



SUBMISSION TO THE

National Cultural Policy

Public Consultation 2026

Submitted by

Australian Network of Youth Orchestras (ANYO)

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About ANYO

The Australian Network of Youth Orchestras (ANYO) is national body representing Australia's state youth orchestras. Our member organisations, spanning every state and the ACT collectively engage over 4,775 young musicians annually, deliver 252,735 hours of orchestral training, employ 883 arts workers, and reach nearly 200,000 live audiences each year. ANYO's mission is to ensure every young Australian has access to transformative musical experiences. Critically, 98% of musicians in Australia's professional orchestras came through youth orchestra programs.

Executive Summary

ANYO welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy and commends the Government on its commitment to consecutive national cultural policies, a historic first for Australia. We offer this submission in a spirit of genuine partnership, and with a shared commitment to the cultural future of all Australians.

Our submission centres on four interconnected priorities that we believe require urgent and explicit attention in the next policy framework:

- Children's rights and access to the creative arts as a fundamental entitlement and the growing burden on families that, without adequate public investment, turns this right into a privilege of the financially secure;
- The acute risk facing youth arts organisations due to insecure venue access a structural vulnerability that threatens continuity of training and community participation;
- The absence of dedicated, direct funding for young artists within the current policy pillars, and the limits of relying on the education system to fill this gap, including the false equivalence between upskilling teachers and resourcing specialist youth arts practitioners;
- The imperative to invest in specialised youth arts organisations as the primary mechanism for identifying and nurturing the next generation of Australia's professional artists; and
- The profound and undervalued role that youth orchestras play in building social cohesion, bringing together young people across cultural, geographic and socioeconomic divides through the uniquely unifying experience of ensemble music-making.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story — Children's Right to the Creative Arts

Cultural participation is a right, not a reward

Australia has obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which recognises every child's right to participate fully in cultural and artistic life. Article 31 is unambiguous: children have the right to engage freely in cultural life and the arts. Yet for many Australian children, particularly those from regional areas, lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and government schools, meaningful access to sustained creative arts training remains out of reach.

ANYO's data illustrates both the opportunity and the challenge: 31% of our participants come from regional communities, and 45.5% attend government schools. We reach these young people because our member organisations are embedded in their communities and deliberately designed to reduce barriers. But we also know that without sustained policy investment, access remains uneven shaped by geography, income and the accident of what's available locally.

A critical and under-acknowledged dimension of this inequity is the growing financial burden placed on families. In the absence of adequate public investment in youth arts, the costs of participation and tuition, instrument hire and purchase, uniforms, travel and touring fall predominantly on families themselves. For many households this burden is already substantial; for marginalised families it is simply prohibitive. The result is a participation

landscape increasingly shaped by socioeconomic advantage: families with the means to invest in their children's arts education do so, while those without are quietly excluded. This is not a natural outcome it is a policy failure.

Without dedicated funding that enables youth arts organisations to actively recruit, support and retain young people from marginalised communities, through subsidised fees, instrument access programs, transport support, and targeted outreach the young people who stand to gain most from transformative arts experiences will continue to miss out. The talent pipeline that sustains Australia's professional arts sector will continue to draw disproportionately from the same narrow demographic cohorts, narrowing Australia's cultural future in ways that compound over generations. This is a loss that neither the arts sector nor the broader community can afford.

ANYO calls on the next National Cultural Policy to:

- Explicitly enshrine children's right to cultural participation as a foundational principle of the policy framework;
- Recognise that equitable access requires dedicated infrastructure and investment beyond what any single sector or institution can provide;
- Acknowledge youth arts organisations as a primary vehicle for delivering this right at scale, with reach into communities that formal education systems and professional arts institutions do not consistently serve.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure - The Venue Crisis Facing Youth Arts

Insecure venues place youth arts organisations at existential risk

Cultural infrastructure policy discussions frequently focus on the sustainability of flagship institutions, concert halls, galleries, theatres, with comparatively little attention given to the infrastructure needs of the organisations that train the people who will one day populate those institutions. This is a significant gap in current policy thinking.

Across Australia, youth arts organisations including ANYO's member orchestras operate without secure, purpose-fit rehearsal and performance venues. Many rely on short-term agreements with schools, universities, community halls, or cultural institutions whose own priorities and funding pressures can result in sudden displacement. The consequences are severe: disrupted programs, loss of community trust, inability to plan ahead, and in some cases, the collapse of programs that have taken decades to build.

Orchestral training in particular demands consistent access to acoustically appropriate spaces large enough to accommodate full ensemble rehearsals. This is not a minor operational preference, it is a fundamental requirement for delivering quality music education. The absence of secure, fit-for-purpose venues is one of the greatest structural vulnerabilities facing the youth orchestral sector today.

ANYO recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Develop a national audit of venue access needs for youth arts and training organisations;
- Explore mechanisms for youth arts organisations to access existing publicly funded venues on secure, affordable, and long-term terms;

- Establish funding streams or infrastructure partnerships that reduce the vulnerability of youth arts programs to venue displacement;
- Consider capital investment pathways for organisations where venue insecurity is demonstrably limiting their capacity to deliver.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist — The Funding Gap for Young Artists

The education system cannot substitute for dedicated arts investment

Across the five pillars of both Revive and the proposed framework for its successor, young artists and the organisations that develop them remain largely absent as a distinct focus. The implicit assumption appears to be that the education system provides for the early development of creative talent, while the professional sector picks up from tertiary study onward. This assumption is flawed, and its consequences for Australia's cultural future are significant.

Schools deliver arts education within a curriculum framework designed primarily around assessment outcomes. The goal is broad exposure and measured attainment, not the deep, sustained, vocationally oriented training that develops a young person's identity as an artist and their desire to pursue a life in the creative sector. These are fundamentally different objectives, and no curriculum, however well-designed, can substitute for the latter.

The gap is most acute for art forms that sit entirely or largely outside the school curriculum. Orchestral and instrumental music at an advanced level, classical dance, and numerous other disciplines require intensive, specialist training environments. Where these art forms are offered in schools at all, it is rarely at the depth or standard required to develop professional-pathway readiness. For many students, ANYO member orchestras are the only environment in which they can develop at the level required to ultimately enter the professional sector.

We note the focus on skilling teachers as a mechanism for expanding arts education in schools. ANYO supports this investment but urges the Government to understand its limits. Teacher upskilling operates within a curriculum framework: it improves the delivery of assessed learning outcomes in designated subjects. It does not, and cannot, replicate what youth arts organisations provide. Youth arts is not a school program delivered by generalist teachers receiving additional training, it is specialist practice delivered by working artists at the highest levels of their fields. The musicians, conductors, tutors and artistic teams who lead ANYO's programs are among Australia's most accomplished performers and educators. They do not require upskilling. They require the organisational infrastructure, funding security, and policy recognition that would allow them to do what they are already expert at doing.

Youth arts organisations also provide something the classroom cannot: a safe, non-assessable, artistically serious space in which young people are free to take risks, develop their own creative voice, and grow not just as musicians or performers, but as human beings. The value of this environment, structured by professional artists who understand both artistic excellence and the developmental needs of young people is immeasurable, and it is entirely distinct from what a curriculum-based setting can offer, however well-resourced it may be.

Without direct policy recognition and investment in young artists as a distinct cohort, separate from both school arts education and professional artist support, we are relying on a structural gap being filled by organisations whose funding base does not reflect the centrality of what they do.

ANYO recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Explicitly name young artists (broadly defined, pre-tertiary to early career) as a distinct investment priority within Pillar 3;
- Develop a dedicated funding stream for organisations providing sustained, structured community based pre-professional arts training that sits outside the school curriculum;
- Recognise the education system and the youth arts sector as complementary but non-interchangeable and fund accordingly;
- Commission research into the value, reach and economic contribution of pre-professional arts training organisations as a prerequisite for evidence-based investment.

Pillars 3 & 4: The Pipeline Imperative — Early Training and Sector Sustainability

Professional artistry begins in childhood, not at conservatorium

For many of Australia's most demanding art forms, instrumental music, dance, opera/singing, and others professional readiness cannot be achieved through tertiary training alone. Serious instrumental study typically begins in early primary school years. By the time a young musician reaches conservatorium, they will have accumulated a decade or more of structured practice and ensemble experience. The same is true of dance, where physical technique must be developed during the years of greatest physiological plasticity.

This means that the organisations responsible for identifying, nurturing and retaining young people with the potential to become professional artists are not conservatoriums or universities, they are youth arts organisations. ANYO's member orchestras serve precisely this function. Our programs are the talent pipeline for Australia's professional orchestral sector. The statistic that 98% of musicians in Australia's professional orchestras came through a youth orchestra program is not incidental. It reflects the structural role that youth orchestras play in the pipeline for the professional sector itself.

Beyond technical development, youth arts organisations perform another critical function: they cultivate the desire to pursue a life in the arts. They are the environments in which young people discover that a creative career is possible, that their talent is valued, and that the arts is a sector worth dedicating their lives to. This motivational and aspirational function is no less important than the technical one, and it too falls outside the scope of what curriculum-based arts education can consistently deliver.

ANYO recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Formally recognise youth arts organisations as a critical component of Australia's cultural infrastructure, with a specific role in the long-term sustainability of the professional arts sector;
- Establish dedicated, recurrent investment for the pre-professional training pipeline, proportionate to the role these organisations play in sustaining Australia's creative workforce;
- Develop policy mechanisms that explicitly bridge the gap between early arts training and professional pathways, including support for regional access to pre-professional programs;

- Ensure that investment in the professional arts sector is understood in the context of the pipeline that feeds it and that the funding architecture reflects this interdependency.

Pillar 2 & 5: Social Cohesion and the Role of Youth Orchestras in Community Life

Orchestras build the social fabric, not just the artistic one

The consultation paper rightly identifies that cultural participation is linked to stronger communities, better mental health and higher civic trust. ANYO submits that youth orchestras are among the most powerful and underutilised instruments of social cohesion available to Australian cultural policy. The ensemble is, by its very nature, a model of interdependence: every musician, regardless of background, instrument or experience level, is indispensable to the collective. No other art form so viscerally teaches young people that individual contribution and collective success are inseparable and that listening to others is as important as being heard.

ANYO's member orchestras bring together young people from vastly different schools, suburbs, cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic circumstances who would rarely otherwise share a sustained, collaborative experience. A young musician from a regional government school sits beside a peer from a metropolitan private school. A student from a migrant family rehearses alongside a young person from a multigenerational Australian household. A child navigating personal hardship finds belonging in the disciplined warmth of an ensemble working toward a shared artistic goal. These encounters repeated week after week across a season build the kinds of relationships, mutual respect, and cross-community understanding that no curriculum unit on civics or diversity can replicate.

The social cohesion value of youth orchestras extends beyond the musicians themselves. Live orchestral performance by young people, for communities is a powerful act of civic participation. It invites families, schools, and local communities into shared cultural experiences that are too often perceived as exclusive or inaccessible. When a youth orchestra performs in a regional town, a suburban community hall, or a school auditorium, it does not just present music: it asserts that this art form belongs here, that these young people belong here, and that culture is not something that happens elsewhere, to other people. With nearly 200,000 live audience members reached by ANYO members annually, the civic footprint of youth orchestras is substantial and largely invisible to current policy frameworks.

Research consistently demonstrates the correlation between sustained engagement in structured group music-making and improved mental health outcomes, increased school attendance, reduced social isolation, and stronger sense of identity and belonging benefits that are amplified for young people experiencing disadvantage. Youth orchestras do not merely produce musicians; they produce young people who are more resilient, more connected, and more capable of contributing to the communities they will go on to inhabit and lead. This is precisely the kind of long-term, upstream investment in social wellbeing that national cultural policy is uniquely positioned to enable.

ANYO recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Explicitly recognise youth arts organisations as contributors to social cohesion and community wellbeing, not just artistic or cultural outcomes, and reflect this in how their value is measured and funded;

- Support investment in youth orchestral touring and community performance programs as tools of civic engagement and regional participation, not solely as artistic development;
- Commission cross-portfolio research into the social wellbeing outcomes of sustained youth arts participation, drawing on health, education and social cohesion evidence bases alongside arts-specific data;
- Explore coordination across the arts, health, education and social services portfolios to better capture and support the community wellbeing contributions of youth orchestras and similar organisations.








Conclusion

Australia's next National Cultural Policy has an historic opportunity to articulate a genuinely long-term vision for the nation's cultural life, one that extends beyond the current generation of professional practitioners to the young Australians who will define the decades ahead. ANYO respectfully submits that this will only be achieved if the policy framework explicitly and substantively addresses the needs of young artists and the organisations dedicated to their development.

The issues we have raised in this submission; children's rights, the financial exclusion of marginalised families, venue security, the limits of education-system reliance, the distinct expertise of youth arts practitioners, the social cohesion power of orchestral participation, and the imperative of early, specialised training, are not peripheral concerns. They are foundational to Australia's cultural sustainability. Without investment in the early stages of an artist's journey, no amount of investment in the professional sector will be sufficient to sustain it.

ANYO welcomes further dialogue with the Government and the Office for the Arts on any aspect of this submission. We are committed partners in building the cultural policy framework that Australia's young people deserve.

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