



Somerset Storyfest

National Cultural Policy Consultation

Submission by Storyfest Board | May 2026

Somerset Storyfest is pleased to contribute to the National Cultural Policy consultation. Over 33 years of delivering storytelling festivals and programs across Australia, we have seen first-hand how national cultural policy shapes what is possible for organisations like ours and for the communities we serve. We congratulate the Government on the delivery of Revive and welcome the opportunity to help shape what comes next.

The Somerset Storyfest mission is to deliver inspiring storytelling festivals and programmes that strengthen literacy, spark curiosity and creativity, and connect young people with diverse voices. As the premier writers' festival for the Gold Coast, Storyfest stands as a beacon of literary excellence, and its annual three-day event on the Gold Coast is the cornerstone of this organisation. Our regional literary experiences reach communities including Longreach, St George, Emerald, Ipswich and Toowoomba. In many of these communities, Storyfest is the only access point to live literary culture and to a bookshop of any kind.

We endorse the submission of Australia Reads and offer this paper as a complementary contribution focused primarily on Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure and on a specific policy reform: the recognition and sustained federal funding of children's literary festivals as essential cultural infrastructure.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure (Our Central Argument)

The central claim of our submission is that writers' festivals are cultural infrastructure and infrastructure is what makes other things possible. A festival does not tell stories on its own but rather, it creates the conditions under which stories reach communities, authors sustain careers, reading culture is cultivated in the places that need it most, and First Nations voices are heard by audiences who would not otherwise encounter them.

Festivals are a significant part of the cultural ecosystem within Australia, yet children's literary festivals receive a fraction of the policy attention and investment directed at other forms of cultural infrastructure. This is perhaps surprising, because in the context of literature festivals, the benefits are cultural, educational and social. Inviting children into the joy of reading may well be one of the most important things we can do for a child's education. The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development reports that students who read for pleasure every day scored "the equivalent of one-and-a-half years of school better than those who do not" (OECD, 2011, p. 2) and in addition to a wide range of literacy, comprehension, critical thinking and knowledge benefits, the research shows that reading for pleasure can positively influence mental wellbeing, confidence, social and emotional literacy, empathy, compassion, decision-making and overall happiness. Funding insecurity and annual grant cycles are not the foundation on which lasting reading culture is built. Rather, the foundation is dedicated federal funding for regional children's literary festivals, providing multi-year recurrent funding that enables organisations to plan, grow, and demonstrate impact over time.

Storyfest's school-hosted festival model illustrates what becomes possible with stable infrastructure. By partnering with local schools to host festival events, Storyfest has developed



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a sustainable, low-capital delivery mechanism for literary access in regional communities. Schools provide the venue and the audience; Storyfest provides the programming and the storytellers. This model is replicable and scalable. We are actively working to extend it into other states and territories, including through training programs that would equip organisations elsewhere to deliver children's literary events and activations. Federal investment in this expansion would directly accelerate literary access in the many communities, particularly regional and remote communities, who are currently unserved.

Strong festival infrastructure enables each of the remaining four pillars.

Pillar 1: First Nations First (Infrastructure Enables Presence)

The live encounter between a First Nations storyteller and a child in a regional town is qualitatively different from any digital or print alternative. It creates a direct, human connection to living culture that can shape how a young person understands their country and themselves. Storyfest's regional reach means we are operating in communities where this connection is needed.

Genuine First Nations participation in literary events cannot be achieved on minimal budgets. Travel costs, cultural preparation time, and community consultation requirements are real. Funded festival infrastructure is the prerequisite for First Nations programming to reach regional communities at scale. We call for dedicated federal support for First Nations authors and storytellers to attend literary festivals nationally, with festivals recognised as the primary delivery mechanism for this investment.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story (Infrastructure Enables Access)

The aspiration that every Australian deserves access to books, stories, and literary culture is not currently matched by reality. In regional and remote Australia, the infrastructure that urban communities take for granted such as bookshops, well-resourced libraries and author events is absent or limited. The barrier is not interest; it is access.

The Storyfest regional festival model addresses this directly. By taking the festival to the community, we have demonstrated that audiences in Longreach, St George, and Emerald are enthusiastic, engaged, and hungry for exactly what we offer. Our school-hosted model makes this sustainable without requiring significant capital: it is a practical example of how existing partnerships and systems can be used more effectively to support long-term access. The cost of providing access to literary events and community is higher in regional and remote areas, and this has the potential to widen what has sometimes been described as a rural-urban reading gap. Without support, organisations who are operating at the margins of their budgets, have no choice but to concentrate their access in geographic areas that are less costly.

Federal investment in the national expansion of this model, and in training programs to build the capacity of organisations in other states and territories to deliver children's literary events, would be a direct, evidence-backed response to the access gap.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist (Infrastructure Underwrites Income)

For many Australian children's authors and illustrators, festival appearances and school visits are not peripheral extras; they are the financial foundation that makes sustained creative



enterprise possible. The economics of children's publishing mean that publishing income alone rarely supports a full-time practice, and festival appearances not only provide an alternative revenue for creators, but also offer opportunities to develop their professional and community networks.

Storyfest's cornerstone Gold Coast event and our regional On the Road program pay Australian authors, illustrators and storytellers Australian Society of Authors (ASA) rates to visit schools and communities. This is direct artist income, delivered through festival infrastructure. We call for government investment in paid author-in-community programs, for festival appearance fees to be adequately funded, and for paid touring initiatives that increase opportunities for authors and illustrators to connect with readers, grow book sales, and build a sustained creative presence in communities across Australia.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience (Infrastructure Creates the Pathway)

Audience engagement at the community level requires sustained, trusted presence. A one-off event creates a moment; a returning festival creates a culture. The communities where Storyfest has been present for multiple years show markedly different engagement patterns from those where we are new. Trust, familiarity, and community ownership of the event take time to build, and they cannot be purchased with a single funded activation.

Festivals are also an investment in our creative future. As well as exposing young people to books, authors and storytellers, literary festivals help children and young people imagine themselves as readers, writers and participants in our shared cultural life.

This is why we argue that community literary engagement requires infrastructure investment, not campaign investment. The two are complementary, but infrastructure must come first. We also support government investment in research into how children and young people discover and engage with literary culture, so that policy and programming can be evidence-led rather than assumption-driven.

Summary of Recommendations

- Establish a dedicated federal fund for regional children's literary festivals, providing multi-year recurrent funding rather than annual competitive grants.
- Recognise children's literary festivals as cultural infrastructure within the next National Cultural Policy and include them as named delivery partners within any national literature strategy.
- Fund dedicated programs to bring First Nations authors and storytellers to festival and community events nationally, with festivals as primary delivery partners.
- Invest in paid author-in-schools and author-in-community programs, and ensure festival appearance fees are adequately funded.
- Support the national expansion of the school-hosted festival model, and fund training programs to build capacity in other states and territories to deliver children's literary events.
- Invest in research funding enabling longitudinal measurement of how children and young people discover and engage with literary culture, to underpin evidence-based policy and programming.

Somerset Storyfest is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. We are happy for this submission to be made public.

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Submitted on behalf of the Storyfest Board:

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