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PGAV submission to Australia's next National Cultural Policy

Dear Office for the Arts,

Public Galleries Association of Victoria (PGAV) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Australian Government's next National Cultural Policy. This submission calls for clear and decisive federal leadership to ensure Victoria's public gallery sector is adequately supported as core national cultural infrastructure.

PGAV is the peak body for a network of 75 public galleries across Victoria, including 22 regional and 13 outer-metropolitan galleries. These galleries are embedded in communities across the state, providing vital access to the arts while delivering significant social, cultural and economic outcomes to the communities they serve.

Victoria's public galleries collectively attract more than 7.4 million visitors annually, care for nationally significant collections valued at \$5.2 billion and support over 700 jobs. They invest \$4 million each year into the careers of nearly 6,000 visual artists and play a critical role in cultural tourism and regional economies.

Public galleries are essential to Australia's cultural ecosystem. They train the workforce that supports major arts institutions, nurture the next generation of Australian artists, and often provide people's first encounter with the arts —helping shape future audiences and benefactors.

Despite their national significance, these organisations operate without commensurate federal investment or policy recognition. The result is a growing disconnect between the sector's contribution to national cultural life and the level of support it receives from the Australian Government.

The sector is operating under acute pressure. Chronic underinvestment, workforce shortages and ageing infrastructure are placing both people and collections at risk. Galleries are delivering ambitious and impactful programming with insufficient staff, creating an operating environment where burnout is widespread and workforce retention is increasingly precarious. The sector's resilience has masked a deeper fragility that requires urgent national attention.

This is not a local issue – it is a national cultural sustainability issue. Without sustained, targeted investment, these pressures will continue to erode the sector's capacity and impact.

PGAV's research highlights a structural funding imbalance. Local government remains the primary funder of Victoria's small-to-medium public galleries, contributing \$27.8 million annually. In comparison, the Victorian Government contributes \$7.5 million, and the Australian Government just \$1.5 million. And while the small-to-medium sector generates \$14.6 million in earned income and

secures \$9.7 million through philanthropy and donations, these efforts cannot compensate for systemic underinvestment at the federal level.

At the same time, stagnation in state funding has intensified sector vulnerability. Victorian Government investment in small-to-medium galleries has remained static for more than a decade, representing a 35% reduction in real terms. Recent decisions under Creative Victoria's Creative Enterprises Program have intensified sector instability, with PGAV defunded and multiple galleries now facing closure due to short-term funding decisions.

This trajectory is unsustainable and risks undermining a sector that is fundamental to Australia's cultural life.

A renewed National Cultural Policy represents a critical opportunity for the Australian Government to assume a more active and strategic role. Federal leadership is essential to stabilise the sector, safeguard nationally significant collections, and ensure equitable access to arts and culture across metropolitan, outer-metropolitan and regional communities.

Without targeted federal intervention, the sustainability of Victoria's public gallery network – and the cultural, social and economic benefits it delivers – will be increasingly compromised.

Through this submission, PGAV responds to the five pillars of the National Cultural Policy and outlines recommendations that call for stronger federal investment to secure a sustainable and thriving future for Victoria's public galleries.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

Victoria's public galleries play a critical role in supporting First Nations artists and providing access to First Nations art and culture. However, this commitment is undermined by low workforce representation, with only 13% of galleries employing First Nations staff. Structural barriers to employment include short-term employment, uncompetitive remuneration, limited access to mentoring and professional development, together with the significant cultural load carried by First Nations staff.

Galleries also face significant challenges in managing First Nations collections, including establishing provenance, determining access or repatriation, and addressing outdated cataloguing practices that reflect colonial approaches and can cause ongoing harm.

With the Victorian Government having entered Treaty, there is an urgent need for the sector to work in genuine partnership with First Peoples to uphold data sovereignty and ensure culturally appropriate access to cultural materials. Progress is currently constrained by limited specialist expertise and resourcing.

Recommendations:

- **First Nations Visual Arts Workforce Development Initiative:** Fund 12-month internships that transition into three-year positions in public galleries to fast-track the First Nations visual arts workforce.
- **First Nations Cultural Safety:** Develop and implement industry-specific cultural safety standards to support, safeguard and sustain First Nations staff.
- **Expand the Australian Government's Indigenous Repatriation Program – Museums Grants:** Extend eligibility to small-to-medium public galleries to support repatriation and remedial conservation of collection items.
- **First Peoples Data Sovereignty & Collections Access:** Co-design standards with First Peoples to guide best practice in data governance and access to cultural materials at public galleries.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Victoria's public galleries are central to preserving, interpreting and presenting Australia's cultural identity, connecting millions of people with unique stories relevant to their communities. Despite this vital role, the sector remains largely unrecognised within the current policy framework.

This capacity to present Australian stories is increasingly under strain. Chronic underinvestment, workforce shortages and ageing infrastructure are limiting the ability of small-to-medium galleries to deliver ambitious programming, while placing staff, collections and facilities at risk.

More than two decades after the Myer Inquiry into the visual arts sector, sustainability remains unresolved. Federal investment accounts for less than 2% of sector income, Victorian Government support for regional gallery programming has stagnated for over a decade, local government galleries in metropolitan and our fast growing outer-metropolitan regions are excluded from state government funding, and six galleries face defunding within two years. This persistent underinvestment overlooks the sector's significant contributions to mental health and wellbeing, social connection, lifelong learning and regional economies.

Targeted investment is urgently needed to ensure public galleries can sustain their workforce, maintain safe and fit-for-purpose facilities and deliver programming that drives cultural tourism and meets community needs.

Recommendations:

- **Commission a National review of the Visual Arts Sector:** Examine the sector's scale, impact and long-term sustainability needs – including peak bodies and service organisations, current funding, workforce conditions, infrastructure, education pathways, audience engagement – to inform long-term policy and investment.
- **Minimum Gallery Service Guarantee:** Establish a coordinated funding framework across Federal, State and Local Government to address structural underinvestment.
- **Trial an Exhibition Tax Relief (ETR) program:** Pilot a tax offset program like that in the UKⁱ, which allows galleries to claim a payable cash tax credit for the costs of producing exhibitions.
- **Visual Arts Australia within Creative Australia:** Create a dedicated body to deliver targeted support to the visual arts and public gallery sector.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Victoria's public galleries invested \$4 million into the creative careers of close to 6,000 visual artists last year through commissions, exhibition fees, presenter fees and acquisitions. Galleries also play a vital role in supporting the professional development of visual artists through career mentoring and residencies. This support is especially vital in regional areas, where access to visual arts education and career pathways is declining.

Visual artists remain among Australia's worst-paid workers, earning an average of \$13,937 from their practice – well below the national minimum wage.ⁱⁱ Unpaid work is widespread, women and culturally and linguistically diverse artists are disproportionately affected, placing the diversity and sustainability of Australia's visual arts sector at significant risk.

At the same time, rising costs of arts education under the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) policy has accelerated course closures and declining enrolments across universities and TAFE.ⁱⁱⁱ This is particularly acute in regional areas, where galleries are already struggling to recruit staff with visual arts expertise. Without intervention, both the artist workforce and the sector that supports it will continue to contract.

Targeted action is needed to secure viable careers for artists and rebuild pathways into the sector, ensuring galleries can continue to engage a wide range of artists and reflect the full diversity of Australian stories.

Recommendations:

- **Trial a Basic Income for the Arts (BIA):** Pilot a guaranteed income model for artists, based on Ireland's highly successful program^{iv}.
- **Reform arts education funding:** End the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) policy and restore affordable access to arts education and training.
- **National commitment to arts education:** Embed arts education into the National Cultural Policy with clear targets.
- **Creative workforce pathways:** Establish paid internships, traineeships and apprenticeships to create new entry points into the public gallery sector.
- **Increase investment in galleries through a Minimum Gallery Service Guarantee:** Coordinate Federal, State and Local Government funding to address workforce shortages and expand paid opportunities for artists.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Public galleries are vital cultural infrastructure, providing access to the arts while delivering significant social, cultural and economic outcomes to the communities they serve. Major exhibitions at Bendigo Art Gallery have attracted 688,000 visitors and generated over \$108 million for the region since 2012, while initiatives such as Geelong Gallery's *Youth Ambassador* program, Art Gallery of Swan Hill's *ACRE Project* and Koorie Heritage Trust's *Blak Design* program demonstrate the sector's impact on employment pathways, community connection and First Nations cultural leadership.

However, ageing infrastructure is limiting what galleries can deliver and placing Victoria's \$5.2 billion public collections at risk. More than 40% of galleries require urgent upgrades to climate control, lighting and security to meet lending standards, limiting their ability to present significant works and take part in the Australian Government's *Sharing the National Collection* program.

Collection storage is a growing pressure point, with 70% of galleries nearing capacity and many forced to rely on costly commercial storage, diverting funds away from acquisitions and programming. At the same time, access to infrastructure funding is uneven – regional galleries benefit from dedicated programs from Federal and State government, while metropolitan and outer-metropolitan galleries are excluded, creating inequitable access to high-quality cultural experiences.

Targeted investment is urgently needed to safeguard collections, unlock programming potential and ensure all communities – regardless of location – can access high-quality gallery experiences close to home and share in the social, cultural and economic benefits they provide.

Recommendations:

- **Implement a national approach to collection storage:** Coordinate Federal, State and Local Government investment in a distributed network of collection storage facilities across Australia.
- **Expand gallery infrastructure funding:** Enable eligibility to metropolitan and outer-metropolitan galleries to ensure equitable access to capital funding.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Victoria's public galleries attract over 7.4 million visitors each year, with over 910,000 attending regional galleries – an extraordinary level of engagement relative to a population of 1.5 million. Free entry and year-round access make galleries among the most accessible cultural institutions in Australia.

Galleries are also central to arts education, welcoming more than 350,000 students annually and playing a key role in delivering First Peoples history and culture within the national curriculum. Yet this demand is not matched by capacity – only 39% of galleries employ qualified education staff, many in part-time roles – limiting their ability to meet demand.

Access to gallery collections remains constrained. While Victoria's public galleries hold over 900,000 items in their collections, only 58% have been digitised and just over half of these are available online.

At the same time, participation in gallery programs is delivering measurable health and wellbeing benefits, strengthening social connection and community resilience, yet declining funding is limiting their impact.

Touring exhibitions are critical to gallery programming and the sharing of Australian stories, particularly in regional areas, but rising freight costs are placing increasing pressure on this model. Expanding support for national and international touring would extend the reach of Australian stories and strengthen the sector's global presence.

Recommendations:

- **Invest in the Visual Arts Education workforce:** Ensure every gallery employs a qualified visual arts educator to help meet the demand from primary and secondary schools.
- **Establish a National Collection Digitisation Fund:** Increase digital access to public gallery collections for national and international audiences.
- **Champion Arts and Wellbeing:** Champion the role of arts participation in improving health and social outcomes.
- **Expand Visions of Australia:** Increase funding to address rising costs, expand eligibility to enable outer-metropolitan communities to benefit from touring exhibitions, and enable international touring.

Conclusion

Victoria's public galleries are essential to Australia's cultural life—safeguarding nationally significant collections, supporting artists, strengthening communities and ensuring broad public access to arts and culture. Yet their continued impact cannot be sustained without stronger, more coordinated federal leadership.

This submission outlines a practical and achievable reform agenda across five pillars: centring First Nations leadership, strengthening the sector's capacity to tell Australian stories, securing viable careers for artists, investing in critical infrastructure, and expanding audience access and engagement. Together, these actions will stabilise a sector under pressure and position it for long-term sustainability.

The next National Cultural Policy is a critical opportunity to recognise public galleries as core national cultural infrastructure and to address the structural funding imbalance that continues to undermine their potential. Without this shift, the gap between the sector's contribution and its level of support will continue to widen.

With targeted investment and policy reform, the Australian Government can ensure Victoria's public galleries remain vibrant, resilient and accessible—protecting Australia's cultural heritage while enabling future generations to create, connect, and participate in cultural life.

Yours sincerely,



Danny Lacy
PGAV President



Anne Robetson
PGAV Executive Officer

Note: This submission aligns with and supports the submissions and recommendations advanced by the following industries bodies:

National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE)
National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA)
National Exhibition Touring Support (NETS) Australia

National Public Galleries Alliance (NPGA)
Museums and Galleries of New South Wales (MGNSW)
Museums & Galleries of Queensland (M&G QLD)
University Art Museums Australia (UAMA)

ⁱ Museum and Gallery Exhibition Tax Relief, see: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claiming-museums-and-galleries-exhibition-tax-relief-for-corporation-tax>

ⁱⁱ McQuilten, Grace; Powell, Chloe; Badham, Marnie; Macneill, Catherine; Lye, Jenny (2025). *Visual Arts Work: Key Research Findings, Implication and Proposed Actions*. RMIT University. See: <https://doi.org/10.25439/rmt.28693721>

ⁱⁱⁱ Gattenhof, Sandra; Saunders, John Nicholas (2026). *The Polycrisis for Arts and Creative Education in Australia*. See: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00049441261421275>

^{iv} Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts (BIA), see: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment-and-redundancy/employment-support-schemes/basic-income-for-the-arts-bia/>