

Arena Theatre Company

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Public Consultation

22 May 2026

About Arena Theatre Company

Arena Theatre Company is a Bendigo-based professional performing arts company with 60 years of practice creating artistically adventurous work for children and young people. As a member of the Children's Theatre Alliance, Arena makes work for and with young people, grounded in the belief that every young person deserves access to creative experiences that build emotional intelligence, social connection, and resilience.

Arena's 2026–2029 Strategic Plan positions the company as a national leader in research-informed, cross-sector creative programs for young people. Our hub-and-spoke model extends programming across Central Victoria, regional communities and nationally, with a particular emphasis on reaching children in regional and remote communities who currently receive negligible access to quality creative programs.

Why This Submission Matters

Arena fully endorses the recommendations of the Children's Theatre Alliance (CTA) submission to this consultation, and closely aligns with the National Youth Arts Network (NYAN) submission. Our submission comes from Arena's perspective as a regional organisation whose work demonstrates both what is possible and what remains critically absent in Australia's support for the creative lives of children and young people (CYP) living outside of major metropolitan cities.

We make two priority arguments:

- Dedicated programs and funding for children and young people are urgently needed across all pillars of the National Cultural Policy - not as a standalone addition but as an embedded, cross-cutting commitment.
- Support for creative programs for CYP in regional and remote Australia is currently negligible. This is a structural inequity that the next National Cultural Policy must name and directly address.

Our strong alignment with the strength of the CTA submission is because it demonstrates, pillar by pillar, how children's cultural participation can be operationalised within the existing framework.

A Cross-Portfolio, Holistic Approach to CYP Wellbeing

Arena's work sits at the intersection of arts, education, health and community services. Our programs are designed around the whole child: emotional, cultural, and physical wellbeing. This is not a framing of convenience. The 2024 Australian Early Development Census records that one in four children now enters school developmentally vulnerable or at risk, with emotional maturity showing the steepest decline of all five developmental domains.

Addressing this requires cultural policy that is itself cross-portfolio. The Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024–2034 already provides the framing for this, spanning Social Services, Health, Education and Arts.

The next National Cultural Policy must leverage that framing, committing to co-investment and coordinated delivery that treats children's creative participation as infrastructure for childhood wellbeing, not as an arts afterthought.

Arena calls on every pillar of the new policy to make specific reference to, and provide dedicated support for, programs focused on the needs of CYP.

Arena's Response Across the Five Pillars

Pillar 1: First Nations First

First Nations stories, languages and ways of knowing must reach Australia's children through First Nations-led practice. Arena is committed to this through programs such as *Country & Belonging* — a schools residency designed and led by First Nations artists — and through our tour of *Saltbush*, integrating First Nations dance theatre with community workshops across regional Victoria and the Northern Territory.

- The next policy should invest in First Nations-led creative programs that specifically centre children, including in remote communities where access is most acute.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Children are part of every story twice over: as audiences whose encounter with Australian stories shapes the cultural citizens they become, and as creators with their own stories and voices.

- The next policy must ensure that 'a place for every story' explicitly includes stories made for and with children, and that the diversity of Australia is reflected in the creative experiences available to children regardless of where they live.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Artists who make work for children are artists in full standing. The sector faces specific workforce constraints - smaller companies, lower ticket prices, limited career pathways - that require dedicated policy attention.

- Pillar 3 must reach artists in the children's and youth theatre sector as deliberately as it reaches the rest of the artistic workforce. Arena's *Makers Program*, which partners professional artists with young people to develop new works, exemplifies the kind of pipeline investment that should be supported at scale.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Children's cultural infrastructure is not a smaller version of adult infrastructure. It requires distinct funding, producing capacity, touring systems, and policy recognition. Federal multi-year operational funding for Youth Arts has contracted from 21 companies in 2007 to 9 today, with only 6 specifically creating theatre for children. There is no ongoing federally funded children's theatre company in New South Wales, Queensland, the Northern Territory or the Australian Capital Territory.

- Arena strongly supports the CTA's call for multi-year funding for at least 18 children's theatre organisations by 2030, the establishment of the Children's Theatre Investment Fund, and the adoption of a dual cultural-and-social infrastructure principle that unlocks cross-portfolio investment in children's creative participation. Regional organisations like Arena demonstrate that this infrastructure need not be capital-city-centred but it must be funded.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

For children, audience engagement is fundamentally a question of equity. Only one in five Australian children currently attends live theatre. The barriers are not only financial - they are also geographic, cultural, and systemic. Children in regional and remote Australia are the least likely to access quality creative programs. This is not because of a lack of ambition or capability in the regional sector. It is because the infrastructure, touring investment and dedicated funding to reach them does not exist at anything near the scale required.

- Arena supports the CTA's call for a national access target, doubling of Playing Australia investment, and targeted access programs for children in regional and remote communities, low-income families, and communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage. A Cultural Pass for families and an Arts Access Investment Program for Schools would be transformative first steps.

Summary of Key Asks

In support of the Children's Theatre Alliance recommendations, Arena calls on the next National Cultural Policy to:

- Commit to a 10-year national arts strategy for children and young people, with dedicated investment across all artforms and age groups from 0 to 25.
- Establish dedicated multi-year federal funding for children's and youth arts organisations, with explicit provision for organisations based in or serving regional and remote communities. *Arena's hub-and-spoke model — delivering Country & Belonging school residencies across Central Victoria, the Saltbush tour through regional Victoria and the Northern Territory, the Makers creative laboratory, and a planned partnership with The Events Centre in Caloundra, Queensland — demonstrates that this reach is achievable. What is missing is the sustained federal investment to scale it.*
- Fund targeted delivery programs that bring creative experiences directly to children in regional and remote communities, prioritising places where access is negligible and inequity most severe.
- Adopt a cross-portfolio approach to CYP cultural participation, co-investing across Arts, Health, Education and Social Services in programs that address the whole child.
- Embed explicit reference to children and young people's creative needs within every pillar of the new policy, not as a separate add-on but as a mainstream commitment.

Arena stands ready to work with government, the children's theatre sector, and cross-portfolio partners to make this vision real. The moment is now.

Debra Allanson

Chief Executive Officer, Arena Theatre Company

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