



National Cultural Policy submission

24 May 2026

[The] library was a sanctuary. It was pathways to another world. It was a place where I found my place and, in many ways, found my voice. And I grew up understanding that reading was not just leisure. There was real power in it. – Professor Larrisa Behrendt¹

Public Libraries Victoria welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the National Cultural Policy consultation.

PLV congratulates the government on the progress made with the delivery of *Revive*, the first National Cultural Policy. The pillars of *Revive*, as ideas and values, have formed a strong foundation for the development and growth of the cultural sector in Australia: First Nations First, A Place for Every Story, Centrality of the Artist, Strong Cultural Infrastructure, and Engaging the Audience. *Revive* has provided direction, stability and opportunity: from the creation of Creative Australia to the focused support provided through the newly-established Writing Australia. The commitment to developing new audiences remains a much-needed priority, alongside the dedication to creators and the infrastructure that underpins our sector.

In the next National Cultural Policy, PLV calls on the government to strengthen its recognition of and support for Australia's public libraries as essential community infrastructure, safe and welcoming places which engage audiences in literature and reading, and foster literacy, learning and creativity. Our focus, then, in this submission, are *Revive* Pillars 4 and 5: Strong Cultural Infrastructure, and Engaging the Audience.

Revive Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

...Libraries provide safe shared space across difference. They model pluralism. They facilitate and support lifelong learning. They foster curiosity. They support literacy which underpins democratic participation. And they offer belonging without ideological precondition.²

Public libraries play a vital role in local communities, providing books and much, much more. They ensure that every Australian, no matter their economic means, is able to access reading material, information, assistance, education, community engagement and at a very basic level, a temperature controlled, safe space. Public libraries support social cohesion, community wellbeing, local history, the arts, culture and literacy.

Despite an expanding role and increased activity, funding for libraries is under pressure. The [2023-24 Australian public libraries statistical report](#) shows that nationally, while total expenditure on public libraries increased 6% to \$1.385 billion, when adjusted for inflation, per capita spending has decreased 12% in real terms, while Victoria has experienced 12 consecutive years of real decline in

¹ [Holding the National Story: Truth, Memory and Social Cohesion in a Fractured Age or Why Libraries Matter More than Ever](#). Australian Libraries and Information Association conference keynote address, May 2026.

² As above.

state government funding. While libraries have been able to achieve efficiencies in operations, they struggle to meet ongoing community demand.

Additional stress has been placed on public libraries due to the ‘digital first’ strategy adopted by governments and the private sector: people flock to public libraries for the in-person support no longer provided elsewhere. As a result, library staff increasingly provide support for federal government service delivery and priorities. From the ubiquitous directions from Services Australia staff to use the public library for printing or assistance filling in forms, through to the provision of early literacy programs and basic social welfare, public libraries are helping to deliver national programs and priorities, but with the costs borne by local, State or Territory governments. This represents not only cost shifting, but a major shift in workload, which is unrecognised and unresourced.

PLV calls on the Australian Government to work with State and Territory governments to ensure adequate funding for the important lifeline public libraries play, whether by direct funding, such as via federal Financial Assistance Grants, or through partnering initiatives to deliver services, such as the highly successful community cohesion grants delivered in 2025-2026 by ALIA in partnership with The Office for Social Cohesion within the Department of Home Affairs. The initiative started in August 2025 and by the end of April 2026 libraries, including those in Victoria, have delivered 750 programs that build, grow and protect social cohesion in line with the Australian Government’s Framework *Connections That Matter: An Engagement Guide to Strengthen Social Cohesion in Australia*. This partnership is an example of what can be achieved when the Australian government recognises the important contribution made by public libraries and establishes a partnership to provide financial support and direction for a national program. The National Cultural Policy could achieve similar immediate impacts at the local level by using federal funding to unlock the potential of public libraries in implementing our national priorities.

Recommendations

- Recognise the role public libraries play as essential cultural infrastructure in the arts ecosystem
- Provide financial support to public libraries to deliver national priorities identified in the National Cultural Policy such as promoting reading, hosting authors, media literacy education, early years story time and community cohesion initiatives.

Revive Pillar 5: Engaging the audience

If we are serious about the pillars of the cultural policy – about engaging audiences, about placing the artist at the centre, about making space for every story – then we have to confront a simple truth. None of it works if people are not reading.³

PLV notes Professor Larrissa Behrendt’s observation of the importance of engaging readers if the Revive policy is to be achieved, and her recognition that ‘reading is not a private pastime. It is a public good,’ essential to democratic participation.

We endorse the call by both Professor Behrendt and [Australia Reads](#) for the Australian Government to properly invest in national reading strategy that supports and expands the work already being done through organisations like Australia Reads and Australia’s public libraries. The personal and public benefits of regular reading for pleasure are well-documented. Australia Reads research shows strategies to increase reading amongst Australians will be most effective when they feel relevant, make reading feel achievable, and give people the confidence to find and read books.

³ As above

Public libraries are natural partners in a national reading strategy. Libraries' physical and digital collections – including materials in languages other than English, large print, audio and other accessible formats – ensure reading is accessible and affordable to all. Library staff help create and support a reading culture across the life cycle, from baby rhyme time, children's story time and early years literacy programs, to book clubs, author visits, writing workshops, short story competitions, and readers and writers festivals.

The [2024-25 PLV Statistical Survey](#) summarises the work of Victoria's 302 public library branches, 31 mobile libraries and 74 other library service points across Australia. Nearly one-third of all Victorians are library members, and this figure is increasing each year. There were 24.3 million in-person visits to library branches and mobile libraries and 46.4 million loans of physical and digital collection items. Over 2.1 million people participated in library programs in 2024-25 in Victoria, including library facilitated book clubs, which have grown significantly in popularity since 2023-24.

PLV recently released the report, [Making a nation of readers: Strengthening reading culture through library book clubs](#), which demonstrates that library facilitated book clubs not only strengthen reading culture, but also support health and wellbeing, reduce loneliness, and strengthen social connection.

To get more Australians reading more often, we need targeted campaigns that increase the visibility of reading and empower more Australians – from children to adults – to add books into their daily lives. Public libraries are extremely well-placed to be active partners in such campaigns.

Recommendations

- Invest in a series of targeted, research-backed campaigns for adults, young adults, children and families that address barriers to reading
- Recognise and resource the role public libraries play in engaging audiences, sharing Australian stories, celebrating authors and providing a place where creativity can thrive and lifelong learning is open to all.

About Public Libraries Victoria

Public Libraries Victoria (PLV) is the peak body for public libraries in Victoria. We represent library services across the state and work together to make our libraries the best they can be. By sharing our resources, combining our buying power and showing how libraries change lives, we have more to invest back into the services our library members value so much.

- Our Vision: A progressive alliance that inspires public libraries to build stronger communities.
- Our Role: We are the peak body that represents public libraries across Victoria.
- Our Mission: We work together to champion the value of public libraries in Victoria.
- Our Purpose: We contribute to a just and fair society by making a positive difference in people's lives.