

24 May 2026

Dear Minister Burke,

I'm writing to you in response to the call out on the new Cultural Policy.

I feel the need to express to you and the advisory committee panel why I believe community arts and cultural development should have a place at the table and further; express my desire to tell you why I believe that access to the arts should be given full consideration and be accessible to all people, **all of us** and with no disrespect intended, not just the more fortunate/privileged.

I was first introduced to devised theatre - theatre that spoke to me, way back when I was in my twenties. I was offered a ticket to see a little theatre group, called Somebody's Daughter Theatre, do a performance at the CUB Malthouse in Melbourne. It was the tale of love, loss, hope and light. I was amazed – my story performed by women who had lived and knew what I knew. It was clever and I was inspired.

However, by the time I was 40 I was in terrible pain emotionally. I had nothing but tears and regrets.

I was by then hopelessly addicted to heroin, my dreams of ever becoming what was compelled over my life to do - **to tell stories**, truthful and painful stories - were all but gone.

So, they locked me up at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (Melbourne's maximum-security Prison), I lost my teenage daughter, my home, my dog.

A sad state of affairs that, to have extra exclusion again, I now have a Criminal Reference Number and less opportunity than ever before...but I had found community there with all these women who'd been raised in poverty, domestic abuse, dysfunctional families, mostly the same stories. AND THEN

Here I was standing with that same little theatre group that had caught my eye so many years ago!

Within that safe space...the joy and buzz of the artists and all they introduced us to. I was so broken, shy and scared to speak above a whisper, my whole life was shaped by the conservative view that art is for artists, but **we were all artists now**.

We sat and shared our stories of self-harm, addiction, sexual abuse and so much pain. Stories of lost children and loneliness. I was encouraged to write, to speak up and the women heard me and valued what I had to say when no one else ever had.

And then I was the centre of attention, I was in the play, and many more going forward, and I felt proud and my family looked on with pride, not shame.

The audience was feeling what I had felt. I could shout out loud of my fears, hopes dreams, grief and my deep deep remorse. And I was thanked by that audience with tears in their eyes and I could thank them for hearing me.

Had I have not gone to prison I would never have been introduced to the arts.

Given council to follow my dreams (SDTC) when I asked whether I should continue writing, I successfully completed my Cert. 4 and now have a Diploma in Professional Writing and Editing with Swinburne University and am currently chipping away at a B.A in Professional Writing. I am still being heard. I am happy, I am healthy and am admired. In this role I can and do offer my life stories, my words, on behalf of and in unity with those women who, like me, didn't find the world a place where they could become all that they could be.

Having been out of prison now for over 20 years, I have been invited by SDTC to work as an emerging artist and mentor to other women who have been through the system. This has been the most important project of all for me. A time in my life where I can say I've made it and although still have lots to do, I am where I should be.

Sir, remorse and guilt, trauma and fear never go away, I am now 61 years old and being exposed to arts and culture have given me permission to live with those feelings and know that I'm a very special person, like all of us who have been tarred with the brush of being less fortunate or of different cultural beliefs than the next person.

I truly believe that having lived-in inner-city working-class suburbs all of my life and noticing gentrification rubbing shoulders with said others, is making life a whole lot harder for the young, we are being taught to condone rather than empathise.

All I would like to see is equality and a chance for woman, girls, children who come after me to be able to experience and engage with the arts and culture and for them to have the best possible crack at the second chances of life.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours most sincerely
Catherine Brigal.