

women*scircus

Submission to Australia's National Cultural Policy

Women's Circus welcomes and strongly supports the Australian Government's commitment to a National Cultural Policy. We believe the policy provides an important framework for building a more inclusive, accessible and representative cultural sector. As a Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) organisation, we see significant opportunity for the policy to further recognise and invest in participatory arts practice as essential cultural infrastructure.

For 35 years, Women's Circus has delivered community-engaged arts practice in Melbourne's west through social circus, performance-making and creative participation programs for women and gender-diverse people. Our work supports people who experience barriers to cultural participation, including migrant and refugee communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, young people and people recovering from experiences of violence.

Our experience demonstrates a key challenge facing the arts sector is that many people do not see themselves reflected in mainstream cultural or feel traditional arts spaces are accessible to them. Cost, geography, discrimination and social isolation all create barriers to participation. There is opportunity for arts policy to support models of practice that engage communities as creators, collaborators, not only as audiences.

Women's Circus contributes to the policy pillar **A Place for Every Story** by creating platforms for underrepresented voices and lived experience. Through collaborative circus and performance-making processes, participants build confidence, creative skills and social connection, contributing to Australia's cultural life. Our performances are often the first-time participants have seen their own stories and identities represented on stage and bring together people from diverse cultural backgrounds, ages and lived experiences to create original, meaningful works. Many participants join with no previous arts experience and initially do not identify as "artists." Through long-term engagement, participants have moved into employment and mentoring roles within the organisation. This demonstrates the broader cultural and social impact of CACD practice beyond the final artistic outcome.

Our work also strongly aligns with **Engaging the Audience** as participation itself is central to our model. We engage people who may never otherwise attend or participate in arts activity, creating lifelong pathways into cultural engagement. In 2025, our annual Open Day welcomed 178 attendees, including more than 100 first-time participants, reflecting the strong demand for inclusive and community-based creative spaces.

While *Revive* acknowledges inclusion and participation, we believe there remains a structural challenge in how Community Arts and Cultural Development practice is recognised within policy and funding systems. CACD work often requires long-term relationship building and sustained community engagement, yet funding models frequently prioritise short-term outputs or conventional artistic metrics. This can undervalue the social, cultural and artistic outcomes created through participatory arts practice.

Meaningful change would include recognition of CACD as a core part of Australia's cultural ecology, alongside increased investment in long-term community-engaged arts practice. Funding structures that support relationship-building, accessibility, artist facilitation and participation outcomes as critical cultural work.

Women's Circus believes Australia's cultural future depends on ensuring everyone can see themselves reflected in cultural life and have genuine opportunities to create, participate and belong. We support a National Cultural Policy that recognises culture as something communities actively shape together.