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About Theatre Network Australia

Theatre Network Australia (TNA) is a national industry development and advocacy organisation dedicated to strengthening the performing arts sector. We prioritise support for independent artists, arts workers and arts organisations. Since our founding in 2009, TNA has grown from a Victorian-based initiative into a nationally recognised leader in performing arts advocacy, sector development, and capacity building.

TNA serves over 700 individual and organisational members and reaches and represents over 7,500 more artists and arts workers through our communications and research. Our vision is for a strong, healthy, and relevant performing arts sector. We stand as a trusted ally for artists and arts workers across theatre, dance, circus and physical theatre, and contemporary performance.

This submission draws on TNA's own research and advocacy positions as set out in previous Federal Pre-Budget submissions, our submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Revive, and our submission to the NSW Cultural Tax Reform Inquiry. It also incorporates and attributes recommendations from allied organisations including Live Performance Australia (LPA), Arts on Tour (AOT), the Network of National Dance Organisations (NoNDO), the First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network and Blak Futures Collective (FNPAC/BFC), the Australian Live Performance Export Alliance, Diversity Arts Australia (DARTS), Arts and Disability Network Australia (ADNA), Creative Climate, the Children's Theatre Alliance, Next Generation Now, and National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE).

TNA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the next phase of Australia's National Cultural Policy and urges the Government to build on the foundations of Revive with bold structural investment that places artists at the centre of cultural life.

Contact

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Summary of recommendations

	Recommendation	Pillar
1	Invest in self-determined First Nations performing arts infrastructure, workforce and commissioning pathways	First Nations First
2	Implement and resource the Tri-Nations Indigenous transnational exchange strategy	First Nations First
3	Establish a CaRM Creator Fund and measurable equity targets	A Place for Every Story
4	Establish a National Disability-Led Cultural Pipeline	A Place for Every Story
5	Introduce a tax exemption for income earned from arts grants and fellowships	Centrality of the Artist
6	Pilot a Living Wage for Artists program	Centrality of the Artist
7	Fund nation-wide industry-led skills and training programs	Centrality of the Artist
8	Regulate AI and protect artists' intellectual property	Centrality of the Artist
9	Develop and resource a 10-year national arts strategy for children and young people	Strong Cultural Infrastructure
10	Strengthen Playing Australia and establish a Live Performance Export program	Strong Cultural Infrastructure
11	Build climate-resilient, accessible and sustainable performing arts infrastructure	Strong Cultural Infrastructure
12	Extend Public Benevolent Institution status to a broader range of arts organisations	Strong Cultural Infrastructure
13	Introduce a 40% Live Performance Production Incentive	Strong Cultural Infrastructure
14	Implement an arts access subsidy program for schools	Engaging the Audience
15	Introduce a Cultural Pass for families with children and young people aged 13–25 years	Engaging the Audience

The state of the sector

Arts and culture are central to Australian life. In 2023–24, the cultural and creative industries contributed \$67.4b — 2.5% of GDP — to the Australian economy, employing more than 282,000 people. Yet the sector operates in increasingly precarious conditions, and TNA's research points to a sector under acute stress.

Declining investment in real terms

A New Approach's research shows that Australia ranks 26th out of 33 OECD countries for government investment in recreation, culture and religion — allocating only 0.9% of GDP compared to the OECD average of 1.2%. Between 2007–08 and 2023–24, Australia's population grew by 27% while cultural expenditure increased by only 19%. Per capita government spending on arts and culture fell from \$314 in 2007–08 to \$295 in 2021–22 (adjusted for inflation). Cultural and creative activity as a share of GDP also declined from 2.9% in 2014–15 to 2.5% in 2023–24.

Artists are struggling to sustain their careers

Creative Australia's Artists as Workers study found that the average total income for artists is 26% below the Australian workforce average, with half of all artists earning less than \$10,000 from their creative work. TNA's 2024 Indie Survey Report found that independent creatives earned an average of only \$21,608 per year from creative practice, with 79% working in other jobs outside their practice to survive.

In TNA's 2024 Member Survey, 59% of independent artists said they have considered leaving the arts industry, with burnout (53%), lack of employment (46%), and poor pay (43%) as the leading causes. In 2024, 71% of TNA member organisations reported being affected by production and technical workforce shortages.

Rising costs are collapsing touring

Touring costs have risen approximately 30–50% since the pandemic (LPA, 2025), while Playing Australia funding has remained largely stagnant. LPA members have already cut regional touring programming by 25% and project that figure rising to 50% by 2026. Some productions are now bypassing Canberra and Adelaide entirely, concentrating activity in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

Children and young people are disengaging

ABS data shows that children's attendance at cultural venues dropped from 94% in 2017–18 to 80% in 2021–22, and attendance at at least one performing arts event fell from 57% to 31%. Only 35% of regional young people report adequate access to arts and cultural opportunities compared to 75% in metropolitan areas.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

First Nations performing arts are essential cultural and social infrastructure – systems of governance, employment, diplomacy, knowledge transmission and community connection. Current policy frames culture primarily as an industry. This framing is insufficient. First Nations performing arts must be recognised as civic infrastructure sustaining language, identity and cultural continuity. TNA supports and aligns with the submissions of the First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network (FNPAC) and the Blak Futures Collective (BFC).

Recommendation 1:

Invest in self-determined First Nations performing arts infrastructure, workforce and commissioning pathways

Endorsed: FNPAC, BFC. Supported: TNA

Invest in First Nations-led training infrastructure for performance and production; support for independent creatives, producers and emerging companies; a national First Nations performing arts workforce study; longer-term operational investment for self-determined organisations; pathways from project funding to institutional sustainability; and embedded First Nations-led commissioning systems. Advance alignment across government portfolios and embed First Nations First protocols across all funding streams.

The Evidence:

Connection to culture contributes to improved social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – a national priority under Closing the Gap. Yet limited national data captures the scale of the First Nations cultural workforce despite its significant role in Australia's cultural, social and economic life. A new National Cultural Policy must strengthen First Nations self-determination, cultural authority and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property protections across all Government portfolio areas.

Recommendation 2:

Implement and resource the Tri-Nations Indigenous transnational exchange strategy

Endorsed: FNPAC, BFC, Australian Live Performance Export Alliance. Supported: TNA

Provide implementation funding for the Tri-Nations Indigenous transnational strategy and establish dedicated First Nations-led international market development infrastructure within Creative Australia, including culturally grounded investment models for Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange developed over more than 20 years across Australia, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Evidence:

First Nations performing arts organisations are increasingly operating within global cultural networks through touring, co-creation and cultural diplomacy. This is not solely export activity – it is reciprocal exchange and Indigenous diplomacy. The Tri-Nations strategy already exists. What is required is implementation and long-term resourcing. Without it, decades of relationship-building are at risk of collapse.

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Every person has the right to participate freely in cultural life — guaranteed by Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and affirmed by Australia's commitment to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Arts and culture do not serve social cohesion as a policy instrument — they create and nurture it. A national identity that genuinely upholds freedom of expression is stronger and more respectful of difference, not weaker. At a time when censorship is increasing globally, a new National Cultural Policy must be unambiguous: artists must be able to make work without fear, programmers must be able to present it, and audiences must be able to encounter it. Structural recognition of underrepresented communities is not a corrective measure — it is the precondition for a cultural life that reflects who we are.

Recommendation 3: Establish a CaRM Creator Fund and measurable equity targets

Endorsed: Diversity Arts Australia. Supported: TNA

Explicitly name Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CaRM) and underrepresented Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities within the policy with direct, measurable actions to address systemic underrepresentation across leadership, commissioning, workforce, programming and funding. Establish a CaRM Creator Fund and protected funding streams for CaRM-led organisations. Require equity action plans and accountability mechanisms across all publicly funded organisations.

The Evidence:

Despite Australia's cultural diversity, CaRM creatives remain underrepresented across funding and leadership. DARTS observes that what is not explicitly recognised within policy frameworks becomes impossible to measure, prioritise or hold accountable. The Multicultural Framework Review report *Towards Fairness* (2024) recommends a comprehensive review of community cultural program investments and a pilot multi-year seed fund for community-driven creative solutions.

Recommendation 4: Establish a National Disability-Led Cultural Pipeline

Endorsed: ADNA, Deaf and Disabled artists. Supported: TNA.

Establish a coordinated \$10m framework over four years supporting the full lifecycle of Deaf and Disabled-led work: a Capacity Building Fund (\$1m) to strengthen venue and presenter capability through an Agent for Change model; a Commissioning Fund (\$5m) to commission ten major disability-led works of national and international scale, modelled on the UK's UNLIMITED program; and a National and International Touring Fund (\$4m) establishing a functioning circuit across access-ready venues in every state and territory. This model presents a particular strategic opportunity aligned with the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The Evidence:

No fully functioning pipeline reliably connects development, commissioning and touring for Deaf and Disabled artists at scale in Australia. This is a structural gap, not a failure of artistic ambition. The UK's UNLIMITED program, established following the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, demonstrated that targeted investment in disability-led commissioning and touring generates greater artistic ambition, expanded audiences, increased international exchange, and stronger venue capability across the broader sector. Australia's arts and disability sector has established through *Revive* that Deaf and Disabled-led practice generates genuine cultural, social and economic value. This proposal provides the infrastructure to realise that value at scale.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Australia needs a national campaign for arts and culture, equivalent to Australian Made or the UK's GREAT campaign, that builds genuine public understanding of what artists contribute and why paying for that contribution is in everyone's interest. Arts and culture contributed \$67.4b to the economy in 2023–24 and generated 31.4m ticketed attendances. Yet public discourse treats arts funding as discretionary. This perception gap shapes budget decisions and leaves artists absorbing costs no other skilled profession would bear alone. That campaign cannot be credible without structural reform behind it. TNA's research shows 59% of independent artists have considered leaving the sector. Half earn less than \$10,000 per year from their creative work. The recommendations below address the structural levers: tax reform, a living wage, workforce development on which a genuine revaluation of creative labour can be built.

Recommendation 5:

Introduce a tax exemption for income earned from arts grants and fellowships

Introduce a tax exemption for income earned from arts grants and fellowships by independent creatives (sole traders), applying to grants and fellowships awarded by government agencies and philanthropic foundations for creative practice, professional development and project development. Estimated cost: \$1.8m per annum of foregone tax on Creative Australia grants and fellowships.

The Evidence:

Creative Australia's *Artists as Workers* study found average artist income is 26% below the workforce average, with half earning less than \$10,000 from creative work. TNA's 2024 Indie Survey found independent creatives earn an average of \$21,608 per year from their practice. Grants and fellowships are not supplementary income — they are a core mechanism for enabling creative work. Taxing them at ordinary rates reduces the effective value of public investment. A tax exemption amplifies existing funding without additional direct expenditure.

Recommendation 6:

Pilot a Living Wage for Artists program

Commission an immediate feasibility study and sector co-design process for a Living Wage for Artists, a regular, guaranteed income payment for professional artists modelled on France's *intermittents du spectacle*, Switzerland's artist income support schemes, and Ireland's Basic

Income for the Arts pilot. The program should reflect the realities of portfolio and project-based careers, with embedded equity provisions for First Nations artists, CaRM artists, Deaf and Disabled artists, and artists in regional and remote Australia.

The Evidence:

France's *intermittents du spectacle* (operating since 1936) supports approximately 280,000 workers through income payments between engagements, recognising career gaps as structural, not personal failures. Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts pilot (€325 per week to 2,000 artists from 2022) found recipients spent significantly more time on their practice, reported improved mental health, took greater creative risks, and were less likely to leave the sector. In Australia, 79% of independent creatives work in other jobs to survive and 59% have considered leaving the sector entirely. A living wage would not replace existing funding – it would provide the foundation on which all other investment becomes more effective.

**Recommendation 7:
Fund nation-wide industry-led skills and training programs**

Endorsed: LPA, NoNDO. Supported: TNA.

Fund nation-wide industry-led training initiatives at \$3.5m per annum over three years to address shortages across technical and production roles, sound and lighting technicians, stage management, scenic artists, prop makers, and business support roles. Build on successful models including Arts Centre Melbourne's Technical Production Traineeship and TechConnect Queensland. Reinstate Creative Australia's ArtStart program at \$1m per annum to support early-career artists. Any national workforce strategy must include circus-specific career pathway and transition support, reflecting the shorter performance careers the artform demands.

The Evidence:

The Federal Government's 2025 Occupation Shortage List confirmed critical shortages in sound and lighting technicians nationally. TNA's 2024 Member Survey found 71% of member organisations affected by production and technical workforce shortages. Creative Australia's Creative Workforce Scoping Study highlights additional gaps in business support and senior management roles. ArtStart's longitudinal evaluation demonstrated measurable improvements in time on practice, creative income, career confidence and professional networks. Its discontinuation in 2015 contributed directly to the workforce attrition the sector experiences today.

**Recommendation 8:
Regulate AI and protect artists' intellectual property**

The next National Cultural Policy must address AI risks to artists' livelihoods and Australia's creative sovereignty. TNA opposes any broad text and data mining exception that would permit AI models to train on copyrighted works without permission or payment. The Government should legislate to further protect creators' rights in the digital environment and develop AI guidelines specific to the creative sector, including equitable participation frameworks.

The Evidence:

Australia's creative industries contribute \$67.4b to the economy. The Productivity Commission's proposed text and data mining exception has been opposed by TNA and Arts Peak network as a license to extract creative output without compensation. Unregulated AI would hollow out the industries producing the cultural material AI systems depend on — generating economic harm, loss of livelihoods, weakened creative ecosystems, and diminished cultural sovereignty.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Cultural infrastructure is more than buildings. It is the ecosystem of organisations, funding mechanisms, touring networks, climate resilience frameworks and — most fundamentally — the artists and arts workers whose labour sustains it. TNA's recommendations address interconnected failures: the absence of a coherent strategy for children and young people, inadequate touring investment, a venue infrastructure deficit, and a policy void on climate.

Recommendation 9:

Develop and resource a 10-year national arts strategy for children and young people

Endorsed: Children's Theatre Alliance, Next Generation Now. Supported: TNA.

Develop and resource a 10-year national arts strategy for children and young people in the arts, co-designed with the sector and with children and young people themselves, spanning all artforms for ages 0 to 25, including youth arts, theatre for young audiences, youth-led work, CACD practice and arts education. Deliver it through two structural actions: establish a Children and Young People in the Arts Investment Fund for work that would not otherwise happen, sitting alongside rather than replacing existing programs; and formally recognise children and young people in the arts as a distinct sector — different audience, different business model, different policy framework — with children as cultural citizens whose voice is centred in how policy is made.

The Evidence:

No national cultural policy has ever contained a dedicated strategy for children and young people. Federal funding for youth arts has fallen from 21 companies in 2007 to six theatre companies creating work for children beyond 2026. No federally funded children's theatre companies operate in NSW, Queensland, NT or the ACT. Denmark supports almost 200 children's theatre companies; Australia supports six. ABS data shows children's attendance at performing arts events fell from 57% to 31% between 2017–18 and 2021–22. The 2024 Australian Early Development Census found one in four children entering school developmentally vulnerable or at risk. Early cultural engagement before age nine is a strong predictor of lifelong arts participation.

Recommendation 10:

Strengthen Playing Australia and establish a Live Performance Export program

Endorsed: LPA, AOT, Australian Live Performance Export Alliance, NoNDO. Supported: TNA.

Increase Playing Australia investment by at least \$8.2m per annum to \$18m, cap individual grants to prevent concentration, and maintain three rounds per year. Establish a dedicated live performance export fund – Playing the World – at \$20m per annum over three years, administered by Creative Australia, to convert confirmed international demand into viable touring. Circus and physical theatre must be explicitly named as a priority artform given their exceptional export strength and disproportionately high touring costs.

The Evidence:

Touring costs have risen 30–50% since the pandemic while Playing Australia funding has stagnated, creating an effective 30–50% cut in real resources. LPA members have cut regional touring by 25%, with projections reaching 50% by 2026. AOT's 2026 data shows 89% of presenters paying touring costs on top of performance fees. On export, the Australian Live Performance Export Alliance observes that Australia lacks systems to convert international demand into feasible activity. Circus companies carry significant international reputations but face the highest per-tour costs of any artform.

Recommendation 11:

Build climate-resilient, accessible and sustainable performing arts infrastructure

Endorsed: Creative Climate, LPA, Arts on Tour. Supported: TNA.

Establish a Fit-for-Purpose Arts Infrastructure Fund at \$25m per annum over three years, with metropolitan and regional streams, to improve disability accessibility, replace obsolete technical facilities, and transition venues to renewable energy and regenerative design standards (minimum 4-star Green Rating for all new infrastructure). Embed climate risk, mitigation and adaptation into all policy delivery and funding criteria. Recognise First Nations leadership on climate; fund low-carbon touring models; and provide cancellation crisis funding for climate-related disruptions.

The Evidence:

Australia has approximately 500 performing arts centres, many mid-20th century heritage buildings with energy-intensive operations uniquely difficult to decarbonise. More than 5.5 million Australians live with disability; Creative Australia's 2021 research identified accessible venues as a top ten priority for Deaf and Disabled artists. Only \$1.2m of the \$8.1m invested in the Arts and Disability Associated Plan has been directed to venue accessibility. AOT notes that November–March is now a high-risk period for climate-related cancellations across touring corridors, and the \$600,000 Climate Action Delivery Partner budget is wholly inadequate to address this across the entire sector.

Recommendation 12:

Extend Public Benevolent Institution status to a broader range of arts organisations

Commission a review to extend PBI status to arts and cultural organisations supporting accessibility, First Nations communities, youth and education. PBI status would enable FBT exemptions and salary packaging, making arts employment more competitive and addressing workforce retention challenges.

The Evidence:

TNA's Salary Survey Report consistently shows arts organisation roles are paid below the national average and well below the broader not-for-profit sector. PBI status would meaningfully increase take-home pay without additional cost to organisations. Most TNA member organisations are already registered charities, making transition administratively straightforward. The review could be delivered through existing departmental resourcing with advice from Creative Australia.

**Recommendation 13:
Introduce a 40% Live Performance Production Incentive**

Endorsed: LPA, NoNDO. Supported: TNA.

Introduce a 40% tax offset on qualifying pre-production expenditure for live theatre, orchestra, circus and physical theatre — commercial and not-for-profit. EY modelling shows this would return \$117.3m in tax received for \$93m forgone, a net positive of \$24.3m, while generating up to \$1,505m in additional industry output and 4,151 FTE jobs. Circus and physical theatre must be explicitly included given their capital-intensive production requirements and current exclusion from equivalent incentives.

The Evidence:

Film, TV and digital games already benefit from 30–40% tax offsets in Australia. Over 80% of commercial theatre investment capital comes from offshore investors increasingly drawn to markets with stronger incentive regimes. Post-pandemic capitalisation for a commercial musical has risen to AU\$13–20 million. *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*, an Australian-conceived production, was developed in the US due to available production tax incentives. Circus productions face equivalent capital barriers, rigging, safety infrastructure and specialised equipment, with no comparable offset currently available.

Pillar 5: Engaging The Audience

Engaging audiences requires removing barriers — financial, geographic and generational. TNA's recommendations address the structural conditions that exclude young and regional Australians and protect the environment in which artists can continue producing the work audiences want to encounter.

**Recommendation 14:
Implement an arts access subsidy program for schools**

Introduce an arts access subsidy program for schools (Prep to Year 12), modelled on PACER, covering transport, tickets and accessibility costs for arts excursions at \$25m per annum, with a pilot in 2026–27. Pilot a Creative Schools program modelled on Sporting Schools at \$10m, engaging local arts organisations to deliver arts activities in schools.

The Evidence:

The PACER program reaches nearly 100,000 students annually from 1,800 schools and adds approximately \$130m to Canberra's economy — a directly replicable model for the arts. Many schools, particularly in regional areas, cannot fund arts excursions without support.

**Recommendation 15:
Introduce a Cultural Pass for families with children and young people aged 13–25 years**

Endorsed: LPA, NoNDO, Children's Theatre Alliance, Next Generation Now. Supported: TNA.

Pilot a means-tested Live Performance Cultural Pass for families and 13-25-year-olds at \$25m over one year, with a tiered funding structure targeting lower-income households across live music, dance, theatre, circus and physical theatre. Explicitly including circus extends the program's reach to audiences less likely to be captured by traditional arts framing.

The Evidence:

The Push's 2024 survey found 64% of young Australians aged 16–25 value attending live events but cite cost as the primary barrier; 80% say a \$200 voucher would increase their attendance. Audience Outlook Monitor data shows 62% of under-35 audiences experienced financial barriers to attendance in 2022. International precedent is strong: Italy, France, Germany and Spain have all run cultural pass programs for young people, with UK data directly linking early arts engagement to adult participation. An Australian pilot would generate crucial baseline data for permanent design.