



Friday 22 May 2026

Dear The Hon Tony Burke MP,
Minister for the Arts,

We are writing to you on behalf of the Young People of Shopfront Arts Co-op.

Thank you for inviting Australians to contribute to the next National Cultural Policy. We are grateful that Young People have again been given the opportunity to share our voices, ideas and experiences.

Shopfront was proud to contribute to the current policy, Revive: A Place for Every Story, A Story for Every Place, and to have the voices of our Young People recognised within the policy itself.

Young People from Shopfront, including Mabelle and Liv, were quoted in Revive on page 95 under the heading Changing the Trajectory:

“The most important lessons I’ve learned were through art.”
– Mabelle, eleven years old, Shopfront Arts

“If you don’t value it, talk about it, care about it and you neglect it, in twenty years you will ask ‘where are all the artists?’”
– Liv, fifteen years old, Shopfront Arts

These Young People are now 4 years older however their words remain just as relevant today.

As a Youth-Led Arts Co-operative our Young People are our voice, they are at the forefront of our organisation as makers, creators and leaders now. Young People are embedded in our organisation as decision makers and hold the power now. As they are – our Young Leader is a core staff member, we have 2 Young People positions on our Board of Directors, and 5 paid Young People Advisory Panels (First Nations, LGBTQIA+, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, People with Disability and Young People).

Since the release of Revive, many of our Young People have grown up within a rapidly changing cultural landscape. Arts and culture continue to shape their identities, communities, friendships, wellbeing and futures.

In 2025, Shopfront:

- Facilitated 1,583 artistic activities
- Worked with 2,541 Young People across 10,836 participations
- Presented 29 productions/events to 23,797 audience members
- Supported 239 emerging artists through our Open Shop program, offering 299 sessions of free creative space
- Delivered 29 free masterclasses and 99 mentorship opportunities
- Supported 313 emerging artists to create new work
- Employed 130 early to mid-career artists
- Collaborated with 19 community and arts partner organisations

Of the Young People we worked with:

- 52% identified as female
- 17% identified as LGBTQIA+
- 26% identified as culturally and linguistically diverse
- 19% identified as living with poor mental health
- 29% identified as living with disability

These statistics reflect the diversity and complexity of contemporary Australia and demonstrate the essential role youth arts organisations play in creating inclusive, accessible and culturally responsive cultural spaces.

For this submission we have consulted with all Shopfront Young People and emerging artists. They spoke honestly about what arts and culture means in their lives.

We want this next policy to recognise something important:

Young People are not just the future of culture.
We are culture right now.

Youth arts are too often dismissed as a stepping stone for “real” art, instead of being recognised as real art in its own right. This way of thinking assumes artistic legitimacy comes later – with age, experience or professional recognition – rather than recognising that Young People are already making work that is insightful, emotionally resonant and culturally valuable. Young People experience the world in distinct and important ways, and their work reflects perspectives that cannot be replicated by adults.

Culture helps us:

- feel connected
- express ourselves
- understand others
- build community
- feel safe
- feel less alone

“Young People have bright ideas, and they should be seen as such and not waved aside.” [REDACTED] (12)

“Art is a language like English. Talking is free so Art should be too.” Shopfront Young Member

“We can express ourselves. We can be free.” [REDACTED] (10)

“We need permission to just be us.” [REDACTED] (8)

“Culture cannot exist without the people, and the people cannot exist without culture.” [REDACTED] (18)

These are not small ideas. They are reflections of what Young People across Australia are experiencing right now.

Again and again, Young People asked for:

- more free and accessible opportunities
- more youth arts spaces
- better support for emerging artists
- stronger pathways into creative careers
- affordable access to arts and culture
- genuine representation in decision-making

Most importantly, Young People asked to be trusted.

The current National Cultural Policy acknowledges that Young People are engaging with culture in new ways, especially through digital storytelling, gaming, social media and collaborative online spaces. However, we believe the next policy must go further.

We strongly urge the Australian Government to take meaningful action through the next National Cultural Policy.

Our Recommendations

Establish Children and Young People as a Dedicated Pillar within the National Cultural Policy

Young People should not simply be viewed as future audiences or future artists. We are already:

- creating work
- shaping conversations
- building communities
- leading cultural change
- imagining new futures for Australia

A dedicated Youth Pillar would recognise Young People as:

- decision-makers
- artists
- audiences
- cultural leaders
- innovators

“Young People should have real decision-making power, not just consultation roles.” Amelia (emerging artist)

“Culture fails when voices are excluded from the conversation.” [REDACTED] (18)

“Young People are the starting point in shaping both the arts and culture.” [REDACTED] (23)

“Adults say that Young People have a bigger imagination than adults, so you should let Young People under 18 have a big say in the arts.” [REDACTED] (15)

2. Increase Long-Term Investment in Youth Arts Organisations

Youth arts organisations are essential cultural infrastructure.

They provide:

- creative development
- safe community spaces
- mentorship
- pathways into professional practice
- social connection
- wellbeing support

Sustained investment in youth arts is an investment in Australia’s future cultural life.

Young People repeatedly told us:

“Too expensive.”

"Kids need more FREE opportunities to learn arts and sport, and anything they enjoy."

3. Improve Equity, Accessibility and Affordability

Young People repeatedly identified barriers including:

- cost
- transport
- geography
- disability access
- representation
- lack of affordable pathways

We call for:

- more free and low-cost arts opportunities
- affordable ticketing for Young People
- accessible creative spaces
- stronger disability access support
- support for First Nations, CALD, LGBTQIA+ and Disabled artists

"Please make the arts more accessible for everyone." [REDACTED] (24)

"Being able to access the arts and theatre has really impacted my life, I have made new friends and stepped outside my comfort zone and had access to opportunities I never thought I would be able to do." [REDACTED] (23)

"Every single person in Australia should have that opportunity." [REDACTED] (18)

4. Recognise Youth Arts as Essential to Wellbeing and Social Connection

Arts participation supports:

- mental health
- confidence
- belonging
- resilience
- community connection

Young People told us:

"It helps me feel connected."

"It helps my mental health."

"Arts and culture have helped me feel less isolated and more connected." [REDACTED] (emerging artist)

"Culture runs through my blood each day and makes me proud of who I am and where I come from." [REDACTED] (19)

At a time when many Young People are experiencing isolation and mental health challenges, youth arts spaces are essential.

Arts and culture are not optional extras. They are part of how Young People survive, connect and imagine hopeful futures.

Young People deserve more than consultation.

We call for:

- youth representation on arts boards and panels
- youth advisory structures within Creative Australia
- paid leadership opportunities
- youth-led programs and initiatives
- direct involvement in policy and funding decisions

Young People should not simply participate in culture.

They should help lead it.

We also support the recommendations of the joint National Youth Arts Network, including:

- sustained national investment in youth arts organisations
- cross-portfolio support connecting arts, health, education and community wellbeing
- greater accessibility and affordability
- youth representation within Creative Australia and cultural decision-making structures

Minister Burke, thank you again for listening to Young People and recognising the importance of arts and culture in Australian life.

We hope this next National Cultural Policy becomes an opportunity to genuinely include children and Young People in shaping Australia's cultural future.

As [REDACTED] (emerging artist) said:

"From little things, big things grow."

And as [REDACTED] (15) warned in Revive:

"If you don't value it, talk about it, care about it and you neglect it, in twenty years you will ask 'where are all the artists?'"

The next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity to ensure that future never arrives – by investing in Young People now, trusting their voices, and recognising them as essential to Australia's cultural future.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Natalie Rose
Creative Director/CEO | Shopfront Arts Co-op

[REDACTED]

On behalf of Shopfront Advisory Panels, Young People, Emerging Artists and staff