

# AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL VETERANS ARTS MUSEUM

## Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation 2026

**Submitted by:** Australian National Veterans Arts Museum (ANVAM), [REDACTED]

**To:** Office for the Arts, Australian Government

**Contact:** Kat Baldwin, Director | [REDACTED] | [anvam.org.au](http://anvam.org.au)

**Date:** May 2026

---

## Overview

ANVAM is a veteran-led charity whose primary purpose is to support the mental health, social wellbeing and cultural identity of the Veteran Community through the arts. Established in 2013 by an artist, arts educator and art therapist, ANVAM is Australia's only cultural institution whose primary purpose is wellbeing. ANVAM works with current and former-serving members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and their families and engages directly with Commonwealth agencies including Defence; the Departments of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), Health, Arts and Foreign Affairs; contributing to policy and portfolio outcomes across government.

This submission makes three connected arguments. First, that culture is foundational to a thriving Australia and should be reflected in the National Cultural Policy. Second, that arts and wellbeing, across the whole-of-life continuum, is the enabling foundation that underpins all five pillars of the policy. Third, that the policy must name the Veteran Community as a specific, underserved and genuinely valuable contributor to Australian cultural life.

ANVAM's perspective is grounded in over a decade of practical experience at the intersection of arts, health, veteran and defence policy. The Veteran Community's participation in this consultation brings perspectives and insights that are not well represented elsewhere in this process. This represents a valuable opportunity.

---

## 1. Culture and a Thriving Australia

Australia does not yet have an overarching national framework that articulates what kind of country it is trying to be; one that brings together national security, health, education, economic development and culture, into a coherent statement of national purpose. The next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to position culture not only as a sector requiring support, but as a foundational contributor to a thriving Australia.

To thrive as a nation is more than to be secure, productive and prosperous. A thriving Australia is one in which its people enjoy a high quality of life, where communities are cohesive, identities are honoured, creativity is nurtured, and citizens have the time and space to participate in cultural life. Arts and culture are not incidental to this vision. They are constitutive of it.

The evidence base for culture's contribution across policy domains is substantial and growing. Cultural participation is linked to stronger communities, better mental health and higher civic trust. Australia's creative industries contribute \$67 billion annually to the economy and employ more than 591,000 people.<sup>1</sup> Cultural diplomacy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, builds relationships that outlast those formed through trade or security cooperation alone. And, as the 2026 National Defence Strategy makes clear, social cohesion, the fabric of shared identity, trust, and belonging that the arts help to build, is now explicitly recognised as a component of national civil preparedness and resilience.<sup>2</sup>

These are not arguments that diminish the intrinsic value of culture. As Prime Minister Albanese stated at the launch of *Revive*, the Arts is central to our identity and worth supporting as an end in itself.<sup>3</sup> The point

is that culture operates on both levels simultaneously: it is worth supporting because people deserve to live richly, and it also delivers outcomes that other policy domains cannot replicate at the same cost or quality.

*ANVAM submits that the next National Cultural Policy should explicitly frame culture as foundational to a thriving Australia; recognising arts and culture as both an intrinsic good and an enabler of health, social cohesion, economic activity and national resilience. This framing should be reflected in the policy's stated purpose, and should be the basis for formal engagement between the Office for the Arts and portfolios including Health, Defence, DVA and Foreign Affairs in the design and delivery of the next policy.*

---

## 2. Arts and Wellbeing: The Foundation Across All Five Pillars

ANVAM's central submission is that arts and wellbeing should be recognised in the next National Cultural Policy not as one program area among many, but as a foundational element and one that enables and amplifies all five pillars of the policy.

Every pillar of the National Cultural Policy is strengthened when the people it serves are well. First Nations communities with stronger cultural and social wellbeing are better placed to lead their own cultural futures. Artists who have access to creative support in times of difficulty produce more and sustain longer careers. Cultural infrastructure that serves communities with complex needs is more effective when it is designed with wellbeing in mind. Audiences who participate in cultural life as a matter of social connection, not just entertainment, are more likely to remain engaged across their lives.

### A Whole-of-Life Perspective

Arts and wellbeing is not a single intervention. It operates across the whole-of-life and the next National Cultural Policy should reflect this. The evidence and the opportunity look different at each stage:

- **Early childhood and education:** creative arts engagement in early childhood supports cognitive development, emotional regulation and social skills. Arts education across schooling builds the foundations for lifelong cultural participation and creative capability in the workforce.
- **Working life and career:** creative industries employ more than 591,000 Australians. Beyond the sector itself, creativity and cultural literacy are increasingly recognised as economic assets across all industries. Creative skills in arts and non-arts fields alike support problem solving, leadership, teamwork and mental health.
- **Recreation and community life:** community arts participation, including local theatre, choirs, dance classes, community festivals, visual arts groups and textile-based art activities, delivers measurable wellbeing benefits and builds social cohesion. These are the programs that reach people who do not engage with formal cultural institutions.
- **Ageing well:** arts participation in older age is associated with reduced social isolation, improved cognitive health and greater quality of life. As Australia's population ages, this is a significant and underutilised policy lever.
- **Cultural diversity and awareness:** as a multicultural country, Australia's cultural life is enriched by the traditions, languages and creative practices of communities from across the world. Arts and cultural policy that actively supports this diversity and that builds cross-cultural understanding strengthens the social fabric that national resilience depends upon.

### A Spectrum of Practice

Arts and wellbeing practice operates across a spectrum: from broad community participation through to structured clinical intervention. The next National Cultural Policy should recognise and fund this full range.

At the community end, accessible and inclusive arts programs deliver social connection, belonging and the kind of informal wellbeing support that reduces pressure on clinical services. In the middle ground, social prescribing models and arts-in-health programs embedded in community health settings are demonstrating strong outcomes and growing in scale internationally. At the clinical end, creative arts therapies including

music therapy, art therapy, drama therapy and dance movement therapy are registered health professions with a substantial evidence base, providing structured intervention for people with complex needs including trauma, mental illness and acquired disability.

ANVAM's experience demonstrates that creative arts therapists have a role across the full spectrum, not only in clinical settings. Their expertise adds significant value in community and cultural contexts, particularly where participants carry complex or unrecognised needs. The boundary between community arts and therapeutic practice is not always visible in advance. Qualified practitioners are equipped to navigate it safely.

*ANVAM submits that the next National Cultural Policy should establish a whole-of-life arts and wellbeing framework that recognises the full spectrum of practice, from community participation through to registered creative arts therapy, and positions this framework as a foundational element that supports all five pillars. It should include a policy standard requiring that federally funded arts-based activity undertaken for therapeutic or mental health purposes be delivered or supervised by a registered creative arts therapist, and should commission an update to the National Arts and Health Framework to reflect the current evidence base.*

---

### **3. The Veteran Community: A Cultural Asset the Policy Must Name**

#### **A Contribution That Runs Deep**

Australia has an estimated veteran population of around 600,000, with approximately 2.4 million Australians directly connected to the Veteran Community when families are included.<sup>4</sup> This is not a fringe cohort. It is a substantial cross-section of Australian society, present in every state and territory, across all ages, backgrounds and communities.

Veterans are not only part of Australia's history, they are active custodians of a living cultural identity. The culture of service, sacrifice, mateship and military storytelling has shaped how Australians understand themselves as a nation. Its most visible expression - the national observance of ANZAC Day - draws millions of Australians together each year in an act of shared memory that is without parallel in our cultural life.

When you look across the full landscape of what constitutes Australia's cultural identity, veterans are present at every turn. From the cricket ground to the gallery, from the stage to the philanthropic foundations that built our cultural institutions, veterans have helped define what it means to be Australian. The names are familiar, including Don Bradman, Arthur Boyd, Nora Heysen, Barry Humphries, Banjo Paterson, Gough Whitlam and many others. What is less often noted is what they share.

This is a two-way relationship. The Veteran Community does not only ask to be recognised, but to also contribute. Veterans bring qualities that are rare and valuable to the cultural sphere: strategic perspective, international experience and cross-cultural understanding including, for many, sustained engagement with First Nations communities through service. When veterans are supported to participate in the arts and cultural life, those qualities flow outward, strengthening social cohesion and enriching the broader cultural ecosystem.

#### **Wellbeing, Transition and the Royal Commission**

The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide identified social isolation, loss of identity and poor transition support as core contributors to poor mental health outcomes among veterans.<sup>5</sup> Its recommendations point directly to the need for community connection, peer support and non-clinical support pathways. The Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025-2030 identifies prevention and early intervention as priorities, with action areas including strengthening social connection and supporting identity through transition from service that arts and cultural participation are well placed to support.<sup>6</sup>

ANVAM has worked at this intersection since 2013. The absence of coordinated policy between the arts and veterans affairs portfolios prevents effective and meaningful initiatives from being funded, evaluated and scaled. The next National Cultural Policy should make this connection explicit and the two portfolios should identify shared outcomes and co-investment opportunities.

## Agency, Voice and a Permanent Home

The Veteran Community's story is one of Australia's most significant and yet most narrowly told. The dominant ANZAC narrative, while powerful, captures only one dimension of a community whose experiences span more than a century of service across conflicts, peacekeeping, humanitarian missions and domestic emergencies. Where veterans' stories do appear in our national cultural institutions, they are too often interpreted by others including historians, curators, academics, journalists and commentators, rather than told by veterans themselves.

What the Veteran Community is asking for is agency. For the generations still serving and still living, veterans should be afforded the opportunity to tell their own stories, in their own way and on their own terms, whether those stories are of service, of transition, of family, or of any other aspect of life and experience they choose to explore through the arts. That is not a modest ask. It is a foundational one.

ANVAM exists to provide exactly this. As Australia's only cultural institution whose primary purpose is the wellbeing of the Veteran Community through the arts, ANVAM already delivers across all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy. But we do so without a permanent home.

ANVAM's proposed permanent home at 310 St Kilda Road, Southbank addresses this deficit directly. The building, a former repatriation clinic built in 1937 and vacant since 1995, has been the subject of our sustained advocacy since 2013. Providing ANVAM with this space would transform a Commonwealth heritage asset, vacant for more than 30 years, into a living national institution: combining arts programming, creative arts therapy, heritage interpretation and community gathering, and delivering across all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy.

The question this policy should answer is not whether such an institution is needed. Rather, it is why a Government that recognises the Veteran Community's contribution to Australian cultural life has not yet given that institution a permanent home. Cross-portfolio policies have failed to resolve this, and veterans still do not have 'a place for every story'; this is a failure of the 2023 National Cultural Policy.

*ANVAM submits that the next National Cultural Policy should explicitly name the Veteran Community as a valued contributor to Australian cultural life and commit to supporting dedicated cultural infrastructure for this community. ANVAM further submits that 310 St Kilda Road, Southbank be made available as ANVAM's permanent home as a national veterans arts and cultural institution under section 122 of the Land Acquisition Act.*

---

## Policy Recommendations

The next National Cultural Policy should commit to the following:

- **Adopt a thriving Australia framing:** explicitly recognise arts and culture as foundational to national wellbeing, social cohesion and resilience, and establish a formal cross-portfolio mechanism engaging the Departments of Health, Defence, DVA and Foreign Affairs in the design and delivery of the next policy.
- **Establish a whole-of-life arts and wellbeing framework** as the foundational element of the policy, spanning community participation through to registered creative arts therapy, with a policy standard requiring qualified delivery for federally-funded therapeutic arts activity, and a commissioned update to the National Arts and Health Framework.
- **Name the Veteran Community explicitly in the policy** as a valued contributor to Australian cultural life, with a commitment to dedicated cultural infrastructure, specifically making 310 St Kilda Road, Southbank available as ANVAM's permanent home as a national veterans arts and cultural institution.
- **Connect the National Cultural Policy to the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025-2030**, identifying shared outcomes and co-investment opportunities between the arts and veterans affairs portfolios.

