



The Hon Tony Burke MP

Minister for the Arts

Australian Government

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

GPO Box 594

Canberra ACT 2601

Re: Submission to the Australian Government's National Cultural Policy Review (REVIVE)

1. Introduction

Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company (SDTC) strongly supports the national Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) alliance submission and its recommendations.

That submission clearly articulates the structural case: that CACD is a foundational, cross-sector cultural practice delivering outcomes in social cohesion, participation, and community resilience, yet remains under-recognised and under-resourced within national cultural policy.

This supplementary response does not seek to repeat or pursue those arguments. Instead, it seeks to ground them, provide an operational context, and highlight the importance of well-considered policy settings.

We write from within a specific context: over four decades of theatre-making with women, young people and gender-diverse people impacted by incarceration, violence, trauma, and systemic exclusion. Our work takes place in prisons, in transitional spaces, and in community settings where cultural participation is rarely assumed, but profoundly needed.

From this position, we want to make visible something that policy frameworks often struggle to hold, that being arts and cultural practice in these contexts is not an “add-on”, it is part of how people make sense of themselves, reconnect with others, and find a way back into community life.

This is where the argument for CACD as “relational infrastructure” becomes real. At a policy level, there is already broad agreement that arts and culture contribute to wellbeing, inclusion and cohesion. The challenge is no longer evidencing value; it is designing policy systems capable of sustaining that value over time.

What we offer here is an account of what happens when those systems do not align with practice.

While Community Arts and Cultural Development is increasingly referenced within national cultural policy, its methodologies, conditions and measures of success are not always consistently understood across assessment and decision-making contexts.

This creates a risk that work grounded in relational, long-term practice - particularly in justice and community settings is assessed through frameworks that do not fully reflect its nature, complexity or impact.

This submission seeks to contribute to a more informed understanding of this practice in order to support effective policy and funding design.

2. About Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company

Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company (SDTC) is one of Australia's longest-running community-engaged theatre and arts practice companies, with over forty years of continuous practice working alongside women impacted by incarceration, family violence, trauma, and social exclusion, as well as disengaged and marginalised young people.

Founded on principles of access, equity and collective storytelling, SDTC has consistently operated at the intersection of arts practice and social justice. The company has developed a distinct methodology grounded in long-term, relational engagement, working within prisons, post-release environments, and community settings to co-create theatre and arts practice with participants whose voices are often excluded and who do not have access to mainstream cultural platforms.

SDTC's work is recognised nationally for its contribution to socially engaged arts practice and its sustained engagement within justice settings. This includes over 25 years of dedicated practice working with marginalised and disengaged young people, including the establishment of *HighWater Theatre*, the company's first offspring initiative in Wodonga followed by *Nobody's Fool Theatre* in Geelong.

Work developed through this model has received national recognition, including an Australian Community Partnerships Award and a Violence Prevention Award, demonstrating the capacity of community-engaged theatre to achieve both artistic excellence and social impact.

The company has built enduring partnerships across corrections, education, health and community sectors, and is frequently engaged as a collaborator in cross-sector initiatives addressing social inclusion, wellbeing and reintegration.

SDTC's practice is characterised by:

- trauma-informed, participant-led creative processes
- long-term partnerships with justice, education and community service systems
- a commitment to cultural participation as a right, not a privilege
- the development of high-quality, artistically rigorous work that centres lived experience while challenging dominant narratives

Over four decades, the company has worked with thousands of participants, many of whom face overlapping forms of marginalisation, including incarceration, unstable housing, mental health challenges and lived and living experiences of violence. Through this work, SDTC has developed a significant and meaningful understanding of the role that arts and cultural practice can play in supporting identity, connection, re-engagement and reintegration.

This sustained, place-based practice positions SDTC as both a cultural organisation and a contributor to broader social outcomes - operating across the boundaries of arts, justice, education, health and community systems.

It is from this position, embedded in both cultural practice and complex social environments that we offer the reflections in this submission.

3. The reality...

In many of the environments we work in, the idea of “audience” does not easily apply. Public presentation is often not appropriate or even possible. Outcomes are not immediately visible. Progress is rarely linear.

What exists instead is a slow, relational process.

Participants come into a room carrying histories of violence, institutionalisation, and disconnection. Trust is not assumed. Voice has often been suppressed or shaped by systems that reward compliance over expression.

The work begins there.

Over months and years, story-telling through theatre and arts practice becomes a way to:

- test language and self-expression
- imagine alternative identities beyond stigma
- practise listening, collaboration, and reciprocity
- sit with complexity rather than simplify it

What emerges is not just a performance outcome, but a shift in how people see themselves and each other.

Participants develop emotional literacy. They build confidence in their own voice. They begin to re-author their stories (not in a superficial sense), in a way that can support safer relationships and pathways beyond the institution.

These are cultural outcomes.

They are also social, emotional, and civic outcomes.

But they are not easily captured within traditional cultural metrics.

4. The limitations...

The national CACD submission makes clear that the sector already operates across multiple policy domains.

Our experience confirms that this is not theoretical, it is embedded in everyday practice.

Yet the systems that fund and assess this work remain largely siloed.

Programs like ours often encounter what we describe as a form of institutional drift:

- **In arts contexts, the work is seen as social or therapeutic**
- **In justice contexts, it is seen as creative or recreational**
- **In health contexts, it is seen as ancillary to core service delivery**

As a result, it is consistently valued but inconsistently owned.

The outcome is a structural gap where responsibility is diffuse, and sustainability becomes precarious.

This is not a question of better applications, clearer framing, or more compelling storytelling. It is a question of policy design.

When work is inherently cross-sector, but funding architecture is not, sustainability becomes structurally undermined.

Australia does not lack evidence of the value of community-engaged arts practice. What is lacking is the courage or political will to act on this evidence through the implementation integrated policy and investment settings that recognise and sustain that value across systems.

5. The sustainability rethink...

Within current cultural policy language, sustainability is frequently framed in terms of:

- viable careers for artists
- growth and reach of the sector
- audience development and markets

These are important considerations. However, they do not fully account for the nature of CACD work in justice settings.

For organisations like SDTC, sustainability is not primarily about scaling output or expanding audiences.

It is about maintaining presence.

Presence in communities where:

- trust takes years to build
- engagement is irregular and fragile
- participants may move in and out of systems
- relationships must be held carefully and consistently

In this context, continuity is not a by-product of the work, it is the work.

Short-term, project-based funding models struggle to support this form of practice. They prioritise visible outputs within fixed timelines, while the most significant outcomes of our work are slow, relational, and often only visible to the limited number of participants and audiences directly engaged in the work — sometimes as few as several hundred people.

This creates an ongoing tension where the work that requires the greatest stability is funded in the most unstable way.

A more accurate definition of sustainability in this context would recognise:

- continuity of relationships as an outcome in itself
- long-term community presence as a core indicator of success
- organisational stability as a precondition for impact

Without this shift, sustainability will continue to be measured in ways that are fundamentally misaligned with practice.

6. The Actual Outcomes...

Much of the impact of justice-based arts practice sits beyond what is typically measured.

We can report on:

- number of workshops delivered
- attendance and participation rates
- creative outputs developed

But these are not the outcomes that matter most.

What matters are the changes that occur beneath or alongside those outputs:

- a participant choosing to speak when they previously withdrew
- a group negotiating conflict without escalation
- a shift from individual isolation to collective responsibility
- the development of language to describe complex emotional states

Over time, these changes contribute to:

- safer interpersonal environments
- improved emotional regulation
- stronger capacity for reintegration into community life

These outcomes align with broader government priorities, including social cohesion, community safety, and wellbeing. However, they are not easily quantified, nor do they fit neatly within existing assessment frameworks.

This disconnect between what is measured and what is meaningful continues to shape how the work is perceived and resourced.

To address this, evaluation frameworks must expand beyond outputs and simple participation metrics to include:

- qualitative and narrative evidence
- longitudinal change
- participant-defined outcomes
- relational indicators such as trust, safety and agency

7. The Artistic Excellence within Quality Outcomes...

It is critical to emphasise that the work described in this submission is not only defined by its social or relational outcomes. It is also defined by the **quality and integrity of the artistic work produced**.

There is a persistent misconception within policy and funding contexts that community-engaged arts practice (even more so within justice-based settings) must necessarily prioritise social outcomes at the expense of artistic ambition and quality. Our experience demonstrates the opposite.

High-quality artistic outcomes are not incidental to this work, they are in fact fundamental to its success.

The creation of rigorous, challenging and aesthetically strong theatre is what enables participants to:

- engage deeply and sustain involvement over time
- experience themselves as artists, not just service users or program participants
- produce work that holds meaning both within and beyond the immediate context
- challenge dominant narratives through craft, structure and performance

Artistic rigour creates the conditions for transformation.

When participants are held within a process that demands creative discipline, collaboration, and artistic risk, the work moves beyond self-expression alone and into shared cultural production.

This distinction is critical. It shifts the work from being viewed as therapeutic or participatory into being recognised as legitimate cultural practice.

For audiences, where public outcomes are possible — the quality of the artistic work is equally important. It is through strong artistic outcomes that the work:

- disrupts assumptions about who is seen as an artist
- reframes narratives about incarceration and marginalisation
- creates necessary moments of recognition, discomfort and empathy
- contributes to broader cultural dialogue

Without artistic excellence, these shifts are significantly diminished.

The commitment to high-quality artistic outcomes also reinforces the responsibilities placed on practitioners. Facilitators in this context are not only managing complex group dynamics; they are also directing, dramaturging, and shaping work to a professional artistic standard, often within highly constrained environments.

This has direct implications for:

- workforce capability and training
- timeframes required to develop work
- funding models that allow for iterative creative processes

Importantly, the pursuit of artistic quality cannot be separated from the relational nature of CACD practice. Trust, continuity and participant agency are not in tension with artistic excellence — they are the conditions that make it possible.

Where policy frameworks position social outcomes and artistic outcomes as competing priorities, they risk undermining both.

A more accurate framing is that artistic excellence is the mechanism through which social and relational outcomes are realised. These don't happen by chance, they are deliberate, structured and effective.

Recognising this has practical implications for how work is funded, assessed and supported. It requires:

- valuing artistic process, not just outputs
- recognising co-created work as professionally rigorous
- resourcing time for development, rehearsal and refinement
- supporting practitioners to balance artistic leadership with community-led practice

For organisations like Somebody's Daughter, the integrity of the artistic work is inseparable from the integrity of the outcomes it produces.

8. The workforce...

Another dimension that is often under-recognised is the workforce required to deliver this practice.

Working in prison and other high-complexity settings requires:

- advanced facilitation skills
- trauma-informed approaches
- emotional resilience
- long-term relationship building
- artistic excellence

Artists in these roles are not only creative practitioners; they are also navigating systems, holding group dynamics, and managing the emotional weight of the environments in which they work.

Despite this, employment structures remain largely short-term and project-based.

This has consequences not only for workforce wellbeing, but for the continuity and integrity of the work itself. Relationships are disrupted, knowledge is lost, and organisations spend significant energy re-establishing capacity rather than deepening impact.

If CACD is to be recognised as essential infrastructure, its workforce must be supported accordingly.

This includes:

- access to supervision and reflective practice
- recognition of trauma-exposed roles

- stable employment pathways
- investment in training and knowledge transfer across generations of practitioners

Without this, the sector risks both burnout and the erosion of practice knowledge built over decades.

9. The Risk and Visibility...

Justice-based arts practice also exists within a broader political and cultural environment.

Work with marginalised communities, particularly those connected to the justice system - can be perceived as sensitive or high-risk. In an environment where funding decisions are increasingly influenced by reputational considerations, this creates additional pressure.

Programs that engage deeply with contested narratives or structural inequality may be seen as more difficult to support, despite their alignment with policy goals around inclusion and social cohesion.

The effect is subtle but significant: the communities most in need of meaningful cultural participation are often those whose work is hardest to sustain within current systems.

This dynamic reinforces, rather than disrupts, existing inequalities.

If cultural policy is to meaningfully deliver on equity, it must be capable of:

- supporting work in politically complex contexts
- valuing dissenting or challenging narratives
- recognising that social cohesion is not achieved through avoidance of conflict, but through structured engagement with difference

10. The Change and What it Looks Like...

The CACD submission provides a clear and comprehensive set of recommendations.

From the perspective of *Somebody's Daughter*, we emphasise the importance of implementation in three key areas.

9a Cross-portfolio alignment

Where work sits across arts, justice, health, and education funding and policy must also sit across these domains. Without mechanisms that actively align portfolios, responsibility will continue to be fragmented, and programs will remain vulnerable.

9b Long-term, relational investment

Investment models must reflect the timeframes of the work. Multi-year, place-based funding is essential to sustain trust, build capacity, and achieve meaningful outcomes.

9c Recognition of relational outcomes

Evaluation frameworks must evolve to recognise that impact in CACD is often:

- qualitative
- long-term
- embedded in relationships rather than outputs

9d Recognition of community-engaged arts practice as an artform

Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) must be recognised not only as a mechanism for social or community outcomes, but as a distinct and rigorous artistic practice in its own right.

Current funding and assessment frameworks often position community-engaged work as secondary to dominant artforms, applying criteria that do not reflect its methodologies, including co-creation, shared authorship and process-led development.

Recognising CACD as an artform would:

- support assessment frameworks aligned to participatory and relational practice
- strengthen the legitimacy of artists working in community and justice contexts
- enable funding models that reflect how this work is developed and presented

Without this recognition, CACD risks continued undervaluation within the cultural system. With it, it can be properly positioned as a core contributor to Australia's cultural life.

11. Conclusion

The CACD sector submission makes a compelling case that community-engaged cultural practice is central to Australia's cultural future.

Our experience within justice settings reinforces that argument, and adds a layer of urgency.

In the environments we work in, arts and cultural practice is not peripheral. It is part of how people rebuild identity, restore connection, and re-enter community life.

These are not abstract outcomes. They are foundational to a functioning, cohesive society.

If the next iteration of REVIVE is to genuinely deliver on its commitments to participation, equity, and social cohesion, then this work must be understood not only in principle, but in practice.

That means:

- recognising its complexity
- aligning policy settings to support it
- and investing in its long-term sustainability

Without this, the burden of delivering these outcomes will continue to sit with organisations and practitioners operating at the edges of the system, rather than being supported as the core cultural work that it is.

Cultural policy in Australia has reached a point of maturity where the question is no longer whether arts and culture matter, but whether our systems are capable of sustaining the kinds of practice that evidence shows matter most.

As always, we welcome the opportunity to meet and speak with policy and decision makers regarding the development of our next cultural policy for Australia.

On behalf of the Somebody's Daughter Theatre Company,

Yours sincerely,



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