

National Cultural Policy consultation submission

23 May 2026

To whom it may concern,

As an Australian writer, cultural worker and consultant, I welcome to opportunity to inform the redevelopment of Australia's National Cultural Policy.

I acknowledge that much of the following is unlikely to endear me to the well-meaning and hard-working policy makers behind the renewed strategy, but not everyone is in a position to say these things our loud.

When I was asked to review Australia's current national cultural policy for ArtsHub in 2023, I was gratified to see it delivered much-needed optimism and unfamiliar hope for a sector bludgeoned by nine consecutive years of funding cuts and three decades of policy drift and neglect. 'Revive' was an appropriate name for a policy that recognised its deficit starting point and the sector's 'post'-COVID exhaustion. It was ambitious without glossing over how hard things were or how much work there was still to go.

But whether Revive was a gamechanger or just a good start will be determined by this next iteration. Because the truth is, last time, the bar was depressingly low. The Albanese Government could have merely taken a win by launching Australia's first cultural policy in 29 years that would last more than six months and ending the annual haemorrhaging of federal arts funding.

But while it did more (with 75 of its 85 funded strategies already underway), overall conditions for artists, cultural workers, organisations, participants and audiences have *worsened* since its launch, not improved. Reports from across Australia show the viability of cultural organisations and individual creative practice has never been less certain, our work never more likely to be censored or prevented from finding its audience.

Ironically, the dire state of Australia's cultural sector also presents a unique opportunity. While our deficits and desperation have never been so high, our issues have never been more closely shared – our collective experience and existential panic cutting across art forms, locations and types of engagement. Which means a new national cultural policy could meet this moment with politically- and art form-agnostic strategies that raise the bar for us all.

Unfortunately, so far, the public consultation paper looks more like a rinse and repeat exercise. The sector is expecting a PR spin that will turn 'Revive' into 'Thrive' or some such self-congratulatory update. And yes, Revive delivered much that's worth celebrating.

But what we need now is a renewed national cultural policy that walks its own talk; that extends and embeds commitments across portfolios and party lines; makes bold decisions that cast off the ways 'things have always been done'; and makes it possible for *all* Australians to meaningfully engage with and contribute to art and culture.

Regards,

Kate Larsen

Guiding principles

1. Whole-of-government approach

In his Minister's Message to the public consultation paper, Minister for the Arts Tony Burke reminds us that the entire concept of cultural policy 'is to make sure the arts aren't simply an afterthought.'

Revive began this work with initiatives delivered across education, workplace safety, disability, mental health and Indigenous portfolios. This now needs to be expanded across the full span of government decision-making: because every decision the Australian Government makes affects the arts and cultural sector, and arts and cultural engagement impact every aspect of Australian life.

A renewed national cultural policy is an opportunity to recognise this contribution by implementing new mechanisms for genuine cross-government collaboration. As suggested by cultural think-tank A New Approach before the last consultation, this could be based on the Australian Government's comparable 2030 plans for agriculture, sport, innovation and tourism to support the use of 'arts and cultural activities in existing and new initiatives across all relevant portfolios.'

2. Recommitment to civic infrastructure

Art and culture are core components of Australia's civic infrastructure, or what Australian-based academic Justin O'Connor describes in *Culture is Not an Industry* as the 'basic requirements for a decent, equitable and sustainable life in common.'

As such, art and culture should be considered (and resourced) alongside education, health, youth, disability, ageing, housing, social services and regional development. Because we do not sit apart from or in competition with any of these vital human services: we are a part of them.

This doesn't just encompass the hard infrastructure of venues, institutions and heritage sites, but the soft infrastructure of policies, programs, practices and people that underpin and foster civic engagement and social relationships.

Unfortunately, one of the great ironies of Revive is that the sector currently has a full suite of State, Territory and Federal cultural policies in place for the first time *and* has never been more vulnerable. Well-meaning or performative policies intended to herald what Burke describes as the 'restoration of culture to be at the centre of our national life' have been accompanied by systemic deprioritisation of civic infrastructure in all areas.

Outside of arts and culture, this can also be seen in Australia's current inflation, housing and femicide crises, rising Aboriginal deaths in custody, planned disinvestment in the NDIS, and increasing restrictions on human rights. For Australia to 'walk the talk' of its own rhetoric, we need a serious commitment to rebuilding public trust and the infrastructure that supports us.

As US cultural strategist Emil J Kang notes, treating culture as civic infrastructure 'changes what gets counted, who gets capitalised, and which organisations are treated as part of the public system rather than as worthy exceptions to it.'

3. Aligned and proportionate investment

Research from A New Approach has recently confirmed that Australian investment in arts and culture is not keeping pace with our population, and State and Territory expenditure (39%) is outpacing Federal Government investment (36%) for the first time. In 2023–24, federal expenditure was the lowest on record (\$114 per capita). This leaves Australia in the bottom quarter of comparable Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

Yet, the Australian Government continues to direct greater investment to politicised 'priority' industries that employ fewer people to provide fewer outcomes across fewer portfolio areas. This is a choice, not an evidence-based strategy.

This disparity is also felt within the sector itself, with more investment going to prop up failing cultural institutions than small-to-medium sized (S2M) organisations, which consistently outperform their larger counterparts in terms of reach, representation, access and return on investment.

Government spending on arts and culture should be proportionate to evidence over lobbying interests, and impact over unquestioned legacy – with a particular focus on increasing support for S2M organisations and individual artists.

This is not a handout for some nice-but-optional window dressing. This is a strategic investment in meeting government priorities across multiple portfolio areas – achieved by increasing investment in arts and culture to match government spending on sport (which fewer Australians engage in), hugely damaging data-centres that will create more problems than they solve, or entirely imaginary submarines.

4. Non-partisan collaboration

This process marks first time in history that Australia will have consecutive national cultural policies – which is something else worth celebrating.

However, with cultural wars deepening, the partisan framing and rhetoric of the existing policy puts the sector it aims to support at greater risk. Arts and cultural policy will only be sustainable when it is genuinely non-partisan, but no national cultural policy has ever survived a change in government in Australia.

We need a renewed cultural policy to be more than a once-in-a-generation opportunity; we need it to be the status quo. Which means this process must be both collaborative and consider its impact beyond the next four-year term. As Australian arts leader Esther Anatolitis wrote prior to the launch of Revive, ‘the Albanese Government’s great challenge is to embed cultural policy across portfolios in such a way that it can’t simply be jettisoned following a change of government.’

If a crossbench approach is too much to ask, we at least need an end to hostilities. Part of valuing our sector is not using us to score points against the other side.

5. Pluralism over ‘cohesion’ and censorship

This submission is grounded in core values of and commitment to decolonisation, anti-racism, anti-discrimination; artists as the moral compass of the sector; freedom of artistic expression; and freedom from political interference in the arts. It is informed by deep concern about the prevalence of censorship, political interference and racism in Australian arts and culture.

Taking its lead from the Australian Government, arts and cultural organisations have recently discovered a newfound duty to preserve ‘social cohesion’ – over and above their stated purpose or values, and apparently redefined to mean social consensus, conformity and coercion. Australia has entered its ‘cultural McCarthyism’ era, characterised by rising authoritarianism, regressive legislative change, deepening cultural unsafety, racism and religious intolerance, and an unprecedented increase in arts and cultural censorship.

At last count, 77 Australian arts and cultural organisations initiatives and groups have been accused of many more instances of censoring, threatening or otherwise harming their own artists, cultural workers or audiences between 2023 and 2026 alone (on top of many others harmed by those outside our sector).

This has not only happened in the time of Revive, but been explicitly enacted by Premiers, Ministers and statutory authorities (amongst others) – making hypocrites of policy makers, funders and cultural organisations, and increasing the risks they hoped their actions would avoid.

Prioritisation of such problematic and inconsistent definitions of ‘social cohesion’ over organisational purpose and basic human rights must be immediately stopped and reversed – and its devastating impacts repaired.

6. Climate responsibility

Revive was disappointingly silent on the climate crisis. But while it has since been followed by investment in the new Creative Climate consortium, it is crucial that climate be better addressed in this next iteration.

This must include an attitudinal change away from the ‘all funding is good funding’ rhetoric to not disadvantage the increasing number of organisations fundraising from an environmental or ethical perspective. Instead of criticising artists and organisations who turn down ‘art-washing’ income from the resource industry, big polluters or other unethical partners, the Australian Government needs to tax those polluters and redistribute the income instead.

Unfortunately, the consultation process has already undermined any potential recommendations in this area – with the Office for the Arts website stating it will use artificial intelligence (AI) tools to manage and analyse submissions. When nearly every arts organisation in Australia has some sort of strategic priority on reducing their environmental footprint, this use of AI makes meeting those ambitions harder.

Not to mention: making us complicit in a range of other workforce and social injustice issues; making it possible to ‘gamify’ the submission process in ways that may skew results; and disrespecting the hours of thoughtful work that artists, cultural workers, audiences and more have put into submissions that will not even be read. (This submission alone is 100% human made and has taken more than 20 unpaid hours to prepare).

Challenges and opportunities

Pillar 1: First Nations First

Revive’s commitment to First Nations-led practice was long overdue. This new iteration presents an opportunity to further increase the visibility of First Nations culture and creators, learn from and embed First Nations ways of working, and embed ways to decolonise our sector’s prevailing monoculture.

As Blak & Bright write in their submission to this consultation, First Nations leadership remains unevenly embedded across broader funding systems and institutional frameworks, and there remains a reliance on consultation rather than a transfer of authority. A renewed national cultural policy must take a **decolonial, anti-racist and anti-discrimination approach**. It should respect and take leadership from First Nations-led organisations and practitioners, and others in the sector who are already working from strong decolonial, anti-racist and anti-discrimination frameworks. It must **move beyond symbolic inclusion into structural reform that embeds First Nations decision-making** across all funding systems, policy mechanisms and cultural institutions.

First Nations storytelling is foundational to this Country and carries distinct cultural and ethical responsibilities. A commitment to First Nations creators and cultural practice can’t just be about the stories our artists and arts organisations tell, but also who tells those stories (and who should not). **Independent First Nations-led organisations must be recognised as essential cultural infrastructure**, not peripheral participants within the arts sector.

A renewed national cultural policy also can’t capitalise on the First Nations arts and cultural economy without **explicit recognition of sovereignty** in cultural production and presentation, alongside stronger **recognition and enforcement of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) consumer protection frameworks, laws and protocols** (including addressing the new challenges of fake art and Generative AI). We also need to **reconsider our current governance models** in ways that **learn from and incorporate two-way governance practices** (which balance both law and lore).

First Nations creators continue to experience disproportionate precarity while being expected to provide cultural labour far beyond formal artistic output. Growing expectations around First Nations representation means that First Nations Elders, Board members, consultants and practitioners are being called on more often by more organisations – often being asked to share their time and wisdom for free.

The sector cannot continue to rely on Blak voices for cultural legitimacy while refusing long-term structural investment. A renewed national cultural policy needs to ensure First Nations wisdom, leadership and

cultural expression is protected from extraction and misrepresentation. This includes changing regulator and funder rules around **paying First Nations and other independent Board members** – either on an individual basis and/or through a centralised First Nations arts advisory resource or funding to ensure this vital cultural labour doesn't become something only bigger organisations can benefit from.

Australia's cultural policy framework should also be more explicitly aligned with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, particularly in relation to shared decision-making, community-controlled sectors, data sovereignty and transforming government systems.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Australia is a signatory to several core international human rights treaties. Our right to enjoy and benefit from culture is contained in Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Australia has also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), of which Article 13 protects the right of expression and information for children.

Our rights to cultural participation and freedom of expression stem from these commitments (though our laws only enshrine where those rights are limited – such as legal restrictions on hate speech). However, not all Australians have equal access to these essential and enshrined human rights. In fact, since the launch of Revive, several of these rights have been lost or restricted, or are still actively under attack.

Addressing these inequities will require the strategic removal of barriers to ensure everyone can participate in art and culture. But equity doesn't come from treating everybody equally, it comes from providing whatever is needed to give everyone an equal experience. This includes **equity of access for all locations, all art forms, at all scales, and all points of engagement**.

A renewed national cultural policy must continue to **work in concert with State, Territory and Local Governments to extend access to all Australians**, regardless of where we live or what we can afford. This includes initiatives and investment to **address the ongoing disparities between cities and regional areas, and between Sydney/Melbourne and everywhere else**.

This response cannot be entirely digital, given more than two million Australians aren't online and the digital divide between those with the highest and lowest levels of income, education and employment is widening, not shrinking, over time. So, while we need to continue to **invest in digital and hybrid work**, we must do so while simultaneously **addressing digital inequality** for artists, participants and audiences, and **reducing the digital divide between organisations** (by considering how we can share technology, skills or capacity).

Most inclusion and diversity initiatives tend to focus on audiences, but our sector's overall monoculture will persist until we **improve access and representation at all points of engagement – from audiences and participants, to artists and cultural workers, leaders, board-members and policy makers** (and everyone in between).

Self-determined, community-led and community-engaged practice (also known as Community Arts and Cultural Development or CACD) should be prioritised to ensure Australia's arts and cultural organisations are safe for, led by and showcase the authentic, lived experiences of the artist and communities they serve (especially those from under-represented groups). This includes **increased investment to revive community arts and community-engaged practice** across art form siloes and other portfolio areas, supporting initiatives that strengthen and foster belonging in Australian communities.

Those organisations that demonstrate a commitment to community-led practice at both governance and executive levels should be **supported and compensated for the additional costs and cultural labour that comes from lived experience**. Those that don't should be required to demonstrate how organisations are **improving accessibility, representation and cultural safety** (such as Chairs and CEOs who lack relevant lived experience replacing themselves with leaders that do).

Finding a place for every story cannot stop at cultural policy. The Albanese Government must address its reputation for rushed and un-evidenced legislative change *and* its reputation for damaging and

‘disrespectful’ delays to the evidence it requests and receives (with more than 100 parliamentary committee reports currently overdue – some by as much as two years).

It must also reconsider and redress the impact of those decisions by **rescinding or reimagining last year’s rushed and poorly-informed speech suppression laws** that have already led to unfair and inconsistent artistic censorship, and the rushed and dubiously-motivated **teen social media ban** that restricts CRC rights to freedom of expression and information. As the only liberal democracy without its own constitutional or statutory bill of rights, the Australian Government must also **adopt the long-delayed national human rights act**.

The **IHRA definition of antisemitism must be removed from all arts, cultural and educational institutions and be replaced with the UN Core Stance of Values**: ‘The UN asserts that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, without distinction of any kind, including race or ethnic origin. It maintains that no state, institution, group, or individual should make any discrimination in human rights and fundamental freedoms.’

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

In the consultation paper, Minister Burke notes how ‘Revive recognised the essential work of Australian creatives, positioning arts workers as real workers who make substantial contributions to Australia’s economic and cultural life.’

But the work required to act on this acknowledgement is nowhere near finished. In fact, the need to **address practitioners’ precarious and subsistence living conditions** has only deepened since the launch of Revive – with five separate research projects released in the last two years alone showing that it’s never been harder to be an artist in Australia.

We are in the midst of a national cultural workforce crisis. Around 78% of artists and 60% of cultural workers are self-employed (a much higher proportion than the overall workforce). Wages have plateaued or fallen since 2000, which means the average Australian artist barely exceeds minimum wage (earning approximately \$54,500 each year, of which only half is likely to come from creative practice). This puts us 26% below the national average and 45% less than similarly-educated workers (despite having some of the highest education costs). With rising costs, fewer and more competitive funding and income opportunities, and worsening employment conditions, the wellbeing of artists and sector practitioners is plummeting (with the 30% of us reporting mental health issues before 2020 now 55% and rising). All of which are exacerbated for people in regional areas and other under-represented groups.

After decades-long deprioritisation of arts participation, education and training pathways, our post-Revive workforce has more artists and cultural workers burning out of the sector than joining it. As Next Wave writes in their submission to this consultation, Australia cannot afford to lose the organisations, artists and pathways that cultivate the next generation of cultural life. The consequences of disinvestment in emerging practice are not just immediate, but cumulative and long-term. The effects are already being felt in diminished artistic diversity, weakened workforce pipelines, reduced cultural participation, and the loss of future sector leaders.

Those who are able to maintain creative careers are finding it harder to make a living and are being censored at previously unimaginable rates. Organisations, funders and donors are losing credibility and viability – their fumbles and failures making mainstream news headlines and creating an increasingly unsafe and fearful culture that is undermining the value and impact of our never-more-important work.

A renewed national cultural policy must **reinvest in arts education pathways at all levels**, including: **entry-level participation campaigns** for all art forms and age groups; working with education departments to **restore arts education as a core component of K-12 schooling**, not an elective afterthought; **requiring all Australian schools have a library, and resourcing them** (given 20% of schools currently operate with a \$0 annual library budget and 43% on less than \$1,000 per year); **rescinding the 2020 Job-ready Graduates reforms** that doubled the cost of humanities degrees; and **re-introducing support for vocational pathways**, including **more accredited arts training courses in more locations** (from TAFE and other providers), and **investment in non-accredited and informal training opportunities** (provided by peak bodies and service organisations).

We need specific policy settings to **ensure artists and cultural workers have the same rights as those in other industries** – through wage standards, job guarantees, a **minimum basic income scheme** or other forms of income support, public employment opportunities and fellowships, raising the JobSeeker rate, increasing rent assistance, and removing mutual obligation requirements for unemployed artists and cultural workers.

We also need **fit-for-purpose legislative, regulatory, tax and investment incentives, expanded collective bargaining rights, removal of tax on prizes and grants, and changes to superannuation and tax legislation** to ensure artists receive superannuation on all their client income.

‘All public funding for arts and cultural projects should be contingent on fair pay for the people who make the work,’ Australian author Jennifer Mills writes. ‘Alongside the current project-based model, **arts funding should investigate and trial better ways of employing artists in more secure forms of work.**’

We also need to protect what artists produce, which is why copyright, intellectual property and speech suppression laws are inseparable from cultural policy. This includes: **re-establishing a commitment to expert, independent and arms-length decision making** free from government or third-party interference; revisiting the **AI legislation, guardrails and policy assurances** that vanished from last year’s Productivity Commission report; **rescinding or reimagining new speech suppression laws** (as above); and **recognising and reversing artistic censorship** (and creating **new resources to help avoid and/or mitigate censorship in the future**).

Strong cultural infrastructure must be based on **artistic freedom of speech**. This is already enshrined in the Creative Australia Act (11.e ‘to uphold and promote freedom of expression in the arts’) and needs to be upheld in the National Cultural Policy. A renewed national cultural policy must protect the rights of artist, cultural workers and organisations to speak freely, sign letters and participate in boycott actions without harming their reputation and livelihoods. Artists must not be allowed to be instrumentalised by institutions, lobbyists, the media and politicians, or targeted in the media for speaking out against injustices.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Much of Revive’s investment was channelled into the redesign and extension of Creative Australia to address historical deficiencies in the support of First Nations arts and culture, music, writing and workplace safety.

It’s now time to turn that focus outwards – beyond the statutory authorities delegated with achieving government priorities to provide new support for organisations navigating an unprecedented polycrisis.

Because all is not well with Australia’s arts and cultural organisations. The sector is being torn apart by manufactured precarity, poor governance, risk and crisis management practices, and astonishing lateral violence. Fewer and more burnt out people are being forced to make more and more complex decisions, faster than they’re used to (and faster than organisational policy or so-called ‘best practice’) – while their organisations make mainstream news headlines for all the wrong reasons. Organisations all over the country have lost credibly and trust, and many are fighting to survive.

Government legacy is often measured in bricks, mortar and ceremonial ribbon-cuttings, so it’s unsurprising capital expenditure made up 18% of overall arts and cultural investment in 2023–24 (compared with 11% in 2009). But what use are shiny new buildings when existing ones are failing (particularly in regional areas), and when we’re losing the artists, cultural workers and audiences they need?

A renewed national cultural policy must take a coordinated national approach that **maintains and expands existing arts infrastructure** alongside a **significant increase in multi-year operational, administrative and capacity-building support for S2M organisations**.

Unlike other industries, the arts and cultural sector does not have a single membership-based equivalent to the Farmers’ Federation with a history of identifying and lobbying on shared priorities. This means we need a renewed national cultural policy that is brave enough to **allow Creative Australia to speak back to power** without fear of punishment (in the same way that Sport Australia undertakes advocacy work).

It also needs to **re-invest in vital peak bodies and services organisations**, which have been systemically deprioritised out of State, Territory and Federal funding portfolios over the past 15 years – leaving decimated pathways and a disconnected sector in their wake, and reducing government access to informed and effective decision-making.

Support for organisations to **radically reimagine governance and duty of care** are also necessary, as are terms of agreement for funded organisations and statutory authorities to **support organisations to be led by their purpose and communities** (and resist undue influence from third-party funders, donors or lobby groups).

In order to create strong cultural infrastructure, art must be able to facilitate critical discourse, address political issues and critique power and class structures. The current culture of intimidation that prevents artists from expressing and creating art freely must end. A renewed national cultural policy must **address the prevalence of censorship, targeting and cancellation of artists** who speak out against injustices, particularly in relation to nations that have been condemned by the UN for acts of apartheid, genocide and war crimes.

Organisations also need pro-active **support for operational pauses, mergers, closures or similar transitions** (as per Sophie Lieberman's Regenerate proposal).

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Telling Australian stories is crucial for our national identity and culture, and the individual wellbeing that comes from seeing ourselves reflected on stage, page and screen.

Revive has begun to address this issue with new Australian content requirements for online streaming services, who will soon be required to invest 10% of local expenditure or 7.5% of local revenue in new Australian content. Its new Media Bargaining Incentive will similarly tax digital news and social media platforms up to 2.25% of their Australian revenue unless they pay for local journalism.

This work needs to expand to include **phased increases of new, scripted screen content quotas to 25%** (with any shortfall paid as a levy to Screen Australia or Creative Australia to distribute to the sector) and the **strengthening of public broadcaster obligations** (such as ABC drama investment), alongside **similar local content requirements for other art forms**.