

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation

Over the last fifteen years, I have worked as a Melbourne-based artist and researcher specialising in contemporary performance with and for children and young people. My practice has spanned small-to-medium and major theatre companies across Australia and internationally, encompassing original performance work created with and for children and young people — from very early years audiences aged 0–3 through to collaborations with emerging artists aged 15–25.

As a researcher and practitioner, I have a strong understanding of the evidence base supporting arts participation for children and young people, as well as the broader ecology that sustains these practices nationally. I submit this response from the perspective of both my creative and research practice and argue that the next iteration of the policy must explicitly champion the creative and cultural rights of children and young people in Australia.

Children and young people must be embedded within the policy framework. I strongly support the call for a standalone pillar — *Next Generation Now* — as a clear signal of the value of cultural agency for children and young people. Such a commitment would strengthen inclusion, improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes, enhance social and educational development, and help ensure the long-term sustainability and vitality of Australia's cultural life.

The current context

Australia is currently in the grip of simultaneous and intersecting crises impacting children and young people.

- 1) The first of these is the devastating decline of the mental health of young people, the primary threat to their wellbeing and productivity.
- 2) Second, and relatedly, funding for arts and cultural organisations that work with children and young people has been decimated by significant cuts to government and philanthropic investment across the last decade. This has disastrously impacted key programs and projects designed to engage Australian children and young people in creative participation and the civic and cultural life of their community.
- 3) Relatedly, arts education across the country is in frightening decline, with a decline in enrolments in many senior secondary arts subjects and a significant reduction of creative arts courses in Australian Universities.

Recent studies demonstrate that the engagement of young people in the arts is associated with improved social and educational outcomes, mental health, wellbeing and resilience, but research also suggests there are significant barriers to access for quality and accessible arts participation experiences in Australia.

As the mental health and wellbeing of our population of young people in Australia declines, the urgency for providing quality arts participation opportunities as part of a holistic strategy

to address mental health in young people is paramount. The challenge here is unprecedented and requires an interdisciplinary, cross-government approach to its resolution. **A dedicated pillar for children and young people within the policy can reinforce national strategies from the Early Years Strategy to Better and Fairer Schools, Closing the Gap, and Measuring What Matters. Cultural policy becomes a driver of wellbeing, education, equity, and social cohesion.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pillar 2 – A Place for Every Story

Children and young people must be seen and heard in our new National Cultural Policy.

- 1) Create and implement a ten-year strategy for children, young people and the arts, in collaboration with young people.

Children across the country must have access to cultural and creative experiences.

- 1) Commission national audience development strategies for children's arts and young people's arts to reduce barriers to access.
- 2) Commission a national audit of youth arts and arts participation providers across the country to identify where gaps are and where resources need to be allocated.

Pillar 3- The Centrality of the Artist

Children must be seen as cultural agents.

- 1) Invest in opportunities for children to exercise their rights to cultural citizenship and engage as active producers of creative content outside of formal education contexts
- 2) Create pathways to arts employment through paid traineeship and internship program as a workforce development strategy for young people.

Artists who work with children and young people require specific and strategic investment to support work across the country.

- 1) Support the delivery of sector and professional development services and national communities of practice for the children, young people and the arts sector.
- 2) Invest in artists in schools programs and provide national upskilling opportunities for arts educators in primary and secondary schools

Pillar 4- Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Children and young people have unique cultural needs, including safe spaces for belonging, agency in co-creation, cultural safety, opportunities for challenge and risk, and support for their health and wellbeing.

- 1) Increase investment for children and young people's arts through ring-fenced organisational, project and fellowship funding.
- 2) Support the establishment of a Children's Theatre Investment Fund to foster opportunities for work for children to happen at scale.