

23 May 2026

Canberra Youth Theatre

National Cultural Policy Submission

Youth arts organisations are essential cultural infrastructure. We are where young people first encounter serious artistic practice, develop their creative voice, and begin pathways into lifelong cultural participation and professional careers. Yet youth arts remains structurally invisible within national policy settings — falling between education, community engagement and professional arts investment. It is time for that to change.

About Canberra Youth Theatre

Canberra Youth Theatre is one of Australia's leading youth arts companies. For over 50 years, we have occupied a rare and vital place in Australia's cultural landscape — a home where young people wrestle with urgent questions, artistic risk is celebrated, and the next generation of artists and audiences flourish.

Our mission is to empower young people and emerging artists to create bold new works alongside professional creatives — amplifying youth voices, telling stories that matter to them, and building the skills and opportunities that transform artists, audiences, and communities. From the first spark of an idea through to full production, we centre young people in the creative process — engaging them as active collaborators in the creation of new works that authentically represent their lived experiences.

We commission ambitious new Australian theatre, build clear pathways from participation to professional practice, and strive to be a place where young people and emerging artists can thrive, free from barriers to opportunity, creativity, or artistic innovation.

Our creative engagement programs work to ensure all young people in our region can access the arts and benefit from its profound social impacts. We provide a platform for young and emerging artists to gain invaluable professional experience, develop their craft, and shape the future of the Australian arts sector.

Canberra Youth Theatre is the voice of youth expressed through intelligent and challenging theatre.

Signatory to the National Youth Arts Network Submission

Canberra Youth Theatre is a proud contributor and signatory to the submission made by the National Youth Arts Network. We fully endorse its analysis and its recommendations, and we urge the Government to adopt them in full.

The youth arts sector calls for four foundational changes to Australia's national cultural policy framework. Canberra Youth Theatre supports each of them unreservedly:

1. **Children and Young People to be recognised as a dedicated pillar of the National Cultural Policy**, establishing it as a professional arts practice and essential cultural infrastructure in its own right — distinct from education, community service, and wellbeing, though complementary to all three.
2. **A sustained national funding stream for youth arts organisations**, administered by Creative Australia, providing multi-year operational investment so that organisations can plan, sustain relationships, and deliver work with lasting impact.
3. **A cross-portfolio funding stream for youth arts participation and engagement**, co-managed alongside Health, Education, Employment, Youth Justice, and Social Services — reflecting the genuine breadth of what youth arts organisations deliver and the communities they serve.
4. **A standing Youth Advisory Committee within Creative Australia**, managed independently by the youth arts sector and reflecting the diversity of young Australians — ensuring young people have a direct and sustained voice in national cultural decision-making.

This submission provides Canberra Youth Theatre's perspective on why these recommendations matter, grounded in our own practice and in the specific cultural and policy context of the ACT.

What is Youth Arts?

Youth arts is the professional practice of creating opportunities for young people to participate in, and actively shape, Australia's cultural life — producing excellent artistic work that contributes to our social and cultural landscape.

Youth arts organisations sit at the intersection of culture, community and the professional arts sector. We work with children and young people not as students or as audiences-in-waiting — but as artists, collaborators and contributors. We ensure young Australians have access to working professional artists, meaningful creative participation, and pathways into the nation's cultural future.

Youth arts must not be conflated with education. Education is vital, and youth arts organisations value our relationships with schools and education systems. But our philosophical foundation is different. We treat young people as practicing artists now — capable of collaboration, authorship, risk-taking and cultural contribution. The work we create together is not a rehearsal for future cultural participation. It is a genuine act of it.

Youth arts is a professional arts practice. It is commissioned, presented, reviewed and internationally recognised as such. The organisations that deliver it are arts organisations — specialist, experienced, and essential to the vitality of the sector as a whole. Policy must reflect

this. Conflating youth arts with education or community wellbeing — however well-intentioned — systematically undervalues the work and distorts the investment decisions that flow from it.

Responses to the Five Pillars

Pillar 1 — First Nations First

Youth arts organisations have a particular responsibility in relation to First Nations young people and culture. This sector works with young people during the formative stages of artistic and cultural identity — the period in which creative authority, representation and cultural visibility shape how young people understand themselves and their place in Australian society.

This work requires sustained relationships, long-term trust and appropriate resourcing. It cannot be achieved through short-term projects or symbolic inclusion. We support increased investment in First Nations-led youth arts programs and organisations, including regionally embedded practice and community-led cultural development.

Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story

Young people's stories are central to contemporary Australian culture, yet they are routinely marginalised or mediated through adult perspectives. Youth arts organisations create spaces where young people create and present their own stories — and where audiences encounter those stories as artistic experiences.

Access to arts participation remains deeply unequal. A young person's ability to engage with artistic practice is shaped by geography, income, school resourcing, disability, cultural background and social circumstances. Youth arts organisations actively work to remove these barriers — but this work carries real cost. Programs designed to reach young people who would otherwise be excluded require greater investment per participant than those serving communities already well-connected to arts and culture. If equity is a genuine national priority, funding frameworks must reflect what it actually costs to deliver it.

Pillar 3 — Centrality of the Artist

The next National Cultural Policy should explicitly recognise young and emerging artists as arts workers, and youth arts practitioners as a specialised professional workforce.

Youth arts organisations provide professional-standard artistic development at the exact moment many emerging artists most need support — when school-based arts engagement has ended, tertiary pathways are often unaffordable or unavailable, and professional companies rarely employ artists at this early career stage. Through residencies, studio programs, mentored productions and commissions, we sustain the pathway that would otherwise disappear. This is essential professional development for the sustainability of our sector, and it should be recognised and resourced accordingly.

Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Infrastructure is not only buildings. It is also the network of organisations, relationships and systems that enable cultural participation to begin, continue and renew across generations.

Youth arts organisations are the foundations of strong cultural infrastructure. We sustain the pathway from early creative participation to professional artistic practice. We nurture experimentation, develop future sector workers, and create opportunities for artistic risk at a scale often impossible within larger institutions.

Without youth arts infrastructure, the broader sector contracts. The future workforce becomes less diverse. Participation narrows. Major institutions lose the pipeline of artists and audiences that sustains them. Small-to-medium arts organisations — youth arts organisations among them — consistently deliver high levels of reach and community impact relative to their investment. Yet they remain chronically under-resourced, and too often dependent on short-term project funding that prevents the very long-term relationship-building on which their work depends.

Pillar 5 — Engaging the Audience

Audiences are developed through participation. The strongest predictor of lifelong cultural engagement is meaningful creative involvement from an early age. Young people who create work become audiences, advocates, donors, collaborators and future cultural leaders. When young people make artistic work, entire communities engage alongside them.

The next National Cultural Policy should not frame young people primarily as future audiences. They are audiences now. They are artists now. They are cultural participants now.

Young People's Cultural Rights

The case for investing in youth arts is not only strategic, it is also a matter of rights.

Article 31 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* — to which Australia is a signatory — recognises the right of every child and young person to participate freely in cultural life and the arts, and calls on governments to encourage and promote opportunities for this participation.

Youth arts organisations are one of the primary mechanisms through which Australia fulfils this obligation. When youth arts organisations are inadequately resourced, or when young people are excluded from cultural participation by financial or geographic barriers, Australia is not merely missing a cultural opportunity — it is failing to meet its obligations to its youngest citizens.

Recognising youth arts as essential cultural infrastructure is not peripheral to the National Cultural Policy's ambitions. It is foundational to them.

Recommendations

Canberra Youth Theatre endorses the key recommendations of the National Youth Arts Network co-signed submission in full, and calls on the Federal Government to act on each of them. In support of that collective position, we make the following specific recommendations:

1. Establish a dedicated Youth Arts pillar within the National Cultural Policy

Youth arts must be recognised as a vital sector in its own right — not as something that sits invisibly between professional arts practice, education and wellbeing. A dedicated pillar would establish youth arts as a professional arts practice distinct from education and community service, recognise youth arts organisations as essential cultural infrastructure, and create a coherent policy framework for consistent investment decisions.

2. Establish a sustained national funding stream for youth arts organisations

A dedicated, multi-year funding stream for youth arts organisations should be established within Creative Australia, providing operational investment — not just project funding. This stream should be structured to support the organisational stability that long-term cultural outcomes require.

3. Establish a cross-portfolio funding stream for youth arts participation

A targeted cross-portfolio stream should be co-managed by Creative Australia alongside Health, Education, Employment, Youth Justice, and Social Services. This would reflect the genuine breadth of what youth arts organisations deliver, and direct investment to organisations with the deepest community relationships and the most direct access to young people who need to be seen and heard.

4. Establish a Youth Advisory Committee within Creative Australia

A standing Youth Advisory Committee should be established within Creative Australia, managed independently by the youth arts sector and reflecting the diversity of young Australians. At Canberra Youth Theatre, our Youth Creative Council embeds young people in our own governance and programming decisions. The same principle should apply nationally — not as token consultation, but as genuine contributors to cultural policy.

Conclusion

Australia's cultural future depends on the conditions in which young people encounter artistic practice.

Youth arts organisations create those conditions. We are where participation begins. Where barriers are removed. Where emerging artists develop their voice. Where audiences are formed. Where future cultural workers first experience belonging in the arts sector.

We also carry a rights-based responsibility: Australia has committed, under international law, to ensuring children and young people can participate freely in cultural life and the arts. Youth arts organisations are how that commitment is made real.

Recognising youth arts as essential cultural infrastructure is not peripheral to the success of national cultural policy — it is foundational to it. Canberra Youth Theatre urges the Federal Government to act on the recommendations of the National Youth Arts Network — and to make the structural investments necessary to ensure Australia’s youth arts sector can continue to do the vital work that no other sector can.

With thanks,



Luke Rogers
Artistic Director & CEO



Public Submission