

Melbourne Fringe

Submission to the National Cultural Policy (May 2026)

Executive summary

Our position on the National Cultural Policy is simple: there is a policy gap for independent arts festivals that is structural, national and urgent. Australia has built one of the world's most significant independent arts festival ecosystems, yet this infrastructure remains largely invisible in federal cultural policy and funding architecture.

Acknowledging a national responsibility to fund independent arts activities and the platforms that support them is not a new idea. Comparable jurisdictions already sustain and grow independent arts circulation through national infrastructure. Canada combines federal investment in professional arts festivals through the Canada Arts Presentation Fund with CAFF's national standardisation of the Fringe model. Germany and France fund the movement of independent performance through festivals and venues, while Perform Europe supports cross-border touring partnerships.

Australia has major open access festivals operating at national scale, but no equivalent federal mechanism that recognises, standardises or funds the infrastructure that sits beneath all this activity.

REVIVE made an important shift by naming artists as workers, recognising cultural infrastructure as essential, and affirming that culture is core to Australia's social, economic and democratic life. The next National Cultural Policy **must now build the delivery mechanisms that enable those principles to reach independent artists.**

The good news is these mechanisms already exist at scale in our major independent arts festivals.

Artist pathways, audience development engines, workforce incubators, cultural tourism drivers and essential national touring infrastructure has been developed with very little federal backing or recognition. Appropriate investment into this would be a catalyst that could lead to a significant scaling that will greatly benefit our national cultural sector.

Our request is for the upcoming review of the National Cultural Policy to:

1. Establish a **National Festivals Strategy** and **National Independent Festivals Framework** that recognise major independent arts festivals as part of a broader national cultural ecosystem
2. **Create funding pathways** to resolve existing gaps for major independent arts festivals by establishing a dedicated funding program administered by the Office for the Arts
3. Fund the creative workforce pipeline and strengthen sustainability through **tax reform, early-career wage subsidies**, and **workforce pathways** for creative sector professionals

About Melbourne Fringe

Melbourne Fringe is Victoria's longest-running multi-arts festival and one of Australia's most significant open-access platforms for independent artists. Since 1982, we have supported artists and arts workers to create, test and present new Australian work, building career pathways across every stage of practice.

Our model advances the priorities of Revive by placing artists at the centre, removing barriers to cultural participation, strengthening independent arts infrastructure and connecting audiences with bold, diverse Australian stories. Alongside our Open Access Festival, our commissioned and sector leadership programs support First Nations artists, d/Deaf and Disabled artists, culturally diverse communities, LGBTQIA+ practitioners, children and young people, and artists working at the edge of form.

Please note: Melbourne Fringe has also contributed to a joint submission made by the National Fringe Festivals Alliance, referred to herein as the 'joint submission'.

Recommendation #1

Recognise independent arts festivals as national cultural infrastructure

Pillars 2, 3, 4 & 5

A National Festivals Strategy

Melbourne Fringe ultimately recommends the creation of a **National Festivals Strategy** that addresses the policy and funding gaps that have been created in the broader context of nationally significant festivals.

This Strategy needs to consider the cultural and social impact of all festivals in Australia, and consider how they are recognised on a national scale, including what funding streams are available to them. The intent should be to assess, address and establish support for parts of the festival ecology that are left behind by existing federal policy and provide deeper support for the organisations and activities that are already delivering on REVIVE.

A National Independent Festivals Framework

As a more urgent priority, Melbourne Fringe strongly backs the National Fringe Festivals Alliance recommendation for the creation of a **National Independent Festivals Framework**. The urgency and essentiality of this proposed framework exists because Federal cultural policy already recognises national institutions, major performing arts companies, regional programs, live music and major international festivals far more clearly and specifically than it does open access infrastructure.

This is a critical policy gap, because organisations such as Melbourne Fringe are currently delivering on the National Cultural Policy's objectives, yet sit outside the federal funding structures designed to achieve them.

Our National Cultural Policy needs to acknowledge that the careers of independent artists operate on a national and international level. A common journey for a Melbourne Fringe artist might be to test out early ideas of their work at Sydney Fringe in September, refine it in a Melbourne run in October, then transfer and present it in Perth and Adelaide early the following year. If successful, many artists will then use this momentum to access Edinburgh or other international markets. This is how independent arts careers are often made.

For this reason it is important that Australia's major independent arts festivals are recognised not just as local cultural events that happen to operate at scale, but as nationally networked cultural infrastructure. Festivals such as Melbourne Fringe support artists, audience development, touring pathways, workforce development and cultural tourism that extends far beyond our state borders.

The need for a separate framework is because independent arts and open access festivals are structurally different from curated festivals, regional festivals, and music festivals. Melbourne Fringe's open access platform lowers barriers to participation, decentralises cultural gatekeeping, and creates space for experimentation, failure, audience testing and artistic risk. This is how many artists grow from training or informal practice into professional work and global representatives of Australian culture.

Melbourne Fringe's work in particular exists across an equity and artform intervention context that has national significance. This includes our Fringe Fund, Equity Microgrants, Deadly Fringe, Radical Access, XS, Pulse and Passport. These programs are a national matter because a sector that is genuinely open must also provide targeted pathways, fees, access support, producing support and subsidised presentation opportunities.

And ultimately: a National Independent Festivals Framework is required in order to resolve the uncomfortable anomalies created by the current architecture, where regional festivals access support through Festivals Australia, live music festivals through Revive Live, and major international arts festivals from within the CAIAF and the Major Festivals Initiative. Independent arts and open access festivals have no equivalent national home, despite supporting tens of thousands of artists and drawing larger audiences than many of the festivals and organisations already acknowledged and serviced as part of REVIVE.

Recommendation #2

Establish dedicated funding pathways for major independent arts festivals

Pillars 3, 4 & 5

Melbourne Fringe strongly recommends that a suitable National Festivals Strategy and National Independent Festivals Framework must include, at a minimum, the creation of direct funding pathways for independent arts festival infrastructure (proposed to be administered through the Office for the Arts).

The establishment of these funds would address the current inefficient structures that require independent arts festivals to fit awkwardly into programs designed for other purposes.

Melbourne Fringe recommends that these funding models draw on the strengths of existing programs:

- like Festivals Australia, they should recognise the role festivals play in local cultural participation and community participation,
- like Revive Live, they should respond to structural pressures that threaten live cultural presentation, artist income, and audience access, and
- like the Major Festivals Initiative, they should recognise that festivals can operate as nationally significant platforms for commissioning, presentation and sector development.

Unlike those programs, these funds must be open to major independent arts festivals that work on a national scale across all artforms, and further the careers of artists at every stage of their practice.

Proposed funding initiatives

Melbourne Fringe supports the joint submission's proposals for a framework of funding initiatives that can amplify the already strong connections between Australia's major independent arts festivals.

The investment proposed is modest yet would create an immediate delivery vehicle for the National Cultural Policy's commitments to artists, audiences and cultural infrastructure. This framework would also enhance national coordination between the major festivals, the establishment of shared standards, evaluation frameworks and a formal mechanism for representation in a national context. It should include three funds:

National Artist Creation and Presentation Fund of \$10 million over four years to support the creation of new work for a national independent presentation context. This fund will reach independent and underrepresented artists in a way existing national funding does not; it would support fair fees, reduce barriers to entry, strengthen producing capacity, and ensure that independent artists who do not have private financial capacity can still make and present work. It is one of the clearest ways the next National Cultural Policy can make the phrase "artist as worker" real for the independent sector, while also investing heavily in the creation of new work that is custom designed to tour nationally and grow into international presentations of cultural significance.

National Touring and Mobility Fund of \$7 million over four years to support travel, freight, accommodation, remount costs and producing support so independent artists can re-present their works to new Australian markets, leveraging the advantages provided by an already strong, yet underinvested, national independent touring network. Federal investment could convert an accidental circuit into a viable national pathway, increasing the circulation of Australian work and building greater capacity for export to international markets.

National Sector Capacity and Innovation Fund of \$4 million over four years to strengthen the national cultural infrastructure already existing in major fringe festivals, by supporting shared access systems, digital engagement, audience development, data collection, sustainability initiatives, venue support, producer development and coordinated evaluation.

International Independent Arts Connections Fund of \$4 million over four years to formalise already existing international partnerships and pathways, creating viable careers for thousands of Australian artists by opening up new opportunities in market-ready contexts around the world.

Recommendation #3

Fund the creative workforce pipeline and strengthen sustainability

Pillars 3 & 4

Invest in the future of the creative industries with an early-career workforce scheme

Major independent arts festivals are not only platforms for artists, they are an unofficial training ground for the creative workforce at large. Producers, production managers, technicians, marketers, development staff, access workers, front-of-house workers and cultural leaders learn through organisations like Fringe because we invest in the development of new talent at a scale rarely seen elsewhere in the sector. Many of the people who now work across the broader arts sector first developed their skills through working at an independent festival, and a large representation move from state to state on a regular basis.

This workforce development function is not adequately recognised or funded as a national concern. The cost of training the next generation is carried by under-resourced arts organisations and senior staff who are already stretched. This weakens organisational sustainability and contributes to burnout, but also means that essential skills in producing, fundraising, technical production, and access are unevenly developed across the sector.

The next National Cultural Policy should include a **creative industries early-career workforce scheme**.

One potential model is a federal wage subsidy covering 50 per cent of salary costs for arts workers in the first five years of their professional careers, to be delivered through established organisations such as Melbourne Fringe that can provide structured supervision and practical training. Priority roles should include independent producers, production managers, technical staff, access workers, development and fundraising staff, with additional focus to train more arts workers who are First Nations, Disabled, or culturally diverse.

Use tax reform to lift wages and strengthen sustainability

Not-for-profit arts organisations compete for staff with government, universities, funded arts institutions, commercial event companies, and other adjacent creative industries, but have never been able to match or even approach their salary offerings.

Tax reform should be treated as a central mechanism for delivering the next National Cultural Policy. If the focus is on artist as worker, strong cultural infrastructure and a place for every story, then the tax system must recognise that creative work is public-interest work. At present, tax settings treat arts activity as discretionary, marginal or commercial, yet arts organisations are delivering measurable public benefit through access, inclusion, wellbeing, education, community connection and workforce development. Reforming these settings would allow government to strengthen the sector structurally through a permanent operating environment.

The immediate reform would be to **broaden the application of Public Benevolent Institution status** to include arts organisations whose dominant purpose includes targeted access, inclusion, social connection and relief of disadvantage through cultural participation. This recognises what the sector already knows: arts organisations working with First Nations communities, d/Deaf and Disabled people, children and young people, refugees, culturally diverse communities and people experiencing social exclusion are not simply presenting entertainment: they are delivering social infrastructure. Access to tax concessions would materially increase the take-home pay for eligible arts workers without requiring equivalent increases in grant funding. This is the most practical and high-impact reform available to address a low-wage sector facing retention challenges.

Tax reform should also **make cultural participation easier** for households and **cultural investment more attractive** for donors. A cultural participation tax credit or rebate, particularly for children and young people, would recognise arts engagement as part of education, wellbeing and social development, not a luxury purchase. Increased deductibility for donations to arts organisations would help unlock private investment.

Together, these reforms would help deliver the ambitions of the National Cultural Policy by increasing artists' incomes, strengthening organisations, widening participation and building a more sustainable creative workforce.