



# Recognising Sydney Fringe as National Cultural Infrastructure

## *A New South Wales perspective on a National Independent Festivals Framework*

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A submission to the National Cultural Policy Review

**Submitted by:** Sydney Fringe, NSW's largest independent arts festival.

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Sydney Fringe is a member of the National Fringe Festivals Alliance (NFFA), alongside Adelaide Fringe, Darwin Fringe, FRINGE WORLD Perth and Melbourne Fringe. This submission complements, and should be read alongside, the Alliance's joint submission proposing a National Independent Festivals Framework within the next phase of REVIVE. The joint submission makes the national case; this submission demonstrates, through Sydney Fringe and the New South Wales context, why that framework matters acutely from the perspective of Australia's largest city and primary international gateway.

## Executive Summary

Sydney Fringe is critical national cultural infrastructure operating without federal recognition. In a single month each September, it activates 89 venues across Sydney, presents more than 450 events, engages over 3,300 artists, and reaches more than 103,000 audiences; yet it sits entirely outside the federal cultural policy framework.

The economics are unambiguous. Sydney Fringe has delivered **\$124 million** in cumulative economic impact since the launch of REVIVE in 2023, returning **\$59 for every \$1** of state government investment, the highest return profile in the national network. Sydney Fringe is doing nationally significant work on a fraction of the public investment its impact would justify.

This is not a Sydney problem to be solved by Sydney, nor a NSW problem to be solved by NSW. Sydney Fringe is the entry point of a national artist career pathway and an important cultural tourism gateway through which international audiences encounter Australia's independent arts. Its artists premiere here and tour the country and the world. No state framework can recognise or resource a function that, by design, crosses every jurisdictional boundary.

Sydney Fringe therefore endorses, in full, the Alliance's proposal for a **\$25 million four-year National Independent Festivals Framework** within the next phase of REVIVE, reviewed at two years and comprising four targeted funds covering creation and presentation, touring and mobility, sector capacity, and international connections. This submission sets out what that framework unlocks for New South Wales artists and audiences, and why federal recognition of Sydney Fringe is overdue.

### 1. The New South Wales vantage point

REVIVE recognises the central role of artists, creative workers and cultural institutions in shaping the nation's identity and economic future. The federal government has established several mechanisms that recognise the role of festivals in Australian cultural life: Festivals Australia, which supports projects at regional and remote events; Revive Live, which supports live music venues and contemporary music festivals; and the Major Festivals Initiative, which commissions new work for the major State and Territory curated festivals.

Each of these mechanisms addresses an important category of festival activity. Together, however, they leave one major part of Australia's festival ecosystem entirely outside federal cultural policy: the network of major open-access independent festivals. In New South Wales, that gap has a name. Sydney Fringe is the state's largest independent arts festival, the largest single platform for emerging and independent artists in NSW, and one of the highest-performing cultural assets in the country and it receives no federal cultural investment commensurate with that role.

New South Wales is Australia's largest state economy and the home of its primary international visitor gateway. The independent arts sector that Sydney Fringe sustains is correspondingly large, but it is also acutely exposed. It is built on a dense ecology of small independent venues and micro-companies operating on thin margins, and it depends on a festival platform that is itself resourced almost entirely at the state and local level. The next phase of REVIVE is the appropriate place to address that omission.

## 2. Sydney Fringe and the open-access model

Sydney Fringe operates under a structural model that distinguishes it from every other recognised category in cultural policy. It is artist-led rather than institution-led, open-access rather than curated, and it sits on top of an ecology of independent venues and small production companies rather than within major institutional infrastructure. It operates at scale. Hundreds of events, thousands of artists, six figures of audience, all on an operating budget and staffing level that are a fraction of those of comparable curated festivals.

Under open-access registration, any artist can register, any venue can participate, and any work meeting baseline conditions can find an audience. This model lowers barriers to entry, creates entrepreneurial pathways for independent creatives, surfaces work that no curated platform could collectively present, activates venues in a way which drives capacity building and audience development, and connects audiences with diverse stories and forms. Federal recognition of the open-access model is the single most distinctive contribution Sydney Fringe, and the wider independent sector, can make to REVIVE's second pillar: A Place for Every Story.

Sydney Fringe hosts substantial First Nations programming, supported by dedicated curatorial pathways and adherence to ICIP protocols that uphold self-determined cultural practice. The combination of an open-access platform with formal First Nations programming structures provides a distinctive vehicle for First Nations creative leadership at scale, directly serving REVIVE's first pillar.

### A career and a workforce begins here

For thousands of NSW artists each year, Sydney Fringe is the first professional stage of a career pathway. It functions simultaneously as a creative incubator, a touring marketplace, a professional development platform, an employment generator and a cultural tourism asset. For the arts workforce, the festival is where careers in the sector begin, develop and sustain themselves:

- **Producers** move between projects and festivals to develop their craft and accumulate the credits needed for sustained careers;
- **Technicians, designers and production crew** find consistent, skilled seasonal employment, ensuring that the next generation of off-stage creative talent is nurtured;
- **Marketers, programmers, ticketing managers and operations staff** build the sectoral expertise on which the broader cultural industry depends and creates the next generation of talent;
- **Front-of-house, hospitality and venue staff** receive a significant seasonal employment uplift, particularly in entry-level and casual roles.

Sydney Fringe is democratic by design, anti-gatekeeping, and delivers federal policy outcomes: artist development, audience reach, workforce development, cultural tourism. This is all at a scale and unit cost no other vehicle in NSW achieves. It is a different category of cultural infrastructure, not a curated festival operating at a smaller scale, and the policy framework has not yet engaged with that distinction.

## 3. The federal responsibility gap, seen from NSW

Sydney Fringe is not a local cultural event that happens to operate at scale. It is nationally networked cultural infrastructure whose artists, audiences, touring pathways and economic impact span every level of government. Yet it is currently funded almost exclusively at state, territory and local levels - through Create NSW, Destination NSW, the City of Sydney and local councils -

demonstrating a structural mismatch between the scale of the ecosystem and the level of government resourcing it. That mismatch produces three outcomes that only federal policy can address.

- 1. State frameworks cannot resource a national function.** Sydney Fringe depends on a single state's funding bodies, operating within a constrained jurisdictional remit, for the great majority of its public support. With state government contributing only 19 per cent of the total cost to deliver, and at the time of writing reducing to 8.5 per cent from 2026, a single adverse funding decision destabilises a festival that contributes nationally. No state government's mandate extends to protecting that national function. This is, by definition, a federal responsibility gap.
- 2. The funding cliff is real and imminent.** Across the network, major independent festivals are facing materially reduced or terminated multi-year state support, not because of underperformance but because state arts and tourism budgets are themselves under structural pressure. NSW is not immune. Sydney Fringe's audience and artist participation are at record levels at precisely the moment its public resourcing is most exposed. Without federal recognition, Australia risks dismantling a world-leading ecosystem one state budget at a time, and the NSW share of that ecosystem is among the most valuable.
- 3. The artist ecosystem is national not jurisdictional.** An independent artist may premiere a work at Sydney Fringe, develop it at Melbourne Fringe, tour it to Adelaide Fringe and FRINGE WORLD Perth, and use those credits to access international touring through the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and beyond. This is the actual career pathway of contemporary Australian independent artists, and it frequently begins in Sydney. No state framework can recognise or resource a pathway that crosses every jurisdictional boundary by design. Only federal investment matches the geography of the ecosystem.

State-level resourcing is vulnerable to contraction at the precise moment audience demand and artist participation are expanding. Federal intervention would stabilise an existing, world-leading ecosystem. Delayed action risks dismantling infrastructure that took decades to build in Sydney and cannot be reconstructed at comparable cost.

## 4. What the National Framework delivers for New South Wales

Sydney Fringe supports the Alliance's proposal for a National Independent Festivals Framework within the next phase of REVIVE. A recognition first, operationalised through four targeted funds delivered over four years and reviewed at two. Recognition would formalise independent festivals as a distinct category of national cultural infrastructure, codify the open-access model, establish coordinating governance under Creative Australia, connect the federal portfolios that already touch independent festival activity, and align with Creative Australia's international strategy. Set out below is what each fund unlocks specifically for NSW artists and audiences.

### a. National Artist Creation and Presentation Fund (\$10m / 4 years)

Direct, accessible funding for independent artists to create and present new Australian work, with disbursements tied to artist fee floors aligned with MEAA Live Performance Award rates. For NSW, this fund would put fair-pay infrastructure beneath the thousands of artists who currently subsidise their own Sydney Fringe seasons, with dedicated streams for First Nations artists - First Nations curators holding budget and curatorial authority – artists with disability, and culturally and linguistically diverse artists who are strongly represented across Sydney's independent sector.

### **b. National Touring and Mobility Fund (\$7m / 4 years)**

The festival calendar already constitutes a near year-round national touring circuit. Sydney Fringe (1–30 September) flows directly into Melbourne Fringe (29 September–18 October), anchoring the eastern-seaboard leg of that circuit. At present the cost of touring - flights, freight, accommodation, additional production - falls almost entirely on individual artists, locking out the very emerging, regional and underrepresented artists REVIVE prioritises. This fund converts an accidental national circuit into a deliberate, equitably accessible one, unlocking interstate mobility for hundreds of artists who begin their touring life in Sydney.

### **c. National Sector Capacity and Investment Fund (\$4m / 4 years)**

A strategic investment in independent festivals as national infrastructure: national accessibility standards, cultural protocols and safety infrastructure, and targeted investment in the independent venues that host festival work year-round. The post-lockout, post-COVID independent venue crisis is felt acutely in Sydney, where the small and mid-scale venues on which Sydney Fringe depends are under sustained pressure or have already collapsed. Federal recognition of independent venues as cultural infrastructure addresses an immediate and continued threat to the NSW sector's sustainability.

### **d. International Independent Arts Connections Fund (\$4m / 4 years)**

A dedicated fund building international export pathways for Australian independent artists, in alignment with Creative Australia's International Engagement Strategy. Sydney's position as the nation's primary international gateway makes it the natural site for inbound buyer programs and showcases that connect international presenters with Australian independent work. This is co-investment rather than a duplication, positioning Sydney Fringe as a domestic platform that amplifies the return on Creative Australia's existing international investment.

## **5. Sydney as Australia's international visitor gateway**

Sydney Fringe is an important cultural tourism asset, with measurable, attributable economic impact that warrants federal recognition as cultural tourism infrastructure. Its distinct contribution within the national network is straightforward with Sydney leveraging Australia's primary international visitor gateway.

Sydney Fringe has delivered **\$124 million in cumulative economic impact since the launch of REVIVE in 2023**, returning **\$59 for every \$1** of state government investment. Within the national picture, Sydney's function is complementary rather than duplicative: Adelaide concentrates impact across Mad March; Perth anchors Western Australia's summer economy; Melbourne activates a deep domestic audience; Darwin extends the network into the Top End; and Sydney captures international cultural tourism through Australia's most globally recognised destination brand and busiest international arrival point.

Independent festivals stay longer in visitors' itineraries, distribute activity across the calendar, and reach audiences across generational and demographic lines that other cultural platforms struggle to engage, at average ticket prices well below comparable curated festivals. They are, in the most literal sense, the people's festivals.

Sydney Fringe accordingly supports the Alliance's proposal for a coordinating partnership with Tourism Australia and DITRDCA, inclusion in international cultural tourism marketing, a nationally

consistent visitor-economy data framework, and recognition of independent festivals as year-round cultural tourism infrastructure. We further support a federal Affordability Guarantee: federally subsidised low-income and first-timer ticketing schemes that position the network as the affordable cultural participation answer to the cost-of-living crisis. In Sydney, one of the least affordable cities in the country, that guarantee would be felt most keenly.

## 6. Sydney Fringe Fact Sheet

*All figures 2025 unless otherwise indicated.*

<b>Status</b>	NSW's largest independent arts festival; 17 years of operation
<b>Model</b>	Open-access, non-curated, artist-led; based in Marrickville, presented across 12,000 square kilometres of Sydney
<b>Dates</b>	1–30 September annually
<b>Scale</b>	450+ events across 89 venues; 3,300+ artists; 103,000+ attendees
<b>Economic impact</b>	\$124M cumulative economic impact since the launch of REVIVE in 2023
<b>Return on investment</b>	\$59 returned per \$1 of state government investment
<b>Public funding share</b>	State government funding is 19% of the total cost to deliver, currently facing reduction to 8.5% from 2027
<b>National role</b>	Eastern-seaboard anchor of the national touring circuit; Sydney flows directly into Melbourne Fringe
<b>Visitor economy role</b>	Leverages Australia's primary international visitor gateway
<b>Alliance</b>	Founding member of the National Fringe Festivals Alliance

### The ask in one line

Federal recognition of major open-access independent festivals as national cultural infrastructure within the next phase of REVIVE, operationalised through the Alliance's proposed \$25 million four-year National Independent Festivals Framework.

*The infrastructure exists. The audience exists. The artist demand exists. What is missing is federal recognition that matches the geography of an ecosystem that, in New South Wales as nationally, has until now been built without one.*