

Friday 22 May 2026

Submission: Towards a new National Cultural Policy

About MusicNSW

MusicNSW is the peak body for contemporary music in New South Wales. We exist to build a NSW music ecosystem where artists have sustainable careers, communities are connected and supported, and music culture is properly valued - with the wellbeing of artists at the heart of all that we do.

Our Priorities

Our work centres First Nations artists - the world's oldest continuous music-makers - and extends to every artist and music community across regional and remote New South Wales. The following priorities reflect our belief that a flourishing music sector must be built from the ground up, and from the edges in.

1. An industry for artists that is safe, equitable and just.

We champion policies and initiatives that support safe and sustainable creative careers and believe that every participant in the music community - artist, audience, and industry worker - should do so within a culture of respect and safety.

2. Standing against market concentration and extractive business practices.

We stand against multinational market concentration and the normalisation of extractive business practices, and champion local artists and music businesses. We support a mix of algorithmic adjustments, levies, and quotas to safeguard Australian music in both the live and recorded music sectors.

3. Affordable access to quality music education.

We believe that every young person should have access to quality music education, and ongoing training pathways - regardless of postcode, income or identity - enabling participation in a diverse range of music industry careers.

4. Public funding and the regeneration of local music ecosystems.

We advocate for public investment that recognises music and music-making as vital social infrastructure and believe investment should flow from the ground up, building diversity, interdependence, community resilience, and sustainability.

5. Protecting artists from AI exploitation.

We value human creativity, support strong protections against the unlicensed exploitation of artists' work by artificial intelligence technologies, and advocate for consent, transparency, and fair compensation wherever AI and music intersect.

6. A sustainable future for music and the planet.

We support a sector that takes responsibility for its footprint - in touring, events, physical releases, and everyday business practices - and uses its cultural platform to model and advocate for climate action and a safer future.

Context and Opportunity

Music at its most elemental is culture and ritual, it shapes the stories we tell and the experiences we share - our way of gathering and deepening identity - together in the places where we live. Even those of us who don't identify strongly as 'music fans', comfort our children and soundtrack the most important moments in our lives with song. Downstream from this cultural value - is social value - music as essential social infrastructure that enables connection, resilience and a culture of reciprocal care.

The only essential participants in music culture are artists and their audiences - the makers and the communities within which they belong. Everything else forms part of the scaffolding that enables this intrinsic artist/audience relationship to flourish - and right now, that scaffolding is collapsing under the weight of systemic challenges.

Platform capitalism has shifted the means of creation, distribution and discovery, with algorithmic recommendations controlling the connection between local artists and audiences. Multinational market concentration has centralised power and widened the inequality between local music community participants and dominant industry forces. Future musicians enter the postcode lottery, with an uneven distribution of quality, ongoing and sequential music education on offer in Australian schools. Artists are threatened by the accelerated rise of AI and live music is impacted by the rising costs of insurance, touring and travel, geopolitical uncertainty and the catastrophic disruptions of life on a warming planet.

Despite this though, Australian communities continue to engage with Australian music and extraordinary Australian artists are emerging from every corner of the continent - led by a continuation of trailblazing First Nations music-makers. We believe that this wave of Australian artist creativity and talent should overflow onto Australian stages, airwaves and schools, enabling the conditions within communities for Australian music to flourish, locally and authentically.

Public funding for music and music-making must consider cultural as well as social and economic dimensions of value. MusicNSW acknowledges the foundations laid by Revive and the establishment of Music Australia whose strategic investments within the sector have been transformative. We believe that bottom-up investment in grassroots music regeneration is essential to the long-term sustainability of the Australian contemporary music ecosystem and should remain an integral part of government strategy in combination with other measures intended to safeguard music communities and enable the conditions for local artists to sustain themselves creatively and economically.

This submission responds to the five pillars of the National Cultural Policy, and makes recommendations to enable its success - over five years, fifty and five generations.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

MusicNSW's First Nations music development is led by Kaleena Smith, our First Nations Development Manager and a practising musician of nearly thirty years. The insights below draw on Kaleena's ongoing engagement with First Nations artists and music workers and were amplified by the delivery of Wamarra Music Lab - a First Nations-led music business incubator, launched in May 2025, following extensive community consultation.

Wamarra Music Lab confirmed an urgent need for structural investment and support to move beyond short-term, artist focused models, towards long-term ecosystem building initiatives that support a sustainable, culturally safe First Nations music industry.

We recommend the National Cultural Policy supports:

Investment in First Nations-led music businesses as cultural infrastructure through a dedicated national funding stream that supports long-term operational sustainability, and culturally safe business development pathways designed by and for First Nations people, including existing programs like Wamarra Music Lab.

Recognition of regional and remote communities as hubs of cultural innovation.

Investment should flow into establishing regional First Nations music hubs, community owned creative infrastructure and long-term local capacity building initiatives.

Cultural safety with accountability - a nationally recognised cultural safety framework for the music sector, mandatory cultural competency requirements for federally funded organisations, paid cultural advisory structures, and stronger reporting frameworks for non-First Nations organisations receiving First Nations-targeted funding.

First Nations data sovereignty - a national First Nations contemporary music data strategy, built on community-controlled collection and governance, covering businesses, workforce, regional participation, and long-term career outcomes.

Sustained pathways into leadership - multi-year career development programs, intergenerational mentorship, and pathways into executive and governance roles, with particular emphasis on First Nations women and LGBTQIA+ people.

Long-term investment in First Nations gatherings and networks - because bringing First Nations music community members together remains one of the most effective ways to build the sector. Investment should acknowledge appropriate time horizons for generational change.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Music is inseparable from place, belonging first to the communities within which it is created. Enabling those communities to gather and connect in the real world, in the places where they live, to share story and song, forms the centre of our work in the regeneration of local music communities.

Regional and remote communities are not the periphery of Australian music culture - they are its heartland. Around a quarter of Australia's musicians live outside major cities. Half of our music festivals take place in regional areas. And community radio - predominantly regional - remains one of the most important discovery and cultural participation funnels we have. Yet policy and funding has historically privileged metro centres, measured by metrics - economic output, audience numbers, visitation, industry density - that are not designed to capture how music actually creates value across dispersed communities - through cultural participation, shared spaces, building resilience and connection through informal networks, and deep local roots. Regional music isn't under-performing. It's operating through different structures, under harder conditions, and with far less support.

In 2025 MusicNSW delivered the second annual Regional & Remote Music Summit - a national platform for policy development and cross-sector collaboration that has engaged over 400 delegates and 100 speakers from every Australian jurisdiction in its first two years. The evidence gathered at this event has been consistent and points to

structural inequity between metro and regional investment, under-resourced infrastructure and workforce, limited touring mobility, over-reliance on individual community champions and informal labour, and climate impacts that are increasing costs and disrupting live music activity.

The next National Cultural Policy must take a genuinely place-based approach - one that invests in local leadership, people and networks.

We recommend the National Cultural Policy supports:

A national network of regional music hubs - with multi-year operational funding supporting rehearsal, recording, performance, and broadcast capability, functioning as anchors for local participation and production.

Investment in people as infrastructure - funding for embedded regional roles including producers, touring coordinators, and community radio coordinators, tied to three-to-five year positions rather than short-term project delivery.

A national reciprocal touring network - supporting multi-stop regional touring, subsidising cost barriers, and strengthening connections between artists, scenes and communities across distance.

Strengthened broadcast and digital capability - recognising community radio and digital broadcasting as core cultural infrastructure, with investment in production capability and digital upgrades.

Market pathways that don't require relocation - supporting regional artists to access distribution, publishing, export opportunities and diversified income without having to leave their communities.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Artists are not beneficiaries of music culture, they are its source. Every other participant in the ecosystem exists in relationship to the artist. And yet the conditions for sustainable music careers in Australia remain deeply challenging. Music Australia's The Bass Line reports an average real wage decrease for artists in FY25 and analysis from A New Approach shows that capital expenditure consumes an increasing proportion of government arts investment - with artists receiving a shrinking share.

MusicNSW submits that public investment must flow from the ground up - benefiting artists at the community level, where creative practice begins and the foundations for sustainable music careers are laid.

We recommend the National Cultural Policy supports:

Direct investment in artists at the community level - through grants, fellowships and place-based funding mechanisms that reach artists where they live and work and support broad participation in local music communities.

Quality music education as a right

The pipeline of future Australian artists begins alongside future Australian audiences, in Australian classrooms. We believe that every young person deserves access to quality, sequential and ongoing music education regardless of their postcode, income or identity. We call for government coordination to ensure the provision of mandated music education across all Australian schools, backed by strong policy, investment and accountability measures; active partnership between government, contemporary music organisations and schools to deliver programs that reflect the breadth of Australian music - including First Nations and contemporary artists; a national commitment to improving access for students in regional and remote communities, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; and teacher training which empowers teachers at all levels with the knowledge and confidence to deliver quality music education.

Reduced barriers to tertiary music education - the structural underfunding of arts and music courses, combined with the price disincentives created by the Jobs Ready Graduates reforms, has saddled music graduates with unserviceable levels of debt relative to likely future earnings. Course closures are accelerating. The government must work across jurisdictions to reduce fee barriers in both the VET and university sectors, implement the tertiary harmonisation commitments of the Australian Universities Accord, and stem the closure of music degree offerings before the damage becomes irreversible.

Safe, fair and viable creative careers - through ongoing support for Creative Workplaces, stronger workplace standards across the sector including minimum performance fees for musicians, and policy settings that treat artists as workers with the same rights and protections as any other.

Strengthened AI protections - mandatory algorithmic transparency, robust consent and attribution frameworks, and models that ensure artists are fairly compensated wherever their work intersects with AI.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

We support measures which seek to safeguard widespread community access to cultural infrastructure in service of sustainable artist activity. We are especially

supportive of third spaces which enable gathering and connection and acknowledge the need for grassroots music venues, community radio stations, rehearsal and studio spaces and other physical spaces in support of the making and presentation of new music.

We support initiatives which seek to deliver community and collective ownership, and additionally support measures to level the playing field for local music business owners in a sector dominated by concentration from multinational market players.

We recommend the National Cultural Policy supports:

A national framework in support of state based ticket levies - a reinvestment mechanism linked to major live music events and stadium scale touring activity, which redirects a portion of revenue generated at the top end of the market into grassroots artist and audience development. In NSW specifically, we are calling for the implementation of a ticket levy and establishment of a NSW Music Futures Fund, governed independently by artists and local music workers.

Increased investment in community radio - recognising community radio as core cultural infrastructure for music discovery, industry training pathways, local curation and regional participation with funding commensurate to its role.

Investment in distributed physical and human infrastructure - rehearsal spaces, recording studios, community venues, regional music hubs and the embedded roles that activate them, recognised and resourced across metropolitan, regional and remote Australia.

A national youth music participation program - aligned with The Push's *A National Plan for Young Australians and Music* and supporting all-ages live music access, youth-led event teams, all-ages touring circuits, and mentoring and workplace learning opportunities that create pathways for young people.

A live music tax offset - modelled on existing screen and digital games incentives and recommended as the first priority by the 2025 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts.

Michael's Rule as national policy - requiring promoters presenting large scale tours in Australian venues to program local supports, ensuring incoming international touring artists generate tangible cultural and economic benefit for the local music ecosystem.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

The algorithms which drive audience discovery and listening habits on the global streaming services are having catastrophic effects on Australian artists, according to a report published by former Spotify Chief Economist Will Page and echoed in recent research published by the Victorian Music Development Office.

As Page explains “the algorithms of streaming services might recognise language, but they ignore geography” which essentially means that Australian artists releasing music in English, compete with all other English speaking markets to capture Australian audience attention, which due to market share if nothing else, means that American artists dominate algorithmic recommendations. This is contrasted in non-English speaking markets like Italy, Germany, France and Japan where local artists have an overwhelming domestic advantage, enabled by the role of language in the algorithm.

This problem is exacerbated by a media landscape which has also moved away from local curators and independent media voices and sees audiences consuming media, art, music and culture through platforms governed by their own algorithmic preferences and editorial bias.

MusicNSW calls on the federal government to explore stronger regulation on streaming platforms which should include a mix of levies, local content quotas and interventions to adjust the algorithmic features which distort the market and unfairly disadvantage English speaking Australian artists.

Additionally, we acknowledge the vital need for supporting local curation and support policy which enables Music Australia to continue support for local community radio and the diverse range of local and independently owned platforms and media which enable artists to build connections with local, national and international audiences.

We recommend the National Cultural Policy supports:

Regulation of streaming platforms - a mix of local content quotas, levies and algorithmic interventions that address the structural disadvantage faced by English-speaking Australian artists. The market is not neutral - policy must correct for its distortions.

A renewed and expanded mandate for Music Australia - with increased investment to develop and promote Australian artists, drive audience development, embed cultural infrastructure in support of sustainable artist careers, encourage innovation and deliver research and sector benchmarking.

Investment in local curation and independent media - supporting community radio, locally owned platforms, and a diverse range of independent media voices enabling

Australian artists to build genuine connections with local, national and international audiences.

Australian music in Australian schools - ensuring the next generation of Australian audiences encounters Australian artists and stories in the classroom, through partnerships between government, contemporary music organisations and schools that embed local music in the curriculum.

Festivals and live events as audience development infrastructure - recognising that festivals are powerful environments for connecting Australian audiences with Australian artists, we encourage investment which supports the sustainability of community level festivals, with an emphasis on local ownership and long-term community benefit.

A national audience development strategy - coordinating investment across streaming regulation, broadcast, live music, education and media to build the conditions for Australian audiences to discover, engage with and sustain Australian artists throughout their careers - locally, nationally and internationally.

Conclusion

We acknowledge with great reverence the value of music, its power, its seat within our humanity. We know that culturally it compels us, socially it binds us and economically it can support us. MusicNSW welcomes a National Cultural Policy that reflects this, one that moves beyond repairing the fractures of systemic challenges, towards building new containers for culture - with the wellbeing of artists at their centre and connected communities gathered around them.

We thank the Australian Government for the opportunity to submit our vision for this future and commit our ongoing time and energy to working towards it.

Joe Muller
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