



SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY REVIEW

1. Executive Summary and Statement of Purpose

Community Music Victoria (CMVic) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Australian Government's public consultation on the next chapter of the National Cultural Policy. As the state's peak body for participatory music-making, CMVic represents a robust ecology of community choir leaders, music facilitators, regional song groups, and tens of thousands of everyday music-makers. For over thirty years, our mission has been centered on fostering connection, community strengthening, and a deep sense of belonging through active, localised, and communal music participation. We firmly believe that culture is not a luxury or a commodity reserved for elite exhibition; rather, it is a vital public resource and an essential contributor to our economy, wellbeing, and national identity.

The launch of *Revive: A place for every story, a story for every place* represented a momentous step forward, successfully restoring culture to the center of national life and establishing key structures such as Creative Australia, Music Australia, and Creative Workplaces. As the government passes the halfway mark of this five-year plan, we are keenly aware of an opportunity that is yet to be fully realised. The community music sector, alongside the broader Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) sector, currently receives little ongoing operational or targeted federal funding, despite community music directly meeting and executing each pillar of the national strategy.

CMVic endorses the submission put forward by the Victorian Network for Creativity and Wellbeing (VNCW). We echo the VNCW's practical recommendations to ensure that the highly skilled artists, facilitators and small-to-medium organisations that work directly in community, educational, and health contexts are not forgotten in favour of elite, major professional institutions and high-profile exhibitions. In our daily interactions with members we see how escalating economic pressures, combined with the continued defunding of local community arts activities, are forcing small-to-medium operators and independent cultural facilitators to leave the sector, along with throttling the pipeline for the next generation of creatives to take up this important community building work. This defunding is taking place despite the proven social, cultural, and health benefits associated with well-facilitated active cultural participation. This submission outlines how community music delivers on the government's cultural strategy and advocates for structural funding parity to protect this vital public asset.

2. Alignment with the Five Pillars of the National Cultural Policy

The community music sector does more than merely align with the five pillars of the National Cultural Policy, it actively brings them to life at the grassroots level every day.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

Revive rightly establishes First Nations cultures as a defining source of national strength and a fundamental priority. While CMVic commends the federal government's progress regarding First Nations' self-determination and the creation of First Nations Arts, these frameworks must be supported via localised, participatory cultural activities. Community music provides a safe, grassroots platform for intercultural dialogue, reconciliation, and the celebration of songlines. Participatory music initiatives play a key role in revitalizing community knowledge, strengthening political agency, and building shared cultural pride. True commitment to this pillar requires ensuring federal investment flows directly to community-driven music initiatives that honor and elevate First Nations voices within local public spaces.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

The consultation paper observes that culture defines who we are, fosters a profound sense of belonging, and strengthens community resilience. Community music is the most democratic and literal manifestation of "a place for every story." Our sector actively dismantles barriers to participation, engaging individuals across all ages, life experiences, and backgrounds. CMVic specifically designs programs to support diverse cohorts, including regional and remote communities, all-abilities (d/Deaf and disabled), low socio-economic households, LGBTIQ+ groups, youth, seniors, and Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) populations, such as multi-ethnic migrant and refugee communities. From singing circles in small country towns to English Language Centre programs for humanitarian refugees, community music ensures that diverse, everyday Australian stories are actively expressed, shared, and preserved.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

The federal strategy prides itself on reinforcing that arts workers are real workers whose contributions are essential to our wellbeing and economy and we commend the improvements to artists' working conditions already achieved through the *Revive* framework. As the VNCW submission highlights, community arts facilitators, group singing leaders, and creative health practitioners are highly professional, specialised cultural workers operating in complex community, school, and healthcare settings. These facilitators perform the invisible but highly skilled labor of cultivating interpersonal safety, navigating vulnerability, and fostering group harmony. They deserve the structural protections, fair remuneration, and career pathways championed by Creative Workplaces, yet they currently

face severe financial precarity due to the uneven and piecemeal support provided by the arts, education and health sectors.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

A resilient, forward-looking cultural infrastructure cannot rely solely on capital city galleries, major performance venues, or digital commercial platforms. A healthy nation requires a decentralised, grassroots infrastructure that supports everyday cultural practice. Non-profit peak bodies like CMVic form the backbone of this infrastructure by providing peer mentoring, capacity-building workshops, resources and locally created repertoire that support those on the ground and are responsive to local needs. As noted by the VNCW, and practitioners within the sector, limited coordination and support across the community, health, and education portfolios has left these grassroots operators isolated and underfunded. Without direct federal operational funding to stabilise small-to-medium organisations, the nation's cultural infrastructure will remain top-heavy, leaving regional and vulnerable communities stranded.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

While federal policy remains preoccupied with the “wicked problems” emerging from digital platforms and hybrid tools that alter audience consumption, discoverability, and fair remuneration, community music simply redefines the concept of engagement. In our sector, the audience *is* the participant. Active, embodied participation in culture produces profound cognitive, social, and emotional impacts that far exceed the benefits of passive cultural consumption. When everyday citizens sing together in a local choir, or play in an intergenerational ensemble at a music camp, they are not merely consumers of entertainment; they are active co-creators of culture. Active engagement stimulates emotional regulation, fosters civic trust, and offers immediate and open-hearted connection. To truly build a creative nation, federal investment must shift its focus from passive viewership to active, cultural participation. AI is enabling an off-shore tech-oligarchy to by-pass (or “disintermediate” as economists would say) the role of local Australian artists and creatives (especially in music production). By contrast, a well-supported community music sector can disintermediate and by-pass these off-shore tech-oligarchs, embodying culture in the ‘here and now’ and reclaiming our stories and our voices through local participation.

3. The CACD Sector in Crisis Despite Proven Wellbeing Benefits

CMVic wholeheartedly agrees with VNCW’s practical suggestions to address the operational crisis currently threatening the viability of the Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) sector. Due to intense economic pressures, rising delivery costs, and the systematic defunding of community arts activities, specialised small-to-medium operators are closing

their doors. This loss represents an irreplaceable erosion of localised cultural infrastructure and expert community knowledge.

This systemic defunding is counterintuitive given the extensive, globally recognised evidence base linking active cultural participation to measurable public health improvements. Active music-making is proven to be a powerful preventative health resource, effectively reducing mental distress, facilitating emotional regulation, alleviating social isolation, and strengthening community resilience. Neglecting to fund the CACD sector ultimately shifts the economic burden onto our national healthcare and social service systems; institutions which are already overextended due to the growing costs of acute care. Each year important CACD programs that address the social determinants of health are cut (e.g. the highly successful Royal Children’s Hospital Festival for Healthy Living Program in Melbourne’s West). The potential benefits of Social Prescription will only be realised if there are trained practitioners and suitable programs to prescribe people into, but the sector is being eroded by precarious funding.

4. The Sport Analogy: Addressing the Grassroots Funding Disparity

Every year, the Australian Government invests hundreds of millions of dollars of public money into community sports infrastructure, grassroots participation programs, and local recreation clubs. This spending is justified by the clear physical health, mental wellbeing, and social cohesion outcomes achieved when citizens actively participate in sport. We strongly support this investment and the work of our project partners like Reclink, who save lives everyday through their participatory sport programs.

Participatory arts, and community music-making in particular, deliver identical—and in many instances, broader—social, cognitive, and health benefits to the population. Active group music-making builds exceptional social trust, aids cognitive development, facilitates deep cross-cultural harmony, and fosters extraordinary community strengthening. A local community choir or regional music-making circle provides the exact same mental health, social connection, and collective resilience benefits as a local netball or football club. Participatory art also saves lives.

We believe that the well-documented benefits of participating in cultural life, for both individuals and society are, at the very least, equal to the benefits of participatory sport. It is time for the Federal Government to recognise participatory culture as a major public health asset, worthy of equitable, structured national investment.

5. Summary and Strategic Recommendations

If the next iteration of the National Cultural Policy is to be a genuinely forward-looking, inclusive framework that shapes a meaningful creative legacy for future generations, it must explicitly support culture where it matters most: in our everyday communities. To safeguard the small-to-medium operators who are the lifeblood of our cultural ecology, CMVic urges the Federal Government to implement the following strategic recommendations:

- **Establish a dedicated body overseeing the CACD sector with a dedicated Grassroots and Participatory Arts Fund:** Create a permanent, ring-fenced federal funding stream via Creative Australia to support not-for-profit peak bodies and small-to-medium operators that facilitate active, community-based arts and music participation.
- **Formally Recognise Community Cultural Workers:** Ensure that Music Australia and Creative Workplaces explicitly expand their operational definitions to recognise community music facilitators and CACD practitioners as highly skilled professional artists, offering them targeted professional development and fair remuneration guidelines.
- **Incentivise Cross-Sector Portfolio Collaboration:** Act on the VNCW's recommendation to invest in cross-sector collaborations spanning the arts, health, and education domains, explicitly aligning federal cultural funding with national wellbeing frameworks such as *Measuring What Matters*.
- **Commit to Long-Term Parity with Sport Funding:** Develop a comprehensive national strategy for participatory culture that mirrors the long-term, structural investment models utilised in grassroots sport, treating community creativity as an essential, preventative public health mechanism.

By enacting these recommendations, the Federal Government will ensure that Australia's next creative chapter is truly written by all Australians, fostering a healthier, more connected, and deeply resilient nation.

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