

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation 2026

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May 2026

Core position

Australia's next National Cultural Policy should recognise creative workforce wellbeing, psychosocial safety and sustainable creative careers as essential cultural infrastructure.

Sustainable cultural policy should not concentrate creative workforce wellbeing investment in a single access point. It should build a legacy of shared capability across the sector.

Executive summary

Hey Mate welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy.

As a national, sector-specific mental health, wellbeing and psychosocial safety organisation working across the creative industries, Hey Mate strongly supports the continuation of Revive's commitment to recognising artists and arts workers as workers. The next National Cultural Policy must now turn that recognition into practical infrastructure.

Australia's creative workers are not only beneficiaries of cultural policy. They are the workforce that makes cultural life possible. Yet many artists, arts workers and creative organisations continue to operate in conditions of financial precarity, burnout, insecure work, emotional labour, role ambiguity, touring fatigue, regional isolation and increasing psychosocial risk.

The next National Cultural Policy should recognise creative workforce wellbeing, psychosocial safety and sustainable creative careers as essential cultural infrastructure. These issues should not sit at the edge of cultural policy as crisis response, welfare, or optional wellbeing support. They are central to the future of Australian culture.

Hey Mate recommends that the Australian Government:

1. Embed creative workforce wellbeing and psychosocial safety as a named priority in the next National Cultural Policy.
2. Move beyond a single access point model and invest in a distributed, preventive ecosystem of specialist support.
3. Establish a transparent, competitive funding stream or consortium model for creative workforce wellbeing.
4. Expand the meaning of safe and fair work to include psychosocial hazards, burnout, income insecurity, emotional labour, cultural load and role ambiguity.
5. Commission an ecosystem map of creative workforce wellbeing services across Australia.
6. Invest in culturally safe, First Nations-led, regional, freelance and small-organisation support models.
7. Ensure public investment strengthens existing specialist capability rather than unintentionally duplicating, narrowing or displacing it.
8. Build sustainability and legacy into creative workforce wellbeing investment by prioritising ecosystem development over single-provider concentration.

The opportunity now is not simply to continue what Revive began. It is to build the next layer of cultural infrastructure: a national system that helps creative workers survive, thrive and sustain their practice over time.

About Hey Mate

Hey Mate is a specialist mental health, wellbeing and psychosocial safety organisation working across Australia's creative industries. We provide counselling and Employee Assistance Program support, Mental Health First Aid training, wellbeing workshops, psychosocial safety education, peer-support initiatives, community programs and sector-specific resources and support.

Our work spans nationally music, screen, live performance, festivals, visual arts, galleries, museums, regional arts, digital games, creative education and community-based practice. We work with individual artists, freelancers, arts workers, creative organisations, peak bodies, government partners and cultural institutions.

Hey Mate's model is purpose-built for creative industry contexts. Our work is grounded in the realities of creative labour: insecure income, project-based employment, touring and production pressure, emotional and relational labour, workplace intensity, blurred personal and professional boundaries, and the specific mental health risks that arise across creative practice.

We welcome the progress made through Revive, including the establishment of Creative Australia, Creative Workplaces, Music Australia, Writing Australia and First Nations Arts. The public consultation paper recognises that Revive positioned arts workers as real workers who make substantial contributions to Australia's economic and cultural life, and that the next policy must continue building a cultural landscape that supports arts workers.

The consultation paper also recognises that cultural and creative activity contributed \$67.4 billion to Australia's economy and employed more than 591,000 people in 2023–24. It recognises culture's role in prosperity, innovation, community resilience, mental health, civic trust and national identity.

This economic and social contribution cannot be sustained without investing in the people who create, produce, present and support culture.

The challenge: creative workers are central, but not yet structurally supported

Revive made an important cultural and policy shift by recognising artists and arts workers as real workers. The next National Cultural Policy must now address what that recognition requires in practice.

The consultation paper identifies Pillar 3, Centrality of the Artist, as a commitment to supporting the artist as worker and responding to changing conditions for creative work, including safer and fairer workplaces, creative rights, lifelong learning and the recognition of creators across the broader economy. It also identifies Pillar 4, Strong Cultural Infrastructure, as a commitment to resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose systems that support long-term sustainability.

Hey Mate's view is that creative workforce wellbeing and psychosocial safety sit directly at the intersection of these two pillars.

Creative work is changing rapidly. Digital tools, hybrid presentation models, global markets, changing audience behaviours, rising costs and unstable income streams are reshaping creative practice. The consultation paper recognises these shifts and notes that rising costs and financial pressures highlight the importance of resilient systems and infrastructure.

For creative workers, resilience cannot mean simply being asked to endure more. It must mean practical systems that reduce harm, build capability and support sustainable careers.

Current sector evidence points to an urgent need. The Support Act and Centre for Social Impact Swinburne 2024 research cited in the attached policy analysis found that 53.5% of surveyed creative industry workers reported high or very high psychological distress, compared with 15% in the general population. The same research found that 19.6% of respondents reported annual income below the poverty line, and 43% identified lack of opportunities due to venue closures, festival cancellations and other external impacts as a key challenge.

These are not individual resilience problems. They are structural workforce issues. Income insecurity, unsafe work, isolation, bullying, role ambiguity, cumulative stress, lack of supervision, and limited access to appropriate support all create psychosocial risk.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore treat creative workforce wellbeing as infrastructure, not welfare.

The gap: from crisis response to preventive ecosystem investment

Hey Mate acknowledges the important role that existing organisations have played in supporting workers across parts of the creative industries. Support Act, for example, has provided crisis relief, counselling access and wellbeing support to music workers and, more recently, broader creative industry workers. Public evaluation material indicates that the Support Act Wellbeing Helpline is valued by many users and provides an important national access point.

However, the evidence also shows that a single access point model is not sufficient as the primary national architecture for creative workforce wellbeing.

The Support Act Wellbeing Helpline evaluation states that the Helpline is delivered by Support Act in partnership with AccessEAP, an Employee Assistance Program provider with over 30 years' experience in mental health and workplace wellbeing. It also states that counsellors with experience or knowledge of the music or arts sector are preferred, but not compulsory, and that evidence suggests not all counsellors have these credentials.

This distinction matters. Generalist Employee Assistance Program providers have an important role in Australia's workplace mental health landscape. Many arts and cultural organisations already use, or have previously used, generalist EAP services. These services can provide valuable baseline counselling and workplace wellbeing support.

However, Hey Mate's experience as a specialist arts health organisation is that many creative organisations are now seeking to move from generic support toward arts-specific models that understand the nuanced realities of creative work. The difference is not simply branding. It is a question of relevance, trust, safety and outcomes.

Creative workers often seek support for issues that are deeply connected to the conditions of creative labour: insecure income, touring fatigue, production pressure, creative rejection, identity-based work, public visibility, grant cycles, festival intensity, vicarious trauma, emotionally demanding material, blurred personal and professional boundaries, and the absence of standard workplace structures.

A generalist EAP model may be able to provide counselling, but it may not consistently understand these contexts unless creative industry knowledge, lived experience and specialist training are built into the model as core requirements.

Support Act's own public information describes its "Support Act as your EAP" offering as including counselling, mediation, critical incident response and manager support, with counselling, mediation and critical incident support delivered in partnership with AccessEAP. AccessEAP publicly describes itself as an Australian-owned EAP provider with in-house clinicians and a large network of mental health professionals across the country.

This experience is valuable, but it is not the same as a dedicated creative industries clinical and psychosocial safety model where artform literacy, creative-sector training, lived experience and industry knowledge are compulsory rather than preferred.

The Support Act Wellbeing Helpline evaluation also identifies mixed awareness of the service, access barriers for some First Nations callers, communication gaps in intake, and the need to redesign language and imagery so the service appeals to the broader creative sector. NAVA's public response to the evaluation also notes that, despite being available to all creative industries, the service's strong association with music has created unintended access barriers for visual artists and other non-music creative workers.

These findings should not be read as a reason to remove existing support. They should be read as evidence that the current architecture is incomplete.

A national helpline is important, but it is not the same as a whole-of-sector wellbeing system. Counselling access is essential, but it cannot substitute for prevention, psychosocial safety capability, peer-support infrastructure, culturally safe referral pathways, leadership training, economic security measures and specialist artform-informed support.

The current model creates several structural risks:

- **Concentration risk:** too much national creative workforce wellbeing investment may be concentrated through one pathway or provider model.
- **Access risk:** workers in visual arts, literature, screen, digital games, community arts, galleries, museums, festivals, regional practice and freelance contexts may not see themselves reflected in a service historically associated with music.
- **Relevance risk:** creative workers need support that understands their artform, employment structure, cultural context and workplace reality.
- **Transparency risk:** where major public investment is made through appointed arrangements rather than competitive or consortium-based processes, the sector has limited visibility over why one model has been selected or how alternative specialist providers are being considered.
- **Ecosystem distortion risk:** public funding can unintentionally narrow the provider landscape if it consolidates delivery through one organisation or model rather than strengthening a diverse ecosystem of specialist services.

Other national cultural policy priorities, including access and inclusion and environmental sustainability, have benefited from partnership-based, advisory or consortium-style approaches. Creative workforce wellbeing and psychosocial safety should be treated with the same strategic seriousness.

The next National Cultural Policy should build on existing services while establishing a broader ecosystem around them.

Where the gaps are, and what fills them

The current national architecture provides important access to counselling and information. The next policy should fill the gaps around that architecture.

Gap	What fills it
Crisis support exists, but prevention is underdeveloped.	Fund psychosocial safety training, reflective practice, supervision models, leadership support, early intervention programs and practical tools for small-to-medium organisations.
General counselling exists, but arts-specific matching is inconsistent.	Fund creative industry specialist providers whose clinicians and facilitators have compulsory creative sector training, lived experience, artform literacy and ongoing professional development in creative workforce risks.
A helpline exists, but workers need embedded sector support.	Create partnerships with peak bodies, festivals, screen organisations, digital games networks, galleries, museums, regional arts networks, arts schools and small-to-medium organisations.
Information resources exist, but implementation support is limited.	Fund practical implementation support, including manager coaching, psychosocial hazard mapping, template policies, debriefing pathways and small-organisation grants to apply guidance in real working conditions.
Public investment exists, but transparency and competition are limited.	Establish a competitive creative workforce wellbeing and psychosocial safety fund, a national consortium model, transparent outcomes reporting and an ecosystem map of existing specialist providers before future major investment decisions are made.
The need is national, and increasingly global.	Support Australia to lead in this field by investing in specialist practice, standards, training, research and exportable models of creative workforce wellbeing.

Sustainability, legacy and ecosystem investment

The next National Cultural Policy should consider not only what support is funded, but how that support creates long-term sustainability and legacy for the sector.

A national creative workforce wellbeing strategy that relies too heavily on one organisation, one access point or one delivery pathway creates sustainability risks. If funding, knowledge, referral pathways, public awareness and sector relationships are concentrated in a single model, the broader ecosystem remains fragile. It also limits innovation, provider diversity, regional responsiveness and the development of specialist capability across different artforms and communities.

By contrast, ecosystem investment creates legacy. It builds capacity across the sector rather than simply purchasing service delivery from one point. It supports multiple specialist providers, strengthens referral pathways, embeds knowledge in organisations and communities, and allows different parts of the creative industries to access support that reflects their specific realities.

This is particularly important in a sector made up of freelancers, sole traders, small organisations, regional networks, festivals, screen workers, artists, crew, producers, community arts workers, galleries, museums and cultural leaders. No single organisation can hold all of this knowledge, reach every community, understand every artform, or respond to every psychosocial risk.

A sustainable model would invest in the whole system. This could include a national ecosystem map, competitive funding for specialist providers, regional and artform-specific partnerships, First Nations-led wellbeing models, shared practice standards, training and supervision pathways, and transparent outcomes reporting.

This approach would leave a stronger legacy than a single-provider model. It would build sector capability that remains even when individual funding programs end. It would also align with the consultation paper's focus on Strong Cultural Infrastructure by recognising that workforce wellbeing infrastructure must be resilient, adaptable and fit-for-purpose.

The next National Cultural Policy should therefore ask: what investment model will leave the creative workforce stronger in ten years' time? Hey Mate's view is that the answer is not a single access point. It is a distributed, preventive and specialist ecosystem.

What matters to Hey Mate's practice

For Hey Mate, the key issue is that creative workers need support that is both clinically sound and culturally relevant.

Many artists and arts workers do not experience their mental health challenges separately from their working conditions. Burnout may be linked to impossible project timelines. Anxiety may be linked to unstable income. Distress may be linked to bullying, harassment, exclusion, vicarious trauma, creative rejection, touring pressure or the cumulative effect of always being "on." Freelancers may not have managers, HR systems, paid leave, structured supervision or employer-funded EAP access.

This is why generic workplace wellbeing models are not enough.

Creative workforce wellbeing support must be designed with knowledge of the sector. It must understand the difference between a touring crew member, a regional visual artist, a young musician, a museum worker, a games developer, a writer, a performer, a community arts practitioner, a festival worker and an arts leader carrying organisational risk.

It must also recognise that psychosocial safety is not only an individual counselling issue. It is a workplace, sector and policy issue.

Hey Mate's practice shows that workers and organisations need a continuum of support: confidential counselling, early intervention, manager coaching, Mental Health First Aid, psychosocial hazard literacy, creative career sustainability tools, peer-support models, community connection, post-incident debriefing, culturally safe referral pathways and practical resources that can be used by small organisations and independent practitioners.

This support must be accessible to workers who sit outside standard employment structures. The sector's most vulnerable workers are often those least likely to have access to formal workplace supports.

What the next National Cultural Policy should reflect

1. Creative workforce wellbeing should be named as cultural infrastructure

The new policy should explicitly identify creative workforce wellbeing and psychosocial safety as essential cultural infrastructure.

Cultural infrastructure is not only buildings, institutions, collections, venues, digital systems or touring circuits. It is also the human infrastructure of the sector: the artists, producers, curators, crew, educators, administrators, facilitators, writers, designers and cultural workers who make Australian culture possible.

If the next policy is serious about the Centrality of the Artist, it must invest in the conditions that allow artists and arts workers to keep working.

2. Safe and fair work should include psychosocial safety

Revive's focus on safe and respectful workplaces was important. The next policy should expand this to include psychosocial hazards and mental health risk.

This includes income insecurity, overwork, role ambiguity, isolation, harassment, cultural load, emotional labour, touring fatigue, vicarious trauma, unsafe leadership practices, unpaid work expectations, and the mental health impacts of unstable creative careers.

Fair pay and mental health should not be treated as separate policy areas. Economic insecurity is a psychosocial hazard.

3. The government should move from a single access point model to an ecosystem model

The next policy should retain and strengthen existing crisis and counselling pathways, while investing in a broader ecosystem of support.

That ecosystem should include specialist providers across artforms and regions, First Nations-led services, disability-led and access-informed approaches, regional and remote supports, peer networks, creative workplace training, psychosocial safety tools, and practical resources for small-to-medium organisations.

The sector needs what comes before a helpline call and what comes after an information sheet.

4. Future investment should be transparent and competitive

Hey Mate recommends that future investment in creative workforce wellbeing be made through transparent, competitive and partnership-based mechanisms.

This could include a dedicated creative workforce wellbeing and psychosocial safety funding stream, a national consortium model, or a set of multi-provider partnerships across artforms and communities.

This would support innovation, reduce over-reliance on any one provider, and ensure public investment reflects the full diversity of the creative industries.

5. The government should commission an ecosystem map

Before future investment decisions are made, the Australian Government should commission a national map of existing creative workforce wellbeing services.

This mapping should identify who is providing support, to whom, in which regions, across which artforms, with what funding, and with what evidence of outcomes.

Without this map, government cannot know whether it is investing in a network or a single node.

6. First Nations creative workforce wellbeing must be First Nations-led

The next policy should support First Nations-led wellbeing infrastructure for First Nations artists, arts workers and cultural workers.

First Nations creative workers can carry additional cultural load, community responsibility, visibility, representation pressure and exposure to culturally unsafe systems. Support must be culturally safe by design, not added later as a substream within general services.

7. Regional, freelance and small-organisation access must be prioritised

Many creative workers are not employed by large institutions. They work as sole traders, casuals, contractors, volunteers, board members, collaborators, project workers and independent practitioners.

The next policy should invest in models that reach workers outside formal employment structures, particularly regional and remote creatives, freelancers, young people, carers, disabled creatives, culturally and linguistically diverse workers, LGBTQIA+ communities and small-to-medium organisations.

8. Australia should lead in creative workforce wellbeing practice

The need for specialist creative workforce wellbeing support is not limited to Australia. Hey Mate's emerging international interest, including in the United States, suggests that creative organisations globally are seeking more specialised support for creative workers.

Australia has an opportunity to lead by recognising creative workforce wellbeing as a specialist field and investing in the infrastructure, practice standards and sector partnerships needed to support it.

Rather than treating wellbeing as a generic workplace issue, the next National Cultural Policy can position Australia as a leader in creative workforce sustainability: supporting the people who make culture, strengthening creative careers, and building exportable knowledge in arts, health and psychosocial safety.

Recommendations

Hey Mate recommends that the Australian Government:

- 1. Name creative workforce wellbeing and psychosocial safety as a priority in the next National Cultural Policy**, linked to the pillars of Centrality of the Artist and Strong Cultural Infrastructure.
- 2. Commission a national creative workforce wellbeing ecosystem map**, identifying existing providers, gaps, artform needs, regional access issues and funding concentration risks.
- 3. Establish a transparent, competitive creative workforce wellbeing and psychosocial safety funding stream**, open to specialist providers, partnerships and consortia.
- 4. Fund preventive psychosocial safety infrastructure**, including training, supervision, reflective practice, leadership support, peer-support models, debriefing pathways and implementation support for small-to-medium organisations.
- 5. Develop sector-specific standards for creative workforce mental health and wellbeing support**, including requirements for creative industry knowledge, cultural safety, lived experience, First Nations leadership and artform-informed practice.
- 6. Ensure generalist EAP provision is not treated as a substitute for specialist creative industry support**, particularly where public funding is intended to support the whole creative workforce.
- 7. Invest in First Nations-led creative workforce wellbeing models**, recognising cultural load, community responsibility, cultural safety and self-determination.
- 8. Prioritise regional, freelance and small-organisation access**, including workers who sit outside traditional employment structures and therefore lack employer-funded wellbeing supports.
- 9. Require transparent public outcomes reporting**, for publicly funded creative workforce wellbeing programs, including reach by artform, geography, employment type, cultural identity where appropriate, referral quality, prevention outcomes and user experience.
- 10. Build sustainability and legacy into creative workforce wellbeing investment**, by prioritising ecosystem development over single-provider concentration, ensuring public funding grows sector-wide capability, shared standards, regional access, provider diversity and long-term referral pathways.
- 11. Support Australia's leadership in creative workforce wellbeing**, including research, standards, training and exportable models of practice.

Conclusion

Australia's next National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to move beyond recognition and into infrastructure.

Revive helped name artists and arts workers as workers. The next policy should ensure they are supported as workers: with fair conditions, safe systems, appropriate support, sustainable careers and access to specialist wellbeing infrastructure.

Hey Mate does not recommend replacing existing services. We recommend building a fuller ecosystem around them.

Australia needs a creative workforce wellbeing system that is preventive, distributed, culturally safe, regionally accessible, transparent, competitive and sector-led. This system should draw on the expertise already present across the sector, rather than relying too heavily on a single access point or appointed provider pathway.

Culture cannot thrive if the people who create, produce, present and sustain it are not supported to survive.

The next National Cultural Policy should recognise that creative workforce wellbeing is not peripheral to cultural life. It is one of the foundations on which Australia's cultural future depends.

Sources and reference material

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