

22 May 2026

Creative Australia  
PO Box 576  
Pyrmont NSW 2009

***Re: Magabala Books response to the National Cultural Policy consultation paper***

I write in my capacity as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Magabala Books to share our response to Creative Australia's invitation to provide feedback on the public consultation paper for the National Cultural Policy.

Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation is Australia's leading First Nations publishing house. Founded in 1987 by Kimberley Aboriginal Elders in an act of self-determination, Magabala became an independent Aboriginal Corporation in 1990. We are governed by a dedicated First Nations Board of Directors elected from our Aboriginal Corporation membership and led by Publisher Rachel Bin Salleh (Nimunburr and Yawuru) and myself, Dr Lilly Brown (Gumbaynggirr).

We publish up to 18 new titles each year across children's picture books, junior and young adult fiction, adult fiction, memoir, non-fiction, poetry, graphic novels and social history. Our titles are recognised nationally and internationally for their literary merit and cultural significance. Magabala won Small Publisher of the Year and Children's Books Publisher of the Year at the 2026 Australian Book Industry Awards, and our 2025 list included winners and short listees for the Prime Minister's Literary Award, ACT Literary Awards, Australian Book Industry Awards, the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year. In 2025 we generated \$2.8 million in sales, sold over 340,000 books, and distributed more than \$500k in royalties to First Nations storytellers, artists, their families and communities. Our staffing profile has grown to 21 employees in 2026, half of which identify as First Nations staff in an industry where less than 1% of the workforce identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>1</sup>

In 2025, in partnership with First Nations literary organisation Blak & Bright, Magabala Books founded the First Stories Collective, an initiative funded by Creative Australia. The focus of the

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Publishers Association. 'Workforce D&I survey results published.' (2022) Available online: <https://www.publishers.asn.au/Web/Latest/APANews/20220831-Workforce-Diversity-Inclusion-Survey-results.aspx>

First Stories Collective is to deliver services to First Nations writers and illustrators and support a strong, connected and vibrant First Nations literature sector.

For Magabala Books the key challenges we face as a First Nations publisher and arts organisation are:

- Increasing costs of publication while growing the industry value of safer publishing;
- As a remote organisation, inadequate infrastructure or business premises with no current viable local options for relocation;
- Securing the resources for employment and training of a First Nations arts workforce as key to sustainable succession planning; and,
- Growing audiences and the educational engagement with First Nations stories

Given these priorities, we provide this submission to inform the new Cultural Policy in our capacity as:

1. A small independent publisher
2. A First Nations not-for-profit arts organisation
3. An arts organisation that is located in a remote area
4. A multiyear funded organisation

### **1. Magabala Books as a small independent publisher**

As a small independent publisher Magabala Books supports the Australia Publishing Associations (ABA) core recommendation that the National Cultural Policy must back Australian publishers and books through a commitment to a National Plan for Books and Reading.

Recognition of the importance of publishing as a core cultural industry affirms the recent comments made by the Chair of Writing Australia, Distinguished Professor Larissa Berhendt, who said in her Australian Book Industry Award (ABIA) address: *books are not simply an item in a marketplace, they help a nation understand itself.*

Magabala Books, like other Australian publishers, is under significant and unsustainable financial strain with rising costs of production, including freight and printing, occurring alongside a fall in consumer spending. Profit margins are decreasing, and in line with this, so too is the ability to invest in published stories that both inform and reflect what it means to be Australian.

To ensure sustainability of the Australian publishing industry, which includes small independent publishers like Magabala, we support the ABAs recommendations to:

- establish an Australian Book Fund to grow new Australian-authored and First Nations works and ensure the sustainability and stability of small independent publishers;
- Increase support for lending rights so authors and publishers can be remunerated fairly when our works are accessed through public and educational libraries;
- Extend creative industries tax offsets, rebates or equivalent incentives to book publishers to support investment in First Nations titles and culturally significant publishing so books can exist beyond their commercial utility;
- Invest in market development and access so more Australian books can get in the hands of readers, including in international markets;
- Invest in the data and digital infrastructure that enables Australian books to be discovered, supplied, licensed, exported and understood and remain competitive in an international market;

- Launch a books export and rights program through the establishment of a dedicated Books Australia program, modelled on Sounds Australia, to promote Australian books, rights, translation and publishing capability internationally;
- Fund accessible publishing and inclusive discoverability to increase access; and,
- Protect copyright and ensure rights-respecting Artificial Intelligence (AI) settings.

The ABA recommendations matter because they will increase the public value of publishing practices, books, and reading as part of our national arts and cultural ecosystem. While Australian books deliver value, including cultural, social and educational, the commercial pressures of publishing mean it's increasingly difficult to recuperate the costs of producing important works in a relatively small domestic market with mounting international competition.

If the recommendations put forward by the APA with industry support are incorporated into the National Cultural policy, a sustained investment—in publishing, public lending rights, data and digital infrastructure, export and rights, copyright protections, and resourcing publishing measures—will pay dividends in increased cultural and intellectual property and works, and in the flow on to workforce and economic outcomes, including increased royalties for authors and illustrators.

## **2. Magabala Books as a First Nations publisher and not-for-profit arts organisation**

As a First Nations arts organisation and publisher, Magabala Books' purpose is to publish and celebrate unique and powerful stories that reflect and affirm the brilliance and diversity of First Nations voices, peoples, cultures, beliefs and sovereignty. Magabala provides best practice leadership in the publishing industry by valuing, supporting and respecting First Nations writers, illustrators, storytellers and publishing professionals. We are also a cultural guardian and advocate—we protect the cultural and intellectual property rights of our creators and their communities.

From this position Magabala Books deeply values that the National Cultural Policy, from its inception, has been built on First Nations First as one of the five pillars driving investment and value in the Australian arts and culture sector. *Revive* was launched in January of 2023, later that year in October, over 60% of Australians voted against the Voice Referendum. As a First Nations organisation Magabala continues to feel the devastating reverberations of this outcome. We also know deeply that a productive relationship between First Nations and non-Indigenous people requires truth telling and our national power holding leaders and institutions to model what valuing First Nations humanity looks like. For Magabala this looks like a National Cultural Policy that guides investment into:

- The safe keeping and safe publication of First Nations stories;
- Developing First Nations arts workers from capacity building the next generation of administrators and professionals, to building existing leadership capacity including through the targeted resourcing of traineeships and cadetships, and First Nations employment subsidies;
- Promoting culturally safer practices as best practice and as counter to the at times extractive nature of commercial publishing;
- Growing the value of First Nations stories as commercial, but also social, cultural and educational; and,
- Developing targeted measures to protect First Nations intellectual and cultural property, particularly regarding AI.

Magabala is not alone in recognising investment in First Nations storytelling as key to the success of the National Cultural Policy. The APA, Reading Australia and Books Creates Australia have all submitted responses as part of the National Cultural Policy consultation that emphasise the importance of embedding First Nations storytelling and cultural authority.

In alignment with these industry leaders, and in further emphasising the importance of APA's recommendation that the National Cultural Policy must develop a National Plan for Books and Reading, Magabala Books recommends this plan also include:

1. the establishment of a First Nations-led writing and publishing framework;
2. funding for First Nations authors, publishers, language programs and community-led initiatives;
3. dedicated resourcing to ensure First Nations books are visible and engaged with in educational settings such as schools and libraries;
4. Ensure there is adequate funding for the campaigning, touring and promotion of First Nations authors and their works;
5. Investment in the culturally safe development of First Nations stories and truth telling, including the additional time and resources it takes to publish Elders stories, stories from collectives and communities rather than individual authors, stories of trauma and colonisation, stories held between community members, stories from storytellers whose first languages are not English; and,
6. Embedding ICIP and data sovereignty in copyright, laws regulating AI, and impact measurement.

In the words of First Nations poet Dr Jeanine Leane, First Nations stories, storytellers, and the arts workers who support them, are not plantations but old growth forests. The above recommendations are important to ensure the safe and sustainable development of First Nations stories, and that these stories are understood and fostered not only within commercial frameworks for commercial purposes, but as imperative to the social, educational, economic and cultural value of books and publishing.

### **3. Magabala Books as a remote arts organisation**

As an arts and cultural organisation operating in a remote area of Australia with a national footprint and reach, the challenges Magabala and other First Nations arts organisations in the Kimberley (for example Marrugeku and Nagula Jarndu) face *in addition* to those in urban centres are unique. These challenges include:

- Incredibly high costs associated with travel that limit Magabala's ability to undertake industry networking and the development of peer relationships and opportunities to knowledge share. The cost of travel also impacts opportunities for staff, and particularly First Nations staff, to participate in off-site professional development and to participate in industry events and opportunities to promote what we do;
- Barriers to recruitment, retention and capacity building of workforce due to lack of housing supply and affordability; more competitive remuneration in the health and service delivery sectors; and a gap in a ready to go skilled arts administration or publishing workforce, requiring a significant amount of resources (particularly time and money) to be invested in the retention and development of staff. For Magabala a priority is investing in local First Nations people, that also requires the time and investment in training and workforce capacity; and,

- Inadequate infrastructure facilities that pose one of the most significant barriers to our growth and success. Following a significant period of growth and economic success, Magabala has expanded to 22 staff (50% of which are First Nations employees), half of whom work on site in our Broome office. We no longer have the space to fit more staff onsite. Further, our lease is set to expire in 2028 and there are currently no viable options for us to relocate to in Broome. Magabala is not exceptional, many arts organisations in the Kimberley can demonstrate significant impact for the communities we seek to benefit, despite operating from premises that are in adequate.

To begin addressing these barriers as part of the National Cultural Policy, Magabala recommends:

1. A rolling regional and remote travel fund to offset the travel, accommodation and per diems of participating in industry events and promotional activities
2. Long term funding opportunities to develop and resource cadetships and traineeships for the development of place based remote workforce, and particularly for First Nations people, in arts administration, finance and project management
3. Development of a plan, followed by a commitment, to address the regional and remote crisis in infrastructure for remote arts and cultural organisations

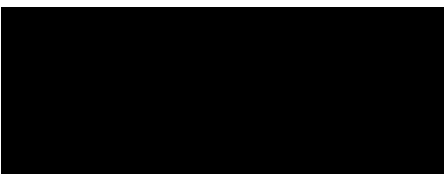
#### **4. Magabala Books as a multi-year funded organisation**

Magabala Books is incredibly grateful to Creative Australia for the ongoing multi-year investment. It cannot be overstated that Magabala's success is contingent on sustainable and flexible resourcing that enable us to go above and beyond what is required to meet the needs of the people and communities our work seeks to benefit.

Increased duration of funding cycles would enable more sustainable and long-term planning and a significant reduction in the time and resources required to develop the application.

Lastly, we recommend increasing the multi-year grant duration from four-years in line with the Major Performing Arts funding.

Kind regards,



Dr Lilly Brown

**Chief Executive Officer**

**Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation**  
Australia's leading Indigenous publisher