporting community connection and extending cultural participation beyond major institutions and CBD venues.

Strong Institutions and Sustainable Infrastructure

Sustainable cultural infrastructure requires investment not only in buildings, but in organisations, people, systems and operational capability.

ARTRAGE supports:

- dedicated investment in fit-for-purpose arts infrastructure;
- reserves rebuilding support for cultural organisations;
- and mechanisms that strengthen organisational sustainability and innovation capacity.

Independent festivals operate large-scale temporary cultural infrastructure requiring significant operational, workforce and compliance capability. These events support artists, audiences, tourism, hospitality and local economies while operating within increasingly complex regulatory and financial environments.

Investment in organisational capability, technology, workforce development and sustainability initiatives is essential to ensuring the long-term viability of Australia's independent cultural sector.

ARTRAGE also supports **extending Public Benevolent Institution (PBI) status eligibility** and **broader tax reform measures** to strengthen the not-for-profit creative sector and encourage greater philanthropic investment.

Cross-Portfolio Coordination and Cultural Leadership

Culture should not sit separately from broader national policy priorities.

ARTRAGE strongly supports **greater coordination across arts, tourism, education, international engagement and economic development portfolios**. Independent festivals demonstrate how cultural investment simultaneously delivers:

- economic impact;
- tourism outcomes;
- workforce development;
- community wellbeing;
- place activation;
- and international engagement.

National cultural policy should position creativity as a core national capability rather than a peripheral sector investment. Australia requires a coordinated long-term cultural leadership framework that recognises arts and culture as essential to national identity, social cohesion, innovation and economic resilience.

A brief word about working in Western Australia

Arts organisations operating in Western Australia face a unique set of structural challenges shaped by **geography, population distribution and market isolation**. Distance from Australia's eastern states significantly increases freight, touring, accommodation and workforce costs, while also limiting access to national touring circuits, philanthropic networks and corporate partnership opportunities concentrated in larger eastern-state markets. These pressures are particularly acute for independent artists and small-to-medium organisations, which often operate with limited infrastructure and staffing capacity while still delivering nationally significant cultural outcomes. At the same time, Western Australian organisations **play a critical role in ensuring local stories, artists and audiences remain connected to national and international cultural conversations**. While based in Perth, ARTRAGE also works beyond the metropolitan area, including regional activity in locations such as Busselton, recognising the importance of extending cultural participation, artist opportunities and creative experiences across the State. National cultural policy must acknowledge these **unique operating conditions** and ensure funding, touring, infrastructure and policy settings adequately support the realities of cultural production and audience development in Western Australia.

Conclusion

ARTRAGE believes Australia has an opportunity to build a more ambitious, coordinated and future-focused national cultural framework that properly recognises the value of independent cultural organisations and festivals within the nation's creative ecosystem.

Independent festivals are not simply events. They are:

- **artist development systems;**
- **cultural infrastructure;**
- **visitor economy drivers;**
- **workforce generators;**
- **civic activators;**
- **and vital platforms for Australian stories and creative participation.**

With strategic long-term investment and policy recognition, organisations such as ARTRAGE can continue to deliver substantial cultural, social and economic value for artists, audiences, communities and the nation as a whole.

Jo Thomas, CEO & Creative Director

ARTRAGE Inc