



National Cultural Policy Submission - 24 May 2026

The Australian Theatre for Young People (“ATYP”) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the new National Cultural Policy and congratulates the Government on its arts and cultural successes over the last 3 years.

For more than 60 years, ATYP has been the national home for young people to create, perform and tell their stories. We give young Australians the tools and confidence to enrich the nation’s cultural life with their own voices and ideas. ATYP is Australia’s flagship youth theatre company, working with young people aged 5–26. We champion youth voices on stage and behind the scenes, creating pathways for young artists, writers and performers to develop their craft, connect with industry and share stories that reflect the world they live in today. Our work strengthens confidence, creativity and community – using theatre as a powerful tool for self-expression, wellbeing and social connection.

Our submission is formed by the joint recommendations of the National Youth Arts Network. During this process, we ran 10 focus groups with 50 young people and organised over 100 young people to complete long-form survey questions. Our key recommendations are the following:

1. Include Children and Young People as a pillar of the national cultural plan.
2. Establish a sustained national funding stream for children and young peoples’ arts organisations that recognises their role in artistic development, cultural leadership, and as a critical pipeline for the future arts workforce and major cultural institutions.
3. Establish a separate cross-portfolio funding stream for youth arts participation and engagement, co-managed with Health, Education, Employment, Youth Justice, and Social Services, to support programs that improve wellbeing, social connection, learning, inclusion, and community participation through arts engagement.
4. Establish a standing Youth Advisory Committee for Creative Australia that is managed independently by the Youth Arts sector, and reflects the diversity of young Australians, ensuring they have a direct voice in cultural decision-making.

We support the submission made by the National Youth Arts Network and agree with the statement that the Youth Arts industry specialises in giving young Australians a voice in our world. Youth Arts is a living cultural practice through which children and young people produce artistic works of excellence

and contribute actively to Australia's social and cultural life. It's a sector that encompasses youth-led and co-created work, emerging artist development, participatory and community-engaged practice, arts education and school engagement, early childhood audiences, socially engaged and CACD practice, pre-professional pathways and workforce development.

Youth Arts organisations sit at the intersection of culture, community, and the professional arts sector, delivering measurable benefits to cultural diversity and innovation, educational outcomes, mental health, social cohesion, and resilience. They are also where many of Australia's artists, performers, writers, and cultural leaders develop their practice, take risks, and experiment. Without sustained investment in Youth Arts, Australia risks the cultural participation of a generation and the long-term vitality of the national arts sector itself.

Their work brokers relationships within communities and starts conversations that connect young people with one another, with service organisations, and with adults in their lives. Research conducted in Australia and around the world demonstrates significant benefits for educational outcomes, community building, and mental health and resilience.

Youth Arts organisations are also a critical part of Australia's cultural ecology and artistic pipeline. They are often the first places where young people encounter serious artistic practice, develop a creative voice, technical skills, collaboration, and leadership, and begin their pathways into the broader arts sector. Many artists, performers, writers, directors and cultural leaders who later contribute to major companies and institutions begin their journeys in Youth Arts settings

There is a need to invest in initiatives that get young people interacting with each other and the wider community. Young people need to be recognised within Australian society, with opportunities to share their own stories, listen to others, and build relationships across generations.

An investment in Australia's Youth Arts industry should be included among initiatives to address the nation's deteriorating mental health and to support community building.

Before the current Government came to power, there was a significant divestment in the youth arts sector, which we are still trying to catch up. Coupled with COVID, the youth arts sector entered into this period with some of the most significant youth art organisations being defunded from the previous Government, they include but are not limited to: Arena Theatre Company (Vic); Backbone Youth Arts (Qld); Barking Gecko Theatre (WA); Canberra Youth Theatre (ACT); Cirkidz (SA); Jigsaw Theatre Company (ACT); La Mama Theatre (Vic); Lowdown (national); Monkey Baa Theatre Company (NSW);

Outback Theatre for Young People (NSW); PACT (NSW); Platform Youth Arts (Vic); Polyglot Theatre (Vic); Riverland Youth Theatre (SA); Shopfront Arts Co-op (NSW); Slingsby (SA); St Martins Youth Arts Centre (Vic); Tantrum Youth Theatre (NSW); The Blue Room (WA); Urban Myth Theatre of Youth (SA); Southern Edge Youth Theatre (SA); and Young People and the Arts Australia (national). The sector has also seen a reduction in state government funding over the last 3 years for many. While we very much appreciated the reinstatement of our and other colleagues' support from the Federal Government, in our case and in others, it was funded at the same level as we were receiving in 2015. This is at a time when the sector's role in providing opportunities for young people is ever-increasing.

If we are to have a vibrant storytelling industry into the future, it cannot be done without investing in Youth Arts.

ATYP calls on the Australian Government to include a dedicated pillar for children and young people in the next National Cultural Policy, as young people are not participants of the future but are citizens of the present – making work, shaping culture, and asking to be recognised as creators rather than recipients. The current policy architecture does not reflect this as strongly as it could. The five pillars contain no structural home for children and young people. Ensuring the pipeline of emerging artists, emerging storytellers and Australian stories requires specialised approaches and a dedicated sector. The Children and Youth Arts Sector is funded inconsistently at the federal level, resourced at the margins, and rarely included in the rooms where policy and decisions are made.

Young people have already told us what they need

In May 2026, ATYP led a survey of more than 150 children and young people aged 8 to 26. This was done in 10 focus groups of 50 young people participating, and over 100 young people answered long-form survey questions. This number will be augmented by the National Youth Arts Network, and we look forward to sharing those results shortly.

Key points from the ten focus groups included:

- Arts is an important place for community, especially after Covid
- How to assist more pathways and longer-term careers in the arts
- Decreasing prices for theatre experiences
- Promotion of local opportunities
- Concern about the impact of AI and future career in the arts
- Training in pitching and writing applications

- Link to lack of attention to Youth Arts as a pipeline for staff and resourcing of qualified arts workers for the 2032 Olympics
- Decrease the costs of an arts education
- Invest in the next generation of storytellers
- Invest in more paid opportunities for young people
- Need to focus on the sustainability of the sector
- Support for the professionalisation of young people in the arts
- More training in the business side of the arts, i.e. how to be a sole trader
- Should be more opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas to participate in the arts

In our focus group work, 99% of respondents said “yes” when asked whether children and young people should be named as a dedicated pillar of the National Cultural Policy. ATYP’s Youth Advisory Body (YAB), one of the largest youth advisory bodies in the Australian arts sector, has been saying the same directly to us for years.

In the survey work of over 100 young people, they answered several questions. One of the major themes running through all answers was that young people should have more opportunities, lower costs, and a stronger voice.

“Don’t underestimate us just because we’re kids.” (Age 12)

The findings are consistent across every age group. Young people raised the issue that cost was a financial barrier to entry-level and further study.

Providing opportunities for emerging artists was a central recommendation by young people, particularly those aged over 16.

“We should be treating young artists as workers. Emerging artists should be paid for their time and supported financially so they have the ability to create.” (Age 21)

The lack of opportunity for young people was exacerbated for those living in regional and rural Australia. Issues such as transportation to access opportunities were raised, as was increasing the opportunities they have in schools.

When asked what was working for young people in the Arts, they talked about gaining confidence and finding a community.

“Creating community: creating connections, ensuring that we are always networking and collaborating with our peers. Especially after COVID, the arts and theatre have been an incredible touchstone for creating connections and speaking to people much more often.”

“Public speaking skills. Confidence in groups of people. Leadership skills. Social aspect.”

What they recommended was more opportunities to see low-cost productions, reduced costs and barriers to accessing theatre classes and further Arts education, and greater dissemination of opportunities in a central place.

Those aged over 16 raised the issue of AI in the focus group work and sought reassurances from the Government about what could be done to ensure their future livelihoods.

Young people want more Australian stories about themselves; they want to be a part of creating those stories in safe spaces.

A place for every story?

The policy commits to ‘reflecting the diversity of our stories and the contribution of *all* Australians as the creators of culture’ and ensuring ‘our stories reach the people at home and abroad.’

ATYP has been demonstrating this year on year. We seed-funded *Fangirls* by Yve Blake, a story of young people that toured Australia before transferring to London. We seed-funded *The Deb*, now adapted into a globally released film. We are presenting *Saplings* by Yuwaalaraay playwright Hannah Belanzky, touring the country and entering school curricula. That is what sustained belief and investment in youth arts produce.

Just this year, *Saplings* has returned to all six NSW youth justice centres, opened a sold-out season at the Sydney Opera House, and is now on one of ATYP’s largest national tours in our 63-year history, performing at QPAC, the Sydney Opera House, and Arts Centre Melbourne, the three most prestigious east coast venues in the country. It is on the Victorian school curriculum.

'Saplings' is the kind of story the policy wants to travel the nation. More can be done in the national policy to ensure Australian stories by, with, and on behalf of young people are made available. The stories we invest in for young people are the works that will define Australian culture for the next twenty to thirty years. Youth Arts is a current and future solution: a pipeline investment in the long-term vitality and sustainability of our nation's culture.

Young people who participate in the Arts become something different

ATYP works with over 12,000 young Australians each year. We see the effects directly: young people who struggle to speak in a classroom find a voice on stage; young people who have never been asked what they think become writers who insist on being heard; young people inside immense difficulties like youth homelessness or youth justice participate as creative collaborators and leave having made something they are proud of. These are not incidental outcomes. They are the point. Across confidence, communication, mental health, social connection, and a sense of agency in one's own life, the impact of genuine artistic participation, not arts-as-therapy but serious creative practice, is documented, repeatable, and significant.

At a moment when Australia's youth mental health crisis is well-documented, this matters beyond the Arts portfolio. The investment required to make that possible, in organisations, in practitioners, in programs that reach young people where they are, should be co-funded across Health, Education, Employment, Youth Justice, and Social Services, not extracted from a single Arts budget that was never large enough to carry it.

As the nation looks to increase social cohesion, young people will be the drivers. In a recent report conducted with Thrive International, the study heard back from over 1,000 young people in a representative poll, as well as from focus groups with over 250 of those aged 16-24.

When asked "what social cohesion means to them", young people reported community and social belonging (30 per cent), followed by harmony and cohesiveness (27 per cent), collaboration and cooperation (22 per cent), social interaction (12 per cent) and mutual support and shared values (9 per cent).

When asked about the "values our community should aspire to", young people reported community and social cohesion (39 per cent), respect and understanding (33 per cent), fairness and equality (22 per cent), faith and beliefs (16 per cent), and health and wellbeing (13 per cent).

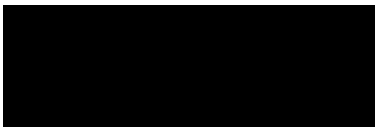
When asked “what things make young people feel included in the wider community”, young people reported safe spaces for young people to connect with others (71 per cent), Opportunities for greater youth voice and participation in decision-making processes both reported 64 per cent, and improved access to a wide support network and professional help (56 per cent).

Young people recommended more opportunities to come together to discuss shared values and safer spaces for them to be able to access in order to do so. With threats to democracy increasing across the globe, young people were calling for more education about their own democracy.

Key recommendations arising from the consultations included: a call for a Youth Social Inclusion Summit, more structured ways to interact with different cultures and identities between young people, greater access for all students to information about democracy in schools, more safe places for young people to come together (youth hubs) and greater use and funding of the arts as part of engaging young people with the issue of social cohesion.

ATYP welcomes this consultation and is committed to supporting the Government through the formation and implementation of the next National Cultural Policy. We have the infrastructure, the relationships, and the direct connection to young Australians necessary to assist in that process. We look forward to contributing further.

Kind regards,



Hayden Tonazzi

Artistic Director & CEO

Australian Theatre for Young People