

Executive Summary responses to the draft National Cultural Plan.

My overall impression of the draft is that the plan is completely out of date, repeating obvious previous aims that have not been sufficiently achieved. Unfortunately, the plan appears removed from the current reality of issues facing Australian artists – freedom of speech, freedom from political interference, freedom from overreaching influential lobby groups, freedom from poverty, freedom from ageism and freedom from anti-regional bias.

I am particularly concerned that the main group advising the development of the draft National Cultural Plan consists of highly paid public servants, non-practising artists who are, for the most part, removed from the daily lived experience of independent full-time professional artists.

Recommendations:

- 1. Fund a living wage for professional artists, especially senior professionals.*
- 2. Address the inequality in funding to regional artists through direct funding and infrastructure.*
- 3. Address and support the social, political, and environmental realities for artists.*
 - a. Commitment to decolonisation, anti-racism and anti-discrimination*
 - b. Acknowledge that Artists are the moral compass of the sector*
 - c. Enshrine freedom of speech and artistic expression*
 - d. Enshrine freedom from political interference in the arts*
- 4. Ensure creative leadership reflects and supports contemporary Australia.*

This policy should shape the future of arts and culture in Australia and ensure the sector reflects the realities, diversity and creative leadership of contemporary Australia (Cmielewski 2021).

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Response to the draft National Cultural Plan.

Challenges and opportunities in the cultural sector

The process of drafting the National Cultural Plan.

Revive was a policy response, in large part, to COVID and the negative impacts felt in particular by full-time professional practicing artists. The draft National Cultural Plan is being developed in similar global and financial uncertainty, and once again, the impacts are being felt with similar impacts for artists to raise funds that deliver ambitious projects. There is little recognition of this current environment in the draft policy statements so far. Since COVID, artists have been forced to leave the creative sector in Australia due to a lack of appropriate funding and poor recognition of their important role in social, political, and environmental catastrophes. Australia ranks 25 out of 31 in developed countries for investment in culture, recreation, and religion (A New Approach 2026). Regardless that the inclusion of religion, which clouds the background data of the draft National Cultural Plan, this is not a ranking to be celebrated and must be addressed comprehensively.

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During my tenure of 13 years in policy development and implementation at the then Australia Council, the process for policy development began by consultation with the sector in order to identify and understand the sector's priorities. From that information, policy aims were then identified. The process for this National Cultural Plan seems to have been developed back to front because the sector is being asked to comment on what looks like a banal fait accompli with little research into the results of Revive. The world has changed significantly since Revive, but that is not reflected in the current draft policy.

What matters to me.

As an independent curator, I struggle to find the resources to even develop a project, let alone one with large ambitions.

As an independent cultural commentator, I struggle to find support for and publication opportunities for genuine critical discussion– not just descriptive accolades.

As the wife of a senior internationally renowned artist, I struggle to understand why he does not receive a stipend for his continued professionalism and experimentation, as is the case in Finland.

As a friend to many artists across Australia and in my local region, I struggle to understand the lack of attention to delivering a basic income for professional artists, as is the case in Ireland.

As an audience member and close friend of many professional artists living regionally, I struggle to understand the paucity of genuine support and opportunities for regional artists.

All of these are missed opportunities and should be addressed by concerted efforts across all three tiers of government. Attention to the needs of artists, first and foremost, must be initiated, co-ordinated, and managed across all tiers of government.

What should be reflected in the new National Cultural Policy

1. A living wage for professional artists, especially senior professionals

The single most important priority must be funding for a Basic Income for Professional Artists. The Irish Government funded such a pilot program between 2022 and 2025. In November 2025, following a review that found increased benefits to artists, businesses and community members, the Irish Government made it a permanent grant program (White, 2025; Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, 2026).

2. Address the inequality in funding to regional artists through direct funding and infrastructure

The systematic inequality because of the low-levels of funding allocations to state and territory-based regional arts organisations must be radically improved. Detailed research must be commissioned to understand the current realities for regionally based artists.

3. Address and support the social, political, and environmental realities for artists

The forthcoming National Cultural Plan must reflect current issues faced by artists and arts workers, as well as the arts sector at large. The increasing prevalence of censorship, political interference and racism in the arts concerns me deeply. I support the following core values of and commitment to decolonisation, anti-racism, anti-discrimination; artists as the moral compass of the sector; freedom of artistic expression without limitations; and freedom from political interference in the arts.

- Commitment to decolonisation, anti-racism and anti-discrimination (Pillars 1: First Nations First, 3: Centrality of the Artist & 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure)

The National Cultural Policy must take a decolonial, anti-racist and anti-discrimination approach. It should respect and take leadership from those in the sector who are already working from a strong decolonial, anti-racist and anti-discrimination framework.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism must be removed from all arts, cultural and educational institutions and be replaced with the UN Core Stance of Values: "The UN asserts that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, without distinction of any kind, including race or ethnic origin. It maintains that no state, institution, group, or individual should make any discrimination in human rights and fundamental freedoms."

- Acknowledge that Artists are the moral compass of the sector (Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist)

The National Cultural Policy must support artists to continue to be ethical and values-driven leaders of the sector and broader community.

Artists must be able to speak freely, sign letters and participate in boycott actions without harming their reputation and livelihoods.

Arts and cultural institutions must respect cultural diversity, and support, champion and care for the diverse conversations that artists bring to their programs, particularly those who have been targeted in the media for speaking out against injustices.

Artists must not be instrumentalised by institutions, lobbyists, the media and politicians.

- Freedom of speech and artistic expression (Pillars 3: Centrality of the Artist & 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure)

Strong cultural infrastructure must be based on artistic freedom of speech. This is already enshrined in the Creative Australia Act (11.e “to uphold and promote freedom of expression in the arts”) and needs to be upheld in the National Cultural Policy.

In order to create strong cultural infrastructure, art must be able to facilitate critical discourse, address political issues and critique power and class structures.

In order to create strong cultural infrastructure, there must be an end to the culture of intimidation that prevents artists from expressing and creating art freely.

The National Cultural Policy must address the prevalence of censorship, targeting and cancellation of artists who speak out against injustices, particularly in relation to nations that have been condemned by the UN for acts of apartheid, genocide and war crimes.

- Freedom from political interference in the arts (Pillars 3: Centrality of the Artist & 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure).

In order to create strong cultural infrastructure, the arts must remain independent and free from political interference.

The National Cultural Policy must ensure independent and 'arms length' funding processes across federal, state and local government. This includes ensuring that politicians at all levels must not influence or give advice that results in the provision or removal of funding support of a particular project or artist. This is already enshrined in the Creative Australia Act (article 14.2) and needs to be upheld in the National Cultural Policy.

A key action for the National Cultural Policy must be to implement an inquiry into political interference in the arts, including through donations and board membership and lobbying.

Donors must not influence arts organisations and institutions.
Board members with connections to political parties or lobbyists must be removed.

4. Ensure creative leadership reflects and supports contemporary Australia.

This policy should shape the future of arts and culture in Australia and ensure the sector reflects the realities, diversity and creative leadership of contemporary Australia (Cmielewski 2021). The resulting policy ensures that cultural safety, accountability and equitable participation are embedded as core principles across Australia's cultural workings.

Culturally and racially marginalised (CaRM) communities, therefore, must be explicitly named and recognised within national cultural policy, and long-term structural reform is needed to ensure meaningful equity and participation. I support the following recommendations:

- Strengthen First Nations self-determination, cultural authority and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protections across national cultural policy.
- Explicitly name Culturally and Racially Marginalised and underrepresented Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities and set direct, measurable actions to address their systemic underrepresentation.
- Develop and resource a national, industry-led Anti-Racism and Cultural Equity Strategy aligned with the Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC) National Anti-Racism Framework and Multicultural Framework Review Roadmap.

- Establish a CaRM Creator Fund and protected funding streams for CaRM-led organisations and projects and creatives.
- Establish a national CaRM Leadership, Workforce and Participation Pathways Strategy across the arts, screen and creative sectors.
- Protect freedom of artistic and creative expression and establish safe reporting mechanisms for censorship, racism and discrimination.
- Embed compulsory anti-racism, cultural safety and equity training across publicly funded organisations and require equity action plans and accountability mechanisms.
- Measure and report on diversity across workforce, leadership, funding, programming, commissioning, collections and audience participation.
- Reform funding, tax and regulatory systems to improve equity and access for CaRM creatives, community-led practice and small-to-medium organisations.
- Regulate AI industries and develop AI guidelines specific to the creative sector, and ensure equitable participation, cultural and intellectual rights and artist protections within emerging technologies and digital cultural spaces.
- Recognise and resource Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) as a distinct, essential sector and provide regional and CaRM cultural infrastructure.

References

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