



National Cultural Policy Submission 2026

Standing on Larrakia land in Garramilla (Darwin) Brown's Mart has been operating since 1971 as the home of Territory Performing Arts, and delivers a year-round arts program centred on collaboration, innovation and artistic energy.

Since its inception, Brown's Mart has played an iconic role across the arts in Darwin and for the broader Northern Territory's creative community. Beyond providing multiple performance spaces for local creatives, Browns Mart is committed to creating and presenting contemporary performance works which engage with audiences across a diverse range of communities and art forms.

As such, Browns Mart is proud to champion new work and new voices from the Northern Territory through a program of residencies, creative developments and presentations.

We recognise that sustained investment in cultural initiatives and policy delivers outcomes far beyond the creative economy, contributing meaningfully to the growth of community, social cohesion and social wealth across regional and remote Australia.

Cultural gathering places, such as ours, serve as important identity-forming institutions and the creative networks that regional cultural spaces form serve as critical social connectors by strengthening civic participation through empathy and expression, fostering local pride and strengthening community cohesion through shared experience.

At the same time, it should be noted that targeted interventions are required to address the structural inequities faced by regional practitioners, including the escalating costs of touring and the barriers regional artists encounter in accessing larger domestic and international audiences.

Further, an important piece of work that Browns Mart is committed to, is prioritising First Nations leadership and storytelling by ensuring authentic cultural expression,

intergenerational knowledge transfer and the elevation of voices are intrinsically connected to place and creative practice.

Browns Mart commends the Australian Government's continued championing of Australia's world leading creative arts industries through a new National Arts Policy which presents a landmark moment to create a policy environment for the establishment of clear talent pathways, focused investment to support the development, retention and export of our creative capability, and in enabling regional and remote communities to participate fully in Australia's cultural and economic future.

First Nations First

Despite First Nations people representing nearly a third of the Northern Territory's population, funding for First Nations performing arts in the NT remains disproportionately low compared to the rest of Australia.

This underinvestment is evident across programs, productions, and capacity-building initiatives. The result is a persistent gap in resources, visibility, and opportunities, especially when contrasted with states where First Nations people comprise a far smaller percentage of the population.

Defined leadership pathways for First Nations artists and cultural workers are also currently lacking, with few opportunities for genuine decision-making roles or long-term career development. Addressing these disparities is essential if we are to centre First Nations voices in Australia's cultural landscape not just as storytellers but as future leaders and shapers of the sector.

As such, the following recommendations are suggested for the Government's consideration:

- **Develop a nationally supported leadership pipeline designed to support the development of First Nations artists stepping into middle tier and senior leadership and decision-making roles across the arts sector.**
 - This initiative could include paid fellowships, secondments, board readiness programs, mentorships and embedded leadership positions within major arts organisations and government agencies.
- **Require funded organisations through federal means to demonstrate cultural authority**, consent processes and benefit-sharing arrangements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Australians.

A Place for Every Story

Given the vital role that Browns Mart plays within the Northern Territory's cultural ecosystem, organisational sustainability must remain a central consideration — not only to ensure the organisation's ongoing viability, but to continue delivering ambitious,

high-quality programming that reflects and serves the community. This is particularly significant in the NT context, which is home to more than 100 nationalities and an extraordinary breadth of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Federal funding opportunities for organisations such as Browns Mart is therefore an investment in a platform that fosters genuine social cohesion, cultural exchange and representation, ensuring the Territory's diverse communities can continue to see themselves reflected in the stories, artists and creative experiences presented on stage.

That being noted, small and medium arts organisations operating in regional and remote areas do not have the same access to philanthropic support as larger organisations based in urban centres and often do not have the in-house capacity to pursue an array of individual grants based at the project level.

The inherent costs involved with touring creative works from these regional and remote centres are also significant due to the geographical distances involved for organisations who wish to share the excellent work regional and remote artists create with audiences further afield.

As such, the following recommendations are suggested for the Government's consideration:

- **Strengthen Multi-Year Core Operating Funding for Regional Arts Organisations** by ensuring that funding models toward multi-year operational support for small and medium arts organisations in regional and remote Australia are adequately resourced to grow these areas of Australia's creative economy.
 - Stable core funding allows organisations to retain staff, build strategic capability and focus on long-term cultural outcomes rather than a focus on continuous grant acquisition.
 - Further it allocates arts and culture funding on systems of measurement other than population density, which inadvertently serve to disadvantage jurisdictions with low population and do not take adequately take in to account geographical distances, remoteness, scales of engagement and existing cultural density.
- **Establish a Regional Arts Philanthropy Matching Scheme**
 - Establishing a Commonwealth-backed matched funding program designed specifically to incentivise philanthropic investment into regional and remote arts organisations. Under such a scheme, eligible philanthropic contributions to small and medium organisations operating in designated postal codes could be matched by government grant funding on a dollar-for-dollar basis up to a capped amount and have a

significant impact upon the cultural life of regional and remote Australia driven by worthy cultural endeavours and amplify a smaller pool of regional and remote philanthropic funding bases.

Centrality of the Artist

“The aim of the artist is not to solve a problem irrefutably, but to make people love life in all its countless, inexhaustible manifestations.” – Leo Tolstoy

As noted in the Browns Mart Strategic Plan 2024-28, We are committed to positioning performing artists from across the NT as the lead creatives on each project.

We do this in recognition that artists are central to the cultural, social and economic fabric of a pluralistic society’s life, and their contribution extends well beyond the stage or studio into broader civic and place-based wellbeing.

In the Northern Territory, due to its diversity of demographics and regional geography, creative practice is inherently multifaceted. Artists here are often operating across intersecting roles as independent creators, educators, cultural leaders, knowledge holders and small business operators, sustaining both artistic the ecosystems and fostering connection across diverse and often remote contexts.

While they are of vital importance, they are too often undervalued as workers. Further, with the emergence and rapid adaptation of artificial intelligence increased pressure is being placed on the inherent value of the artistic capital.

A National Arts Policy has the opportunity to ensure a clear, enforceable model for artist remuneration is needed across all arts funding, ensuring sustainability and dignity for artists at every stage of their career.

As such, the following recommendations are suggested for the Government’s consideration:

- **Set up a policy framework that supports the dynamic work arrangements of artists and creative practitioners** as they often have project based portfolio careers and often work multiple part-time jobs to support their creative endeavours or operate separate business ventures while practicing in their field.
- **Continue to strengthen protections for artists’ rights in digital and AI contexts**, particularly for Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) material and remote creators.
- **Establish a National Artist Remuneration Framework with Enforceable Funding Conditions** through the introduction of a Commonwealth-led policy framework that sets minimum, enforceable standards for artist remuneration across all publicly funded arts programs. This should include mandatory

payment for creative labour, rehearsal, development, and presentation time, with indexation to reflect inflation and sector-specific conditions.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure

In the Northern Territory, and across remote Australia more broadly, cultural infrastructure such as Browns Mart is often deeply embedded in community life, delivering a range of cultural, social and economic outcomes that extend well beyond venue presentation.

The Brown's Mart precinct is in the heart of the Darwin CBD and includes two black box theatres, the Brown's Mart Theatre (90-180 pax) and the smaller Studio (60 pax), an outdoor courtyard with a small bar, and a rehearsal room; all of which are used year round for our various programs, as well as by independent artists, festivals, and hirers.

While Australia does have established mechanisms for operational and multi-year investment, as noted earlier these frameworks are often more readily accessed by larger, metropolitan organisations, leaving smaller and regional institutions to operate within more fragmented and project-dependent funding environments.

As such, Brown's Mart is often dependent on artists themselves securing project funds for works we produce and present. This funding is difficult and time-consuming to procure, places undue pressure on these artists, and limits their creative visions and our curatorial possibilities.

As such, the following recommendations are suggested for the Government's consideration:

- **Introduce Base Load Operational Funding for Core Cultural Infrastructure specifically for Regional and Remote areas**
 - Establish a dedicated, multi-year operational funding stream for key cultural infrastructure in the Northern Territory and designated remote Australia, recognising venues such as Browns Mart as essential civic assets rather than just project-dependent organisations.

Engaging the Audience

In the Northern Territory, audience engagement for a theatre organisation is fundamentally shaped by geography, mobility, cultural diversity and scale.

Communities are dispersed across large distances, and cultural participation often occurs through a hybrid mix of theatre venues, festivals, community-led events, touring work, and increasingly digital and on-Country experiences, rather than reliance on metropolitan-style venue attendance alone.

In this context, Brown's Marts discovery is largely relational and audience-led, driven by community networks and digital amplification, alongside targeted programming and partnerships rather than traditional marketing channels in isolation. For many Territorians, engagement with theatre is not limited to attendance, but is closely tied to participation, shared cultural experience and connection to place.

To give a sense of this model in the past four years alone, Brown's Mart supported over 100 artists to create 53 new performance works, a further 200 were given access to space or auspicing support, and nearly 30,000 people attended Brown's Mart during the Darwin Fringe and Darwin Festivals.

At the same time, NT theatre organisations and independent artists operate within a dual imperative. Both to serve local communities meaningfully while also connecting to national and international audiences, ensuring that Territory stories are not only created and experienced locally, but sustained through broader touring circuits, markets and platforms that support long-term artistic and economic viability.

As such, the following recommendations are suggested for the Government's consideration:

- **Continue and expand remote place-based Audience Development and Touring Support Programs such as Playing Australia**
 - By ensuring the continued support of this dedicated funding stream that recognises the unique geography and dispersed population of Australia by investing in sustained, place-based audience development alongside touring infrastructure.
 - This means that regional theatre organisations can continue to build long-term relationships with communities across both remote/regional and urban settings through repeated engagement rather than one-off presentations.
- **Continue to offer exchange opportunities and export support to showcase Australian artists, companies and their works to the widest possible audience.**