



AIATSIS

Towards A New National Cultural Policy

Submission

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Introduction

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission towards a new national cultural policy. We contribute as the Australian Government's only Indigenous-led National Cultural Institution.

We want to see a shared understanding of Australia as having a single, living history, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are recognised, embraced, and valued by all Australians. A review of Revive presents an opportunity to identify areas for enhanced focus and strategic development including under the important Pillar of First Nations First.

Pillar 1 – First Nations First

Revive explicitly positions First Nations cultures at the centre of Australia’s national cultural policy, committing the Australian Government to truth-telling, the revitalisation and maintenance of First Nations languages, self-determination, and strengthened protections for Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP).

AIATSIS strongly supports this direction and the continued prioritisation of First Nations First as a foundational principle of the national cultural policy. This aligns directly with AIATSIS’s national role to support the cultural vitality, preservation and resurgence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across the nation, in line with our legislated role spanning:

- Custodianship and stewardship of collections and cultural heritage.
- Research leadership, governance and policy advice.
- National leadership in ICIP, ethical standards, protocols and cultural authority.

Revive largely frames First Nations cultures through arts and creative industries rather than embracing a broader definition of culture. AIATSIS has consistently argued (including in its previous *Revive* submission) that culture cannot be solely collapsed into ‘the arts’ without loss of meaning and authority. AIATSIS reaffirms that a new national cultural policy must adopt a broad understanding of culture, one that encompasses everyday practices, languages, heritage, values, and ways of life. As the only National Cultural Institution exclusively focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, culture and knowledge systems, *AIATSIS plays a distinct and irreplaceable role in realising Revive’s First Nations First commitments. A policy genuinely grounded in this pillar must recognise not only cultural diversity and dynamism, but also the need for First Nations-led institutions to guide national standards, frameworks and system-wide approaches.*

Built into its legislative functions, AIATSIS provides advice to the Commonwealth on the situation and status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage. In the course of this work, AIATSIS has developed a framework that articulates the diversity and complex facets of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. This framework is structured around six core pillars – Languages, Country, Family, The Arts, Governance, and Values. It reflects a First Nations–informed view of culture rather than more-restrictive arts lens. These pillars help demonstrate that First Nations cultures are not a single domain but a complex system encompassing family structures, governance, values, and creative expression.

A new national cultural policy must speak to the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, language groups, and communities. In addition to this, a new policy must support the full spectrum of culture and priorities for the practice, strengthening and transmission of culture.

ICIP clarity and continuity

Revive committed the Australian Government to develop stand-alone ICIP legislation through a First Nations-led process. This remains essential. AIATSIS eagerly anticipates updates on the development of this legislation as ICIP concerns not only artistic expression, but also documents, consultation processes, languages, ancestral remains, sacred sites and archival materials, which are all domains central to AIATSIS' work.¹

AIATSIS commends the Office for the Arts on assembling its First Nations Expert Working Group on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property in 2024 and looks forward to their continued leadership on developing new ICIP legislation.

Without legislative clarity, access, digitisation, repatriation and educational use of collections all remain challenged by inconsistent interpretations of ICIP and cultural authority.² AIATSIS manages ICIP through various frameworks, especially in collections access and management, as well as research realms.

Within the current cultural policy, and within current legislation, community control and communal ownership of Indigenous knowledges are not adequately reflected; such as the current profile of the artist, reflected solely as an individual under Intellectual Property (IP) law.^{3,4} The wealth of communal art practice, traditions of communal ownership and contemporary communal ownership practices, are not adequately protected by legislation. AIATSIS continues to support safeguarding of First Nations traditional knowledge and cultural expressions.

Improved legislation for cultural protections in Australia are well overdue. AIATSIS eagerly anticipates updates on the development of this legislation. Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) asserts the right of Indigenous peoples to “maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.”⁵

¹ Australian Government's Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, Stand-alone legislation fact sheet, <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Standalone-legislation-fact-sheet.pdf>

² AIATSIS Submission – Draft Copyright Reform Legislation, <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/copyright2021-submission-no-13-australian-institute-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-studies.pdf>

³ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), *A Guide to applying The AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Canberra, 2020, p. 8.

⁴ International Council on Archives Expert Group on Indigenous Matters, *Tandanya - Adelaide Declaration*, 2019, sec. 2(c).

⁵ United Nations, *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples.*, article 31.

AIATSIS asserts that the ICIP work currently operating under the remit of the Office for the Arts - specifically the drafting of ICIP legislation - is the highest priority work for meaningful impact under the new national cultural policy, ensuring the protection of traditional knowledge and cultural expression is adequately supported with new legislation enacted.

The adequate protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, cultures and intellectual property is an ongoing discussion within the research and cultural sectors, which relate to the broader ICIP discussion. As exemplified by the recommendations released in the Productivity Commission's 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and Crafts – Study Report' (2022), ICIP remains an opportunity for Governments to better engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists who are focused on the resurgence and strengthening of their cultures and communities.

Creative Australia can lead the process of embedding ICIP as a foundational policy principle across cultural and creative sectors, ensuring consistency, legal certainty and ethical standards in all engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and cultural expression. AIATSIS looks to the new national cultural policy for clear leadership and decisive action on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, recognising ICIP protection as essential to cultural authority, ethical practice and Australia's national and international reputation as a nation that respects and upholds the rights of First Nations peoples.

An ethical approach to cultural projects and to research

AIATSIS is responsible for the continued development and implementation of the AIATSIS Code for Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (the AIATSIS Code)⁶ and the related guide to applying the AIATSIS Code⁷ in association with AIATSIS' statutory function under section 5 of the *AIATSIS Act 1989*. These cornerstone resources form part of the national research ethics framework, together with the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee, which through rigorous assessment ensures applicants demonstrate appropriate application of the AIATSIS Code and ICIP protocols.

The AIATSIS Code is built on the principles of Indigenous data sovereignty, cultural authority, and self-determination surrounding research and knowledge. This concerns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research conducted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The AIATSIS Code supports co-design principles, which emphasise collaboration and shared decision-making between all researchers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait

⁶ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*, 2020, p. 12.

⁷ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), *A Guide to applying The AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*, pp. 6–8.

Islander peoples throughout all stages of a project. Co-design involves communities as equal partners in shaping research goals, methods, and outcomes, ensuring that their knowledge, priorities, perspectives and decisions guide the work. This approach helps create research that is culturally appropriate, ethically grounded, and positions communities as primary benefactors.

With its strong emphasis on community partnership and co-design principles, the AIATSIS Code is highly relevant across the national cultural policy and the First Nations First pillar. As it can inform not only academic research but all forms of cultural project work to be grounded in respect for place, community authority, and genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. AIATSIS would like to see a greater emphasis on co-design principles employed across First Nations arts projects and improved funding to support the AIATSIS Code, Ethics and Research functions which underpin the protection of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property, ethical engagement with First Nations communities, and the integrity and sustainability of Australia's First Nations arts and research sectors. The AIATSIS Ethics function and advice through the AIATSIS Code further underlines the importance of urgent progress in the area of ICIP legislation.

Infrastructure, digitisation and connectivity

Digitisation of at-risk material is foundational to cultural maintenance, truth-telling and knowledge revival. However, both AIATSIS and many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities lack the digital infrastructure and connectivity needed to manage, receive and govern digitised or repatriated material effectively.

Despite the existence of a First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan, home broadband and mobile coverage remain unavailable or unaffordable in many remote communities, directly affecting access to digital collections and community-based keeping places.

A connected government approach to support the Revive policy is needed to address this matter. Sustained investment in community-controlled digital infrastructure, long-term data storage and culturally appropriate access systems are essential to ensure First Nations communities can safely steward and benefit from their own cultural heritage. Without coordinated action across cultural and infrastructure portfolios, digitisation programs alone will fail to enable equitable cultural access and self-determination.

Return of Cultural Heritage

The return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage to communities is a core expression of self-determination, cultural authority and First Nations leadership. Despite increased attention in recent years, both international and domestic repatriation programs remain under-resourced despite strong and growing community demand.

AIATSIS plays a critical national role in facilitating culturally governed returns of archival, language and documentary materials from overseas that support cultural revival, truth-telling and intergenerational knowledge and practices transmission. In Australia, the Office for the Arts facilitates the Indigenous Repatriation Program – Museum grants which support the return of Australian First Nations peoples’ ancestral remains (ancestors) and secret sacred objects (objects) held in the collections of eight major Australian museums to their Traditional Custodians. A renewed national cultural policy would extend the funding profile of both programs to facilitate more extensive returns services which enable both programs to work at the pace and scale required to support the community-led returns that strengthen culture, wellbeing and continuity across generations.

Languages

The National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS) constitutes the primary dataset used by the Productivity Commission in monitoring progress against Closing the Gap Target 16 and supports AIATSIS’ statutory function under section 5(e) of the *AIATSIS Act 1989* to provide advice to the Commonwealth on the situation and status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage. AIATSIS’ work in this area is funded by philanthropy and corporate partnerships rather than government appropriation funds.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are foundational to cultural identity, law, knowledge transmission, connection to Country and intergenerational continuity. Languages encode cultural authority, ecological knowledge, kinship systems and worldviews, and their maintenance and revival are therefore central to cultural resurgence. Despite this, Australia currently lacks dedicated legislation to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander linguistic resources, leaving languages vulnerable to loss, misappropriation and inadequate recognition within existing intellectual property and cultural heritage frameworks. Language revitalisation efforts are further constrained by an insecure funding structure and inconsistent recognition of the expertise held by language speakers, Elders and community language workers (whose labour is often undervalued, underpaid or treated as voluntary despite being essential to cultural maintenance, education and community wellbeing).

Languages - Case Study: Paper and Talk - Reviving Language

Paper and Talk is a nationally significant, Indigenous-led initiative that builds community capability in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language revitalisation through hands-on archival research and applied linguistics training. In 2025, the program

brought 14 Aboriginal Community Researchers from five language groups to Canberra for an intensive two-week residency at AIATSIS and the National Library of Australia. Since 2019, Paper and Talk has been delivered five times and has become an annual program, consistently exceeding original delivery targets and responding to strong national demand. Each cohort produces tangible language resources - videos, recordings, books, songs or wordlists - ensuring immediate community benefit and long-term cultural transmission.

Grounded in culturally safe practice and community control, Paper and Talk offers a proven, evidence-based model for national investment in language revival, cultural continuity, and Indigenous-led knowledge systems - delivering outcomes that endure well beyond the life of the program.

Recommendations – Pillar 1

The next national cultural policy should:

- Explicitly define First Nations culture beyond the arts, including Lore, kinship systems, custodianship, language, ceremony and knowledge governance.
- Through a strong ICIP program, position Australia as a global leader in Indigenous rights-based cultural governance, aligned with UNDRIP, strengthening international partnerships, cultural diplomacy and trust in Australia's stewardship of Indigenous culture and heritage.
- Embed ICIP protection and Indigenous data governance as core policy criteria, consistent with the ICIP legislation commitment under *Revive*.
- Ensure uplift equity – AIATSIS was not funded out of the \$535m under *Revive* for NCIs in the 2023-2024 budget. While *Revive* restored base funding for most National Collecting Institutions, AIATSIS did not receive a comparable base uplift, despite its unique national mandate. AIATSIS has not had an uplift in over a decade. This structural gap presents a risk to the long-term stewardship, transmission, and accessibility of First Nations cultural knowledge. For the National Cultural Policy to deliver on its 'First Nations First' pillar, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures must be supported on an equitable and sustainable basis. As AIATSIS is the only national cultural institution dedicated exclusively to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and heritage, this omission highlights a structural gap between cultural policy intent and implementation, particularly under the principle of First Nations First. It also points to a broader issue in the allocation of responsibility across government, reinforcing that investment in and stewardship of Indigenous culture and heritage cannot be treated as the sole responsibility of the National Indigenous Australians Agency. Addressing this gap is essential to ensuring Australia's national cultural infrastructure equitably supports the transmission and renewal of First Nations

cultures and in ensuring the success of Ngurra: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Precinct [see pillar 2].

- Fund legislated functions of First Nations cultural institutions on a sustainable long-term basis, rather than relying on philanthropy and corporate partnerships for fundamental responsibilities.
- Undertake a national review of cultural infrastructure and digital capability to ensure cultural materials can reach Indigenous communities appropriately.

The next national cultural policy should consider the development of stand-alone legislation to recognise, protect and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as living cultural heritage, including protection of linguistic resources and associated knowledge. The policy should also commit to sustainable investment in the languages sector, including proper remuneration and employment conditions for language workers, Elders and cultural knowledge holders that acknowledge their expertise, cultural authority and central role in language maintenance and revival.

Pillar 2 – A Place for Every Story

While Pillar 1 of Revive recognised the importance of supporting First Nations histories and stories across Australia’s cultural institutions, an updated national cultural policy should strengthen this commitment through dedicated and appropriately scaled funding.

Central to the storytelling work of AIATSIS is *Ngurra: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Precinct*. Ngurra will provide a unique opportunity for the nation to engage meaningfully with the diverse stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Through Ngurra, AIATSIS will deliver stories, expression and content that allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories to be front and centre and accessible for the nation.

In an AIATSIS context, the development of Ngurra strengthens this policy alignment (pillar) by enhancing AIATSIS’ physical, cultural and civic presence as a national platform for First Nations storytelling and expression. Ngurra enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to tell their histories and stories with authority, at the scale and visibility envisaged by the national cultural policy. More than cultural infrastructure, Ngurra functions as a national gathering place supporting truth-telling, shared understanding and social cohesion through community-led narratives grounded in Country, culture and lived experience.

AIATSIS’ development of Ngurra, a First Nations-led cultural centre, responds directly to this policy gap by enabling community-curated spaces, culturally governed access,

education programs and truth-telling initiatives. This reimagines AIATSIS's role in stewarding a national collection, advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research, strengthening partnerships, and promoting understanding of First Nations peoples' rights, knowledges, cultures and stories as foundational to Australia's national narrative.

Case Study: Marlaloo Songline - Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer in Action⁸

The Marlaloo Songline project exemplifies First Nations - led intergenerational knowledge transfer, aligning strongly with Revive's, A Place for Every Story pillar. Supported by the AIATSIS Foundation, the project enabled Nyikina Warrwa Elders to record, map and revive a songline that had not been sung for more than 40 years, ensuring the continuity of cultural knowledge embedded in Country along the Martuwarra (Fitzroy River). Recognising the risk of loss with only two remaining Elders, knowledge holders Rosie Mulligan and Madeline Yanamara selected and authorised two younger leaders to carry the songs and ceremonies into the future, following strict cultural protocols.

The project demonstrates how culturally appropriate resourcing enables Elders to exercise authority over when, how and to whom knowledge is transferred, ensuring legitimacy and cultural safety. Through on-Country recording, mapping and ceremony, the songline was activated as living knowledge rather than archival material, reinforcing that 'songlines are alive' and carry memory across generations. Marlaloo illustrates how targeted investment in First Nations-led cultural projects empowers communities to maintain, transmit and revitalise ancient knowledge systems - delivering precisely the outcomes envisioned under Revive.

The above case study is evidence of the richness of expression that Ngurra will host.

Education Program

Aligned with *Revive's* 'Cultural Infrastructure' pillar, the AIATSIS Education Program represents a critical but under-supported component of Australia's national learning

⁸ AIATSIS, The Marlaloo Songline, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/marlaloo-songline>

ecosystem. The program is the only education offering in Canberra designed and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators, providing culturally authoritative learning experiences for students, teachers and education professionals. Its core purpose - to influence what children learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia and to support educators to teach confidently and accurately - directly advances Revive's commitments to truth-telling, First Nations leadership, and improved cultural understanding across society. These outcomes are foundational to national objectives in social cohesion, reconciliation and anti-racism.

However, the program's ability to deliver on these policy ambitions is constrained by a lack of appropriate cultural infrastructure. Current funding supports staffing only; it does not extend to resource creation or comprehensive digital education products, limiting reach, sustainability and systemic impact.

Educational materials are largely subsidised through cost recovery programs rather than being supported as a core public function. The program has no permanent or fit-for-purpose learning space, relying on a shared room used for multiple institutional functions that must be temporarily reconfigured for each school visit or professional development session. This absence of dedicated space restricts delivery, reduces efficiency and prevents the creation of immersive, interactive learning experiences expected in contemporary education environments. In addition, outdated technological infrastructure limits the program's capacity to integrate digital tools, hybrid delivery models and accessible learning content, particularly for regional and remote audiences.

Investment in dedicated education programs as envisaged under *Revive*, such as a purpose-built learning hub within Ngurra (supported by contemporary teaching technologies and digital platforms) signifies a commitment to embedding Indigenous-led knowledge, authority and pedagogy within Australia's education system. Strengthening the Education Program through sustained investment in technological and spatial infrastructure ensures that the goals of *Revive* are realised in practice; through enduring, high-quality educational experiences that shape understanding, respect and shared futures for the next generation.

Recommendations – Pillar 2

- Support community-led keeping places, including online keeping places, with infrastructure and workforce development.
- Fund digitisation governed by ICIP and community authority.
- Properly remunerate Elders and cultural knowledge holders, including Elders-in-residence.
- Address copyright and access barriers affecting language revival and cultural use. Prioritise long-term funding partnerships over short-term project cycles to allow trust-building, cultural governance, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Pillar 3 – Centrality of the Artist

Artists are central to Australia's cultural life - not only as creators of work, but as custodians of knowledge, storytellers, educators, innovators and contributors to social, cultural and economic wellbeing. Culture does not sit apart from law, governance, kinship or Country - it is the system through which these are enacted, maintained and transmitted. A national cultural policy must therefore recognise that supporting First Nations artists requires supporting the cultural systems that give rise to artistic practice, rather than isolating art from the authority, responsibility and relationships that sustain it.

This reframing of Pillar 3 ensures that artists remain central; however, not just as individualised cultural producers, but as part of living, governed cultural systems that, in an Indigenous context, sustain Australia's oldest continuing knowledge traditions into the future.

While *Revive* rightly foregrounds the centrality of artists, its framing is primarily anchored in professionalised arts labour. These risks excluding Elders, cultural custodians, language holders and those engaged in unpaid or intergenerational cultural labour essential to continuity in First Nations contexts.

When 'the arts' stand in for culture, the result can be the extraction of stories without the protection of cultural authority, the funding of outputs rather than custodians; and the celebration of cultural symbols without investment in the systems, such as governance, law and timeframes for intergenerational transmission, that ensure those symbols remain meaningful and alive. Culture-led policy design is therefore essential to avoid reinforcing these structural gaps.

Embedding First Nations leadership within Pillar 3 requires recognising culture as collective, and accountable to Country and to law. Long-term, relationship-based investment is particularly critical, as cultural transmission and revitalisation do not align with short funding cycles. Supporting culture in this way strengthens not only artistic practice, but community wellbeing, continuity of knowledge and economic self-determination.

AIATSIS's own Art Market provides a practical example of how culture-led models can operate together. By prioritising ethical practice, direct engagement with Indigenous art centres, clear provenance and fair economic returns, the Art Market demonstrates how supporting custodianship and community authority can strengthen cultural transmission while contributing to a sustainable creative economy.

Recommendations – Pillar 3

To strengthen alignment with *Revive* and ensure First Nations perspectives are fully realised, Pillar 3 should:

- Expand the definition of the cultural workforce to include Elders, custodians, language holders and knowledge authorities, recognising both paid and unpaid cultural labour. From an Australian languages' perspective, this includes workforce development and clear career pathways so language speakers are appropriately remunerated and able to pursue sustainable careers.
- Guarantee minimum wages and fair remuneration for artists and standardised pay for cultural workers, recognising the value of cultural labour alongside artistic output.
- Prioritise long-term funding partnerships over short-term project cycles to allow trust-building, cultural governance, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- Support the development and funding of community-based arts and culture centres, ensuring that cultural production, transmission and economic participation are locally governed and culturally accountable.

Pillar 4 – Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Australia's capacity to sustain and support resurgence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage, as well as make returns of documents and objects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage to communities, is fundamentally shaped by the strength of its cultural infrastructure.

Sustained investment in cultural infrastructure - people, systems and governance - is not optional; it is foundational to delivering national cultural policy outcomes. Sophisticated digital infrastructure, paired with a properly resourced and specialised Indigenous-led workforce, would enable faster digitisation, secure digital delivery to communities, and more culturally appropriate access pathways for collections.

Crucially, this investment would shift the AIATSIS Collection from a model of constrained custodianship to one of active cultural return, unlocking the full social, cultural and economic value of Australia's documentary heritage. Strong cultural infrastructure is the mechanism through which commitments to language revival, self-determination and cultural rights become real and measurable.

AIATSIS' primary infrastructure commitment in the period of the next cultural policy is delivering Ngurra.

Ngurra

Creation of an iconic cultural institution such as *Ngurra: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Precinct* (discussed in Pillar 2) generates opportunities for

future growth and sustainability, including growth and collaborations with Indigenous businesses, art centres and artists.

As a First Nations-led cultural and engagement centre, Ngurra represents a transformative opportunity to address structural constraints. World class galleries and activation spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programming and dedicated display space will enhance AIATSIS' ability to generate self-sustaining and own source revenue, contributing significantly to long-term sustainability by expanding revenue capabilities beyond government appropriations. Revenue streams will include commercial and philanthropic opportunities associated with visitor engagement and tourism. As relevant to a strong Cultural Infrastructure profile, the following are envisaged:

- Economic empowerment, through ongoing employment, program delivery and workforce development, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- A year-round program of activity, involving artists, cultural practitioners, researchers and communities, rather than short-term or project-based engagement.
- Dedicated space for creatives to engage with arts and cultural practice, alongside opportunities for ethical commercial activity, including the sale of artworks and cultural products.
- Infrastructure to support education, exhibitions, research, repatriation, truth-telling and community-led storytelling, delivered in culturally safe and authoritative ways.
- Ngurra will provide infrastructure necessary for AIATSIS to modernise key aspects of its digital capabilities, improve access for communities, and respond effectively to the growing demands of digital cultural stewardship.
- Investment Logic Mapping undertaken by AIATSIS identified three key problems that could be addressed through investment in Ngurra:
 - That there are no dedicated national facilities led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to care for and manage limited provenance Ancestral Remains.

- Australia does not have a National Cultural Institution that is exclusively dedicated to telling the stories of Australia's First peoples, their histories and cultures with a public-facing presence.
- The best contextualised collection of Indigenous Australia (the National Collection) is held and cared for in facilities at AIATSIS. These facilities are inadequate for protecting and sharing the Collection's significance.

The AIATSIS Collection

The AIATSIS Collection holds irreplaceable language, sound, image and manuscript materials that are central to cultural continuity, wellbeing and language revitalisation. Yet chronic under-investment in both technological and human infrastructure has constrained the Collection's capacity to digitise materials at scale, deliver content securely to communities, and respond in a timely way to Indigenous requests for access. Delays in accessing language and cultural materials do not simply affect service delivery; they interrupt community-led revitalisation efforts, intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and cultural authority, with direct impacts on wellbeing.

These challenges are structural. The Collection operates within outdated and costly legacy systems, fragmented digital architecture, and limited storage and delivery platforms that are not fit for contemporary community access expectations. At the same time, the workforce required to manage digitisation, rights, metadata, ICIP assessment and community engagement is under-resourced and under-remunerated relative to comparable Australian Public Service roles. This has resulted in skills shortages, difficulty attracting and retaining specialist staff, and backlogs across digitisation, description, ICIP decision-making and copyright clearance. The absence of clear, consistent national frameworks for ICIP and copyright - particularly in legacy collections - further compounds delays, creating risk-averse processes that slow the return of materials to communities.

Case Study: Mogo Land Council – Return of Destroyed Cultural Heritage

The destruction of community-held cultural infrastructure during the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires, including the loss of the Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council building, underscores the critical role of national collecting institutions in safeguarding and providing access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural materials. In the aftermath of the fires, communities such as Mogo were reliant on externally held collections, including those at AIATSIS, as some of the only remaining sources of historical, language and cultural records.

This example highlights the importance of national collections as cultural repositories of last resort, and the urgent need for sustained investment in digitisation, access systems and workforce capability to ensure timely, culturally appropriate delivery of materials when communities need them most.

Recommendations – Pillar 4

- Recognise physical, digital and workforce infrastructure as foundational enablers of First Nations cultural continuity, access and truth-telling.
- Invest in fit-for-purpose spaces for education, exhibitions and community engagement within AIATSIS, including dedicated learning and performance areas.
- Support the delivery of Ngurra as a First Nations-led cultural centre, recognising its role in economic empowerment, workforce development and year-round cultural programming.
- Resource AIATSIS to modernise its digital infrastructure, including systems and workforce capability to manage, preserve and provide access to born-digital materials.
- Address access inequities by investing in infrastructure, including keeping places and capability at the community level, so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can receive, manage and govern digital and repatriated materials locally.
- Fund education programs holistically, including the development of teaching resources, digital platforms and learning infrastructure, rather than relying on cost recovery to support essential public education outcomes.
- Bring NCIs together to find collaborative solutions to the ‘digital deluge’ problem created by vast quantities of digital media that collections face for acquisitions processing.

Pillar 5 – Engaging the Audience

Effective audience engagement within a First Nations-led cultural policy context depends on ethical, culturally grounded approaches that prioritise self-determination,

co-design, trust-building and appropriate resourcing. Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures—whether through exhibitions, public programs, education initiatives or outreach activities requires time, expertise and sustained relationships, particularly with Elders and cultural knowledge holders who carry authority for cultural knowledge, stories and practice.

While *Revive* identifies engagement and truth-telling as central to strengthening social cohesion and enabling broader understanding of Australia's histories and cultures, the practical mechanisms required to deliver these outcomes remain underfunded. There is insufficient recognition that meaningful engagement with communities must be adequately resourced from the outset, rather than treated as an ancillary or discretionary component of projects.

This includes funding for genuine co-design processes, community consultation and decision-making, as well as fair and consistent remuneration for cultural knowledge holders whose contributions underpin the cultural integrity of exhibitions, experiences and educational programs.

For institutions such as AIATSIS, the lack of dedicated funding for engagement limits the ability to support community-led storytelling, deliver sustained outreach to regional and remote communities, and provide culturally safe educational experiences for diverse audiences. Without appropriate investment, engagement risks becoming extractive or transactional, undermining both trust and cultural authority. Conversely, properly resourced engagement enables communities to represent themselves on their own terms, strengthens cultural transmission, and ensures that audience experiences are grounded in lived knowledge rather than institutional interpretation alone.

Ngurra offers the opportunity to create immersive audience environments that gently attune visitors to the rhythms of Country. Through the careful use of light, sound, projection and digital textures, spaces can evoke the vastness of desert horizons, the movement of seas and tidal waters, and the layered presence of land shaped by time, story and care. Rather than replicating landscape, these environments can suggest it, inviting reflection, listening and embodied connection, and allowing visitors to feel held within living systems of land, sea and sky. In this way, the latest digital technologies become quiet collaborators, supporting experiences grounded in respect, subtlety and the enduring presence of Country across the nation. Engaging the audience through digital platforms creates new pathways to connect the world's oldest living culture with contemporary innovation, amplifying First Nations voices while honouring tradition in dynamic and accessible ways.

Recommendations – Pillar 5

The next national cultural policy should:

- Treat audience engagement as a funded and core cultural practice, rather than an add-on to exhibitions, collections or programs.
- Provide dedicated funding for engagement with communities on exhibitions, cultural experiences, outreach initiatives and education programs, recognising the time and relationship-building required.
- Ensure cultural knowledge holders, Elders and community practitioners are appropriately compensated for their expertise, authority and labour across co-design, delivery and evaluation activities.
- Invest in fit-for-purpose physical and digital spaces that enable education, outreach and community-led storytelling, including spaces for communities to engage directly with audiences on their own terms.