NSW & ACT
PERFORMING ARTS CENTRES
ASSOCIATION INC

Submission to Australia's New National Cultural Policy

NSW & ACT PERFORMING ARTS CENTRES ASSOCIATION INC - NAPACA

NAPACA is the peak member-based body representing professionally managed performing arts centres across metropolitan, outer-metropolitan, and regional New South Wales and ACT. Our members are predominantly owned and operated by local governments and are deeply embedded civic, cultural, and economic assets in their communities.

- 34 Performing Arts Centres
- 65% are regional based / 35% metro
- NSW local government invested $555.4 million in arts and culture in 2021-22[1], an increase of 11% per capita since 2007. This contrasts with an increase of only 3.9% per capita spending from state and territory governments, while the federal government's per capita expenditure has fallen by 18.9%.[2]

Compared to other tiers of government, local governments are carrying a growing share of responsibility for arts and culture.

NAPACA members strongly support the development of a new National Cultural Policy that builds on the achievements of Revive while addressing ongoing structural challenges facing the performing arts ecosystem—particularly those experienced by presenters, venues, and local government partners.

[1] Australian Government, *Cultural Funding by Government: 2021–22 Overview*, Office for the Arts
[2] ANA Insight Report (2024), The Big Picture 4: Expenditure on artistic, cultural and creative activity by governments in Australia in 2007–08 to 2021–22

Performing Arts Centres - more than venues

Performing arts venues are not simply "touring stops"; they are year-round cultural hubs that present, produce, develop, and nurture artistic work while building and maintaining relationships with audiences. They play a vital role in supporting Australian artists, creating pathways for creative careers, and providing access to culture for communities that may otherwise be underserved.

Our network of venues delivers substantial public value—socially, culturally, and economically—yet this role is currently under-recognised in national policy settings and funding mechanisms, which tend to prioritise artist and production over presentation and audience development embedded in local communities.

Key Emerging Priorities

NAPACA members face four intersecting priorities that the new National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to address:

1. **Workforce shortages** – Performing arts centres are struggling to attract and retain skilled technical and production staff. National workforce strategies must have a regional and metropolitan focus that allows for skills development across all levels at a local level, along with employment programs that support regional relocation.

2. **Ageing infrastructure** – Many civic theatres are 50–60 years old and approaching end-of-life stages. Without coordinated reinvestment across all levels of government, venues are unable to meet contemporary technical, digital, and access requirements, limiting the ability of Australian work to be presented.
3. **Declining local government capacity** – Increasing pressure on local councils has reduced programming subsidies and the ability to hold risk for presenters. This undermines touring viability, audience access and artistic diversity—particularly in outer-metropolitan and regional areas.
4. **Audience change and imbalance** – Audience numbers are declining across all genres, while performance fees, royalties, and on-costs continue to rise. At the same time, much of the new work being developed by medium-to-large companies, although often of high artistic quality, is not always suited to touring or aligned with the needs or expectations of broader local and regional audiences. Ticket prices cannot keep pace with these rising expenses while remaining accessible to audiences.

Opportunities to support a vibrant and sustainable cultural future

NAPACA's network of performing arts centres as cultural hubs is uniquely placed to deliver national cultural objectives locally, supporting artists, building audiences, and ensuring that every community has access to meaningful cultural experiences.

A new National Cultural Policy must recognise performing arts centres as key enablers of a sustainable and vibrant national cultural ecosystem.

NAPACA Emerging Priorities and the Five Pillars of *Revive*

The current key priorities of NSW and ACT performing arts centres strongly align with all five pillars of *Revive*. A future National Cultural Policy that fully recognises and invests in presenters and venues will strengthen artists' livelihoods, improve access and equity, enable First Nations leadership at a local level, and deliver a more sustainable, resilient performing arts sector nationwide.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

Recognising and respecting the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia's arts and culture

Performing Arts Centres – value proposition

Performing arts centres provide trusted, on-Country spaces for First Nations artists, communities and cultural expression, particularly in regional and outer-metropolitan areas. NAPACA venues provide an opportunity to support First Nations work through presentation, co-commissioning, residencies, community partnerships and audience development, enabling sustained engagement rather than one-off touring interactions.

Policy opportunity

National policy should recognise presenters and venues as key delivery partners for First Nations cultural outcomes at a local level, supported by funding models that prioritise long-term relationships over short-term projects. Devolved funding held by presenters would enable locally responsive support for First Nations artists and communities, directly aligned with place, cultural authority, and protocol.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story
Reflecting the breadth of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.

Performing Arts Centres – value proposition
NAPACA members service communities beyond capital city CBDs, providing equitable access to professional performing arts for a significant proportion of Australia's population. Performing arts centres are year-round cultural hubs, deeply embedded in their communities and reflective of local stories, identities, and audiences.

Policy opportunity
Current touring and funding models do not adequately reflect population distribution or the central role of local government-owned venues in delivering access to audiences. A new National Cultural Policy must better align funding distribution with population and audience need, recognising performing arts centres as essential cultural infrastructure for place-based delivery.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist
Supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators.

Performing Arts Centres – value proposition
Performing arts centres directly support artists through making work locally, presentation fees, commissions, residencies, marketing support, technical resources and sustained audience relationships. Current workforce pressures within venues—particularly in technical, production and administrative roles—directly affect artists' capacity to tour, present work and earn sustainable income.

Policy opportunity
Supporting artists requires investment not only in creation, but also in the presenter resources required to enable artists to reach audiences, tour safely and sustainably, and build long-term careers. Dedicated support for Creative Producers within venues strengthens local artist pathways, new work development and local creative ecosystems.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure
Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts, culture and heritage.

Performing Arts Centres – value proposition
Performing arts centres are natural connectors between artists, audiences, local government, education, philanthropy, and community partners, enabling collaboration across the cultural ecosystem and ensuring that stories from across Australia are told.

Policy opportunity
The next National Cultural Policy should formalise presenters and venues as co-investors and partners rather than passive recipients, enabling shared risk and stronger returns on public investment. NAPACA advocates for new investment models that directly support presenters, including devolved presenter funding, matched funding and co-commissioning models, presenter–producer risk-sharing, philanthropy pilots that recognise venue contribution, and taxation reform to rebalance risk across the live performance ecology, unlock private investment, support workforce sustainability and ensure equitable access to Australian live performance.

Performing Arts Centres – value proposition
Many civic theatres have served their communities for 50–60 years and are now approaching end-of-life. Reinvestment in ageing performing arts infrastructure presents a timely opportunity to modernise venues so they meet contemporary production, digital, accessibility, and audience expectations. This will improve experiences for audiences, artists, and presenters, while enabling a broader and more diverse range of Australian work to be created, toured, and experienced by communities.

At the same time, there remain well-populated regional centres and emerging growth areas across Australia that have never had access to purpose-built performing arts infrastructure. This highlights the continued need for coordinated investment across all levels of government in large-scale, long-term cultural infrastructure projects that are designed to serve communities for the next 100 years. Strategic performing arts infrastructure not only supports cultural outcomes, but also drives economic activity, tourism, education, community wellbeing, and the growth of regional creative industries.

Policy opportunity
Performing arts centres should be explicitly recognised within national infrastructure, workforce and sustainability strategies, alongside producing companies and major cultural institutions. Without targeted reinvestment in venue infrastructure and workforce capability, national touring networks, audience access and the long-term sustainability of the performing arts sector will be significantly undermined.

There is also a need to establish coordinated whole-of-government funding pathways for major regional cultural infrastructure projects, including performing arts centres and creative precincts. This should include the development of tripartite funding agreements across local, state and federal governments to support the delivery of large-scale strategic cultural infrastructure that generates long-term social, cultural and economic benefits for regional Australia.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience
Making sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad.

Performing Arts Centres – value proposition
Performing arts centres are embedded in their communities and exist as part of those communities, not apart from them. Through year-round operation, long-term audience relationships, and direct engagement at a local level, venues are uniquely positioned to understand audience needs, preferences, barriers to access, and evolving patterns of participation. This makes performing arts centres the most effective partners for building audiences, testing new work, fostering cultural engagement, and identifying sustainable growth opportunities for Australian stories—both locally and nationally.

Policy opportunity
A new National Cultural Policy has the opportunity to formally recognise performing arts centres as the primary audience intelligence partners within the cultural ecosystem. As community-embedded organisations with year-round engagement, venues are uniquely positioned to understand audience needs, preferences and barriers to participation. Leveraging this local insight through devolved funding, co-investment and partnership models will strengthen audience development, reduce touring risk, and enable Australian stories to connect more deeply with communities at home while building pathways for national and international engagement.

Performing Arts Centres – value proposition

Regional and metro presenters and venues are the critical link between touring productions and community impact. As locally embedded organisations, they understand audience needs, build long-term participation, and provide the operational, marketing and engagement capacity that makes arts access meaningful and sustainable in regional Australia. Their value lies not only in presenting work, but in sustaining year-round cultural life, strengthening local creative ecosystems and ensuring national cultural investment reaches communities beyond capital cities.

Policy opportunity

The reform of *Playing Australia* presents a significant policy opportunity to rebalance federal investment toward regional and metro presenters as essential cultural delivery partners. A refreshed model should directly support presenting organisations, recognise the real cost of regional touring, fund audience development and local engagement, encourage diverse touring circuits and consortium models, and reduce administrative complexity. This would improve cultural equity, reduce financial pressure on regional communities, and create a more sustainable national touring system.