



Sunday 24 May 2026

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This submission can be published

Minister Tony Burke
Federal Minister for the Arts
Office for the Arts
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport
and the Arts

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Dear Minister Burke

I am writing on behalf of the Ngaruwanajirri committee.

Ngaruwanajirri is a community-controlled Aboriginal art and culture centre based in Wurrumiyanga on the Tiwi Islands. Established in 1994 to support local Tiwi people with disabilities, the art centre currently supports 11 member artists with disabilities, 10 carvers, 4 arts workers and 2 cultural leaders.

For over 32 years, Ngaruwanajirri has provided a safe, respectful space where Tiwi people with disabilities are supported to develop their creative practices, maintain and share culture and language while creating meaningful employment and income opportunities.

The art centre plays a key role in strengthening community life here in Wurrumiyanga. Families and carers know the artists are in a safe place, respected and supported to develop their work and be provided opportunities to sell and exhibit.

Ngaruwanajirri artists and carvers are renowned across Australia for their individual and contemporary interpretation of the ancient traditions of Tiwi art and culture. Artists and carvers continue working with traditional materials of ironwood, bloodwood, stringybark and ochre, while also using canvas, paper, lino block and batik.

In recent years Ngaruwanajirri artists have been finalists in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award and the Wynn Prize, as well as participating in many exhibitions in galleries and museums, contributing to Australia's nationally and internationally recognised Indigenous art and culture sector.

Over the last 50 years, the remote and regional Aboriginal art and culture sector has produced one of the world's unique contemporary art movements. Today the Australian Indigenous art industry generates over \$250 million annually.

While Ngaruwanajirri does the important work of producing and selling artwork, our role goes much further. Our work is central to passing cultural knowledge between generations. The centre contributes to community health and wellbeing, youth engagement, aged and disability care and heritage. It provides opportunities for employment, education, skills development and cultural tourism.

Strong culture is the foundation of strong communities and a thriving art movement.

As an art centre supporting people with disabilities we have a big responsibility in the local community, and are trusted and respected for the level of care and opportunities we provide for artists with disabilities.

As you will know, people living in remote Aboriginal communities experience the most extremes of poverty and social disadvantage in Australia. Our art centre supports the health and well-being of our members, artists and employees through not only being a safe respectful work space, but through providing food security, a place to wash clothes and shower, and the provision of clean uniforms for the carvers each day.

One of our key purposes is supporting Tiwi culture and language. We do this by working with senior culture leaders in the community on Tiwi skills development for the centre's arts workers.

For example in 2026 we ran tunga (bark basket) making workshops with senior Tiwi culture women from the community. They passed this special knowledge on to our women arts workers, one of who subsequently led a follow-up workshop for another local art centre Bima Wear, and for senior girls from the local high school. This was very successful and Ngaruwanajirri is exhibiting painted tunga in Sydney in July 2026 as a direct outcome.

We work directly with the community and its organisations including the two other Tiwi art centres in Wurrumiyanga Bima Wear and Tiwi Design. As the example above with the tunga workshop, we work with the local school Xavier College and run culture workshops for young people regularly.

We also work with the local aged care centre Calavary Care Mulkanya where we run regular activities for the women who live there.

We work with the local training and education board Titeb, and are closely connected to the local Julanimawu community health clinic which we visit several times a week supporting people with medication and health checks.

Annually art sales from Ngaruwanajirri contributes over \$100,000 directly to the members, with sales increasing at least 50% year-on-year for the past three financial years.



While our achievements are significant, they are increasingly difficult to sustain under current funding and policy settings.

To continue this work into the future, there are several key areas where greater support is needed.

Core funding

Ngaruwanajirri is experiencing significant increases in operating costs which impact our viability. These include excessive building insurance expenses, infrastructure and vehicle maintenance, freight for essential materials, and costs of staff travel. These basic costs have risen sharply since 2020 due to the pandemic and global economic pressures.

As a remote art and culture centre, our basic operating costs are around 40% higher than those of urban organisations (Australian Council of Social Services). This gap continues to grow and is acutely felt by our organisation.

For example, diesel now costs more than \$4.20 a litre, yet we must continue to provide transportation for artists with disabilities, and we must continue to gather local materials such as ironwood, stringybark and ochres. We can't stop doing those key activities even if the expenses are excessive. Flights from Bathurst Islands to Darwin are now approaching \$500 return - making necessary trips to town very expensive. And freight costs continue to rise through the local service Sea Swift.

Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) is the only stable operating funding source for art centres and it has not kept pace with rising costs. As a result, Ngaruwanajirri requires a significant increase to support its core operations.

In the past, IVAIS core funding has been sufficient to cover some key operational costs, including the manager's salary and contributing to administrative expenses such as insurance, accounting, auditing, rates, and utilities. In the current environment, it only partially covers those running costs.

Recommendation:

- Increase IVAIS funding to stabilise the sector – we estimate our centre requires a minimum additional \$200,000 in core operational funding per year to continue operating sustainably.
- Increase IVAIS funding so art centres can reduce the commission they take from sales. If we had increased funding the artists would receive more of the money from art sales. Our art centre currently takes 50% commission from sales – an artwork that sells for \$250 means the artist receives \$125.



Staffing and career pathways

Ngaruwanajirri faces ongoing challenges in attracting and retaining qualified local and relocating staff. Recruitment and retention is difficult due to a limited pool of skilled local people and lack of resources to support local Aboriginal staff into leadership roles.

Challenges Ngaruwanajirri face include:

- Competition with other service providers for skilled local staff
- Limited staff housing, which affects our ability to hire or retain staff (local or relocating)
- Impoverished living conditions for local Aboriginal staff including a lack of secure housing and food security, which impacts their ability to work at a consistent level
- Increase in workload because of increased administrative and business requirements.

Recommendations:

- Invest in a Remote Art and Culture Centre Workforce Development Plan that focuses on pathways for managers, arts workers, board directors and cultural leaders
- Develop a National Art and Culture Centre Infrastructure Fund, with minimum standards for climate appropriate, safe, fit-for-purpose buildings, housing, vehicles and digital systems

Artists' livelihoods

Ngaruwanajirri relies on the leadership, knowledge and availability of senior artists and cultural practitioners to work with cultural integrity, teaching and mentoring emerging artists, developing exhibitions and collaborating with national and international institutions.

Senior artists play a vital role in keeping knowledge alive through teaching future generations. Our art and culture centre is not funded to pay for this work, except through occasional projects. Many artists who have taught multiple generations of young artists, largely without pay, live below the poverty line. Without superannuation or accumulated wealth, they face ongoing economic hardship, food insecurity and associated chronic health impacts.

For example our senior arts worker is one of the Tiwi Islands most experienced arts workers. However he has a serious health condition which now limits the types of work he is able to do. He lives in insecure and inappropriate housing with one of the artists with disabilities, without any support. He has little superannuation and with his poor health can no longer make works to the level and scale he used to be able to do, so that he now only produces a few pieces per year so barely makes money from art sales.

Ensuring a stable income for senior artists would recognise their role as community leaders, educators and cultural authorities. It would acknowledge their ongoing cultural, social and economic contributions beyond traditional retirement age.



Recommendations:

- Establish a Basic Income for Artists (BIA) program to provide an unconditional fortnightly stipend for recognised senior remote and regional Aboriginal artists and cultural practitioners
- Create a stipend fund for senior artists and cultural practitioners

Infrastructure and climate change

Fit-for-purpose infrastructure (buildings, housing, vehicles and digital systems) are essential to our centre's operations. Areas of particular need include:

- appropriate climate controlled, insect resistant building for storing art works
- climate controlled workspaces for the artists to work in particularly during the intense weather of the build-up season
- culturally appropriate and accessible bathrooms and kitchen area
- secure, weather resistant garaging for centre vehicles.

Climate change presents an immediate and ongoing risk to Ngaruwanajirri. The Tiwi Islands has already been significantly affected by increased temperatures, cyclones and altered weather patterns resulting in our heritage-listed building The Keeping Place at risk of losing its roof in the next cyclone season.

Adaptation and investment in appropriate infrastructure are essential to ensure the centre can continue operating into the future.

The increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters have also led to hugely expensive, unaffordable insurance premiums, assets becoming uninsurable, the possibility of operating without adequate insurance coverage.

Recommendations:

- Develop a National Art and Culture Centre Infrastructure Fund, with minimum standards for climate appropriate, safe, fit-for-purpose buildings, housing, vehicles and digital systems
- Establish a government-backed insurance program to protect remote art and culture centres from climate-related risks

Cultural heritage

Ngaruwanajirri plays a dual role in supporting the production of contemporary art while also caring for cultural material. Its role is vital to maintaining community access to cultural heritage and Indigenous intellectual property. We have the great privilege and responsibility to work from the heritage-listed Keeping Place - one of Australia's first purpose-built



Aboriginal buildings. We do not have funding or plan in place to maintain the building and its incredible painted ceiling.

Ngaruwanajirri is one of Australia's first disability focused Aboriginal art centres. Our artists are recognised for the vitality and excellence of their work. However we have nowhere to store or archive our collection of works by the artists from its 30 years of operation. The archive lives in a flat plan drawer in the manager's house, which restricts what we can archive and it is inaccessible to the artists and community.

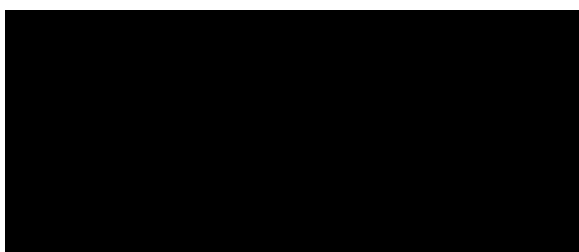
Recommendations:

- Invest in a Remote Art and Culture Centre Workforce Development Plan which specifically builds local skills in archiving, conservation and digital preservation
- Formally recognise remote art and culture centres as custodians of community collections and partners in repatriation and rematriation processes
- Invest in Aboriginal-led approaches to collections management, including culturally appropriate storage, digital infrastructure and access protocols

Ngaruwanajirri supports ANKA, the peak body representing Aboriginal art and culture centres across Arnhem Land, the Kimberley, Darwin–Katherine and the Tiwi Islands and the national alliance of art and culture centre peak bodies' (AACHWA, ANKA, Desart, IACA and Ku Arts) call for a long-term, coordinated approach to strengthening the sector.

Every day, our centre sees how culture, employment, community wellbeing and education are interconnected through our work. Art and culture centres are uniquely placed to bring all these things together. This work must be properly recognised and supported through Australian Government policy.

Regional and remote Aboriginal artists and art and culture centres must have a central place in a strong National Cultural Policy. They are essential to Pillar 1 – First Nations First, the foundational pillar of the Australian Government's current Revive National Cultural Policy. Remote art practice delivers significant cultural, social and economic benefits for communities and contributes far beyond its scale to Australia's cultural standing internationally.



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