

SUBMISSION TO THE NEXT NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY CONSULTATION Susan Huang — Arts Executive, Theatre Maker, Producer, Actor, Drama Educator | Founder, Shiny Heart Productions | Business Manager, Flight Path Theatre and Inner West Drama

WHO I AM

I am a Vietnamese-Australian arts executive, theatre maker, producer, actor, and arts educator with over 20 years in performing arts and business management. I am the Founder and Creative Director of Shiny Heart Productions - a Sydney-based children's theatre company making and touring culturally rich, inclusive theatre for children and young people. I also work as Business Manager at Flight Path Theatre and as Drama Educator at Inner West Drama, and previously at Shopfront Arts Co-op and O'Grady Drama. I am an active member of Australian Health & Arts Network NSW/ACT, Contemporary Asian Australia Performance, Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and Drama NSW. I make work because I believe every child - regardless of race, gender, disability, neurotype, family structure, or postcode - deserves to feel seen, heard, valued, represented, inspired, and full of possibility - and I know from experience that too many don't.

WHAT MATTERS TO MY PRACTICE - THE CHALLENGES I SEE AND WHAT I WANT TO SEE CHANGE

The five pillars articulate the cultural Australia I believe in and work toward every day and each one speaks directly to my practice.

First Nations First matters to me as proof of concept. A dedicated pillar, autonomous governance, legislation, and over \$130 million in infrastructure [Revive: Australia's Cultural Policy 2023] proves that structural commitment to cultural equity works. That model must now be extended to every group this policy names but has yet to effectively resource - CALD, people with disability, LGBTQIA+, female.

A Place for Every Story is the standard I hold myself to as a Vietnamese-Australian artist. It is the reason I founded Shiny Heart Productions and the reason I made *The Great Zodiac Race* - a puppetry work rooted in Chinese-Vietnamese cultural storytelling. It is the principle I live by and the gap I confront every time I try to fund, tour, and sustain work that reflects communities this country rarely sees on stage.

Centrality of the Artist speaks directly to my reality as an independent practitioner. I make culturally specific work for underserved communities while absorbing financial risk the system should be carrying. I have watched colleagues leave the sector because they cannot sustain a career on honorariums and project grants. This is not individual failure. It is a structural failure.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure shapes what is possible for every independent artist and company in this country. Right now, infrastructure investment flows overwhelmingly to major institutions - orchestras, opera companies, national collecting bodies. Community arts companies, children and youth theatre makers, and culturally specific independent practitioners compete for project grants every one to four years with no recurrent baseline. There is no equivalent of the National Gallery model where recurrent public funding makes access possible for the independent arts sector.

Engaging the Audience names the children I make work for. But the policy does not yet treat children as a constituent group the system is obligated to serve - with dedicated infrastructure, touring investment, or commissioning pathways. That gap is personal to me and structural in its consequence.

Australia's cultural system is a closed loop. Meaningful participation shapes identity and aspiration. Governance determines what is funded and produced. Production shapes what audiences, especially children, see and believe is possible. When the loop works, cultural equity becomes self-reinforcing across generations. When it breaks, exclusion is reproduced even within inclusive policy intent. Right now it is broken at three points, and the following challenges name each fracture and how it could be addressed.

CHALLENGE ONE: THERE IS NO DEDICATED NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Relevant pillars: A Place for Every Story / Engaging the Audience

Children are 20.8% of Australia's population - 5.3 million people [ABS Census 2021] - yet they appear in Revive primarily as audiences, not as a constituent group with dedicated infrastructure, commissioning pathways, or national investment. Children's cultural attendance has already fallen from 94% to 80% between 2017–18 and 2021–22 [Creative Australia, Cultural Participation Survey 2022]. The trend is moving in the wrong direction. There is no national strategy to reverse it.

The funding reflects this gap starkly. The National Performing Arts Partnership Framework — Australia's largest recurrent performing arts investment — contains exactly one dedicated children's theatre company nationally: Terrapin Puppet Theatre in Tasmania, receiving \$716,601 per year [Creative Australia, National Performing Arts Partnership Framework 2026 Annual Investment Amounts]. Meanwhile, opera alone receives over \$27 million per year through the same framework — Opera Australia receiving \$24,797,102 and Opera Queensland \$790,952 and State Opera of South Australia \$1,827,394 [Creative Australia, National Performing Arts Partnership Framework 2026 Annual Investment Amounts]. **That is more than 38 times more federal investment in opera than in professional children's theatre nationally.** Opera audiences are predominantly older - most heavily patronised by those aged 55–64 [ABS Music in Australia, Cultural Attendance Data 2013–14] - and in 2021–22, only 7%

of Australian adults attended a musical or opera [ABS Cultural and Creative Activities 2021–22]. The cultural system's largest recurrent investment is flowing to an artform attended by a small and older demographic, while 5.3 million children, the next generation of cultural participants and creators, receive a fraction of the investment. This is not a critique of opera. It is an indictment of a system that has not yet decided that children's cultural experiences are worth investing in at scale.

Early childhood is precisely when identity, imagination, empathy, and cultural aspiration are formed. These are not supplementary outcomes. They are foundational to a child's sense of self, their capacity for connection, and their belief in what is possible for someone like them. Every child - regardless of race, gender, disability, neurotype, family structure, or postcode - deserves access to both appreciating and making art. Not just sitting in an audience. Making. Creating. Telling their own stories.

When I brought *The Great Zodiac Race* to Sydney audiences, children who had never seen themselves or their stories on stage felt a proud sense of belonging. Children from different cultural backgrounds gained empathy and understanding of our multicultural nation. Both responses matter. Both are what meaningful children's arts does - and what the cultural system should be designed to produce consistently, not occasionally.

How this could be addressed through reforms to Pillar 5 — Engaging the Audience:

- **A dedicated National Children's Arts Strategy** — a standalone national framework that treats children and young people as a distinct cultural constituency with dedicated investment, infrastructure, and accountability. This strategy should sit within Pillar 5 as a recognised priority audience requiring deliberate, sustained national attention — not incidental inclusion within broader arts funding programs.
- **Dedicated children's theatre companies in every state and territory under the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework** — currently only one children's theatre company nationally receives Partnership Framework funding. Every state and territory should have at least one dedicated professional children's theatre company with recurrent multi-year investment, enabling long-term artistic development, touring capacity, and community reach that project funding cannot sustain.
- **Outcome standards measuring belonging, identity, and cultural aspiration — not just attendance.** Right now, publicly funded children's arts programs are measured by how many children show up. Not by what happens to them when they do. That is the wrong measure. The question is not how many children attended — it is whether they left feeling seen. Whether they felt the story was theirs. Whether they were inspired to imagine themselves as makers, not just audiences.

We know these outcomes are real and measurable. Research confirms that arts engagement produces demonstrable improvements in children's identity, belonging, resilience, and cultural connection [University of Western Australia, Good Arts Good Mental Health; Creative Australia, Next Generation Now 2025]. The measurement tools exist. What is missing is the policy requirement to use them.

Outcome-based reporting — measuring cultural impact, not just cultural access — should be a mandatory condition of all publicly funded children's arts programs. A child who attended is a statistic. A child who felt seen is the whole point

How this could be addressed through reforms to Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story:

- **Commissioning pathways for CALD, First Nations, disabled, and regionally based artists making work for and with children who share their experiences** — the stories children see on stage must reflect the full diversity of who they are. Dedicated commissioning pathways — with funding, development support, and touring infrastructure — are needed to resource underrepresented artists to create work rooted in their own cultural knowledge and lived experience. This is not about tokenism. It is about cultural authorship: the right of every community to see their stories told by someone who holds them.
- **Investment in children as makers — not just audiences — through community-based arts creation programs outside school curriculum** — access to art is not only about watching. Children who make art — who devise, perform, create, and tell their own stories — develop identity, confidence, empathy, and creative agency in ways that passive attendance cannot replicate. Publicly funded community arts creation programs, outside and alongside school curriculum, are essential to ensure every child — regardless of location, income, or background — has the opportunity to be a maker, not just a witness.
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CHALLENGE TWO: THERE IS NO STRUCTURAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS

Relevant pillars: First Nations First / A Place for Every Story

Revive names women, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disability, and CALD communities as groups whose participation and representation matter. But naming is not architecture. The data shows the gap with clarity:

Group	Population	Revive Action	Dedicated Strategy
First Nations peoples	3.2% [ABS Census 2021]	Dedicated pillar, autonomous governance, legislation, \$130M+ infrastructure [Revive 2023]	YES

Women	50.7% [ABS Census 2021]	Named in Pillar 2	NO
CALD — overseas born	27.6% [ABS Census 2021]	Multicultural Framework Review, continued Diversity Arts Australia funding	NO
CALD — one parent overseas born	49.1% [ABS Census 2021]	As above	NO
People with disability	18% [ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers 2018]	\$5M Arts and Disability Plan [Revive 2023]	NO
LGBTQIA+	4.5% [AIHW 2022]	Named in Pillar 2	NO

First Nations communities — 3.2% of the population — received a dedicated pillar, an autonomous governance body with decision-making authority, stand-alone legislation, and over \$130 million in cultural infrastructure [Revive: Australia's Cultural Policy 2023]. Every other named group received collective aspiration and modest program funding, with no governance authority, no dedicated strategy, and no accountability mechanism. That is not equity. It is a structural hierarchy within an inclusive policy.

The opportunity here is significant. Revive has already demonstrated, through First Nations First, that dedicated structural frameworks produce real change. The precedent exists. The blueprint works. The question for the next policy is whether Australia is prepared to extend that same commitment to the other communities it has named but not yet resourced.

As a Vietnamese-Australian artist, I do not lack ambition or craft. I lack structural support — in governance, in commissioning, in leadership pathways. CALD communities represent up to 49.1% of Australia's population by heritage [ABS Census 2021] yet hold no proportional authority over what gets funded, commissioned, or told about them. That is a system misaligned with its own stated values.

How this could be addressed through reforms to Pillar 1 — First Nations First and Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story:

Develop a CALD Cultural Governance and Leadership Framework as the immediate priority — then apply it as the structural template for every named underrepresented group, including

women, people with disability, and LGBTQIA+ communities.

- **Formal representation within Creative Australia's decision-making structures — not advisory roles, decision-making authority.** There is a critical difference between being consulted and being in the room where decisions are made. CALD artists and communities are regularly invited to advise, to consult, to contribute their perspectives and then watch those perspectives filtered through governance structures that do not reflect them. Formal, mandated representation within Creative Australia's decision-making bodies, with real authority over funding strategy, commissioning priorities, and equity frameworks, is the only mechanism that produces structural change rather than symbolic inclusion.
- **Mandated representation across all funding panels, commissioning bodies, and assessment processes.** Who assesses an application determines what gets funded. Who sits on a commissioning body determines what gets made. If funding panels do not reflect Australia's cultural diversity, the work that reflects Australia's cultural diversity will continue to be underfunded, not through malice, but through structural blind spots that homogeneous panels cannot see past. Mandated representation is not about lowering standards. It is about raising the quality of decisions by ensuring those decisions are made by people who understand the full breadth of Australian cultural life.
- **Leadership pipelines — fellowships, succession pathways, and paid institutional development programs.** Underrepresentation in cultural leadership is not a talent problem. It is a pathway problem. CALD artists, women, people with disability, and LGBTQIA+ practitioners are not absent from the sector — they are present, skilled, and experienced. What is absent is the structured pathway from practice into institutional leadership. Dedicated fellowships, paid development programs embedded within funded organisations, and explicit succession planning requirements for major arts institutions are the mechanisms that turn aspiration into appointment.
- **Transparent annual public reporting on representation across governance, funding decisions, and institutional leadership.** What gets measured gets changed. What is never reported never improves. Annual public reporting — disaggregated by artform, organisation, and funding tier — on who holds decision-making authority in Australia's cultural sector creates the accountability infrastructure that makes all other reforms enforceable. Without it, commitments to diversity remain aspirational. With it, they become measurable obligations.
- **Accountability mechanisms tied to organisational funding eligibility.** Reporting without consequence is not accountability. Organisations receiving public arts funding should be required to demonstrate progress against equity benchmarks as a condition of that funding — not as a punitive measure, but as a recognition that public money spent on cultural institutions that do not reflect the public is public money not fulfilling its purpose.

First Nations First established the principle - that cultural authority, embedded structurally within decision-making systems, produces real and lasting change. The next policy must honour that principle for everyone Revive named. The blueprint exists. The commitment is what is missing.

CHALLENGE THREE: ARTS INFRASTRUCTURE AND ARTIST SUSTAINABILITY ARE STRUCTURALLY UNDERFUNDED

Relevant pillars: Strong Cultural Infrastructure / Centrality of the Artist

Australia has made a deliberate policy decision to fund sport and major cultural institutions as public goods. It has not yet made that decision for independent and community arts. The consequences are measurable and serious — and I see them every day in my own practice.

I work as Business Manager at Flight Path Theatre, an independent theatre venue in Sydney that in the past seven years has hosted 136 productions, 111 of which were new Australian works. Flight Path Theatre is exactly the kind of organisation Australia's cultural policy claims to value — a community-embedded, artist-centred venue developing and presenting new Australian stories. It operates without recurrent baseline funding. Every year is a financial negotiation. Every season is built on a combination of venue hire, project grants, philanthropic support, and the goodwill of artists who accept less than they are worth because they believe in the work.

I also founded Shiny Heart Productions to make and tour culturally rich, inclusive theatre for children and young people. Every production requires a new funding application. Every tour requires assembling resources from scratch. The artists I work with are skilled, experienced, and committed — and they routinely accept honorariums because the funding does not stretch to professional wages. Not because the work is not valuable. Because the system was not designed to sustain it.

This is not unique to Flight Path Theatre or Shiny Heart Productions. It is the lived reality of the entire independent arts sector.

In 2024–25, the Australian Sports Commission invested \$217 million directly in high performance sport and reached 2.06 million students through its Sporting Schools program across 6,389 schools [Australian Sports Commission Annual Report 2024–25]. The 2032 Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games has attracted a \$3.4 billion infrastructure commitment [Australian Government Federal Budget 2023–24]. Sport has national participation strategies, recurrent organisational funding, athlete development pathways, dedicated research investment, and community infrastructure — all funded as public good, because Australia has decided sport matters.

Creative Australia's establishment budget was approximately \$199 million [Revive: Australia's Cultural Policy 2023] — less than half the Sports Commission's investment. Within that, the Partnership Framework's five major orchestras alone receive over \$59 million per year combined [Creative Australia, National Performing Arts Partnership Framework 2026 Annual Investment Amounts]. The independent and community arts sector — which reaches the communities major institutions do not, develops the new Australian work that defines our culture, and employs the diverse artists this policy claims to champion — competes for project

grants on one-to-four-year cycles with no recurrent operational baseline.

Australia funds public hospitals with recurrent government appropriation because we have determined, as a society, that healthcare is infrastructure — essential, ongoing, and worth sustaining regardless of whether it turns a profit. We do not ask hospitals to apply for grants to keep their emergency departments open. We do not ask them to justify their existence production by production. We accept that some services are so fundamental to community wellbeing that their continuity must be guaranteed by the state — because the cost of losing them is too high.

The arts are that kind of service. The evidence is no longer contested. Arts participation produces measurable improvements in mental health, social connection, identity, belonging, and community resilience [University of Western Australia, Good Arts Good Mental Health; Creative Australia, Next Generation Now 2025]. Yet independent arts organisations — the venues, companies, and practitioners delivering these outcomes in communities that major institutions never reach — are treated as projects, not infrastructure. The result is predictable: artists accept honorariums just to make work. Venues like Flight Path Theatre operate on the edge of viability. Companies like Shiny Heart cannot plan beyond the next grant. Talented practitioners leave the sector for industries that can offer them certainty. The cultural system loses exactly the voices it claims to value — and the communities those voices serve lose the cultural experiences that sustain them.

This is not a pipeline problem. It is a structural one. And like all structural problems, it must be solved from the top down.

How this could be addressed through reforms to Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure:

- **Establish a Community Arts Infrastructure Fund — recurrent baseline operational funding for small-to-mid independent and community arts companies, treated as public cultural infrastructure, not perpetual grant applicants.** Flight Path Theatre has presented 111 new Australian works in seven years. Shiny Heart Productions has created and toured culturally specific theatre for children who have no other access to stories that reflect their lives. Neither organisation receives recurrent baseline funding. Both deliver demonstrable public cultural value. A Community Arts Infrastructure Fund would provide the recurrent operational baseline — not tied to specific productions or programs — that gives independent companies the stability to plan, develop artists, build audiences, and tour work sustainably over time. This is not a new idea. It is the application of an existing funding model to a sector that has been excluded from it. We do not ask public hospitals to fundraise to keep their wards open. We should not ask independent arts organisations to either.
- **Extend National Performing Arts Partnership Framework eligibility to dedicated children's theatre and community arts companies in every state and territory.** The

Partnership Framework currently provides up to eight years of recurrent investment to 39 organisations nationally [Creative Australia, National Performing Arts Partnership Framework 2026]. One is a dedicated children's theatre company. None are explicitly community arts organisations. Extending Framework eligibility to at least one dedicated children's theatre company and one community arts organisation in every state and territory would not require dismantling the existing framework — it would require expanding it to reflect the full breadth of Australian cultural life, not just its most established institutions.

- **Invest in a National Arts and Wellbeing Research Program to build the longitudinal evidence base for arts as essential public infrastructure.** The Australian Sports Commission co-invested \$2.7 million with three universities in 2024–25 to establish a dedicated sport participation research unit [Australian Sports Commission Annual Report 2024–25]. Arts and health research in Australia is fragmented, underfunded, and largely project-based. A National Arts and Wellbeing Research Program — developed in partnership with Creative Australia, the Arts Health Network NSW/ACT (AHNNA), the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and university arts-health research units — would build the longitudinal, population-level evidence base that makes the case for arts as essential public infrastructure irrefutable. We cannot keep asking the government to fund what we cannot prove. This research program would give us the proof.

How this could be addressed through reforms to Pillar 3 — Centrality of the Artist:

- **Once the funding infrastructure exists, mandate minimum professional fees across all publicly funded arts productions — not just government events as Revive currently does.** Revive introduced a mandate for minimum remuneration for musicians and performers contracted at Australian Government events [Revive: Australia's Cultural Policy 2023]. This was a meaningful step — and a limited one. It covers government functions. It does not cover the vast majority of publicly funded independent arts productions where artists routinely accept honorariums because the grant funding does not stretch to professional wages. I have lived this — as a producer at Shiny Heart, as a business manager at Flight Path Theatre, and as an artist myself. Mandating minimum professional fees across all publicly funded arts productions — as a condition of receiving public money — would be a direct, enforceable intervention. It would not cost more in total. It would require that the money already flowing into the sector flows to the artists who create the work, not only to the infrastructure around them. The reason this reform must follow infrastructure investment rather than precede it is simple: you cannot mandate wages the system does not yet have the funding to pay. Build the infrastructure first. Then set the floor.
- **Establish multi-year operational funding cycles for independent companies, replacing project-by-project uncertainty with the planning stability needed to employ, develop, and retain artists properly.** Flight Path Theatre cannot offer an artist a multi-year contract. Shiny Heart Productions cannot guarantee a touring artist work beyond a single production. Not because the demand is not there. Because the funding

cycle does not allow it. An independent arts company operating on one-to-four-year project grants cannot offer an artist a stable career. It cannot plan a season. It cannot develop a body of work. It can only survive — lurching from application to application, spending artistic energy on grant writing rather than art making, and watching talented practitioners leave for sectors that can offer them certainty. Multi-year operational funding cycles — minimum four years, ideally aligned with the Partnership Framework's eight-year model — would give independent companies the planning horizon to function as genuine cultural organisations rather than perpetual grant applicants. Artists would have careers, not episodes. Companies would have visions, not projects. The sector would retain the practitioners it is currently losing.

CONCLUSION

These three challenges are not separate. They are a single systemic problem expressed in three ways — and they compound each other in a closed loop that, right now, is broken.

A child cannot feel seen if the stories made for them don't reflect their world. Those stories won't be made if the artists who hold those worlds are not resourced, empowered, and structurally supported to create them. And those artists cannot sustain their practice without an infrastructure system that treats their work as the essential public good it is. Fix one without the others and the loop stays broken — for the children, the communities, and the artists who need it most.

I have spent over 20 years working inside this system — as an artist, a producer, a business manager, a drama educator, and a company founder. I have watched talented practitioners leave the sector because they could not afford to stay. I have made work on honorariums because the funding did not stretch further. I have sat with children in Western Sydney who saw themselves on stage for the first time and understood, in that moment, what was at stake. That moment, a child recognising themselves in a story, believing for the first time that culture belongs to them, is not a nice-to-have. It is the whole point. And right now, the system is not designed to guarantee it.

Australia's next National Cultural Policy has a genuine opportunity to move beyond aspiration toward architecture. To treat cultural participation not as a discretionary benefit but as an essential public good, as fundamental to a child's development as education, as central to community wellbeing as health, and as critical to national identity as the stories we choose to tell about ourselves.

I am calling for three structural commitments:

- **A National Children's Arts Strategy:**
 - under **Pillar 5 — Engaging the Audience and**

- **Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story** — that guarantees every child in Australia, regardless of who they are or where they live, access to culturally meaningful art experiences and the opportunity to make art of their own
- **A Structural Equity Framework for all underrepresented groups**, beginning with a CALD Cultural Governance and Leadership Framework:
 - under **Pillar 1 — First Nations First** — as the blueprint
 - **Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story** — that extends the structural commitment already made to First Nations communities to every group this policy names, ensuring that the people who reflect Australia's diversity hold genuine authority over what gets funded, made, and valued
- **A Community Arts Infrastructure Fund**:
 - under **Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure** and
 - **Pillar 3 — Centrality of the Artist** — that treats independent arts companies as the public good they are, funds them accordingly, and ensures the artists who create this country's cultural life can sustain careers worthy of their contribution

Revive set an important direction. The next policy must go further, not just naming the Australia we want to be, but building the systems that make it possible.

Culture shapes what children believe is possible. It shapes what communities believe they are worth. It shapes what a nation understands about itself. A National Cultural Policy is the opportunity to build a system worthy of that responsibility.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Huang is a Vietnamese-Australian arts executive, theatre maker, producer, director, and creative leader, and Founder and Creative Director of Shiny Heart Productions - a Sydney-based children's theatre company making and touring culturally rich, inclusive theatre for children and young people. She also works as Business Manager at Flight Path Theatre and Drama Educator at Inner West Drama, and previously at Shopfront Arts Co-op and O'Grady Drama. She is an active member of Australian Health & Arts Network NSW/ACT, Contemporary Asian Australia Performance, Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and Drama NSW.

Her practice centres culturally responsive theatre for children and young people, with a deep focus on belonging, identity, imagination, and wellbeing. She is committed to making work that ensures children feel seen, heard, valued, and connected, to themselves, to others, and to the wider world.

Her practice is grounded in her Vietnamese-Australian lived experience and a long-term belief that cultural systems must reflect the diversity, complexity, and lived reality of contemporary Australia - not only in who is represented on stage, but in who has the power to create, decide, and lead.

