

**New National Cultural Policy Public Consultation 2026**  
**Submission from the Yuin Folk Club Inc.**  
**and the**  
**Cobargo Folk Festival**  
**Cobargo, NSW**  
**May 2026**

## **About the Yuin Folk Club and Cobargo Folk Festival**

The Yuin Folk Club Inc. (YFC) is a registered charity and community-led, not-for-profit organisation based in Cobargo, a village of around 800 people on Djiringanj Country of the Yuin Nation, in the Bega Valley, NSW. Incorporated in 1996, the YFC's purpose is to foster a thriving, independent folk and roots music community in Cobargo and the region.

The YFC produces the annual Cobargo Folk Festival, now in its 30th year. The festival is an award-winning, three-day celebration of folk, roots, First Nations, world music, spoken word, dance, storytelling and community spirit, held each February/March. The festival is produced and delivered by a year-round volunteer organising team, and approximately 380 volunteers who come to Cobargo from across the country to help deliver the event.

The 2026 festival presented around 70 acts featuring more than 369 individual artists and 40 youth performers across five stages. The festival includes a dedicated First Nations program, The Crossing Youth Stage for emerging young performers, KidBargo! children's festival, poetry and spoken word, dance sessions, workshops, food and craft markets and more.

Beyond the festival, the Yuin Folk Club invests festival surpluses and raises funds for the next festival, for year-round workshops, concert series, small grants for regional artist development, funding indigenous music initiatives, volunteer training and certification. We have also provided significant support for infrastructure improvements at the Cobargo Showground, a NSW Crown Reserve where the festival is held. After the Black Summer fires of 2019/20, the YFC was the catalyst for raising almost \$800,000 in bushfire recovery funds, much of that from musicians and festival supporters.

The 2025 Cobargo Folk Festival drew more than 3,300 unique attendees to Cobargo across the festival weekend, with 72% travelling from outside the Bega Valley. It generated close to \$550,000 in direct expenditure and more than 9,000 volunteer hours over the year, a contribution of time and labour that no ticket price can adequately capture<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> A conservative itemised accounting of core festival activities reaches approximately 9,250 hours. It likely understates the true contribution. Our own volunteer surveys put the true volunteering figure at 15,700 hours annually in 2025, reflecting the full depth of activity that keeps a thirty-year community cultural organisation running. This figure is consistent with volunteer surveys conducted in previous years, confirming it as a reliable measure of community contribution rather than an aberration. Volunteers bring skills they maintain at their own cost, such as first aid and safety certifications, technical qualifications, specialist expertise, and contribute informal promotion and word-of-mouth marketing that no budget could easily replicate. volunteer hour counts. At a mid-level arts worker rate of \$40 per hour, the surveyed 15,700 hours represents \$628,000 in unpaid community labour every year, a co-contribution that current grant frameworks rarely recognise nor reward.

In a village that has weathered drought, fire and economic hardship, the festival endures as a source of collective pride and proof of what this community can do.

The Cobargo Folk Festival is one of some 70 folk and roots festivals operating nationally. We make this submission from the perspective of a medium-sized, volunteer-run, community-owned folk festival in rural/regional Australia. These organisations make a critical contribution to Australia's cultural life and to cultural infrastructure in the regions but remain chronically under-recognised and under-resourced in national cultural policy.

## **Executive Summary**

The Yuin Folk Club made a submission to the 2022 review of Australia's National Cultural Policy. We write now from a position of lived experience of what that policy made possible for us and how we hope the next policy will help us build on this. In 2022, we were deep in recovery from the 2019–20 bushfires yet optimistic about the future. In 2026 we can report that our optimism was warranted, our progress is real but the work is unfinished.

This submission addresses all five pillars. It makes recommendations for what we believe the next policy needs to do to close the gap between its stated intentions and the on-the-ground reality of the organisations that carry much of Australia's cultural life in the regions.

Our recommendations are grouped under the five pillars and summarised at the end of this document.

## **What has changed since 2022**

### *Introduction of Revive Live*

Revive and its Revive Live grant program helped to rebuild our festival as we brought it back to life after the Black Summer bushfires and Covid.

Revive prompted the NSW Government's Creative Communities policy, which has a welcome focus on regional cultural activity and infrastructure. We received Create NSW two-year funding to support CoMAC (Cobargo Music Arts Culture), a new, year-round program of workshops, concerts and community events, demonstrating what can be achieved when a volunteer-run organisation has sustained resourcing.

We are grateful and we are building on the momentum. But the structural challenges confronting the core revenue-generating activity of our organisation, the Cobargo Folk Festival, have not been resolved. Youth participation has declined dramatically since Covid. Production costs continue to rise faster than ticket prices in economically disadvantaged regional areas can absorb. Young people with creative talent still face a fundamental choice between a cultural career and leaving the region. As commercial festivals and venues disappear, artists are increasingly turning to those independent festivals still standing to meet the income shortfall, a gap that community festivals are ill-equipped to fill alone.

And a new threat has emerged as generative AI is disrupting the economics of creative work in ways that will disproportionately harm regional creators who are least able to absorb the impacts.

## **Pillar One: First Nations First**

We urge more support for community folk festivals to build long-term, ongoing relationships with local First Nations communities and Elders, recognising that genuine cultural partnership cannot be built within a single grant cycle and requires sustained investment.

The Cobargo Folk Festival works closely with the Djiringanj people of the Yuin Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which the festival is held. When the folk club started, permission to use the Yuin name was received through the support of Yuin Elder [REDACTED]

Our First Nations' Program is central, not a token addition to our festival. We engaged a Yuin Elder First Nations Program Coordinator/Cultural Advisor in 2019. Together we create spaces for sharing cultural knowledge, showcasing Indigenous musicians, storytellers, artists and Elders, with the Yuin Elders' Yarning Tent as a focal point for knowledge sharing. We program First Nations artists across all stages and we commission new collaborative works that bring First Nations and non-Indigenous artists together. The most recent commissioned work was "Djinjnuurun Yangamang - Sparkling Stars Sing", a series of Yuin Stories set to music and dance, which was produced for and presented at the 2026 Cobargo Folk Festival.

Community folk festivals can, and should be, accessible and authentic venues for First Nations cultural participation in regional Australia. We are embedded in Country, working in developing partnerships with local First Nations communities and programming First Nations artists in settings that foster genuine cultural sharing and exchange rather than simply curated performance. The next National Cultural Policy should recognise and support this.

Current funding architecture does not support this work. We can find no funding mechanism at Federal or NSW state level that supports a non-Indigenous community organisation like the Yuin Folk Club to fund an ongoing, embedded First Nations cultural advisor or to sustain a long-term cross-cultural partnership. Existing First Nations arts funding flows to First Nations-owned organisations, while general arts and festival funding supports discrete projects and events. There is no clear pathway to fund the sustained cross-cultural partnership work that sits between these two streams, the relationship-building, cultural advising, and embedded leadership that makes genuine First Nations co-design and participation in our folk festival and other activities possible.

### **Recommendations**

These recommendations have been co-developed with our First Nations Program Coordinator and Cultural Advisor.

#### **Recommendation 1**

Dedicated ongoing funding for First Nations cultural coordination roles in regional volunteer-run cultural organisations, recognising First Nations cultural leadership as an ongoing institutional role, not a one-off engagement.

#### **Recommendation 2**

Dedicated funding streams for First Nations cultural programming and performance within community festivals, with flexible acquittal requirements that reflect the relational and ceremonial nature of First Nations cultural practice.

### Recommendation 3

Support for community festivals to build long-term, ongoing relationships with local First Nations communities and Elders, recognising that genuine cultural partnership cannot be built within a single grant cycle and requires sustained investment.

## **Pillar Two: A Place for Every Story**

We would like to see the next National Cultural Policy treat regional community folk festivals as creators, custodians and champions of the stories that communities tell about themselves. These roles are already being displaced and undermined by streaming platforms, touring productions and content strategies developed in capital cities.

Folk musicians are the custodians and contemporary creators of Australia's diverse stories: from First Nations songlines to migrant traditions, from frontier ballads to contemporary social commentary. These are place-based narratives that commercial music rarely captures and that streaming algorithms actively suppress, directing Australian audiences toward North American or European content regardless of the richness of the local cultural landscape.

The Cobargo Folk Festival is a living demonstration of what culturally diverse, community-rooted music and storytelling looks like in practice. Our 2026 program offered audiences First Nations rap and hip-hop, bluegrass, alt-country, Hazara music, West African rhythms, Chinese blues, Celtic and Catalan sounds, Scandinavian nyckelharpa, the multi-cultural “Western Sydney Sound” and more. This was a more diverse range of performers and songwriters telling the stories of this country and this region than might be found in more commercial settings. This is the diversity of Australian cultural life, expressed in one place, over one weekend, in a village of 800 people.

Folk festivals like ours create and hold spaces where stories can be told by independent artists with authentic, original voices. These are artists who cannot get much traction in commercial venues, whose work does not fit the algorithms, and whose audiences are real communities. These are not niche stories. They are the stories that define who we are as regional Australians: stories of place, of resilience, of the land and the people who live on it, of what it means to belong somewhere specific rather than everywhere in general.

The Cobargo Folk Festival is also an enabler, extending its role as a home for community cultural life through initiatives like “It Takes a Village” (a free fringe event held in our village before the actual festival), CoMAC (Cobargo Music Art and Culture). CoMAC is an annual program of workshops and concerts that operates year-round, which together with our Ideas from the Edge conversation series and poetry festival-within-a-festival, brings diverse voices, stories and perspectives to regional audiences.

Without folk festivals like ours, regional voices and authentic Australian stories will disappear, displaced by external narratives produced at scale, increasingly by AI, designed for likes and follows rather than art, insight and connection. The space will be dominated by content that is not Australian, projecting a version of ourselves that is at odds with who we are and where we live.

Our work to resist this requires sustained investment but the return is a creative community producing and promoting original work that is authentically Australian, connected, resilient and linked by a genuine sense of belonging

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 4**

Recognition within the National Cultural Policy of folk, roots and acoustic music festivals as essential infrastructure for place-based storytelling and regional cultural identity, not as niche genre events but as community institutions of national cultural significance.

### **Recommendation 5**

Investment in local curation, community media and digital archiving, including community radio, independent regional platforms and festival living archives, that champions place-based stories, makes regional cultural production permanently and publicly accessible - locally, regionally and nationally.

## **Pillar Three: Centrality of the Artist**

We are grateful recipients of Revive Live funding, which we have used to support the participation of more than 736 Australian performers and 90 youth performers at our 2025 and 2026 festivals. We welcome the decision to continue this program.

### *Role of folk festivals in artist development*

We call for more support for artist development, targeted at regional musicians and performers, that recognises the lack of proximity to industry networks, studios and collaborators that urban artists take for granted.

We particularly seek greater recognition of the role of community folk festivals in regional artist development. This role is almost entirely invisible in national cultural policy. The Cobargo Folk Festival supports artists at every stage of their careers: providing well-paid performance opportunities with professional production values, letters of support for grant applications, introductions to bookers and promoters, and stepping stone pathways to larger national and international festivals.

A regional musician who has performed on the Cobargo main stage before a knowledgeable, multi-generational audience, supported by professional sound and lighting and promoted through festival marketing, is a fundamentally better proposition to international bookers and promoters than one who has only played local venues. Regional festivals are where emerging artists prove themselves and where the networks form that open doors to national tours and international opportunities.

### *Artist remuneration*

Artists need fees that reflect their expertise and the real costs of developing their craft. Increasingly, artists, both local and international, are requesting higher remuneration, yet there is an obvious gap between what the regional market can bear and what artists reasonably expect. Regional folk festivals, operating within tight financial constraints and

geographic disadvantage, cannot close this gap alone. Performance income pays artists to present existing work but it does not fund the creation of new work. Without direct investment in the creative process through grants, commissioning programs, residencies, and creative development support, repertoire stagnates and regional artistic careers struggle to survive.

Many Governments in like-minded countries recognise the challenges confronting artists and invest accordingly. Canada funds dedicated streams for recording, touring, and export-readiness. Scotland's Made in Scotland program presents Scottish artists to international promoters and funds their international touring. Ireland's Arts Council runs creative development bursaries and touring support; Culture Ireland supports artists at strategic international festivals and venues; and Ireland has committed in 2026 to making permanent a Basic Income for the Arts.

As a small festival, we benefit from this funding as it brings us international touring artists within our budgets. We have programmed many Culture Ireland and Made in Scotland artists as a result of that support. Australia should match this investment for our own artists, and recognise that regional folk festivals can contribute to tour-readiness.

### *Streaming algorithms, AI and regional artists*

Finally, as mentioned above, we are extremely concerned about the impact of streaming algorithms and AI on independent and regional artists, especially those without major label backing who are effectively invisible to their own audiences. The threats are well-documented.

For independent regional folk and roots artists, this invisibility is acute. Regional artists have less capacity to generate the activity that streaming algorithms reward, ie: frequent releases, playlist placement, marketing activity, industry networking. Distance adds cost and friction at every step. The result is that some of Australia's most distinctive place-based storytelling, the music most deeply rooted in Australian community and cultural identity, is the content least likely to surface on the platforms where most Australians now listen.

We would like to see the next National Cultural Policy tackle the algorithmic suppression of Australian music on streaming platforms as a market failure requiring direct regulatory response and go further than the Australian Content Requirement legislation passed in November 2025, which leaves music unaddressed.

There is also a cultural heritage risk from AI particular to the folk sector that has not yet received adequate policy attention. Folk music is a living tradition built on a shared repertoire of songs, tunes and arrangements passed down, adapted and performed communally across generations. Much of this material exists in festival recordings, community archives, and the work and living memories of independent and regional musicians. The scraping of this material by AI deprives musicians and songwriters of revenue, steals intellectual property without attribution, and undermines festivals like ours that depend on the vigour and sustainability of an original live music sector. It is also the appropriation of our cultural heritage for commercial ends.

We would like to see a new national cultural policy treat this as a distinct and urgent category of harm. New policy could protect independent artists by requiring that Australian artists give

consent before their work is used to train AI systems, and that they are credited and paid when it is; update moral rights protections so that AI cannot legally reproduce an artist's style or sound without permission; ensure that human musicians are not replaced by AI-generated music in any publicly funded cultural context; and commission research specifically into how AI is affecting regional and independent musicians, including in the folk and roots sector.

## **Recommendations**

### Recommendation 6

A direct artist development fund for regional Australian artists providing grants for recording, commissioning, creative development, national touring and export-readiness support.

### Recommendation 7

Recognition within the National Cultural Policy of community folk festivals as artist development institutions, with dedicated funding streams that support festivals in their artist development role rather than treating performance fees as the sole measure of support for artists.

### Recommendation 8

A federal touring support program that specifically addresses the geographic cost inequities faced by regional and remote folk festivals covering artist travel, accommodation and ground transport costs that are structural rather than discretionary, and that cannot be managed away through organisational efficiency.

### Recommendation 9

Investment in a dedicated ongoing program supporting folk festivals to book quality artists at appropriate rates, building on the model established by the Revive Live initiative. Acquittal frameworks for artist travel and accommodation funding that require festivals to book and pay these costs directly, ensuring government support translates into reduced net costs rather than being absorbed into artist fees.

### Recommendation 10

Federal policy intervention addressing the suppression of Australian regional and independent content by streaming platform algorithms, including exploring content quotas along the lines of those that have long protected Australian content on broadcast television and radio, and requiring platform operators to demonstrate measurable investment in the discovery and promotion of Australian regional content.

### Recommendation 10a

Address the AI threat to cultural heritage. Adopt a policy that requires that Australian artists give consent before their work is used to train AI systems, and that they are credited and paid when it is; update moral rights protections so that AI cannot legally reproduce an artist's style or sound without permission; ensure that human musicians are not replaced by AI-generated music in any publicly funded cultural context; and commission research specifically into how AI is affecting regional and independent musicians, including those working in the folk and roots sector.

## Pillar Four: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The Yuin Folk Club has delivered the Cobargo Folk Festival for nearly thirty years, with two interruptions: the first caused by the 2019–20 Black Summer fires, the second by the COVID pandemic. The festival is thriving because it's a place-based event, embedded in our community, sustained by volunteer labour, underpinned by community trust and the shared belief that this event really matters. This resilience is the defining characteristic of many community-run folk festivals and it is what distinguishes them from commercially operated events, many of which have collapsed in the past three years.

### *Festivals as socio-cultural infrastructure*

Our festival is more than a one-off event. It is a key deliverable of an organisation with a year-round presence, a long-term vision, and an established role in the cultural and social life of our region. The festival is what we do; community infrastructure and community development is what we are.

Our 2022 submission pointed out that volunteer-run regional organisations were being asked to deliver socio-cultural infrastructure on volunteer goodwill alone, without the sustained capacity that makes programs consistent, evidence-generating and replicable. We have been delivering community development benefits for many years, but on an ad hoc basis, as volunteer capacity allows.

Recurrent core funding transforms community folk festivals from organisations living from event to event, into organisations capable of planning, investing and growing. It frees volunteer energy from fund-raising, endless grant-writing and financial anxiety to focus on the artistic and community work that makes these events worth funding in the first place.

We can demonstrate exactly what becomes possible when that capacity exists. We have secured Create NSW two-year funding to deliver a program of community cultural activity. This includes partnering to deliver a highly successful, new youth-driven music festival called Southern Lights, which was launched in April 2026, led by a renowned regional digital artist, with the YFC, Griffith and RMIT Universities and other regional community arts organisations. Southern Lights brought together some 30 young people in a four-day intensive with professional artist-mentors across music, performance, production and digital media. Participants co-created original work and took real leadership roles in producing a public event. The project showed what can be achieved when young people are given genuine creative responsibility and professional support.

The YFC is now seeking further funding to deliver the Cobargo Folk Festival Living Lab, a four-year, structured community development program for young musicians, performers, artists and event managers, providing focused training and mentoring, creating pathways and giving a hands-on, authentic, experience of event delivery. We have shown that there is an appetite for this in our region, especially amongst young people who have ambitions and interests that are not being satisfied in schools. We have a proven model that meets young people where they are, provides practical experience, bridges generations, documents replicable practice and generates rigorous evidence for the sector.

The lesson is clear: the gap between a good volunteer-run festival and its potential as a fully realised community development program, with measurable, replicable outcomes, is not a gap of ambition or capability. It is a structural gap of resourcing, recognition, and sustained investment.

### *The grant funding challenge*

But where does an organisation like ours sit in a government policy framework? Are we art and culture, or tradition, heritage and multicultural activity? Are we community development, youth engagement and disaster resilience? Are we regional development? Are we mental health and wellbeing? We would argue that we are all this and more. Which is probably why policy-makers find it so difficult to place folk festivals and stick us in the too hard basket, and why we must spend hours chasing grant funding from many different sources. More cross-sector thinking and approaches would benefit the regional cultural sector enormously.

Funding bodies have not yet fully recognised this work for what it is, and without that recognition, the infrastructure to do it consistently cannot be built. Coordination is part of what is missing, but the deeper problem is that festivals are funded as events, not as the ongoing cultural and community development programs they already are. The next policy might close this gap, not just acknowledging it, but funding the structural support that turns ad hoc impact into lasting change.

National cultural policy, and the grant programs that flow from it, continue to treat community folk festivals as projects rather than vital social capital and community infrastructure. The consequences are severe. Opportunity is lost. Programs that fund new initiatives rather than proven organisations require community festivals to spend scarce volunteer capacity chasing grants for activities that should be considered core operations. Existing grant assessment frameworks, benchmarked against metropolitan costs, fail to take into account freight, travel and distance penalties faced by rural and remote regional festivals. Grant systems that run on inflexible government timetables that conflict with festival delivery schedules force organisations to choose between committing to contracts they may not be able to honour, or programming conservatively on the assumption that funding will not arrive in time.

Many grants also require significant cash co-contributions from applicants. Community-run volunteer organisations contribute enormously to the cultural programs they deliver through volunteer labour, community infrastructure and in-kind support rather than cash. This is not a limitation, rather it is the model. Grant programs that require cash co-contributions are designed for larger organisations with staff, reserves and annual budgets and so excludes those community organisations that could do most with new, recurrent funding.

Organisations like ours, with proven records of delivery, deep community roots and demonstrated capacity, have almost nowhere to turn for the investment needed to mature into fully resourced organisations. The funding landscape rewards beginnings, pilots and projects. It has little to offer organisations that have already proved themselves and are ready for the next stage.

We also note the tendency of partnership funding models to extract value from community organisations without adequately resourcing them. When larger organisations apply for partnership grants, they frequently include smaller community groups in their consortia to

strengthen their applications drawing on decades of demonstrated delivery, community trust and volunteer capacity they could not replicate independently. The community organisation contributes the legitimacy that made the grant possible but holds neither the funding nor the decision-making authority. Partnership grant programs should require that community organisations are genuine co-designers rather than subcontractors, and allow funding to flow to them in proportion to their contribution.

### *New opportunities*

We draw attention to something our 2022 submission could only anticipate: the new cultural spaces emerging from disaster recovery. Cobargo's rebuilt main street now includes a theatrette, exhibition areas, and al fresco performance spaces that need programmers, producers, managers, and technical crews.

After the kind of disaster that our region experienced, capital investment through government grant funding in cultural infrastructure is often a vital part of the recovery process. But it may fail without also investing in the people who can activate the spaces and make them work. The skilled people to fill those roles do not yet exist in sufficient numbers locally because there has never been a structured pathway to develop them. We would like the next policy to recognise the importance of this connection.

### *Potential funding models*

The most effective use of recurrent operational funding for community-run festivals may not be to replicate the staffing model of commercial events, but to address the structural vulnerabilities that most threaten long-term sustainability. On the cost side, recurrent funding directed at core production expenses such as tent and temporary infrastructure hire, sound and lighting, insurance, compliance requirements, including insurance, freight, utilities and performer fees including travel and accommodation, would relieve the most acute and rapidly escalating financial pressures.

On the people side, the answer may not necessarily be to replace volunteers with permanent paid staff, which risks undermining the community culture that makes these festivals resilient but to enable the introduction of modest stipends for key volunteer team leaders who carry disproportionate loads of year-round planning, coordination and institutional knowledge, and to engage contractors to handle the relentless administrative burden to ensure compliance, accountability and transparency. Together, fixed cost relief, direct performer cost support, administrative resourcing and volunteer stipends may constitute a targeted, efficient and culturally appropriate model for recurrent investment.

### *Free government events: unintended consequences*

We also wish to raise the issue of government-funded free events. We are not opposed to government investment in free cultural events as they serve genuine public access goals that we share. However, these events do not simply compete for audiences on a given weekend. They progressively shape community expectations about what cultural activity should cost and what it should look like. When free government events feature high-profile acts and high production values, they set a benchmark that volunteer-run, ticket-funded festivals cannot match. The result is a double distortion: audiences come to expect not just free entry, but a

scale of experience that only significant public subsidy can deliver. In a regional area with a small audience pool, this is cumulative and damaging, making it harder for not-for-profit festivals to justify any ticket price, however modest, or any program, however strong, against a baseline that has been artificially raised.

We welcome a conversation about how policy design might offset the structural inequities that free events create for community-run organisations whose long-term viability depends on audiences being willing and able to pay for cultural experiences.

### *The coordination challenge*

A further structural challenge is the lack of coordination between government funding bodies and community organisations already doing the work. When new grants for regional venues and music programs are announced without first mapping what already exists, the result can be duplication rather than development. The organisations that have been quietly subsidising grassroots cultural activity from their own reserves often seem to be invisible to the very programs designed to support them. A simple requirement that grant-making bodies consult with established local organisations, including councils, before committing to new regional programs would cost little and make government investment significantly more effective.

### *Ticketing platforms and community benefit*

Australia already has a homegrown proof of concept that booking fees need not simply enrich commercial operators. Humanitix, an Australian-founded not-for-profit ticketing platform, has demonstrated that ticketing infrastructure can be built around community benefit rather than shareholder return, redirecting 100% of its net profits from booking fees into charitable programs, with total donations surpassing \$13.8 million since its founding. (*Wikipedia*)

We use Humanitix and support its model. But we note that the benefits generated by Australian community festivals flow entirely to international programs. The booking fees paid by our audiences, people in regional Australia attending a community folk festival, leave our community entirely. There is no mechanism by which those fees contribute to the cultural ecosystem that generated them.

A new national cultural policy could address this directly. We call on the government to work with the ticketing sector to develop a community-directed benefit stream: a mechanism by which a portion of booking fees generated by registered not-for-profit festivals can be directed back into regional arts and cultural development.

### *Community festivals generate community benefits*

Finally, critics will say that if community festivals can't afford to pay their own way then they should be allowed to fail. We argue that this view fundamentally misunderstands what community festivals are and what they do. Community festivals do not exist to generate profit for a small group of shareholders. They exist to nurture artistic development, strengthen community connectedness, generate belonging and build the kind of social and cultural infrastructure that commercial operators are structurally unwilling to fund. They are not failed businesses. They are public goods, delivering cultural access, community cohesion, and regional identity in ways that the market cannot and will not replicate.

## **Recommendations**

### Recommendation 11

A national recurrent operational funding program for community-run folk festivals with proven track records providing multi-year core funding for production costs, performer fees and volunteer stipends. Recognition that regional folk festivals are more than one-off events but cultural infrastructure.

### Recommendation 12

Grant program design that meets festival timetables with rolling application windows, multi-year decision horizons, and acquittal frameworks that reflect the actual production cycles of festivals rather than financial year boundaries.

### Recommendation 13

A geographic cost-loading adjustment in grant assessments for remote and regional festivals recognising that freight, artist travel, infrastructure hire and crew accommodation costs are structural features of geography that cannot be managed away, and that metropolitan cost benchmarks systematically undervalue the true cost of regional cultural delivery.

### Recommendation 14

A pre-funding coordination requirement that funding bodies demonstrate they have consulted with existing community cultural organisations in a region before establishing new programs, protecting proven community investment and ensuring public funding builds on existing foundations rather than competing with them.

### Recommendation 15

A framework for assessing the competitive impact of government-funded free events on existing ticketed community festivals before funding decisions are made, particularly in regional areas where audience pools are small and resistant to paying increases.

### Recommendation 16

Partnership grant programs design that requires genuine resource-sharing with community co-applicants. This means direct funding flows to community organisations that is proportionate to their contribution and a requirement that lead organisations demonstrate, not just claim, how resources are being shared.

### Recommendation 17

Greater investment in physical cultural infrastructure in regional areas, rehearsal spaces, recording studios, performance venues and showground facilities, recognising that community folk festivals contribute to public infrastructure at their own cost and that government has a responsibility to co-invest in the assets that make regional cultural activity possible.

### Recommendation 18

Work with the ticketing sector to develop a community-directed benefit stream: a mechanism by which a portion of booking fees generated by registered not-for-profit festivals can be directed back into regional arts and cultural development.

## **Pillar Five: Engaging the Audience**

The regional folk festival sector has been largely left out of the national conversation about audience development, which tends to focus on larger festivals and venues, digital platforms and commercial touring models. We call for recognition of community folk and roots festivals as front-line audience development institutions with dedicated investment in their capacity to engage diverse audiences including young people, families, First Nations, migrant and under-represented communities, and regional residents.

The Festivals Australia program is the primary federal mechanism for supporting arts activity at festivals, but it is largely a project grant program that funds discrete new works rather than the operational activity that sustains audience engagement year after year. We welcome this program and have benefited from it, but it is no substitute for the sustained investment in community folk festival operations that would allow us to deepen our audience development work over time.

Community folk festivals build audiences for the long term by engaging young people through The Crossing Youth Stage, KidBargo!, workshops, dance sessions and school programs in formative experiences of live music that establish lifelong cultural habits of participation. The 17-year-old volunteer on the stage crew may be a festival director at 35, the ten-year-old at the children's festival may be a main stage artist in another ten years, the child attending with her grandparents may become a peer mentor in years to come. This is audience development creating a community of practice that reproduces itself across generations.

It's important to recognise that headline international and national artists are not an indulgence, they are a commercial necessity. They are one of the reasons audiences travel from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Wollongong and Canberra to the Bega Valley hinterland, generating the out-of-area visitation that underpins the festival's regional economic impact. They set the artistic standard that makes a Cobargo performance meaningful on a young artist's resume, creating the environment in which regional talent is taken seriously, developed and launched. The high-quality of their performance and their sharing of skills and networks with our local musicians during the festival contributes to the raising of standards. The high cost of bringing world-class artists to a rural regional location is not a discretionary expense but is the investment that makes everything else the festival delivers possible.

### **Recommendations**

#### Recommendation 19

Recognition of community folk and roots festivals as audience development institutions with dedicated investment in their capacity to engage diverse audiences including young people, families, First Nations communities and regional residents.

#### Recommendation 20

A national all-ages live music strategy that specifically addresses the barriers facing regional venues and community-run folk festivals in programming for young audiences.

#### Recommendation 21

Continued and expanded investment in the Festivals Australia program, with funding for operational (recurrent) audience development activity for folk festivals, recognising that sustained audience engagement cannot be built through one-off commissioned works alone.

## Closing Statement

The Cobargo Folk Festival is thirty years old. It has survived fires, floods, a pandemic and a decade of federal cultural policy neglect. It is still here because of the extraordinary commitment of hundreds of volunteers who believe that what they are doing matters.

Beyond their economic and cultural contributions, community folk festivals like ours generate profound and enduring social value that is rarely captured in grant assessments or policy frameworks. These events are engines of social cohesion bringing together diverse groups across generations, backgrounds and geographies in shared cultural experience at a time when opportunities for shared community experiences are increasingly scarce.

For regional communities still navigating the long aftermath of crisis, whether bushfire, drought or pandemic, the annual rhythm of a festival provides a focal point for collective recovery, renewal and pride. For local youth, folk festivals offer formative pathways into music, performance, production, event management and community leadership. This investment in skills and capacity is cumulative and irreplaceable. It takes decades to build and can collapse within a single generation if the festivals that sustain it disappear.

Community folk festivals also cultivate a deep and distinctive sense of place, anchoring regional identity in living cultural practice rather than heritage nostalgia, and signalling to residents, particularly young people weighing whether to stay, that their community is worth investing in. This social infrastructure has no commercial equivalent and no government program that replicates it. It exists because volunteer communities have chosen to build it, and it deserves to be recognised and protected as the public good it is.

Independent research from Monash University's Fire to Flourish program has documented what the Yuin Folk Club, with the Cobargo Folk Festival, has helped to rebuild and why it matters for Cobargo's recovery and resilience. The report can be found here: [https://firetoflourish.monash/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/3766037/Independent-Review-of-the-Cobargo-Community-Bushfire-Recovery-Fund\\_FINAL.pdf](https://firetoflourish.monash/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/3766037/Independent-Review-of-the-Cobargo-Community-Bushfire-Recovery-Fund_FINAL.pdf)

We would like the next National Cultural Policy to explicitly recognise the social value of community folk festivals, not as a secondary benefit of cultural investment but as a primary policy outcome in its own right, deserving of its own measurement framework and its own funding rationale.

Ours is one of many community folk organisations across the country with long records of support for regional creative life, building artistic capacity, strengthening community wellbeing, and doing so year after year on goodwill and ingenuity alone. We hope the next National Cultural Policy will recognise these efforts and achievements with more targeted, predictable, recurrent operational funding that can transform a community organisation producing a well-run, rural and regional folk festival into a community development powerhouse.

We realise that this is a long submission but these are complex issues that touch on the challenges facing many regional community organisations like ours. We write from a particular standpoint informed by our lived experience. The Yuin Folk Club has grown a festival from scratch and sustained it for more than thirty years. We have learned about the importance of music, art and culture in healing and wellbeing, in nurturing social cohesion and in building community resilience first hand. We have learned this as festival makers and, more recently, in our community recovery work after the Black Summer bushfire disaster. We know what community capital looks like when it is tested. We know what it takes to build it, and what is lost when it fails. We invite you to come to Cobargo and see firsthand the importance of the work that is happening here.

We are happy for this submission to be made public and attributed to the Yuin Folk Club Incorporated/Cobargo Folk Festival.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next National Cultural Policy.

**Peter Logue, President, Yuin Folk Club | Zena Armstrong, Director, Cobargo Folk Festival**

Yuin Folk Club Inc. | [REDACTED] | cobargofolkfestival.com

ABN 91 772 762 752 | [REDACTED]

## Summary of Recommendations

No.	Recommendation	Pillar
<b>PILLAR ONE: First Nations First</b>		
R1	Dedicated funding for First Nations cultural advisors and programming within community folk festivals, with flexible, relationship-sensitive acquittal requirements that reflect the relational rather than transactional nature of First Nations cultural partnerships	Pillar 1
R2	Support for long-term, ongoing relationships between community folk festivals and local First Nations communities, including funding structures that recognise cultural leadership as an ongoing institutional role	Pillar 1
R3	Recognise regional community folk festivals embedded in Country as a critical and underutilised vehicle for First Nations cultural expression, audience development and intergenerational knowledge sharing	Pillar 1
<b>PILLAR TWO: A Place for Every Story</b>		
R4	Recognise folk festivals as essential infrastructure for place-based storytelling and regional cultural identity, and as community institutions of national cultural significance	Pillar 2
R5	Investment in local curation, community media and digital archiving that amplifies place-based stories and makes regional cultural production permanently and publicly accessible	Pillar 2

No.	Recommendation	Pillar
<b>PILLAR THREE: Centrality of the Artist</b>		
R6	A direct artist development fund for regional Australian artists providing grants for recording, commissioning, creative development, national touring and export-readiness support, without requiring metropolitan intermediaries	Pillar 3
R7	Recognise community folk festivals as artist development institutions with dedicated funding streams supporting their artist development role, not treating performance fees as the sole measure of artist support	Pillar 3
R8	A federal touring support program explicitly addressing geographic cost penalties facing regional and remote folk festivals, ie: freight, artist travel, accommodation and production equipment/services	Pillar 3
R9	Investment in a dedicated program supporting folk festivals to engage quality artists at appropriate rates, with acquittal frameworks allowing direct booking of artist travel and accommodation by festivals	Pillar 3
R10	Federal policy intervention addressing streaming algorithm suppression of Australian regional content, treating algorithmic distortion as market failure requiring regulatory response	Pillar 3
R10a	Adopt a policy that requires that Australian artists give consent before their work is used to train AI systems, and that they are credited and paid when it is; update moral rights protections so that AI cannot legally reproduce an artist's style or sound without permission; ensure that human musicians are not replaced by AI-generated music in any publicly funded cultural context; and commission research specifically into how AI is affecting regional and independent musicians.	Pillar 3
<b>PILLAR FOUR: Strong Cultural Infrastructure</b>		
R11	A national recurrent operational funding program for community-run festivals with proven track records that is multi-year, base-funded, indexed to cost increases	Pillar 4
R12	Grant program design better aligned with festival planning timetables, including rolling applications, multi-year funding, and delivery schedules that reflect actual production cycles	Pillar 4
R13	A geographic cost-loading adjustment in grant programs for remote and regional applicants, formally recognising that projects in regional areas are materially different value propositions from those in cities because of location	Pillar 4
R14	A pre-funding coordination requirement obliging grant-making bodies to map existing community cultural activity before committing to new programs, preventing duplication and protecting existing community investment	Pillar 4

No.	Recommendation	Pillar
R15	A framework for assessing the competitive impact of government-funded free events on existing ticketed community festivals before funding decisions are made, particularly in regional areas where audience pools are small	Pillar 4
R16	Partnership grant program design requiring genuine, documented resource-sharing with community co-applicants, including direct funding flows proportionate to their contribution	Pillar 4
R17	Greater investment in physical cultural infrastructure in regional areas such as showgrounds, community performance spaces, recording studios and rehearsal venues, as the enabling infrastructure on which community festivals depend	Pillar 4
R18	Work with the ticketing sector to develop a community-directed benefit stream: a mechanism by which a portion of booking fees generated by registered not-for-profit festivals can be directed back into regional arts and cultural development.	Pillar 4
<b>PILLAR FIVE: Engaging the Audience</b>		
R19	Recognise community folk and roots festivals as front-line audience development institutions providing dedicated investment in their capacity to engage young people, families, First Nations communities and regional residents	Pillar 5
R20	A national all-ages live music strategy specifically addressing barriers facing regional venues and community-run festivals	Pillar 5
R21	Continued and expanded Festivals Australia program, with a stream for operational funding for regional audience development activity, recognising that sustained audience engagement cannot be built through one-off commissioned works alone	Pillar 5