

Self-determined First Nations performing arts organisations submission

National Cultural Policy 2026

Submission summary

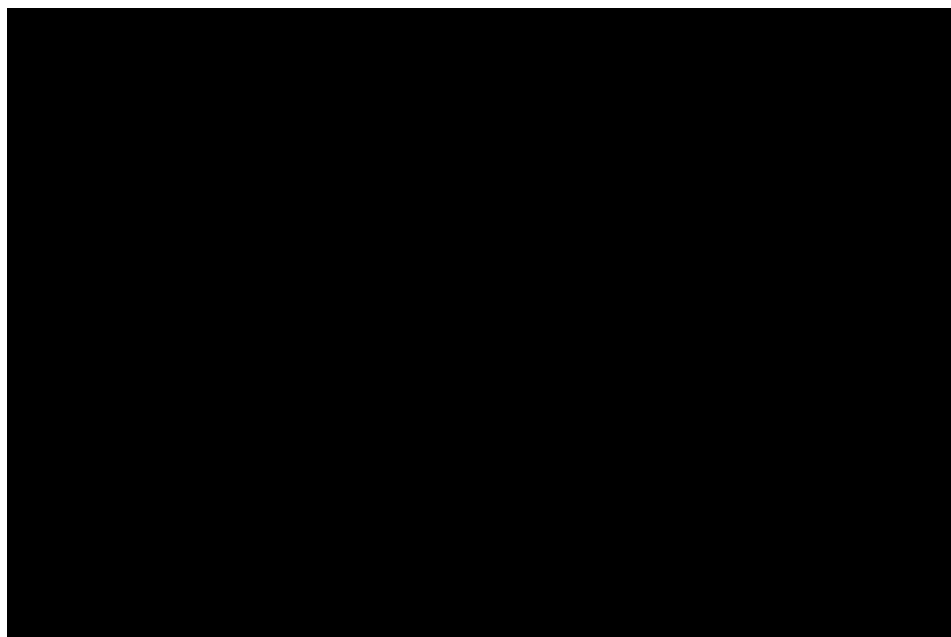
We are First Nations artists, leaders and organisations working across Indigenous-led and controlled dance and theatre practice.

Self-determined First Nations performing arts organisations are essential cultural and social infrastructure within Australia's creative and cultural ecology. These organisations do not simply produce performances. They sustain cultural governance, intergenerational knowledge systems, employment pathways, artistic development, community relationships and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) frameworks.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that connection to culture contributes to improved social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is recognised as a national priority under [Closing the Gap](#). However, there remains limited national data recognising the scale and contribution of the First Nations cultural workforce and the organisations that sustain it.

Self-determined organisations are the core infrastructure of First Nations performing arts practice. They operate as long-term cultural institutions grounded in community accountability, sovereignty and cultural authority.

These organisations also play a critical role internationally. First Nations-led performing arts companies are among Australia's most recognised cultural ambassadors globally through touring, Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange, co-creation, commissioning and cultural diplomacy.



This work is not solely export activity. It is also reciprocal exchange, relationship building and Indigenous diplomacy across Nations globally.

The Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous transnational exchange, export and commissioning strategy between Indigenous artists and organisations across Australia, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand has already been developed over more than twenty years through Indigenous-led organisations, festivals and cultural leaders. The strategy already exists. What is now required is implementation and long-term resourcing.

Current policy settings do not adequately support how self-determined organisations operate in practice.

Key gaps include:

- unstable operational funding
- under-resourced cultural governance and ICIP
- fragmented touring and market development systems
- lack of dedicated First Nations-led international market development infrastructure
- limited workforce and organisational sustainability pathways
- insufficient producer and cultural brokerage capacity
- infrastructure investment prioritising buildings over people, governance and practice.

Despite the scale and maturity of the sector, there remains no properly resourced federally funded small-to-medium First Nations performing arts sector. This creates a significant structural gap between independent practice and major institutions.

We call for:

- long-term operational investment for self-determined First Nations organisations
- dedicated commissioning systems
- full resourcing of cultural governance and ICIP
- dedicated First Nations-led touring and market development infrastructure
- implementation support for the Tri-Nations strategy
- workforce and organisational sustainability pathways
- investment in technical, production and touring workforce development
- funding for a national First Nations performing arts workforce feasibility study and data framework.

Self-determined First Nations organisations are not supplementary to Australia's cultural system. They are foundational cultural institutions sustaining governance, workforce, cultural continuity, international relationships and community infrastructure across generations.

The work is already happening.

The systems must now match it.

Submission

Introduction

We are First Nations artists, leaders and organisations working across Indigenous-led and controlled dance and theatre practice.

The following companies have contributed to this submission:

- Bangarra Dance Theatre
- BlakDance
- ILBIJERRI Theatre Company
- Moogahlin Performing Arts
- Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company
- Karul Projects Dance Theatre
- Joel Bray Dance



The First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network (FNPAC) has worked collectively for many years to represent the interests and voices of federally funded self-determined First Nations organisations across the country.

Our organisations give voice to First Nations peoples by:

- developing and creating works that speak to who we are
- telling our stories our way
- creating employment and development pathways for First Nations artists and arts workers
- determining the stories that need to be told in contemporary Australia.

We are essential cultural infrastructure within Australia's creative and cultural ecology.

Our organisations are governed and led by First Nations peoples and our fundamental purpose centres on First Nations culture.

These organisations do not simply produce performances. They sustain:

- cultural governance
- intergenerational knowledge systems
- employment pathways
- artistic development
- community relationships
- climate resilience practices
- Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) frameworks.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that connection to culture contributes to improved social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is recognised as a national priority under Closing the Gap.

Despite this, there remains limited national data recognising the scale and contribution of the First Nations cultural workforce and the organisations that sustain it.

Self-determined organisations are the core infrastructure of First Nations performing arts practice. They operate as long term cultural institutions grounded in:

- community accountability
- sovereignty
- cultural authority.

These organisations play a critical role nationally and internationally across both Indigenous-led and broader performing arts ecologies.

The next phase of Revive must move beyond symbolic recognition toward long-term structural investment in First Nations-led organisations as enduring cultural institutions.

The role of self-determined organisations

Self-determined organisations:

- develop and sustain First Nations artists, producers, technicians and cultural workforce
- produce and present nationally and internationally recognised First Nations work
- maintain cultural governance and accountability
- sustain long-term relationships with communities and Country
- create pathways for emerging First Nations artists and independent practice
- lead ICIP frameworks
- carry knowledge transmission and intergenerational cultural leadership
- undertake international exchange, touring and Indigenous diplomacy
- maintain cultural continuity through relationships to Country and community.

These organisations operate as long-term cultural infrastructure, not project based entities.

They provide continuity, cultural authority and sector leadership that cannot be replicated through short term or transactional funding approaches.

International exchange, export and Indigenous diplomacy

Self-determined First Nations organisations have developed substantial international relationships and touring pathways over decades through sustained cultural exchange and artistic excellence.

This work includes:

- international touring
- Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange
- co-creation and residency models
- long-term presenter relationships
- global market development
- cultural diplomacy and relationship building.

Importantly, the Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous transnational exchange platform between Indigenous artists and organisations across Australia, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand has already developed a robust sector-led strategy for Indigenous exchange, export, commissioning and market development over more than twenty years.

This strategy has been collectively shaped by Indigenous-led organisations, artists, festivals, producers and presenters across the three Nations and provides an existing framework for:

- reciprocal exchange
- commissioning
- touring
- market development
- Indigenous diplomacy.

Despite this work, there has never been sustained dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure embedded within Creative Australia's international systems.

Current export frameworks often fail to recognise:

- cultural governance requirements
- ICIP responsibilities
- long-term relationship maintenance
- producer and cultural brokerage labour
- climate and geographic realities impacting touring
- the additional costs associated with culturally grounded exchange models.

Many First Nations organisations are carrying international demand without the long-term infrastructure required to sustain it. This creates significant strain on workforce, governance and organisational sustainability.

The strategy already exists. What is now required is implementation and long-term resourcing.

Climate, Country and cultural infrastructure

For First Nations peoples, Country is not separate from culture.

Land, sea and sky hold story, knowledge, ceremony and cultural responsibility. Climate change, biodiversity loss and extractive industries therefore directly threaten First Nations cultural continuity and cultural practice.

Self-determined First Nations organisations carry significant responsibility in maintaining and transmitting cultural knowledge connected to:

- Country
- community
- environmental stewardship.

Climate adaptation and cultural adaptation cannot be separated within First Nations cultural practice.

As identified in emerging climate and culture policy frameworks, culture must be understood as part of Australia's resilience infrastructure.

This includes:

- sustaining cultural knowledge systems
- strengthening community resilience
- maintaining intergenerational knowledge transmission
- supporting regenerative cultural practice
- enabling long-term place-based relationships and exchange.

Climate adaptation and cultural adaptation cannot be separated within First Nations cultural practice.

Integrated system principles

First Nations cultural governance, workforce development, climate resilience and international exchange should operate as integrated principles across all pillars of the National Cultural Policy rather than isolated initiatives.

This includes:

- commissioning
- touring
- infrastructure
- international engagement
- climate adaptation
- audience development
- workforce systems
- education and knowledge transmission
- community resilience.

First Nations performing arts organisations are not solely cultural producers. They are systems of:

- governance
- employment
- diplomacy
- knowledge transmission
- civic infrastructure.

To fully realise *Revive and Closing the Gap*, policy settings must move beyond symbolic recognition toward integrated implementation frameworks that support how self-determined First Nations cultural institutions operate in practice.

The policy gap

Despite the critical role of self-determined organisations:

- many organisations continue to operate without stable long-term operational funding
- cultural governance and ICIP remain under resourced
- workforce development is not structurally embedded
- commissioning pathways remain inconsistent
- international market development support is fragmented and under resourced
- touring and audience systems do not adequately support culturally grounded practice
- infrastructure investment often prioritises buildings over people, governance and practice
- there remains no dedicated national First Nations performing arts workforce data framework.

These gaps limit the capacity of First Nations organisations to sustain:

- artists
- workforce
- touring
- international cultural leadership
- organisational continuity.

This is not a workforce shortage. It is a failure to recognise and structure the systems and cultural labour already sustaining the sector.

Policy priorities

To fully realise *Revive* and Closing the Gap commitments, policy implementation should prioritise:

- long-term operational investment for self-determined First Nations organisations
- First Nations-led commissioning systems and creation pathways
- embedded workforce development across producing, technical, touring and leadership roles, including partnerships with First Nations-led training infrastructure and vocational workforce development initiatives
- full resourcing of cultural governance, protocol and ICIP frameworks
- dedicated First Nations international market development and touring infrastructure
- investment in Indigenous-led exchange and cultural diplomacy
- implementation and resourcing of the Tri-Nations Indigenous transnational exchange, export and commissioning strategy
- support for producer and cultural brokerage capacity
- coordinated national touring and audience development systems
- pathways from project funding to long-term sustainability and institutional growth
- funding for a national First Nations performing arts workforce feasibility study and data framework to properly capture the scale, needs and contribution of the sector
- integration of climate resilience and sustainability planning within cultural infrastructure and touring systems.

International exchange, workforce development and cultural governance should operate as integrated priorities across all areas of cultural policy.

Alignment with National Priorities

This work directly aligns with:

- Pillar 1: First Nations First and Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure of *Revive*
- Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4
- emerging national climate and resilience policy directions
- Australia's commitments under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).



Including the rights of Indigenous peoples to:

- maintain and strengthen cultural institutions
- protect and develop cultural heritage and knowledge systems
- exercise self-determination in cultural development
- maintain international relationships between Indigenous peoples.

Specific recommendations

We recommend:

- the establishment of a coordinated First Nations performing arts workforce framework
- dedicated multi-year operational investment pathways for self-determined First Nations organisations
- implementation funding for the Tri-Nations Indigenous transnational exchange, export and commissioning strategy
- dedicated First Nations-led international market development infrastructure within Creative Australia
- embedding ICIP and cultural governance requirements across all commissioning, touring and international exchange systems
- investment in technical, producing and touring workforce development pathways
- support for First Nations-led training infrastructure including NAISDA and new First Nations-led infrastructure to be developed
- coordinated national touring and audience development systems for First Nations work
- investment models prioritising people, governance and cultural practice alongside infrastructure
- improved national data collection and workforce mapping for the First Nations performing arts sector.

Conclusion

Self-determined First Nations performing arts organisations are not supplementary to Australia's cultural system. They are foundational cultural institutions.

They sustain:

- artists
- communities
- governance systems
- workforce

- touring networks
- environmental knowledge systems
- international cultural relationships

across generations.

First Nations performing arts organisations are already demonstrating internationally recognised models of:

- cultural leadership
- resilience
- exchange
- innovation.

The challenge for the next National Cultural Policy is whether Australia's systems evolve to properly sustain, resource and recognise the work that is already occurring.

The work is already happening.

The systems must now match it.