

Submission to the National Cultural Policy

From Arts Upper Hunter Inc

We are the Regional Arts Development Organisation covering the Local Government Areas of Dungog, Muswellbrook, Singleton and Upper Hunter. We are a not-for-profit incorporated association serving a diverse range of audiences and artists. Our programs include Blak Arts Collective for First Nations creatives (IVAIS funding), Creative Valleys cultural tourism website, Alive In The Upper Hunter regional touring program (NSW Regional Touring grant) and Visuaural (sound+art). All our program is in partnership with other groups.

The last policy, Revive, has served well, despite the fact that the regional and remote regions like ours did not get specific attention. I do feel this could be better. The main points I wish to make (and these are grounded both in local experience as an advocacy, project management and professional development organisation and as a member of a statewide network) are of two sorts: ones that are specific to our part of Australia, and ones that are generally crucial for regional creative communities and the arts.

General points for regional creative communities:

1. **The best returns for First Nations communities happen with attention to Country.** First Nations are continuing their revival of language, culture, pride, income, and connection – despite the Voice result. In our experience the best results occur when activities and culture occur On Country, from traditional to hyper-contemporary. In this vision of Aboriginal Australia, everywhere is regional, everywhere is Country, but everywhere is also to be framed as a THAT Country. As long as considerable consultation happens along the way, if a project is First-Nations devised and co-delivered (as happens throughout our own Blak Arts program) it will get the greatest engagement and results if attention is paid to Country – or if it happens in a site-specific Culture-specific way. This is particularly crucial for youth, but crosses generations as well.
2. First Nations work should be mindful of **Closing The Gap** goals too.
3. Small to mid-size contributions can have an outsize effect – whether it's Country Arts Support Program of a few thousand, a RAF grant for \$30,000 or Regional Touring grants of \$70,000, the results on the ground in the regions have a serious effect. A new program can begin, new champions can come out of the woodwork, local people can try something for the first time, and community connections are strengthened – and there's no sense of a cargo culture helicoptered in from the city, with its one-size fits all agenda. **Small to medium grants build communities of creativity ineluctably.**
4. Disaster preparedness and disaster recovery are essential considerations – they affect creatives heavily (this is recognised in the recovery to some extent but

barely in preparedness) and they affect regions heavily (especially as climate change worsens). **To my mind, disaster needs to be factored into every pillar of this policy.**

5. Spaces, run by creative people or accessed by them, are crucial to establishing and maintaining culture and vibrancy in every community. A space that is appropriate to the region, maintained, upgraded, and offered connection to the digital world, are the great secret to growth and resilience. Artist-run spaces should be encouraged, but in the country, multi-use spaces are the norm – sometimes just a few tweaks can make a useable box and super-functional one. **Please support local people to access, own, enhance and empower spaces throughout the regions.**
6. The other side of infrastructure is the non-physical sort. **We recommend that small cultural support organisations such as the Regional Arts Network** be supported generously – they deliver locally apposite programs and projects, build national connections and advocate for key concerns.
7. Other elements of cultural infrastructure, including conservatoriums, regional galleries and performing arts centres also require support and attention. Above all, **arts and music education in schools** is in a sad state across the country.
8. Artists are poor and getting poorer – or else they're upper middle class and have economic stability behind them. We recommend **a Basic Artist Income or similar program for creative people** to be considered. This can also be achieved in a backhand manner with a tax policy that is generous to creatives.
9. **The regions thrive when they are visited**, whether it's a Blacktown First Nations person visiting his Wiradjuri people in the outback, an international tourist heading to a small rural festival or a trip around the bush for a city family. We would love to grow regional cultural tourism with a two-pronged attack – encouraging creative regional folk to recognise the potential of being part of the visitor economy, and encouraging tourists to head to the regions where culture has a deep authenticity. This will help build audiences.
10. Audiences need education to even *become* audiences. Building accessibility in both senses into arts programs is essential.

Specific to our region (the Upper Hunter Valley of NSW) though relevant to several others:

1. Digital access remains a challenge – and will increase as AI reshapes the employment market.
2. The carbon transition is the single biggest “disaster” facing our region. While some mines are expanding, others are closing, leaving whole landscapes unusable, and the economic shift from high-paying, drive-in-drive-out minework

to lower-paid rural economies is going to be a huge economic shock for whole communities. Our goal is that **creative people should be built into planning for the transition**. This should always be done with respect and kindness for all sides of the often hot debate.

3. **Locally devised programs** that offer potential alternative futures need to be supported. Though there are many ideas for the future of the Hunter Valley, actual programs being piloted and empowered will yield results in the mid-term. These could build digital skills for regional youth, traineeships in creative industries or incentives for creative firms to move to changing towns.
4. **Wanaruah/Wonnarua people have specific needs**. Perhaps like other First Nations groups that were colonised early, their language and culture is being resurrected from a difficult starting point. But the need and passion are there and the potential for the revival, if supported adequately, to create great opportunities for the community is huge.