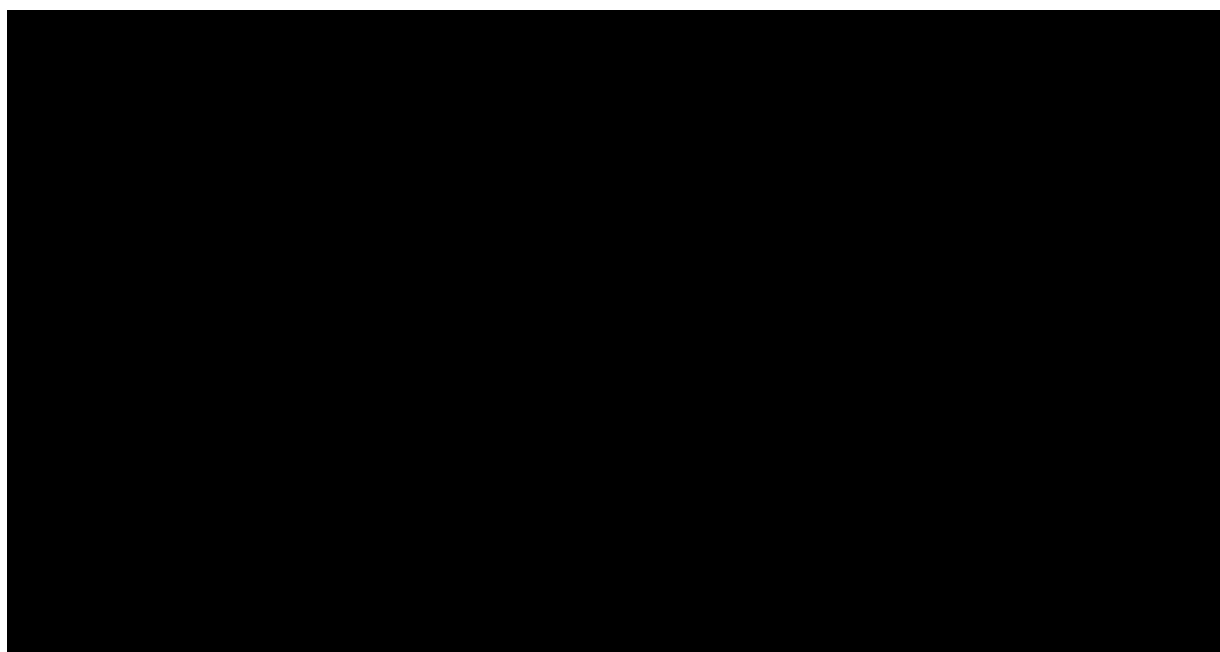


**Culture First.**

Supporting Aboriginal Art Centres  
of Central Australia

*In our art and culture centres we acknowledge and respect our elders, those that came before us and established the Aboriginal Art Centre movement. We acknowledge our young people who come into the art centre to learn from their elders. These young people are the future of Aboriginal Art and Culture centres.*

*Desart Chairperson, June Smith*

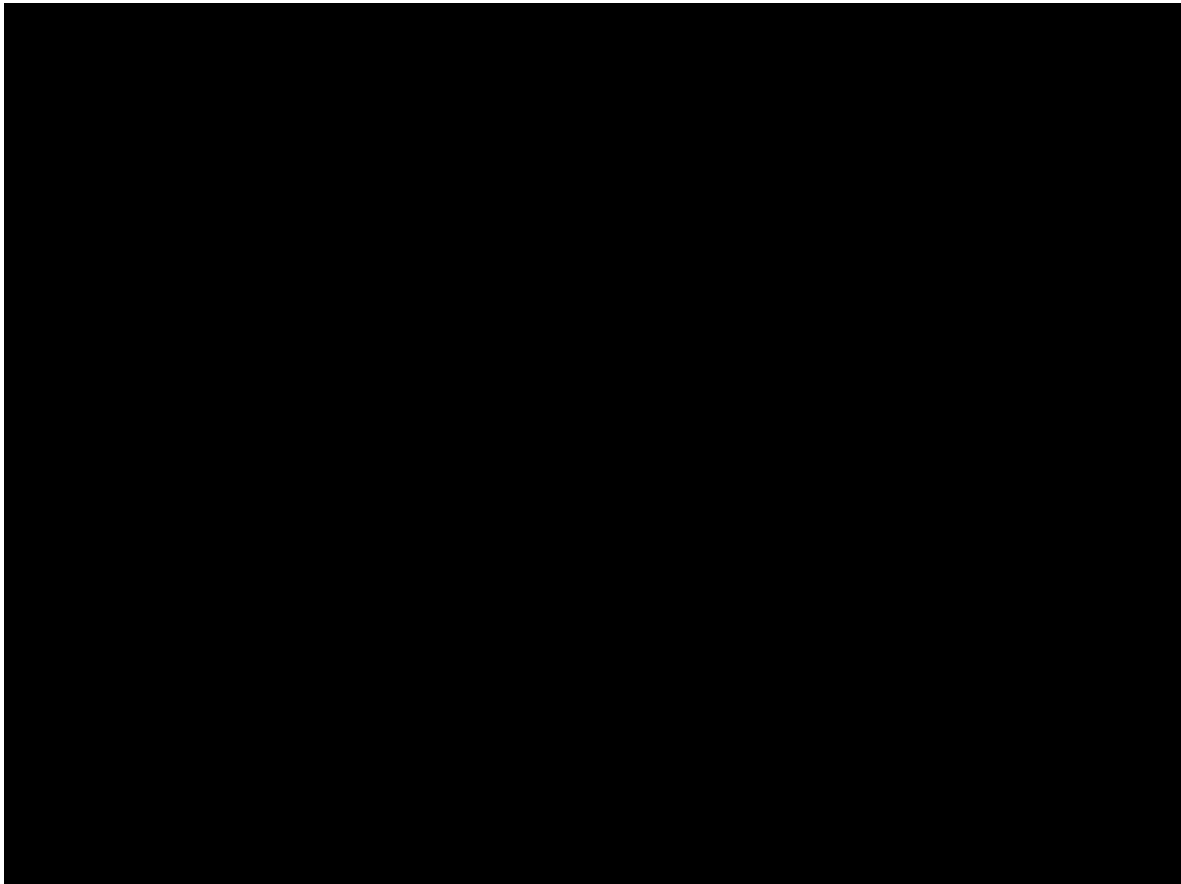


## Part One

**Note: Desart has submitted 4 video clips as Parts 2-5 of its submission**

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# 1. Introduction

In April 2025 Desart's membership came together for a historic conference in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) to devise ways to strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture centre sector. Over two days of collaborative workshops with artists and arts workers from 39 remote art and culture centres across Central Australia, with input from our partner organisations including Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Artists (ANKA), Indigenous Art Centres Alliance (IACA), and Ananguku Arts and Culture Aboriginal Corporation (Ku Arts), we listened to the voices of those at the forefront of one of the most vibrant and durable art movements in the history of this country.

We heard that our art and culture centres are not only hubs for art production and sales but also play essential roles in culture and language preservation, employment and training, education and youth engagement, health and wellbeing, and aged and disability care. Art and culture centres are cornerstone institutions in their communities and the roles they perform in supporting community cohesion for our most remote populations, deliver immeasurable benefits across local, regional, and national spheres.

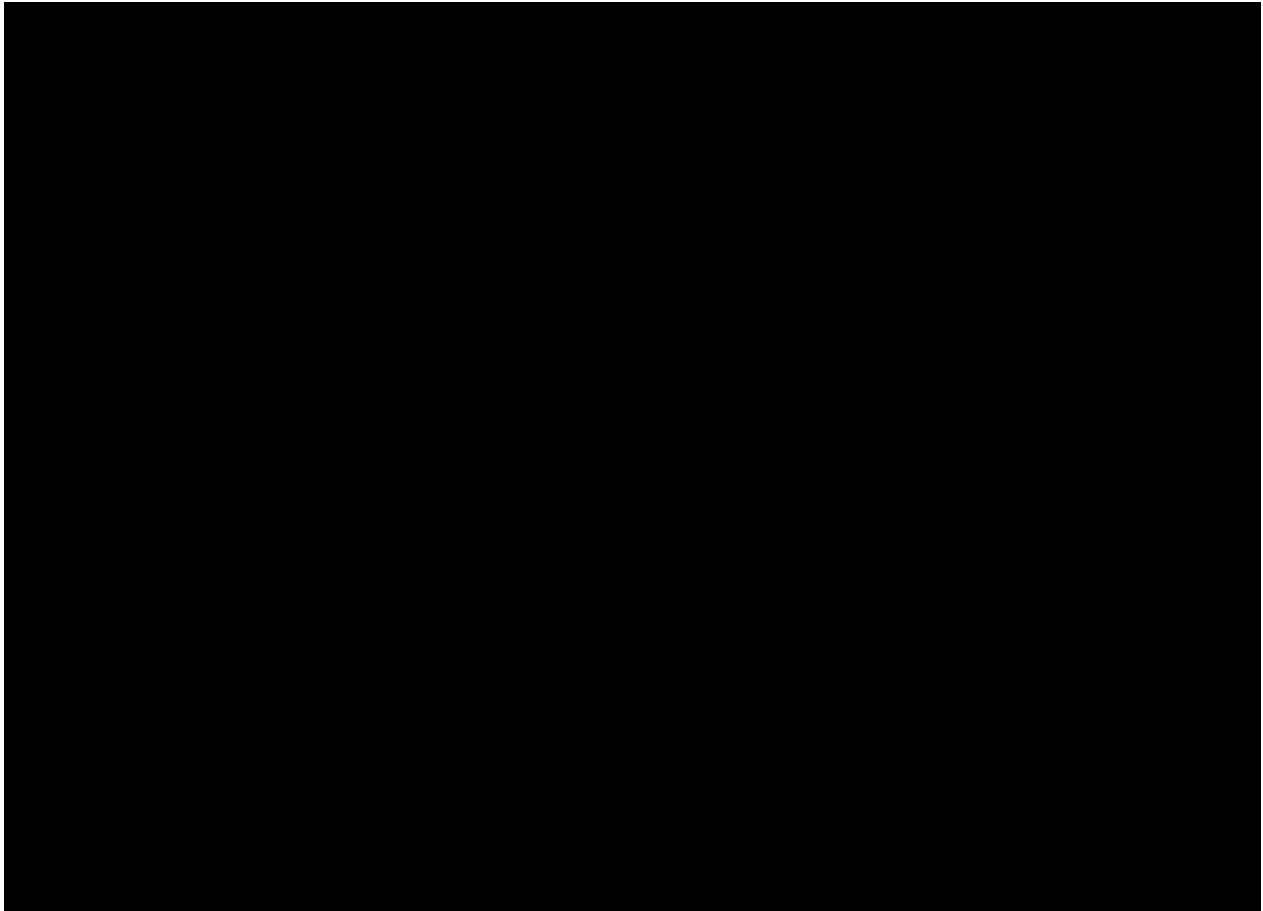
The difficulties we face running businesses in remote desert communities cannot be overstated. Minister for Indigenous Australians, Senator Malarndirri McCarthy, recently announced a \$50 million scheme to ensure food security in remote communities by subsidising the cost of essential items. 'First Nations people living in remote communities have been paying significantly higher prices for essential items than people in the cities for far too long', she said.

In this environment, where power and internet failures are frequent, where essential repairs and maintenance face long delays and exorbitant costs, and where the price of diesel hovers around \$4 a litre, the challenges of running a business just get more extreme. The importance of reliable digital infrastructure is now paramount to the success, indeed the survival, of remote art and culture centres operating in the Central and Western Deserts.

Desart's annual festival of Aboriginal art and culture, Desert Mob, is one of the few positive stories with strong representations of Aboriginal culture in an environment where media negativity portrays Aboriginal culture only as problematic. This event brings economic and social benefits to Mparntwe – Alice Springs despite the high production costs and challenges of doing business in a remote location. The Desert Mob Exhibition remains a major supplier of works of fine art to many of the major collecting institutions.

Desart works collaboratively as one of the five peak bodies for the sector who have joined together to form the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Culture Centre Alliance (the Alliance). Along with Aboriginal Art Centre Hub Western Australia (AACHWA), ANKA, IACA, and Ku Arts, we are working together to present the interests of regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and their communities to government.

This submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation comes from the heart of Australia, putting forward the issues that matter most to thousands of artists and arts workers and their families who face the daily challenges of living and working in the harshest conditions faced by any of Australia's creative workforce. We live in these places because the country is alive with culture and our work keeps this culture alive.



Remote art and culture centres are recognised for their cultural contributions and increasingly for their role in community support and as a gateway to government services. Our message is strong. The stories we heard at our conference in Mparntwe underscore the far-reaching impact of these centres, and the critical need for increased investment in their growth and prosperity over the long-term.

Our recommendations reflect the needs of not only some of the most successful and prolific artists in the country but entire populations in the vast regions of remote country in central and northern Australia who keep culture and country alive. Ours is the longest surviving culture on the planet. If we, as a nation, are to protect and nurture it in a complex and ever-changing world, the time to invest in its future is now.

Here's some of what we heard at the conference:

*Creating pathways for young people to work at art centres ensures generational continuity and fresh perspectives. (Desart, 2025, p.6)*

*Teaching children cultural knowledge, Tjukurrpa (Dreaming), and law remains a core responsibility of art centres. (p.7)*

*Protecting Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), especially regarding the use of Western and Central Desert symbols, is essential to maintaining cultural integrity. (p.7)*

## 2. List of Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Funding Review**

In line with the 2022 recommendation of the Productivity Commission, we call on the Government to instigate a co-designed review of government expenditure directed to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts sector with the aim of ensuring the long-term sustainability of the sector.

### **Recommendation 2: Digital Capability Funding**

Government should commit to the provision of ongoing funding to support growth in digital capability for art and culture centre sector guided by a framework co-designed with the sector.

### **Recommendation 3: Funding for Art Fairs**

The Government should commit to ongoing increased funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art fairs including financial assistance for remote art and culture centres to attend.

### **Recommendation 4: National Infrastructure Fund**

Desart supports the call by the Alliance for the Government to establish a National Infrastructure Fund for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Culture Centres to finance fit-for-purpose, safe, climate resilient and digitally capable infrastructure, guided by a national framework developed with the alliance.

### **Recommendation 5: Workforce Development**

Desart supports the Alliance in its call for the Government to enter into a co-design process with the Alliance to develop a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture centre workforce development strategy to compliment Creative Australia's First Nations Creative Workforce Strategy.

### **Recommendation 6: Sector Mapping**

Desart supports the Alliance's call for the Government to create a co-designed sector mapping project that details the full contribution made by remote art and culture centres to service provision in their communities. This project should devise a mechanism to measure, evaluate and fund all services provided by art and culture centres across different portfolios, departments and agencies.

### **Recommendation 7: Recognise and Fund the Alliance**

Desart calls on the government to recognise and fund the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Culture Centre Alliance as the national consultative voice of the sector.

### **Recommendation 8: Tax Reform**

Desart supports the NSW Department of Creative Industries' proposal that the Government consider the following tax reforms affecting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art centre sector:

- Make prize and grant money for creative competitions tax-free.
- Amend GST rules to prevent artists and creatives from being required to register for GST after a one-off spike in income
- Offer a standard deduction for individual artists and creatives in lieu of itemising numerous small expenses and keeping receipts.
- Raise the minimum distribution rate for Private Ancillary Funds in line with Productivity Commission advice.
- Amend Self-Managed Superfunds (SMSF) rules to permit artworks owned by the fund to be displayed in the member's home or business premises.
- Broaden the range of deductible expenses to include living costs for artists undertaking residencies; Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) costs such as travel to Country and engagement with Elders; and costs while touring, including childcare.
- Improve tax education, support and guidance (and financial literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and arts workers)

### 3. About Desart

Desart is the Association of Central Australian Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Centres, established 34 years ago in 1992. Our membership covers Central Australia’s desert regions in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. We currently have 39 art and culture centre members representing around 8,000 artists. We are governed by a 10 member Aboriginal executive committee elected from the membership regions. Desart services a membership area of 1.2 million square kilometres.

Desart supports its member art and culture centres with advice, support and resources covering business, people and culture, work health and safety, governance, marketing, IT, infrastructure and funding. It advocates on behalf of its membership to state and territory, and federal governments, both individually and in collaboration with the Alliance.

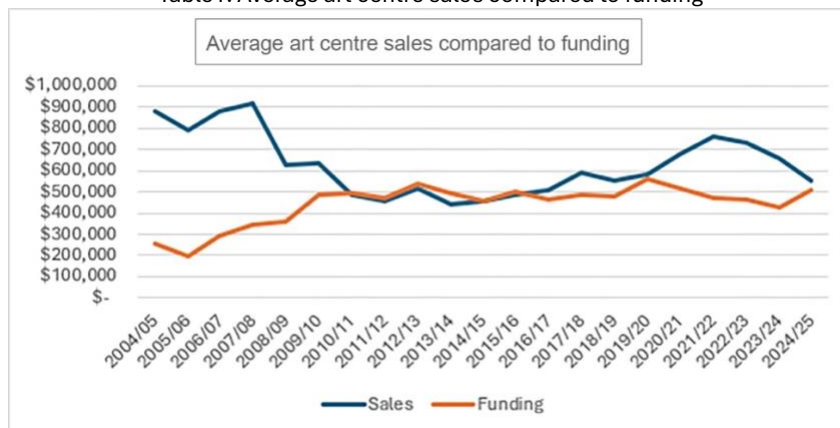
Desart provides the sector’s unique online art and culture centre business management tool, SAM (Stories, Art, Money), which is used by almost every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture centre in Australia. SAM provides not only an indispensable business software package tailored specifically to this sector, but an accurate and efficient method of data collection which has successfully tracked market trends and growth in the sector over decades. Desart has also initiated a national digital labelling project which implements QR codes for Indigenous art products to verify authenticity and combat fake merchandise.

Desart has been a key driver in the formation of the Alliance and its development of a sector strengthening plan to ensure a sustainable future for art and culture centres. We bring the voices of desert artists and their communities, and indeed the whole sector through the Alliance, to government in this submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation.

### 4. Review of Funding

The main source of operational grant funding for the art and culture centre sector is the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support program (IVAIS) administered by the Office for the Arts. Historically, the sector saw a sharp increase in reliance on funding from 2005 to 2010; this is likely due to numerous new and smaller art centres opening. For several years from 2019 on, average art centre sales grew strongly, while average funding remained static, again seeing a reduced reliance on funding. Over recent years, with falling sales, art centres have seen a return to the proportion of total income from sales and funding being similar.

Table1: Average art centre sales compared to funding



Over the last decade, reliance on grants has generally been declining ... A greater proportion of self-generated income means art centres increase their financial autonomy ... falling levels of grant income may also be linked to the static level of funding available to the sector. (Desart, 2026b, p.5-6)

According to Desart's analysis of SAM financial data, IVAIS funding for art and culture centres has fallen in real terms by 25% per art centre over the decade to 2025-26, leaving the average art centre with a drop of \$77,000 in funding. The latest figures show a 20% decline in sales revenue over the past three years which, coupled with the fall in the value of grant funding, leaves art and culture centres vulnerable to the pressures of rising costs exacerbated by the remote locations of our centres.

Desart's member art and culture centres are facing growing financial difficulties which have been compounded by a static funding environment and recent sharp increases in the cost of doing business. At our 2025 conference, Desart members called for, 'Secure funding that covers fair wages, professional development and infrastructure maintenance (Desart, 2025, p.8).' We, along with the other art and culture centre peak bodies, support the position of the Alliance in calling for a review of funding for the sector.

### **Recommendation 1: Funding Review**

In line with the 2022 recommendation of the Productivity Commission, we call on the Government to instigate a co-designed review of government expenditure directed to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts sector with the aim of ensuring the long-term sustainability of the sector.

## **5. Digital Capability**

Desart is at the forefront in the provision of national digital infrastructure for the art and culture centre sector. The development and roll out of the SAM online business platform and the national digital labelling project have positioned Desart as the key provider of digital assets for the sector. Currently, 95% of IVAIS funded art and culture centres use SAM as their key business management tool linking art production, cataloguing and sales with online retail and marketing functions. SAM also provides an efficient portal for the collection of reliable, up-to-date data on the performance of the sector, tracking trends in sales, production, participation, workforce and revenue over time. This function provides detailed industry data critical for policy responses and business strategies that facilitate sustainable economic performance across the sector.

Desart also provides SAM training for art centre staff and manages software upgrades and system maintenance for the SAM platform. This unique online tool is an invaluable asset for the sector as the global economy moves online and the development of digital functionality and innovation in e-commerce and AI speeds up. It is crucial for SAM to keep pace with innovations in the online business environment and government should recognise that this will require adequate resourcing.

Desart's digital labelling project connects consumers at the point-of-sale through the SAM portal with a range of information including certificates of authenticity and information about the artist and the work. Desart trains art centre staff in a full suite of marketing skills to support the implementation of digital labelling.

The physical isolation of desert art and culture centres from their markets make access to reliable digital tools and infrastructure supremely important in achieving sales growth. As the cost of doing business in remote Australia spirals, investment in digital connectivity for our art and culture centres will fortify these essential community-owned enterprises for the future.

In an online environment growing ever more complex, the protection of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) is emerging as a significant area of risk requiring urgent action on research, policy development and program delivery. Art and culture centres hold the sacred knowledge at the heart of their communities and much of this information is stored on the SAM platform. At Desart's Strengthening the Sector conference in 2025, participants outlined a comprehensive strategy which '... aims to ensure respectful recognition and protection of ICIP while enhancing understanding across Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and institutions' (p.15). Cyber security continues to pose a general risk to art centre businesses creating an ongoing expectation that peak bodies will provide relevant training and information for their members. Funding should be made available to address these issues.

### **Recommendation 2: Digital Capability Funding**

Government should commit to the provision of ongoing funding to support growth in digital capability across the art and culture centre sector guided by a framework co-designed with the sector.

## **6. Art Fairs**

Art Fairs have been an integral part of the strategic marketing of Aboriginal art in Central Australia since the Desert Mob exhibition was founded in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) 35 years ago in 1991. Now hosted by Desart, Desert Mob has evolved into a multi-event Indigenous arts festival that attracts over 8,000 visitors annually, more than half from interstate or overseas (Desart, 2026a, p.4). With the addition of more art fairs in recent years including the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (2007), Revealed (2008), Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (2009), Tarnanthi (2015) and the National Indigenous Art Fair (2019), the major art fairs have become an integral part of the annual art events calendar and an indispensable outreach vehicle in the recruitment of new audiences.

These events are now viewed as a primary point of contact with people who have never previously purchased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and a key strategic driver of market expansion for the sector. They are also an important site for the presentation of new work for private collectors and major collecting institutions around Australia. Art Fairs offer a unique entry point for consumers to become regular buyers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art with affordable artworks and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander designed homewares available with no commissions paid to gallerists, shown alongside collectable works from award winning artists at curated exhibitions.

But with declining sales at Desert Mob, down from over \$1 million in 2023 to \$873,000 in 2025 (Desart, 2026a, p.15), these events need an urgent injection of funds to maintain their effectiveness. With the number of artists attending falling by almost 20% over the last three years (Desart, 2026a, p.12), it's clear that many art and culture centres are struggling to attend.

The sector needs an urgent injection of funds to maintain the effectiveness of our major art fairs and to assist remote art and culture centres with the high cost of attending these events. Art fairs are a critical platform for market growth and government support should be bolstered to ensure the sector returns to sales growth and avoids a long-term decline in market size.

### **Recommendation 3: Funding for Art Fairs**

The Government should commit to ongoing increased funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art fairs including financial assistance for remote art and culture centres to attend.

## **7. National Infrastructure Fund**

Recent surveys of the infrastructure needs of remote art and culture centres by peak bodies in conjunction with state and territory governments give a very strong indication that art centres are high risk environments in terms of work health and safety (WHS). Infrastructure, including buildings, equipment, vehicles and storage spaces, is often inadequate and/or non-compliant.

Work health and safety legal frameworks are designed to apply equally to Australian workers wherever they are located, however, there is mounting evidence that workplace practices, equipment and infrastructure in remote art centres are often not fit for purpose exposing artists and art centre staff to unacceptable levels of risk while art centres have very low capacity to deploy remediation strategies. Language barriers in remote settings make communication with artists and workers challenging especially when dealing with technical information. Investment in infrastructure upgrades, training, and information resources is critical to make the sector safe for its workforce.

Climate change impacts are increasing the WHS risks for remote art and culture centres exponentially as extreme heat and flooding become regular events across northern and central Australia. 'Climate change is further intensifying these pressures. Extreme heat, humidity and rising sea levels are accelerating deterioration across art centre facilities and staff accommodation. Many centres are experiencing chronic infrastructure failures ... that are becoming financially unmanageable and, in some cases, dangerous (IACA, 2026, p.1).'

The Northern Territory infrastructure survey reported 75% of buildings were more the 21 years old and of these, almost half are more than 40 years old and either at the end of their useful life or requiring expensive upgrades to be fit for purpose (NT Government et al, 2023, p.24). In Western Australia, a 2024 survey recommended urgent upgrades to 26 art centres at a cost of \$51.5 million (AACHWA, p10), while a 2025 survey of north Queensland art centres predicted a surge in funding requests as 80% of IACA members had received no infrastructure funding over the previous 4 years (IACA, 2025, p.10).

Without dedicated funding for repairs, upgrades and future-proofing, some facilities risk becoming unviable, threatening the sustainability of IACA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art centres as critical cultural, social and economic hubs within their communities.

A severe shortage of safe and appropriate staff housing is also limiting the ability of art centres to recruit and retain skilled staff, undermining operational capacity and long-term sustainability.  
(IACA,2026, p.1)

There is a clear and well documented need for a designated fund to provide the art and culture centre sector with ongoing access to finance for infrastructure upgrades.

#### **Recommendation 4: National Infrastructure Fund**

Desart supports the call by the Alliance for the Government to establish a National Infrastructure Fund for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture centres to finance fit-for-purpose, safe, climate-resilient and digitally capable infrastructure, guided by a national framework developed with the Alliance.

## **8. Workforce Development**

There are more than 8,000 Aboriginal people in Central Australia who engage in art and craft production for financial gain. They are at the coalface of the Aboriginal art market producing affordable art and craft for the tourist and homewares markets as well as high-priced fine art for private collectors and institutional buyers.

Despite the scale and durability of the Aboriginal art industry in Central Australia, participation by local Aboriginal people is limited to the roles of artist, where remuneration is dependent on the value of works sold, or Aboriginal Arts Worker employed by an art centre where work is typically casual or part-time. There are no local Aboriginal people employed in a management role in Central Australian Aboriginal art centres or in any of the commercial or public sector galleries (Desart, 2019, p.9).

This imbalance in career opportunity where leadership and decision-making roles in the Central Australian art industry are dominated almost exclusively by non-Aboriginal people should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Desart's 2019 report on workforce development for the region identified a range of measures including traineeship programs, university scholarships, wrap-around employment services and mentoring programs, to overcome the complex barriers to Aboriginal participation in the art and culture workforce. The pathways to employment and career advancement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts workers are unique not only to the art and culture centre sector but to specific regions and communities across remote Australia.

The complexities of successful delivery of certified training courses are distinct to this environment and can only be achieved through partnerships that bring the resources of industry, local, state/territory and federal government together with those of employment and training providers and the art and culture centres themselves. This requires a singular approach to the planning and resourcing of workforce programs for the sector.

Desart has been active in the development and delivery of accredited training and nonaccredited professional development programs for remote and very remote workers since 2008. We recognise that this cohort of Aboriginal art workers is drawn from a population that has the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy, the lowest achievements in school education and the highest levels of unemployment in the country. As remote and very remote residents living on their ancestral lands who speak an Aboriginal language in the home and regularly participate in traditional Aboriginal ceremonies, these workers possess a unique skillset that includes detailed knowledge of complex kinship systems, cultural knowledge that underpins the cosmologies of the oldest living cultures on earth, linguistic dexterity that enables communication across regional and cultural boundaries and a deep knowledge of the landscape that combines the environmental sciences with cosmological lore to create the unique understanding of human existence on which Aboriginal art in Central Australia is based.

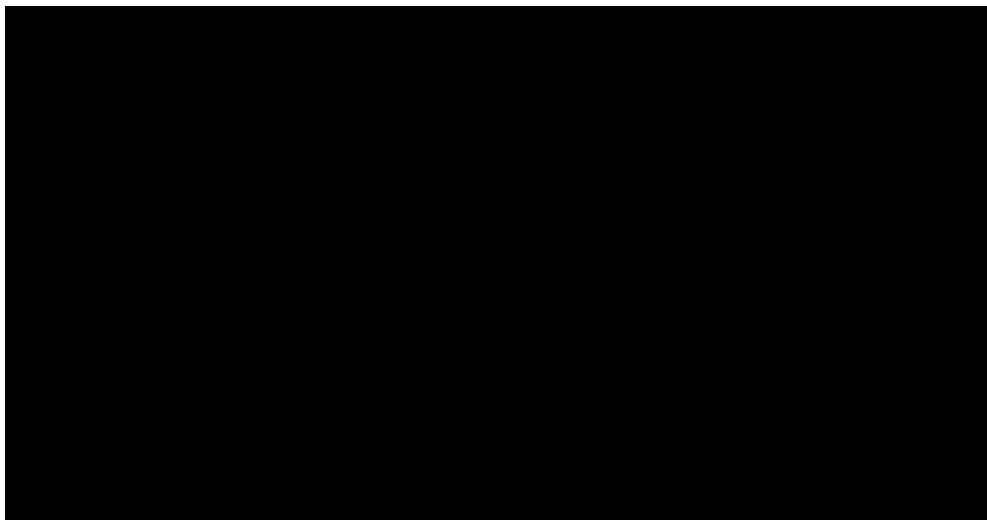
From this perspective Desart views the remote and very remote Aboriginal workforce as highly literate and highly qualified for work in the Aboriginal art industry. Our aim ... is to identify pathways that enable this cohort to adapt their skills to a modern work environment (Desart, 2019 p.11).

In the long term, everything is at stake as remote art and culture centres are now beginning to face recruitment problems with many Desart members reporting difficulty attracting suitable candidates to fill senior roles. The inability of centres to recruit locally, or for Aboriginal arts workers to advance their careers to take up senior positions needs a long-term strategy to overcome the layers of disadvantage affecting this cohort.

The Productivity Commission found that ‘Gaps and deficiencies in training contribute to under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in some roles and positions in the visual arts industry’ (2022, p.41). Desart’s 2019 workforce study found, ‘There is a complex matrix of barriers faced by Aboriginal people entering the workforce and the solutions require equally complex strategies (p.9)’. Desart supports the Alliance position of treating workforce development as a major long-term project to create pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to advance into leadership and management roles within the industry.

### **Recommendation 5: Workforce Development**

Desart supports the Alliance in its call for the Government to enter into a co-design process with the Alliance to develop a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture centre workforce development strategy to compliment Creative Australia’s First Nations Creative Workforce Strategy.



## 9. Strengthening the Sector

Participation in art and culture centres is predominantly female with only 20% male participation. The biggest cohort among practicing artists is women over 60. Programs that encourage young artists and male artists are needed to engage this cohort in arts practices.

Desart's strengthening the sector conference heard a call to, 'Strengthen partnerships with community organisations to support youth engagement and holistic community wellbeing (Desart, 2025, p.8)'. In 2024-25 the number of new artists working in art and culture centres was at its lowest level in almost 15 years (Desart, 2026b, p.3). Artists and their boards expressed the desire to work more closely with schools, land management and ranger groups to bring younger members of the community into the art centres more often. Participants called for support for new art forms and digital media as well as investment in marketing and storytelling to enhance visibility (Desart, 2025, p.8).

Art and culture centres should be recognised as sites for training and skills development, cross-sector program delivery and youth engagement as well as the health, aged care and disability services they proactively deliver.

### **Recommendation 6: Sector Mapping**

Desart supports the Alliance's call for the Government to create a co-designed sector mapping project that details the full contribution made by remote art and culture centres to service provision in their communities. This project should devise a mechanism to measure, evaluate and fund all services contributed by art and culture centres that intersect with different portfolios, departments and agencies.

## 10. Funding the Alliance

Desart supports the Alliance as the voice of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture centre sector. We recognise that the lack of a unified voice to deliver effective high-level political advocacy has resulted in the sector being overlooked by governments as a key stakeholder in the delivery of a wide range of cultural, health and other social services (Congreve & Acker, 2024, p.9). To maintain a strong and sustainable sector that can continue to enable remote-living Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists to generate an independent income for their families, it is essential that governments hear and act on the needs of the artists.

Recognising and funding the Alliance as the key advisory, research and advocacy body representing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture centre sector is the critical next step in the development of a structure to '... share decision-making authority with governments (Productivity Commission, 2022, p.40)', in line with commitments made under the Closing the Gap agreement.

### **Recommendation 7: Recognise and Fund the Alliance**

Desart calls on the government to recognise and fund the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Culture Centre Alliance as the national consultative voice of the sector.

## **11. Tax Reform**

Recent research conducted by the NSW Department of Creative Industries (NSW Gov, 2025) into tax reform to benefit arts and culture devised a range of measures to ease the tax burden on artists and arts organisations. The art and culture sector has highlighted tax policy settings as a ‘notable impediment to artists and creatives’ business viability, international competitiveness and income stability (NSW Gov, 2025, p.6).’

Desart supports calls to review tax policy settings that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and regional and remote art and culture centre businesses.

### **Recommendation 8: Tax Reform**

Desart supports the NSW Department of Creative Industries’ proposal that the Government consider the following tax reforms affecting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art centre sector:

- Make prize and grant money for creative competitions tax-free.
- Amend GST rules to prevent artists and creatives from being required to register for GST after a one-off spike in income.
- Offer a standard deduction for individual artists and creatives in lieu of itemising numerous small expenses and keeping receipts.
- Raise the minimum distribution rate for Private Ancillary Funds in line with Productivity Commission advice.
- Amend Self-Managed Superfunds (SMSF) rules to permit artworks owned by the fund to be displayed in the member’s home or business premises.
- Broaden the range of deductible expenses to include living costs for artists undertaking residencies; Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) costs such as travel to Country and engagement with Elders; and costs while touring, including childcare.
- Improve tax education, support and guidance (and financial literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and arts workers).

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