

## Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation

**Matthew Kelly, co-creator, The Listies**

I support the development of a new National Cultural Policy. I write as a practitioner with eighteen years making theatre for children, and I want to address Pillar 3, Centrality of the Artist, specifically how changing conditions for creative work affect independent artists in the children's theatre sector.

When I started out I made coffees to pay rent. That is normal for emerging artists and I accepted it. What made the difference, as my practice grew, was a small ecosystem of supplementary income that grew alongside it. DVDs of our shows. CDs and physical albums. Merchandise in the foyer after shows, when kids were still buzzing and parents were in a generous mood. In children's theatre that money did several jobs at once: it covered living costs, funded new work, and compensated for a fundamental economic reality of our sector. You charge less for a ticket. That is not a choice, it is the reality of the audience.

### **That ecosystem is gone.**

Nobody owns DVD or CD players anymore. Streaming has replaced physical music sales but the economics went to the platforms, not the artists. Merchandise is expensive to produce, costly to transport, and generates wasteful dead stock. We used to earn \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year from merch. We now earn around \$100 a month. A full play of our 20-track album on Spotify earns \$0.08. To replace that \$15,000 we would need our album played 187,500 times a year.

The obvious response is: pivot. Find new revenue models. But pivot to what? YouTube Kids does not allow advertising. We have no control over what ads appear in our podcast, and the ethics of advertising to children is a separate problem entirely. Patreon and subscription models turn professional practitioners into buskers, demanding a volume of content production that is incompatible with building a practice from scratch. They work, modestly, once you have an established audience. They do not work when you are trying to build one. These models do not centre the artist. They centre the platforms. The platforms get paid more than the artists do. That is not a problem artists can solve by being more entrepreneurial. It is a structural problem that policy needs to address.

Our company would not have survived without that early income. It is what allowed us to get good, to build an audience, and through that a sustainable career. I am not confident that path still exists, let alone for artists working in the children's sector where the economics are hardest.

I am one of the lucky ones. The Listies have toured nationally and internationally for eighteen years. We have won awards at Edinburgh, Melbourne and Sydney. We have made television for the ABC and built a podcast with over three quarters of a million downloads. We have built something real. We have also burnt ourselves out doing it. When the supplementary income disappeared we did not work less. We worked more.

The Next Generation Now report (Abrahams and Giles AM, commissioned by Creative Australia, 2024) found that children's attendance at performing arts events fell from 57% to 31% between 2017 and 2022. The causes are multiple. But a sector that cannot sustain its artists cannot reverse that trend. Fewer viable careers means fewer new works, fewer tours, and fewer children who encounter live art at all. The research tells us arts engagement builds emotional skills, reduces anxiety and supports children's social development. One in four Australian children now enters school developmentally vulnerable or at risk. We know what helps. We need the artists to deliver it.

I call for a future that sees new artists entering the children's and families sector, that ensures new Australian work is made and toured, and that sees children across the country growing up with live theatre as a normal part of childhood rather than a privilege of postcode or income. The artists and the appetite are there. What is missing is policy that takes seriously the economics of sustaining them.

I ask the next National Cultural Policy to commit to ring-fenced creative development funding for artists working in children's theatre, at both emerging and mid-career stages, explicitly designed to replace the creative time the market once provided and no longer does.

Sincerely,

**Matthew Kelly** Co-creator, The Listies May 2026