

# CHILDREN'S THEATRE ALLIANCE SUBMISSION TO THE NEW NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

The Alliance acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet, gather, and work. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

## The Alliance's call: Theatre for every child!

Every Australian child has the right to take part in cultural life. Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child names that right. Four in five Australian children do not have the opportunity to exercise that right.

### ABOUT THE CHILDREN'S THEATRE ALLIANCE

Established in 2026, the Children's Theatre Alliance<sup>1,2</sup> is the sector-led national platform of Australia's professional theatre companies making work for children. We cover theatre for children aged 0 to 14, with a focused lens on children aged 0 to 8.

We believe children's theatre is both cultural and social infrastructure for Australia's children. The next National Cultural Policy is the moment to recognise and resource it as such.

This submission makes the following five recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** Develop and resource a 10-year national arts strategy for children and young people.

**Recommendation 2:** Strengthen the Children's Theatre Sector through targeted investment and support.

**Recommendation 3:** Co-invest in the Children's Theatre Investment Fund.

**Recommendation 4:** Adopt the cultural and social infrastructure principle through cross-portfolio collaboration.

**Recommendation 5:** Remove barriers to access.

These actions are mapped to the five pillars of the policy, with the substantive load on Pillars 4 (Strong Cultural Infrastructure) and 5 (Engaging the Audience).

The Alliance stands in solidarity with the wider sector, including youth arts, arts education and other artforms, in calling for stronger national recognition of children and young people in cultural policy.

We support sector voices advocating for this recognition to be embedded structurally including through the addition of a dedicated sixth pillar focused on children, young people and the arts.

## Where children's theatre stands today

### The moment

One in five. That is roughly how many Australian children aged 0 to 8 attend live theatre in any given year. The other four do not. Access is shaped by postcode and family income rather than need or right.

Australia has more than 4.4 million children aged 0 to 14. That is 16% of the population. No national cultural policy has yet had a strategy for them. The next National Cultural Policy is the moment to change that.

### The Children's Theatre sector

Australian children's theatre is world-class but structurally constrained. The professional sector produces work recognised internationally, with companies regularly touring globally. The structural conditions tell a different story.

Federal multi-year operational funding for Youth Arts has fallen from twenty-one companies in 2007 to nine beyond 2026. Of those nine Youth Arts companies, only six are theatre companies that create work for children. For comparison, Denmark, a country of five million people, supports almost 200 theatre companies devoted to children. Australia, with five times the population, supports six.

There are currently no ongoing federally funded children's theatre companies based in New South Wales, Queensland, the Northern Territory or the Australian Capital Territory. This is a significant structural gap, particularly given that New South Wales has historically had the largest share of Australia's child population, with Queensland also home to a substantial proportion of children nationally.

There is also no dedicated federal funding stream for children's theatre, leaving the sector reliant on broader, highly competitive artform and project funding programs that do not adequately recognise the distinct role, audience, practice and public value of theatre made for children.

### About Australia's children

Around 580,000 children (0-8 years) attend theatre in any given year. The headline figure masks a sharp divide. A small group of families attend regularly while the majority attend rarely or never. The children most likely to miss out are those for whom shared cultural experience would matter most: children in regional and remote communities, children in low-income families and children in communities where wellbeing is most under pressure.

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<sup>1</sup> The Alliance is an independent sector-led forum and will be supported by a National Children's Theatre Initiative. The Initiative is a national system that is currently being established to support and sustain coordination, fundraising and capacity building efforts.

<sup>2</sup> "Children's Theatre" can also be referred to as Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA). We are explicitly using "Children" to place focus on the 0-14 years.

This is happening at a moment of developmental concern for Australian children. The 2024 Australian Early Development Census shows emotional maturity recording the largest decline of all five developmental domains, with **one in four children entering school now developmentally vulnerable or at risk**. Positive peer and parent-child relationships have also fallen sharply since 2020. The case for cultural participation has rarely been stronger.

## **The opportunity**

The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 provides cross-portfolio architecture across Social Services, Health, Education and Arts. This creates a structural opening for cultural participation in children's wellbeing that has not existed before. The Children's Theatre Alliance gives government a single coherent sector partner to work with on professional theatre for Australia's children.

The pieces are already in place. Australia has the artists. It has the systems to put new funding to work. What is missing is a national strategy that makes children's cultural participation something the policy delivers.

## **The cost of inaction**

Each year that passes without a national strategy for children and young people's arts further entrenches the inequity in access and narrows the workforce. It also carries downstream costs the broader system absorbs in health, education and social services, as children miss the experiences that build belonging, emotional skills and connection. The cost of coordinated action now is less than the cost of doing nothing later.

## **Why theatre**

Children's theatre is not just entertainment. It is part of how children develop.

**Belonging and connection.** Children who belong thrive. Live theatre builds the kind of shared, embodied belonging that other experience cannot. It is part of the fabric and precursor towards social cohesion.

**Emotional wellbeing.** Theatre builds the emotional skills children need to feel, regulate and connect. At a moment when children are struggling with emotional maturity, this matters more than it has for a generation.

**Health and wellbeing.** There is overwhelming evidence that arts engagement in the early years strengthens brain, body and relationships.

**Artistic engagement.** Children shape Australia's cultural life now, not just in the future. They are audiences for Australian stories, and creators of culture.

These four outcomes are supported by robust, peer-reviewed research, Australian and international. These outcomes compound over repeated, age-appropriate engagement. That is the case for sustained access.

## A children's lens across all five pillars

Revive set the five pillars of Australia's national cultural policy. The next policy is the chance to ensure every pillar includes Australia's children. Each pillar has a children's dimension that is not yet operationalised. The Alliance offers, for each pillar, a single question: what does this pillar need to deliver for Australia's children?

### **Pillar 1: First Nations First**

Recognising and respecting the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia's arts and culture.

#### **WHAT THIS PILLAR NEEDS TO DELIVER FOR AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN**

First Nations leadership must shape how First Nations stories, languages and ways of knowing reach Australia's children.

Leadership on this pillar sits with First Nations artists, communities and sector voices. The Alliance supports the calls made in submissions led by them. Australia does not currently have a dedicated First Nations-led professional theatre company creating work for children. We celebrate the work of First Nations-led companies whose work reaches children alongside other audiences, such as Bangarra Dance Theatre and Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company. The Alliance is committed to working closely with First Nations-led companies particularly those creating work for children.

### **Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story**

Reflecting the diversity of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.

#### **WHAT THIS PILLAR NEEDS TO DELIVER FOR AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN**

Australia's children belong in every story, as audiences for the diversity of Australian stories and as creators of culture.

Children are part of "every story" twice over. They are the audience whose encounter with Australian stories shapes the cultural citizens they become. They are also creators of culture, with stories and artistic expression that deserve to be made, heard and resourced. Australian theatre for children is one of the most direct ways the diversity of Australia reaches Australian children at the developmental moment when identity is forming. A Place for Every Story needs to include the stories told for children and the stories told by them.

### **Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist**

Supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators.

#### **WHAT THIS PILLAR NEEDS TO DELIVER FOR AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN**

Artists who make theatre for children are artists in full standing and require the same investment in pay, pathways and leadership as the rest of the artistic workforce.

Artists who make theatre for children are artists in full standing. They are writers, directors, designers, performers, producers, technicians and educators whose specialist skill is making work that meets children at their developmental moment. The sector faces specific workforce challenges: smaller average company size and lower ticket prices constrain pay, career pathways and leadership development. Centrality of the Artist needs to reach this part of the artistic workforce as deliberately as it reaches the rest.

### **Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure**

Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts, culture and heritage.

#### **WHAT THIS PILLAR NEEDS TO DELIVER FOR AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN**

Children's theatre is both cultural and social infrastructure, and must be funded, produced and toured as the distinct sector it is.

Children's theatre is essential cultural infrastructure. It also functions as social infrastructure for childhood wellbeing. **One in five** Australian children attends live theatre. **One in four** enters school developmentally vulnerable or at risk. The connection between cultural participation and child wellbeing is well evidenced. Neither role is currently operationalised in the national cultural policy framework.

Strong cultural infrastructure for children is not a smaller version of the infrastructure that serves adult audiences. It needs distinct funding architecture, distinct producing capacity, distinct touring infrastructure, and distinct policy recognition. Without it, cultural participation as part of childhood becomes lofty aspiration rather than reality.

The structural conditions reflect that absence: only six children's theatre organisations hold ongoing federal funding nationally, with no ongoing federally funded children's theatre company in New South Wales, Queensland, the Northern Territory or the Australian Capital Territory. Strong Cultural Infrastructure for Australia's children requires the recommendations 2-3 in this submission. We urgently need dedicated multi-year organisational funding as a sector.

## Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Making sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad.

### WHAT THIS PILLAR NEEDS TO DELIVER FOR AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN

Every Australian child should encounter live theatre as part of growing up, regardless of postcode, income or other barriers standing in the way.

For Australia's children, audience engagement is fundamentally a question of equity. Only one in five Australian children currently attends live theatre. Access is shaped by postcode and family income rather than need or right.

Children are often understood as audiences of the future. They are also the audiences of today. Both matter, but the policy weight has sat on the future for too long. The next decade must be about investing in children as active cultural participants now, not only as future audiences to be developed later. This is broader than ticket prices and transport, although those matter. The barriers are nuanced. Whether theatre feels like it is for them. Whether it is culturally safe. Whether the timing works for families. Whether schools have the resourcing to bring children at all. Engaging the Audience for children requires the fifth recommendation in this submission.

### A note on structure of the pillars

Submissions from across the youth arts, arts education and broader cultural sectors have called for a dedicated sixth pillar for children, young people and the arts. The Alliance stands in solidarity with that call, offering a complementary approach: to demonstrate, pillar by pillar, that a children's dimension could run through every part of national cultural policy within the current structure.

## Our recommendations

### Recommendation 1: A 10-year national arts strategy for children and young people

A national strategy is the policy frame that holds all the others (Pillars 1 through 5).

- 1. The Alliance calls for the next National Cultural Policy to include a 10-year national arts strategy for children and young people, with the investment to make it real.** The strategy spans all artforms for children and young people aged 0 to 25, supporting a rich and diverse sector including youth arts, theatre for young audiences, youth-led and co-created work, emerging artist development, socially engaged and CACD practice, arts education and school engagement. Collectively known as the CYPAs sector (Children and Young People, in the Arts). The strategy delivers for children and young people: stronger cultural participation, deeper artistic experiences, equitable access, and meaningful voice in the cultural life of the nation.

## **Recommendation 2: Strengthen the Children's Theatre Sector through targeted investment and support**

A strong sector is the precondition for everything else in this submission (Pillar 4).

- 1. Recognise children's theatre and the children it serves within Australian cultural policy.** Recognise children's theatre as a distinct sector. Different audience, different business model, different policy framework required. Children as a distinct cultural policy priority cohort. Not a younger version of teenagers or young adults. Children as cultural citizens, with a voice centred in how policy is made.
- 2. Build a national operational funding base.** Commit to ongoing multi-year federal operational funding for at least 18 children's theatre organisations by 2030, with geographic distribution that reflects where Australia's children live.
- 3. Invest in the Alliance as the sector-led platform for coordination.** The platform that lets the sector behave like a sector: convening, communities of practice, advocacy, workforce coordination, and national data and evidence.

## **Recommendation 3: Co-invest in the Children's Theatre Investment Fund**

A dedicated investment fund is the financial vehicle that makes new Australian work for children happen at scale. (Pillar 4)

- 1. Support the establishment of the Children's Theatre Investment Fund.** A dedicated, strategic investment mechanism for new Australian theatre for children, with a clear remit: invest in children's theatre work that would not otherwise happen. Built on a relational model, designed for the realities of small organisations. The Fund works alongside existing federal funding (Major Festivals Initiative, Playing Australia, Creative Futures, project funding).
- 2. Anchor the 50/50 public-private model.** Federal anchor investment is what enables the Fund's 50/50 architecture. The model uses new philanthropic money to leverage government investment, achieving more than either could alone. It also opens the door to philanthropists who back systemic change rather than individual projects.
- 3. Build the Fund around sector-led governance and outcomes directed toward children.** Investment decisions for children's theatre are best made by those who know the work and the audience. The Fund is managed within the sector through support from the National Children's Theatre Initiative, with independent governance. Detail is in the separate submission.

## **Recommendation 4: Adopt the cultural and social infrastructure principle through cross-portfolio collaboration.**

The case for children's theatre is strongest when both functions are named together: cultural infrastructure for Australia's children, and social infrastructure for childhood wellbeing. (Pillar 4)

**SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE** refers to the systems, services and spaces that build social wellbeing and connection: early childhood services, libraries, parks, community centres. Naming children's theatre as part of this category is what unlocks the cross-portfolio investment case.

- 1. Adopt the dual infrastructure principle for children's theatre.** Cultural infrastructure, because theatre is how children participate in cultural life. Social infrastructure, because theatre builds the emotional literacy, co-regulation and connection underpinning childhood wellbeing.
- 2. Establish cross-portfolio investment in children's cultural participation.** The first National Cultural Policy did not substantively achieve its cross-portfolio objective. Children's policy is already cross-portfolio. The Early Years Strategy makes that visible. This is the practical place to start. The next National Cultural Policy should commit to coordinated investment across Arts, Social Services, Health and Education.
- 3. Commission a first-mover cross-portfolio demonstration.** A structured demonstration gives the relevant portfolios a concrete vehicle through which to invest together in children's wellbeing. Built to deliver both cultural and social outcomes, with a strong evidence framework.

## **Recommendation 5: Remove barriers to access**

For Australia's children, audience engagement is fundamentally a question of equity. (Pillar 5)

- 1. Adopt a national access target for children's theatre.** Commit by 2030 to two theatre experiences for every Australian child by age eight. Set four by 2035 and six to eight as long-term cultural entitlement. Norway's Cultural Rucksack already guarantees every child arts experiences through schooling.
- 2. Invest in the producing, touring and new-work pipeline that delivers it.** Access is a system design problem. What is missing is producing and presentation capacity. The Alliance supports LPA's call to double Playing Australia investment, alongside the Children's Theatre Investment Fund (Recommendation 3).
- 3. Deliver targeted access programs for children most likely to miss out.** Prioritise children in regional and remote communities, low-income families, and communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage, in partnership with the communities themselves. Resource the specific needs of children with disability

and the creation of suitable programmes, content and adaptive measures. The Alliance supports LPA's call for an Arts Access Investment Program for Schools.

- 4. Pilot a Cultural Pass for children's families.** A parallel pilot to LPA's 'See It Live' Cultural Pass, with a voucher mechanism for families to access live theatre. The Cultural Pass reaches children through families, the Schools Program through schools. Together they deliver universal access.

## In solidarity across the sector

The Alliance's submission sits within a broader sector conversation about young people and the arts. The Alliance stands in wholehearted solidarity with the CYPA sector (Children and Young People, and the Arts).

- **The National Children's Theatre Initiative.** This submission is a 'sister' submission to this submission and sets out the technical architecture referenced throughout this submission.
- **The Youth Arts Sector.** Children's Theatre (or Theatre for Young Audiences) sits within the Youth Arts Sector, and that the case for Children's Theatre is part of the wider case.
- **The National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE)** on the arts in the education of Australia's children and young people.
- **Theatre Network Australia (TNA)** on the wider Australian theatre sector.
- **Live Performance Australia (LPA)** on the broader live performance industry, including its call for performing arts tax offsets.
- **Australian Live Performance Export Alliance** to recognise export and international engagement as critical to the long-term viability of the performing arts ecology, including the Children's Theatre Alliance.

The Alliance also stands in solidarity with others calling for stronger inclusion of young people in the next National Cultural Policy. Together these submissions describe the ecosystem within which Australia's children and young people encounter cultural life.

**A WHOLE SYSTEM** The Alliance asks the next National Cultural Policy to recognise and resource the children's and youth theatre ecosystem rather than picking among its parts.

## The moment is now

This submission asks the next National Cultural Policy to ensure that a generation of Australian children grows up with theatre as part of their lives. Not as a privilege of postcode or income. As a right, not a chance. This is the moment. Theatre for every child.

## **The Alliance**

### **The Children's Theatre Alliance**

*Arena Theatre (VIC)*

*Barking Gecko Arts (WA)*

*Brymore Productions (QLD)*

*CDP Theatre Producers (NSW)*

*Dead Puppet Society (QLD)*

*Imaginary Theatre (QLD)*

*Monkey Baa Theatre Co (NSW)*

*Patch Theatre (SA)*

*Playable Streets (VIC)*

*Polyglot (VIC)*

*Sensorium Theatre (WA)*

*Shake & Stir (QLD)*

*Slingsby (SA)*

*Spare Parts Puppet Theatre (WA)*

*Terrapin (TAS)*

*The Listies (VIC)*

*Threshold (VIC)*

*Windmill Production Co (SA)*

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