

Towards a New National Cultural Policy

Submission from Big hART

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Introduction

Big hART welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy.

For more than 35 years, Big hART has worked alongside communities across Australia to create ambitious, socially engaged arts projects grounded in place, participation and long-term relationship building. Across regional, remote and urban communities, our work has consistently demonstrated that culture is not simply an industry sector, nor solely a matter of presentation or consumption. Culture is a form of social infrastructure. It shapes belonging, participation, visibility, connection and the capacity of communities to imagine shared futures.

We welcome the continuation of the five pillars established through Revive and acknowledge the significant work undertaken through the current policy framework, particularly:

- Recognition of First Nations cultural leadership
- Strengthened national coordination through Creative Australia
- Recognition of artists as workers
- Investment in regional participation and touring
- Greater support for safer workplaces
- Recognition of culture as central to national life

At the same time, we believe the next phase of national cultural policy presents an opportunity to expand how culture is understood, valued and supported within Australian society.

Culture as Social Infrastructure

One of the most significant gaps in current cultural policy is the continued tendency to frame culture primarily as:

- an industry sector
- a funding category
- a presentation outcome
- or a professional pathway

Our experience over three decades suggests culture operates far more broadly. Culture functions as:

- social infrastructure
- preventative infrastructure
- community infrastructure
- civic infrastructure
- intergenerational infrastructure
- ecological infrastructure

In many communities, particularly regional communities, culture is embedded within:

- food systems
- storytelling
- music
- gathering
- environmental stewardship
- volunteering
- youth participation
- shared rituals
- local identity
- collective memory

The next National Cultural Policy should more explicitly recognise culture as an essential part of everyday civic life.

The Importance of Place-Based Cultural Practice

Many of the most transformative cultural outcomes emerge not through one-off presentations, but through:

- long-term relationships
- embedded local practice
- trust-building over time
- participation
- continuity
- community ownership

Regional communities are not simply recipients of metropolitan culture. Increasingly, regional Australia is:

- generating new cultural models
- driving interdisciplinary collaboration
- linking creativity with ecology, education and food systems
- creating hybrid forms of participation
- building local leadership through cultural practice

However, many place-based initiatives struggle within systems designed primarily around:

- institutions
- disciplines
- short-term project cycles
- measurable outputs over long-term outcomes

We encourage the Government to strengthen support for:

- long-term regional cultural development
- embedded artist development
- place-based participation models
- hybrid cultural initiatives that cross sectors
- community-led cultural ecosystems
- hybrid cultural initiatives that cross sectors

Participation as a Core Cultural Outcome

Participation itself must be recognised as a core cultural outcome.

Australia's cultural future will not be sustained through major institutions alone, but through the everyday cultural ecosystems that enable people to:

- gather
- create
- contribute
- collaborate
- belong

A child attending a music workshop, a volunteer helping deliver a regional festival, a young person participating in a skate and arts project, or a community member sharing knowledge through food and storytelling are all participating in the cultural life of the nation.

Importantly, participation should not simply be understood as audience access to finished work.

In socially engaged and community-based practice, the participatory process itself is often the primary cultural outcome.

The process of:

- gathering
- contributing
- collaborating
- listening
- making together

frequently generates deeper and longer-lasting impacts than presentation alone.

Current funding structures remain disproportionately weighted toward final presentation outcomes despite the substantial long-term social, civic and cultural value generated through:

- relationship-building
- co-creation
- participation
- local capacity building
- collaborative process

In many forms of community cultural development, process may constitute 80% of the cultural work, while final presentation outcomes represent only a small visible component.

Policy and funding structures should recognise and support this accordingly.

Cultural Justice and Visibility

Culture shapes who is visible within national life.

Nations are narrations. The stories a country platforms, preserves and participates in influence who belongs within it, whose experiences are recognised and whose voices remain excluded.

Cultural policy therefore cannot be understood solely as an investment framework for creative production. It is also a framework for:

- participation
- visibility
- belonging
- cultural justice

If large sections of the community remain absent from:

- cultural institutions
- collections
- stages
- funding systems
- decision-making structures

then cultural policy risks reinforcing exclusion rather than addressing it.

This is not only a question of representation within finished cultural content. It is also about who has the right and opportunity to participate meaningfully in cultural life.

The next National Cultural Policy should continue expanding pathways for:

- community participation
- local authorship
- emerging voices
- intergenerational exchange
- culturally safe participation
- regional leadership

First Nations First

We support the continuation of First Nations First as the foundational pillar of national cultural policy.

However, if this principle is to remain central, it must continue to be reflected through sustained structural investment and long-term capacity building.

In particular, the nationally significant network of Aboriginal Art Centres represents one of Australia's most important cultural infrastructures and should be recognised and resourced accordingly.

These centres are not simply arts organisations. They are:

- cultural knowledge systems
- economic infrastructures
- language and storytelling hubs
- intergenerational learning environments
- internationally significant cultural institutions

Long-term investment in First Nations cultural leadership and infrastructure should remain a national priority.

Case Studies from Big hART Practice

Songs for Freedom

Songs for Freedom demonstrates the role of music and storytelling in:

- social connection
- intercultural understanding
- collective memory
- community participation

The project created spaces where people could gather, share stories and contribute creatively regardless of professional artistic background.

Key insights:

- Participation often matters as much as artistic output
- Shared creative experiences build social cohesion
- Music remains one of the most accessible forms of cultural participation

Artisan

Artisan emerged as a place-based creative ecosystem model in regional Tasmania.

The project combines:

- arts participation
- social enterprise
- mentoring
- youth engagement
- creative pathways
- skills transfer

Importantly, Artisan demonstrates that cultural participation is deeply connected to:

- local economies
- community confidence
- intergenerational learning
- regional resilience

Artisan also highlights the importance of:

- informal creative spaces
- embedded artist mentorship
- long-term local investment
- hybrid cultural and social models

Skate of Mind

Skate / Skate on Mind demonstrates the importance of meeting young people within spaces they already inhabit culturally and socially.

The project combines:

- youth participation
- skate culture
- storytelling
- creativity
- wellbeing
- community connection

Key learnings include:

- Creative participation does not always begin in formal arts settings
- Informal cultural spaces are often highly effective engagement environments
- Youth-led participation creates stronger long-term engagement outcomes
- Culture and wellbeing are deeply interconnected

First Foods Workshops

Community food workshops and First Foods initiatives demonstrate the role of food as cultural practice.

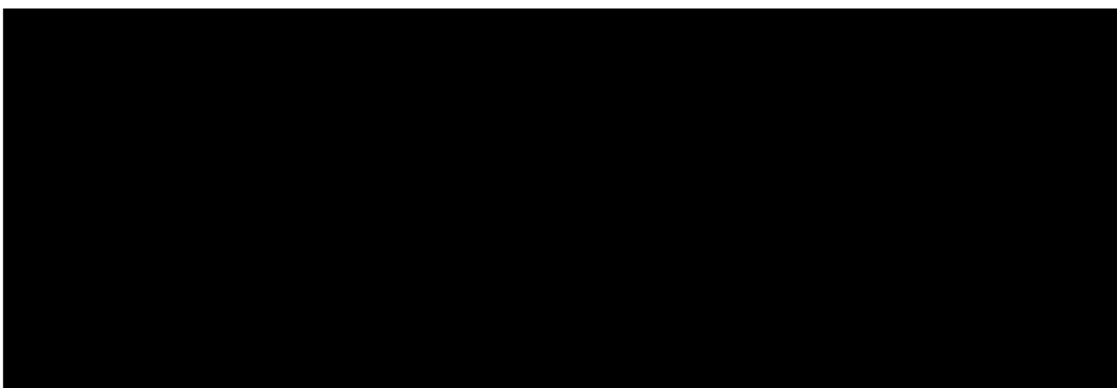
These projects combine:

- intergenerational exchange
- ecological knowledge
- cultural storytelling
- gathering
- participation
- local knowledge sharing

Importantly, these initiatives reveal how cultural participation often exists across multiple sectors simultaneously:

- arts
- environment
- education
- agriculture
- community wellbeing

Current policy structures can struggle to accommodate this kind of hybrid practice despite its significant social and cultural value.



Regional Artist Development

Big hART's regional artist development work demonstrates the importance of:

- local creative pathways
- mentoring
- embedded professional development
- community-based collaboration

Regional artists often face:

- geographic isolation
- reduced access to networks
- fewer long-term opportunities
- limited infrastructure

At the same time, regional communities frequently generate highly innovative cross-disciplinary cultural work precisely because artists are working in close relationship with:

- place
- community
- environment
- local industries
- social issues

The next National Cultural Policy should recognise regional practice not as peripheral, but as central to Australia's future cultural ecology.

Young People and Cultural Futures

Young people and children require stronger recognition within national cultural policy.

Without sustained investment in youth participation and arts access, Australia risks undermining future:

- audiences
- artists
- cultural workers
- participants
- creative leaders

Participation in culture during childhood and adolescence is not peripheral. It is foundational.

Cultural policy should support:

- early participation pathways
- accessible creative experiences
- youth-led cultural spaces
- regional youth engagement
- post-tertiary pathways for emerging artists

Across many communities, post-tertiary pathways remain extremely limited, particularly outside metropolitan centres. Emerging artists frequently face:

- geographic isolation
- unsustainable career conditions
- lack of mentoring
- limited long-term opportunities

The next National Cultural Policy should address these structural gaps more directly.

Expanding Definitions of Cultural Infrastructure

The next National Cultural Policy should broaden how cultural infrastructure is understood.

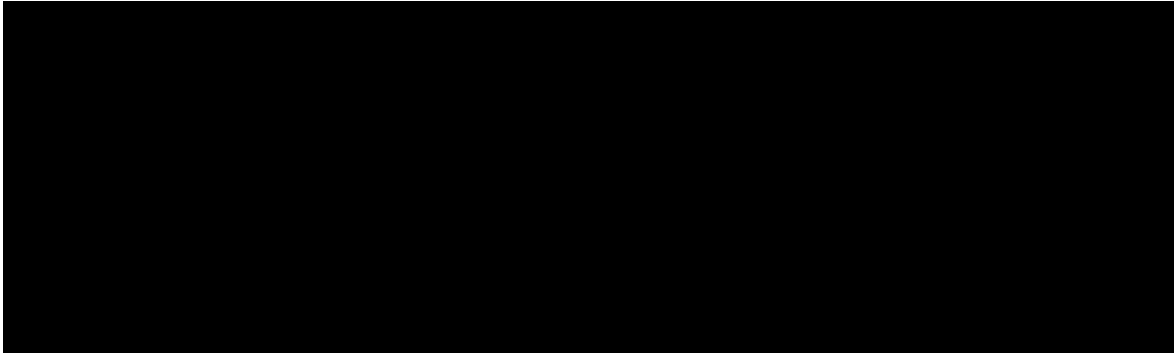
Cultural infrastructure is not limited to:

- galleries
- theatres
- museums
- major institutions

It also includes:

- neighbourhood halls
- libraries
- skate parks
- schools
- community kitchens
- farms
- regional venues
- informal gathering spaces
- volunteer networks
- temporary and pop-up spaces

These environments often enable some of the most meaningful forms of participation and connection.



Australia in its Region

Australia's future cultural policy should also recognise the importance of cultural diplomacy and regional cultural exchange.

Australia exists within a broader regional cultural ecology across the Pacific and Asia-Pacific region. Cultural relationships within our region should not be viewed as secondary to domestic cultural policy, but as essential to Australia's cultural future and international identity.

As a wealthy nation within a comparatively disadvantaged region, Australia has both an opportunity and responsibility to invest meaningfully in regional cultural exchange, collaboration and participation.

Long-term investment in cultural diplomacy can strengthen:

- mutual understanding
- regional partnerships
- creative exchange
- social cohesion
- Australia's role as a constructive regional partner

Cultural Structures and Systems

If Creative Australia is to remain Australia's peak cultural body, it must continue to be adequately resourced to provide strong national leadership.

Complex community-based and participatory cultural work cannot be sustained through short-term or under-resourced funding structures alone.

The next National Cultural Policy should:

- recognise the real cost of participatory cultural work
- support long-term relationship-based practice
- reduce cost shifting onto artists and organisations
- strengthen cross-government cultural collaboration
- support joined-up approaches across arts, health, education and community development

We also encourage consideration of renewed national cross-government cultural coordination mechanisms, including re-establishing stronger ministerial collaboration around cultural outcomes across portfolios.

Recommendations

We encourage the Government to:

1. Recognise culture as social infrastructure

Embed participation, belonging and community connection more centrally within cultural policy frameworks.

2. Strengthen support for place-based cultural ecosystems

Support long-term regional cultural development rather than primarily short-term project delivery.

3. Recognise participation as core cultural work

Ensure participatory and community-based process is recognised and funded as a legitimate cultural outcome.

4. Support hybrid and cross-sector practice

Create funding mechanisms supporting projects operating across:

- arts
- health
- food systems
- environment
- education
- community development

5. Strengthen support for young people and emerging artists

Invest in youth participation, regional pathways and post-tertiary artist development.

6. Expand definitions of cultural infrastructure

Recognise that meaningful cultural participation occurs across diverse formal and informal spaces.

7. Strengthen investment in First Nations cultural infrastructure

Support long-term capacity building and sustained investment in Aboriginal Art Centres and First Nations cultural leadership.

8. Measure cultural value more broadly

Ensure evaluation frameworks include:

- participation
- wellbeing
- belonging
- civic trust
- social cohesion
- cultural continuity

not economic contribution alone.

9. Support cultural diplomacy within Australia's region

Recognise regional cultural exchange and collaboration as essential to Australia's cultural future.

10. Fund cultural work at real cost

Ensure funding structures accurately reflect the labour, time and relationship-building required for complex community-based cultural work.

Conclusion

Australia's cultural future will depend not only on what we fund, but on what kinds of participation, relationships and cultural ecosystems we choose to sustain.

At its best, cultural policy does not simply support the production of creative work. It helps create the conditions for people to:

- participate in cultural life
- contribute to community
- build relationships
- share stories
- experience belonging

Culture is not only what we attend or consume.

It is how communities gather, remember, create and imagine shared futures.