

Submission to the Review of the National Cultural Policy

Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place

Submitted by South Coast Arts

Regional Arts Development Organisation, NSW South Coast

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About South Coast Arts

My name is Louise Croker. I am the Executive Director of South Coast Arts, the Regional Arts Development Organisation (RADO) for Shellharbour, Kiama and Shoalhaven local government areas on the NSW South Coast. I am submitting on behalf of South Coast Arts, our Board of Management, and the creative communities we serve across the traditional lands of the Yuin and Dharawal nations, including the Wodi Wodi, Wandiwandian, Jerrinja and Murramarang peoples.

I am asking for improvements to the way Australia's national cultural policy supports regional creative infrastructure, specifically the co-investment models, funding certainty, and systemic recognition that enable organisations like South Coast Arts to do the work that national policy aspires to. These changes will lead to more equitable access to arts and culture for Australians outside major cities, stronger regional creative economies, and a more resilient national sector.

South Coast Arts is one of 15 RADOs across NSW, supported by Regional Arts NSW and funded by Create NSW and local councils. We became incorporated in 2022 and have been operational since 2023. We are the only broad-remit arts service delivery organisation across our three local government areas, covering a large geographic region of coastal and hinterland communities with a combined population of over 221,000 people.

In 2025, we engaged 8,045 participants across our programs and services, including face-to-face connections with 685 individuals. For every \$1 contributed by our local councils, we returned \$1.97 of additional funding into our region, with a two-year average return of \$2.81. We are small, but our multiplier effect is significant.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

The problem: national policy is shaped by metropolitan assumptions

Australia's arts and cultural policy has historically defaulted to a metropolitan frame. Major cultural institutions, flagship programs and arts tourism infrastructure are concentrated in capital cities. When regional communities appear in policy, it is often as passive recipients of touring product rather than as generators of original creative culture.

For communities like ours on the NSW South Coast, this framing is both inaccurate and limiting. Our region has deep, original creative cultures rooted in place, landscape, First Nations heritage, and the distinctive character of coastal

and rural life. The Shoalhaven, Kiama and Shellharbour communities are not waiting for culture to arrive from Sydney. They are making it.

The challenge is that the infrastructure required to support place-based creative practice in regional areas is fundamentally different from what works in cities. It requires organisations with genuine geographic reach, long-term community relationships, and the capacity to work across multiple local government areas simultaneously. This is exactly what RADOs do. But the co-investment model that sustains RADOs is fragile, and the current policy environment does not adequately protect it.

What we recommend

We recommend that the renewed National Cultural Policy explicitly recognise Regional Arts Development Organisations as essential place-based cultural infrastructure, and that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to establish stable, co-funded support for RADO network models across the country.

We also recommend that the policy explicitly address the gap in sub-regional cultural data. There is strong national and state-level evidence for the value of arts investment, but granular regional data remains thin. South Coast Arts is beginning to address this locally through our Amplify Music Industry Research project, which is mapping the music ecosystem across our three local government areas. National policy should actively support this kind of regional evidence-building, which in turn strengthens the case for sustained investment.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

The problem: regional creative workers face compounding disadvantages

Creative workers on the NSW South Coast face conditions that are structurally different from those in metropolitan centres. Geographic distance from industry hubs, limited local infrastructure, smaller local markets, and the absence of a dense peer network all compound the economic precarity that already characterises arts work in Australia.

This is not abstract. Through our 1:1 creative support program, we delivered 36 individual support sessions to 40 regional creatives in 2025, covering funding navigation, project development, promotional strategy, and partnership pathways. What we consistently encounter are practitioners who are talented, committed and economically vulnerable, working without the support systems that their metropolitan peers can more easily access.

Our Creativity Gatherings, held across Shellharbour, Kiama and Shoalhaven in 2025, drew consistent attendance and candid feedback from participants about the conditions of regional creative practice. One attendee described our gatherings as "a great way to meet other local artists in a relaxed environment as well as engage in conversations relevant to being an artist on the South Coast." The demand for peer connection, sector knowledge and professional

development is real and growing. The infrastructure to meet it is not keeping pace.

Our Creative Pulse business development program, delivered in 2024, provided targeted support to regional creatives developing sustainable practices. Our Creative Business Summit partnership in 2025 brought over 70 delegates together for professional development and distributed ten complimentary tickets to ensure access was not limited by cost. These programs work. But they depend on the existence of an organisation with the mandate, relationships and capacity to run them.

What we recommend

We recommend that the renewed National Cultural Policy include a specific commitment to regional creative workforce development, including investment in programs that build the business, professional and networking capacity of artists and creative workers outside major cities.

We also recommend that the policy address the particular barriers facing regional creative workers in accessing Creative Australia and other federal funding programs. These include the capacity burden of applications, the challenge of demonstrating "significance" from a regional base, and assessment criteria that implicitly favour metropolitan contexts. Regional weighting, simplified pathways and dedicated regional funding streams would materially improve outcomes.

Additionally, we are developing a Creative Mental Health and Wellbeing Project in direct response to what we hear from regional practitioners about the psychological pressures of creative work. This kind of holistic support should be recognised in national policy as a legitimate part of workforce development, not a peripheral welfare concern.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The problem: regional cultural infrastructure is under-recognised and under-protected

In metropolitan areas, cultural infrastructure is visible: major galleries, concert halls, arts centres, and well-funded flagship organisations. In regional areas, the equivalent infrastructure is often less visible but no less important. It is the network of community arts groups, local festivals, hospital arts programs, community halls, and the intermediary organisations that connect them. When this infrastructure erodes, communities lose something that is very hard to rebuild.

South Coast Arts has experienced firsthand the fragility of regional cultural infrastructure. In 2025, we navigated significant funding challenges, including an unsuccessful application for four-year Create NSW funding, which required us to move quickly to secure two-year funding and maintain operational continuity. We are grateful that we succeeded, but the experience highlighted how

exposed regional organisations can be when funding timelines are short and applications are competitive.

We are also observing a pattern of risk at the local government level. Across our region, council funding for arts and cultural programs is under pressure from competing budget priorities. The compounding effect of local government withdrawing support while state and federal funding remains uncertain creates genuine gaps in the infrastructure that communities depend on.

South Coast Arts operates as a tri-council RADO, working across Shellharbour, Kiama and Shoalhaven simultaneously. This model is efficient and effective: one organisation builds relationships, manages partnerships and delivers programs across three local government areas, generating a return on investment that single-council models cannot match. In 2025, our two-year average ROI was \$2.81 for every council dollar invested. This is the kind of infrastructure value that policy should be actively protecting.

Our work extends beyond direct programming. We provide auspicing and support for hospital arts projects at both Shellharbour and Shoalhaven Hospitals through the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District arts working groups. We supported the hosting of a First Nations ICIP Gathering on behalf of Create NSW in Nowra, bringing regional voices into state-level policy conversations. We contribute to the Creative South cultural tourism platform, which now carries 74 South Coast listings as part of over 600 experiences across the region. And we are incubating Culture Bank South Coast, a grassroots micro-grant model that will create new pathways for community-led creative projects that sit outside conventional grant processes.

None of this is possible without stable, sustained investment in the organisation itself.

What we recommend

We recommend that the renewed National Cultural Policy explicitly recognise RADOs and equivalent regional intermediary organisations as cultural infrastructure, not program deliverers. The distinction matters: infrastructure requires sustained investment, not project-by-project funding.

We recommend the Australian Government work with states and territories to develop a national framework for multi-year, stable co-funding of regional arts intermediaries. This should include mechanisms that protect against the risk of a single-tier funding withdrawal destabilising an organisation that is simultaneously supported by multiple levels of government.

We also recommend that the policy support better integration of arts and cultural infrastructure into regional planning, health and community service frameworks. South Coast Arts already works across these sectors, but this integration is often informal and vulnerable. Clearer policy signals about the role of arts in regional health, wellbeing and community development would strengthen these connections.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

The problem: regional audiences are underserved by national distribution and access models

National arts touring and distribution models are typically designed around population density and commercial viability. Regional communities receive less, pay more for what they do receive, and have fewer options for accessible, affordable arts engagement. This is a structural inequity, not a reflection of regional audiences' interest in or appetite for arts and culture.

South Coast Arts engages audiences differently. Our Creativity Gatherings are free community events held in accessible local venues that reflect the character of our region: a brewery in Jervis Bay, a heritage cinema in Huskisson, an airport terminal in Shellharbour. These are not conventional arts venues. They are community spaces where people feel comfortable. Our approach consistently produces genuine engagement rather than passive attendance.

In 2025, we engaged diverse community members including First Nations participants (6% of our audience), young people under 25 (11%), CALD community members (6%), people with a disability (3%), LGBTIQ community members (4%) and neurodiverse creatives (6%). These numbers reflect deliberate inclusion practice, not chance. They are the result of designing programs that genuinely welcome people rather than programs that tolerate them.

Our Weave platform, a community-facing directory and events listing tool, now hosts 168 members, 161 public directory listings, and 92 events listed in 2025. The Weave app, completed in 2025, makes this accessible on mobile. The Creative South cultural tourism platform extends our reach further, connecting visitors to our region with locally grounded creative experiences. Our social media presence reached 3,129 followers with email open rates well above industry benchmarks, reflecting a genuinely engaged audience.

The Hit Factory South Coast residency brought together musicians from First Nations, Swiss and Latin American backgrounds to collaborate, record, and perform. The resulting music and the ongoing band that formed from the program, now performing at events including the Cabargo Folk Festival, is a concrete example of what happens when you invest in authentic creative connection across cultural difference. This is audience development in its fullest sense.

What we recommend

We recommend that the renewed National Cultural Policy include a specific commitment to supporting place-based audience development in regional communities, including investment in organisations that build authentic, long-term relationships with regional audiences rather than delivering one-off touring experiences.

We also recommend that digital infrastructure for regional arts engagement be treated as a policy priority. South Coast Arts has invested significantly in digital tools including Weave and Creative South, but maintaining and developing these

platforms requires sustained resourcing. National policy should support regional organisations to build and sustain the digital infrastructure that connects regional creative communities with each other and with audiences.

Conclusion

Revive set out an ambitious vision: a place for every story, a story for every place. We welcome that ambition. But ambition without structural support for regional creative infrastructure will produce a policy that looks equitable on paper while delivering inequitably in practice.

South Coast Arts is three years old. In that time, we have built genuine community relationships, supported hundreds of individual creative practitioners, contributed to state policy processes, established new platforms and programs, and demonstrated a consistent return on investment for our funders. We have done this from a small base, with limited staff, across a large geographic area, during a period of significant funding uncertainty.

Imagine what we could do with genuine stability.

We are asking for a national cultural policy that treats regional creative infrastructure as essential, not supplementary. One that recognises the distinct conditions facing regional artists and creative workers. One that invests in the organisations that connect creative communities with each other, with their audiences, and with the broader national sector.

The stories of the South Coast are worth telling. The people telling them deserve the infrastructure to do so.

Contact

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