NEW NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY | SUBMISSION May 2026

INTRODUCTION

Sydney Dance Company welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the new National Cultural Policy.

We are committed to supporting the Government to build on its landmark *National Cultural Policy – Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place* (*Revive*). However, we would suggest, to fully reach its ambition, additional targeted initiatives are required in this next National Cultural Policy.

Cultural and creative activities help build community, belonging and trust, while enhancing empathy and inclusion, as most recently highlighted through research from A New Approach. These activities also help combat loneliness and isolation, support individuals and communities in recovering from disasters and trauma, and make cities, suburbs and regions more liveable. Live performance provides opportunities to connect with others and socialise, and to create shared experiences with a breadth of our community. They also are a practical approach for sharing stories and developing an understanding about different lived experiences.

However, the broader performing arts sector and all its workers, including Sydney Dance Company, continues to be impacted by a combination of forces beyond our control – including significantly higher costs, particularly in travel and production; critical skill shortages; reduced budgets for presenters or festivals to program works; and the sustainability of careers in the sector.

In addition to these factors, attendance at live performances in Australia is heavily constrained by cost-of-living pressures. Many audience members are scaling back, making decisions much closer to the date of the event, and/or seeking free, low-cost, or localised events.

These impacts have been amplified by, in real terms, flat or decreasing Government investment at all levels – Federal, State and Local. Recent research indicates that although Australia's population increased by 27% between 2007–08 and 2023–24, cultural expenditure over that time only increased by 19%. This represents a significant decrease in the investment in this vital societal lever. Despite Australia being a culturally active country, it is currently ranked 23 out of 34 OECD countries for expenditure on culture, recreation and religion, with the average expenditure 1.23% of total GDP while the Australian figure is only 0.95%.

These combined factors are having an immediate negative impact as well as weakening the foundations of Australia’s cultural life for future generations, reducing the benefit of the arts as a means to build community.

Arts companies are increasingly needing to be more risk averse, often focusing on smaller-scale productions; reducing their range of offerings; and employing fewer artists and arts workers. Technical skill shortages risk best-practice show delivery and safety, and high-quality audience experience. Fewer new works can be commissioned, and there is less ability to invest in vital sector development and training.

For example, in 2026, due to these combined forces, Sydney Dance Company has reduced its number of Sydney seasons, impacting opportunities for audiences, artists and arts workers. Commissioning of new works, and the ambition and scale of those works, including the engagement of artists from other parts of the creative sector, is also being negatively affected. Vital training and career development programs, including for Australian creatives, are being cut due to financial sustainability. Due to increased touring costs, Sydney Dance Company now has reduced its annual national and regional presence by approximately one third, with likely longer-term impacts on more geographically dispersed areas. Recent geopolitical events have exacerbated this impact, with committed touring also now at risk given additional increases to freight and travel costs, driven by increasing fuel costs. Participatory workshops engaging the wider community are also increasingly now only available on a fee-for-service model, reaching only those who can afford to attend.

The opportunities outlined in this submission provide solutions for these issues.

We also endorse the recommendations in the submissions from Live Performance Australia (LPA), the Network of National Dance Organisations (NoNDO), the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework (NPAPF) organisations, and the Blak Futures Collective and First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network (FNPAC).

SYDNEY DANCE COMPANY

OPPORTUNITIES | SUMMARY

The New Cultural Policy should

Pillar One: First Nations First

From the Blak Futures Collective and First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network submission:

1. Sustainably support, develop and recognise the entire First Nations performing arts workforce system.
2. Provide dedicated investment for a First Nations performing arts commissioning system.
3. Ensure appropriate resourcing and recognition of requirements to fully support cultural governance and ICIP Infrastructure.
4. Support national touring and international exchange systems which reflect First Nations cultural practice and systems.
5. Ensure culturally informed pathways to long term sustainability for First Nations artists, arts workers and organisations.
6. Embed First Nations led cross-Government alignment.

Pillar Two: A Place for Every Story

7. Introduce a 40% Live Performance Production Incentive for commercial and not-for-profit producers.

Pillar Three: Centrality of the Artist (and Arts worker)

8. Support nation-wide industry-led training initiatives to address identified skills shortages across the arts and cultural sector.

Pillar Four: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

9. Enhance the overall level of investment in the sector, structured for long term sustainability.
10. Empower a coordinated national approach to policy development and funding across federal, state and local jurisdictions, and across portfolios.
11. Commit to a more ambitious arts philanthropy framework, incentivising increased private support for arts and culture.

Pillar Five: Engaging the Audience

12. Develop a Cross-Government, longitudinal and dedicated Arts Access Program for schools.
13. Endorse and commit to providing a federal Government—funded Cultural Pass for 13–25-year-olds.
14. Significantly increase support for Australian live performance companies and creatives to tour internationally.
15. Expand investment that supports live performance touring across Australia.

ABOUT SYDNEY DANCE COMPANY

Based on Gadigal Land at Sydney's Walsh Bay Arts Precinct, Sydney Dance Company is Australia's leading contemporary dance company. Employing a full-time ensemble of 17 dancers, the Company's international reputation celebrates contemporary Australia, connecting with diverse audiences locally, nationally and worldwide under the artistic direction of Rafael Bonachela. Sydney Dance Company is also a place of learning, encouraging engagement and participation through Australia's largest public dance program, together with a range of education and development programs, including in our role as a Registered Training Organisation (#45863), nurturing Australian talent and providing exposure to international opportunities.

In 2025, Sydney Dance Company performances, workshops and classes had over 156,000 attendances, reaching people from Hobart to Helsinki. We commissioned 11 new world premieres, and showcased works by 21 choreographers and dancemakers, including four First Nations artists. We engaged with communities in 22 locations across four Australian states and five countries, and delivered nearly 230 education workshops in Sydney, Western Sydney and across Australia. Our accredited training programs expanded to include a new Dance Teacher Training Course, and we collaborated with the Sydney Conservatorium of Music to create innovative training for emerging choreographers and composers.

Approximately 70% of our income is self-generated through performances, classes, philanthropy and other partnerships. The remaining 30% of our income reflects the combined investment from the Federal and the NSW Government as part of the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework.

Pillar One: First Nations First

Sydney Dance Company supports the specific opportunities outlined in the submission of the **Blak Futures Collective and First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network** – acknowledging their cultural authority and expertise in articulating the First Nations performing arts priorities in Australia.

As identified in that submission, First Nations cultural governance, workforce development international exchange and cultural continuity must operate as integrated principles across all pillars of the next National Cultural policy, rather than as isolated initiatives.

To fully realise *Revive* and *Closing the Gap* commitments, **the new National Cultural policy should:**

1. **Sustainably support, develop and recognise the entire First Nations performing arts workforce system.**
2. **Provide dedicated investment for a First Nations performing arts commissioning system.**
3. **Ensure appropriate resourcing and recognition of requirements to fully support cultural governance and ICIP Infrastructure.**
4. **Support national touring and international exchange systems which reflect First Nations cultural practice and systems.**
5. **Ensure culturally informed pathways to long term sustainability for First Nations artists, arts workers and organisations.**
6. **Embed First Nations led cross-Government alignment.**

Pillar Two: A Place for Every Story

The new National Cultural policy should:

7. **Introduce a 40% Live Performance Production Incentive for commercial and not-for-profit producers to attract investment in a globally competitive market, supporting the development of new works in Australia across dance, ballet, and other live performance.**

   This critical investment in Australian live performance across the commercial and not-for-profit sectors offers a 40 per cent offset on qualifying production costs. It would be applied as a tax offset for taxpaying entities, or as a rebate for not-for-profit companies such as Sydney Dance Company. Rebates or offsets would only be realised on eligible production-related spend, ensuring the benefits flow directly to the industry and are tied to tangible creative output.

   This initiative would amplify Sydney Dance Company's ability to commission and create new work, enhancing opportunities for Australian artists, story tellers and arts workers. This new work is reflective of contemporary Australia, with community members able to connect with and see themselves and their experiences on Australian stages. Through organisations like Sydney Dance Company, this work then frequently goes on to tour nationally and internationally, reaching audiences across multiple years beyond its initial premiere, longitudinally expanding the impact of the initiative.

   Following the Creative Industries Tax Summit in September 2025, this high impact initiative is understood to be supported by all State Governments.

   International case studies highlight the significant benefit of this proposal for the nation's performing arts sector. As one example, the UK Government's Theatre Tax Relief (TTR) has driven over £163 million in investment, supporting hundreds of new productions annually. Live Performance Australia modelling of a 40% incentive anticipates it would create 4,000+ new jobs, add over $1.5 billion in economic activity, and estimates it would support an additional 160 new productions each year in Australia.

   PRIORITY

Pillar Three: Centrality of the Artist (and Arts worker)

The new National Cultural policy should:

8. **Support nation-wide industry-led training initiatives to address identified skills shortages across the arts and cultural sector, particularly in technical and production areas.**

   The recent Creative Workforce Scoping Study conducted by Service and Creative Skills Australia (SaCSA) articulates that Australia's creative industries are facing critical workforce and skills shortages, particularly for technical and production employees exasperated by precarious work conditions, a disconnect between formal education and industry needs, low wages and overwork.

   It highlighted the need for new or re-invigorated initiatives in the performing arts to strengthen support for industry-led on-the-job mentoring and traineeships to address identified skills gaps and ongoing workforce resilience. The ANZCO classifications also should be reviewed to sufficiently capture performing arts producing roles (such as Executive Producers, Producers and Assistant Producers), bringing this into alignment with screen producers and ensuring that the Occupation Shortage List (OSL) accurately captures all workforce supply gaps.

   The recent Production Workforce Training initiative through Creative Australia could provide guidance for future longer-term programs. Through this once-off investment, Sydney Dance Company and Dance Makers' Collective (New South Wales) provided on-the-job training programs for three trainees across metropolitan and regional dance performances in multiple venues and formats. These emerging arts workers are now employed in the sector, utilising technical and touring skills learnt.

Pillar Four: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The new National Cultural policy should:

9. **Enhance the overall level of investment in the sector, structured for long term sustainability.** This would allow for rebuilding of capability within the sector, organisational stability and vitality, and the crucial scaffold to support the ongoing development of artists and artform.

   With federal per capita arts and culture expenditure in 2023 being the lowest on record at $114, there is a clear and urgent need for increased investment to achieve the ambitions of the National Cultural Policy.

   This increase should include a step change in the level of overall investment that:
   - reflects the current increased cost base impacting all arts organisations and individual artists;
   - acknowledges the recent broadening of criteria applied to many funding schemes and increases funding pools to avoid unintended reduced investment for existing activities and organisations;
   - enables individuals and organisations, including multi-year funded organisations, to seek strategic project funding which specifically supports the new Cultural Policy. This should include research and commissioning funds for unique work of ambition, complementing and amplifying the impact and specific remit of the *Creative Futures Fund*.

   In addition, to be sustainable, Government funding must structurally keep pace ongoing with rising expenses, rather than being indexed at less than CPI. The sector cannot meet the objectives of *Revive* or a new Cultural Policy with partially indexed funding from government, which is a decline in real terms. This damages the ability to maintain standards, employ artists and arts workers, maintain infrastructure, invest in new work, and keep ticket prices affordable and audiences who are representative of the whole community.
   - As an example, core Creative Australia funding for Sydney Dance Company has increased an average of 2.6% year-on-year between 2021-25, with the increase to 2026 being 1.8%. This compares to an overall average Australian CPI increase of 4.5% 2021-25, with significant increases predicted to year-end 2026. Touring funding has remained relatively stagnant, with cost increases impacting regional, national and international touring reaching over 20% in some areas. This has meant that the reach of our touring activities has had to be cut by approximately one third to ensure ongoing financial sustainability, limiting reach and engagement with the Australian community.

10. **Empower a coordinated national approach to policy development and funding across federal, state and local jurisdictions, and across portfolios (e.g. Health, Education, Trade, Investment).**

International and Australian research confirms that arts and culture have direct, positive impacts on cohesion, health, sustainability, security and prosperity. Providing access to arts and culture for all Australians, whoever they are and wherever they live, is not simply a matter for the arts portfolio. This is a critical whole-of-government responsibility.

There is a depth of research highlighting the positive impact that dance, for example, has on physical and mental health. A recent 2024 University of Sydney study concluded that undertaking structured dance of any genre is generally equal to and occasionally more effective than other types of physical activity for improving a range of psychological and cognitive outcomes, including emotional well-being, depression, motivation, social cognition, and some aspects of memory. These findings were not just seen in older adults, but also younger populations and people with clinical conditions.

Unlocking this power of the performing arts to support other policy areas will require creating real mechanisms designed to broker cross-portfolio connections – with structured opportunities to unleash additional investment. For example, this could include recognising Arts and Culture as an eligible sector under the National Reconstruction Fund and Industry Growth Program, enabling enhanced research and development in the arts.

This could also be facilitated by elevating the existing meeting of Cultural Ministers to a formalised Ministerial Council, reporting annually to National Cabinet, as suggested by A New Approach. This would provide a functional and transformative step to give higher priority to the nation's cultural needs and ambitions. Crucially, this new Ministerial Council should be tasked with developing an intergovernmental non-partisan plan for long-term collaboration.

11. **Commit to a more ambitious arts philanthropy framework, incentivising increased private support for arts and culture,** specifically to
    - Increase tax deductible donations to 1.5x the amount of the gift.
    - Expand matched funding programs to increase donations.

Private sector income cannot be viewed as a replacement for the ongoing investment from all layers of Government. However, philanthropic support - ranging from individual donations, to trusts and foundations, to private ancillary funds (PAFs) - is increasingly required to bridge the gap in constrained public funding, providing the necessary resources to create high-quality work. Philanthropy can also play a critical and transformative role for organisations and independent artists - acting as a catalyst for innovation, risk-taking, and financial stability. Approximately 30% of Sydney Dance Company's income is through philanthropy and corporate partnerships, with this requirement only growing into the future.

Revive identified the need to promote philanthropic giving. However, more work is needed to meet the Australian Government's commitment to double giving by 2030. The Productivity Commission noted that, while the total value of donations has increased over recent decades, fewer people are claiming a tax deduction for giving. Australia's giving also compares unfavourably with our global counterparts - Australian giving equates to 0.81% of GDP, in comparison to New Zealand (1.84%) and the United States (2.1%).

Individuals are less likely to give if the financial incentive they receive is too weak. Currently, donors can claim back the exact amount that they gift to a DGR entity. Allowing them to claim a deduction of 1.5x the donation amount would incentivise donations. This model has been successfully implemented in Singapore, where individuals receive $2.5 deductions from their taxable income for every $1 donated.

Matched funding schemes amplify individual contributions to create a more substantial collective impact. It adds legitimacy to the fundraising campaign, and gives donors a compelling reason to give, knowing their contribution will be matched and maximised. Proven benefits of matched schemes include increasing donation amounts; building stronger relationships with major donors; expanding the donor base, particularly smaller donors; making the 'ask' easier; and boosting visibility and attracting media coverage. Existing programs like Plus1, MATCH Lab, and ACF Boost (all administered by Creative Australia) could be used as models on which to expand further.

A model such as the UK's Gift Aid program for arts and cultural organisations with DGR status could also be considered. Under this model, for every donation made to a registered DGR status arts and cultural organisation, the Australian Government would directly contribute an additional percentage to the organisation. Gift Aid has successfully increased giving in the UK, with half of donors utilising it and cultural charities gaining substantial benefit. In Australia, a similar rebate could assist arts organisations who struggle to attract large volumes of donations, encourage donors at all levels through immediately boosting the impact of every donation and create a compelling message to galvanise more giving.

Pillar Five: Engaging the Audience

The New Cultural policy should

12. Develop a Cross-Government, longitudinal and dedicated Arts Access Program for schools.

A growing body of international and Australian research demonstrates the multiple benefits of an arts-rich education. As highlighted by the National Advocates for Arts Education, over and above development of individual creativity and self-expression, school-based arts participation increases learners' confidence and motivation, thereby improving school attendance rates, academic outcomes and the well-being and life skills of children and young people. Benefits include achievements in reading, language and mathematics development, increased higher order thinking skills and capacities, greater motivation to learn, and improvements in social behaviours.

Specifically, dancing assists children to self-regulate which develops spatial awareness, essential for moving safely in their environment. Experimenting with a broad range of movements improves balance which supports concentration and learning skills. Using imagination to create movements or when recalling a set of steps prepares a child's body for quick responses and uses cognitive skills related to reasoning, decision-making, problem solving, and thinking.

Sydney Dance Company is proud to run a range of programs to engage children, young people and students through the power of dance – such as school matinees, education and holiday workshops, youth ensembles – both in Sydney and across Australia.

At a time of converging social, economic and environmental crises, and a widening divide between disadvantage and privilege, arts education must support equitable opportunities for everyone to participate. However, the combination of pressure on school budgets and performing company budgets now mean that these programs are increasingly being reduced, cut altogether, or are only available to communities who can afford costly fee-for-service models. Where possible, additional private sector support can occasionally be secured in the short-term to reduce financial barriers to participation. However, this need is far wider than this philanthropic support can sustainably address, with schools unable to afford even minimal ticket costs or fee-for-service pricing. This is exacerbated by additional ancillary costs such as transport and substitute teachers to support attendance at events. As a result, these opportunities are often only available to those who can afford to pay, increasing disadvantage and inequity.

An Arts Access Program could, for example be used to support opportunities such as, but not limited to, artist-in-residence programs; workshops with teaching artists; or access requirements for schools to attend performances. The Cultural School Bag (Norway) could provide an international benchmark to emulate – with this program giving all students the opportunity to experience, become familiar with, and develop an understanding of high quality professional artistic and cultural expressions.

"Our students don't have opportunities that most other students have. Not one of our students are able to access after school or weekend sport or hobbies, so we feel a huge need for us to provide chances for them to experience these things. Your outreach education gives some equity and joy to our students that is desperately needed and valued."

Principal, Regional NSW Public School

SYDNEY DANCE COMPANY

13. Endorse and commit to providing a federal Government—funded Cultural Pass for 13–25-year-olds.

Despite proven interest, attendance at live performances in Australia is heavily constrained by cost-of-living pressures - 59% of young people (16-25) and over half of the general population have identified expense as the primary barrier.

A Cultural pass would support significantly discounted or free access to arts and cultural live performances and participatory workshop experiences, without impacting financial sustainability for organisations.

Successful overseas examples of a Culture Pass have been rolled out in Italy, Germany and France, providing between €100 to €500 to young people to use across cultural events and products; in France, 41% of these funds have been used for live performances.

14. Significantly increase support for Australian live performance companies and creatives to tour internationally, supporting cultural diplomacy outcomes and showcasing Australian talent on the world-stage.

Sydney Dance Company is proud to tour works by Australian creatives to communities from London to Singapore, with new and diverse Australian voices reaching international audiences. This investment in the export of Australian performance and artist exchange into international markets has both cultural and economic relevance. It expands the power of valuable soft diplomacy across multiple jurisdictions, as well as meeting demonstrable market demand, particularly in Europe and the Americas. Ongoing feedback from international posts also highlights the value of the performing arts in cultural diplomacy.

Dance, in all its forms, fosters an inclusive, equitable and diverse society. It has the capacity to tell "story" like no other medium - not always a narrative, its transcendent qualities – beyond the verbal and intellectual and through the body – are inarguably its greatest power. In an analogous manner to our world-class sporting teams, international touring showcases our unique and high-quality talents in choreography, dance and creative prowess on global stages.

However, because of increasing travel costs from Australia, and our cost-competitiveness compared to other international peers, Sydney Dance Company and other high quality Australian companies are currently unable to accept invitations to some of the world's most prestigious festivals and venues.

Foundational DFAT programs such as the Australian Cultural Diplomacy Grants Program (ACDGP) are significantly over-subscribed and individual grants are still limited to pre-pandemic levels. This severely impacts performing arts international touring viability, particularly for works with a larger cast or requiring freight.

Where available, funding parameters and timelines are often asynchronous with confirmation of presentation arrangements, leading to lost opportunities or significant risk being borne by touring artists and organisations. Unpredictable geopolitical, climate and other disruptions can also add significant costs at short notice, beyond secured investment envelopes.

Whilst there has been a welcome shift in Creative Australia programs which support international touring for live performance, greater investment and program responsiveness is required to keep up with escalating international travel costs and evolving global touring opportunities and challenges.

"Sydney Dance Company is one of the most interesting creative dance companies in the world. The quality of the dancers is really extraordinary. They always come with wonderful choreographic works that we usually don't see in Europe in this quality and this energy",
Programming Advisor, Theatre National de Chaillot, Paris (2022)

"We are here to look after the overall relationship between Australia and the United States. We foster political, military, economic and commercial relationships. What you [Sydney Dance Company] do is something none of us can do as diplomats and touches people's hearts and souls. What you do fills this enormous piece in the canvas that we can't fill."
Former Australian Ambassador to the USA (2024)

15. Expand investment that supports live performance touring across Australia, specifically:
- Doubling investment in Playing Australia for touring focused in regional and remote Australia;
- Amplifying this investment with complementary touring funds for companies and artists to showcase their work nationally in larger metropolitan centres;
- Developing targeted support for new ways of engagement between producing companies, presenting venues, and local communities. These could include: green-touring initiatives; skills sharing initiatives; new audience development strategies; new programming models which combine workshops, engagement with local artists, and performances over longer periods; expanding funding program remits to support touring of performances into regional schools; a “go see” fund to enable presenters to see new work created regionally and nationally; collaborative engagements which support the development of new work outside of metropolitan centres; and/or use of non-traditional venues and spaces.

Sydney Dance Company proudly tours internationally acclaimed contemporary dance works across all Australian states and territories, including locations from Ballarat to Brisbane, Leeton to Launceston, and Albany to Alice Springs. We work in partnership with national and regional presenters to engage their communities with performances and in participatory workshops.

These tours deliver opportunities for communities across Australia to engage with a diversity of artforms, complementing the vital and unique offerings from local artists, driving equity and place-based activation. Performances delivered in collaboration with local venues provide direct employment and skills development for local cultural sector workers. In addition, regional inbound touring further stimulates local economies through engaging with local accommodation and hospitality businesses.

The current regional and national touring model is under intense pressure, substantially reducing the ability for companies, such as Sydney Dance Company, to connect with audiences across all parts of Australia.
- Producing companies have faced, and continue to experience, significant increases in the costs of touring. These are no longer able to be covered by stagnant Government touring funding envelopes;
- Fees payable by regional, metropolitan, and international presenting venues have been reduced due to their own increased costs of operating and revenue pressures, adding to the gap between touring and broader operating costs for producing companies and available funding.

These pressures can be resolved through the updated proposed approach to investment, which reflects real growth in costs and ensures funding models continue to be fit-for-purpose for evolving regional community needs, sustainable touring models, and audience and artistic development requirements.

In conclusion, Sydney Dance Company believes the initiatives outlined in this submission will strengthen the impact of the sector locally and nationally, amplifying and leveraging the strengths of internationally acclaimed Australian companies such as Sydney Dance Company. This will, vitally, provide meaningful benefits to Australian artists, arts workers and audiences, improving access to the performing arts for all Australians, and ensuring the performing arts remain one of Australia’s most vibrant and important contributors to Australian society.