

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY CONSULTATION

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Introduction

I am the Director of [REDACTED] Gallery [REDACTED] the major public art gallery for [REDACTED] [REDACTED] operates across a precinct of heritage buildings in [REDACTED] the Traditional Country of the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji and Yirrganydji peoples, and serves one of Australia's most culturally and linguistically diverse communities, with a high proportion of First Nations residents and deep connections to the arts of the Asia-Pacific region. I make this submission in a personal capacity, drawing on my professional experience as a gallery director in regional Australia.

[REDACTED] is a mid-scale regional institution. It is not a major collecting institution. It is not a metropolitan gallery. It sits in the space between the smallest community galleries and the state flagship institutions, a space that is poorly served by current federal cultural policy settings and funding eligibility structures.

This submission makes four practical and specific asks: addressing freight, travel and touring costs; heritage infrastructure funding; eligibility reform for Creative Australia programs; and a dedicated northern cultural engagement program.

1. Freight, Travel and Touring

The cost of transporting artworks, artists and touring exhibitions to and from regional Australia has become the single greatest barrier to programming quality at [REDACTED]. Freight and travel costs have increased dramatically due to sustained fuel price volatility. This is a structural threat to the viability of regional touring altogether, not a temporary inconvenience.

For a gallery at the end of a long supply chain in tropical north Queensland, these costs are acute. Bringing a major touring exhibition from a southern capital to Cairns involves road, air, or combined freight across thousands of kilometres in conditions requiring climate-controlled transport and specialist art handlers. Touring fees now routinely exceed what [REDACTED] can absorb within its exhibition budget.

This is not a simple matter of bringing metropolitan content to the regions. Many significant artists from Cairns and the Far North have relocated to other cities, and their works have entered collections across the country. The freight and travel crisis is therefore also a cultural repatriation problem: the stories, works and artistic figures that belong to this region are held elsewhere, and the costs of reconnecting them with their communities of origin are prohibitive. Regional galleries are caught in both directions: unable to afford what comes in, and unable to afford to bring back what has gone out.

Live Performance Australia wrote to federal and state arts ministers in early 2026 on this issue, and the visual arts sector needs equivalent attention. The current federal touring programs were calibrated for a different cost environment. Funding envelopes have not kept pace with freight inflation.

I ask that the next National Cultural Policy:

- **Establish a dedicated regional freight and travel subsidy for the visual arts**

A freight and travel subsidy for touring exhibitions and artists to and from regional and remote Australia, available to both sending and receiving institutions, administered through Visions of Australia or as a standalone program under Strong Cultural Infrastructure.

- **Allow freight costs as standalone eligible expenditure**

Freight is currently fundable only as part of a broader touring project application. Galleries that receive tours but do not originate them have no avenue to support inbound freight costs.

2. Infrastructure

[REDACTED] operates within a significant precinct of heritage-listed buildings. These buildings are irreplaceable assets culturally, architecturally, and to the identity of Cairns, but they present an infrastructure burden that is poorly understood in national policy settings designed around temperate metropolitan contexts.

The tropical climate of Far North Queensland means building maintenance, climate control for collection care, and structural conservation involve costs and complexities that do not apply in Sydney or Melbourne. Extreme heat and humidity, cyclone risk, and the deterioration patterns of heritage fabric in these conditions require specialist expertise and substantially higher maintenance expenditure than equivalent southern buildings. Heritage compliance obligations, including Conservation Management

Plans, heritage authority approvals, and specialist trade contractors, add further cost and time to every capital project. Standard infrastructure grant programs are largely inaccessible because they are calibrated to new or refurbished purpose-built facilities, not the ongoing conservation of existing heritage fabric. The result is a compounding infrastructure deficit.

I ask that the next National Cultural Policy:

- **Establish a federal heritage cultural infrastructure fund for regional institutions**

There is currently no dedicated federal mechanism for heritage maintenance at regional cultural institutions. The next policy should establish a fund specifically for conservation and maintenance of heritage-listed buildings in active cultural use, with weighted eligibility for regional and remote institutions and explicit recognition of climatic variation.

- **Fund an accessible solar transition program for regional galleries and museums**

Heritage constraints make standard renewable energy transitions difficult and costly. Dedicated support for solar infrastructure in heritage buildings would reduce operating costs and free up funding for programming.

- **Recognise that infrastructure funding for regional heritage galleries is a shared federal responsibility**

Federal co-investment in operational infrastructure is essential for institutions whose mandate is national in scope but whose buildings are local in ownership.

3. Eligibility gap for mid-sized galleries

██████████ occupies an eligibility gap in the current federal funding landscape. It is not a major collecting institution, so cannot access NCITO. It is not a small community arts organisation, so falls outside some Creative Australia project grant categories. It is not in a metropolitan area, so lacks the cross-subsidy opportunities available to metropolitan institutions.

Creative Australia's two-year pilot investment program for small-to-medium arts organisations, announced in 2024, was primarily directed at performing arts, theatre, dance, and community cultural development organisations. Regional public galleries, which carry collection, heritage, community and public access obligations that differ fundamentally from project-based arts organisations, remain outside any multi-year operational investment framework.

I ask that the next National Cultural Policy:

- **Create a dedicated investment pathway for regional public galleries**

Regional public galleries with collection and heritage responsibilities should be a distinct category within Creative Australia's investment framework, with their own eligibility criteria, panels with regional expertise, and multi-year investment options.

- **Extend NCITO eligibility or create an equivalent for regional galleries**

NCITO is inaccessible to regional galleries without national collection status. The next policy should either extend NCITO eligibility to include regionally significant public galleries, or establish an equivalent program for the development and touring of exhibitions from regional collections.

- **Mandate geographic equity in Creative Australia assessment panels**

Assessment panels for programs with regional eligibility should include members with demonstrated knowledge of regional and remote practice, with geographic equity targets.

4. Northern Engagement

From Cairns, Port Moresby is closer than Sydney. Jayapura, Dili, and the islands of the Torres Strait are within the immediate cultural catchment of this region. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Far North Queensland have ancient and living relationships with communities across the Papua New Guinea border and throughout the Strait, relationships that predate the nation-state and that national cultural policy has never adequately resourced.

Australia's stated geopolitical priority is deeper engagement with Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and cultural diplomacy is a core instrument of that engagement. But the institutions tasked with brokering those relationships are based in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, cities with no geographic logic for sustained presence in this region.

This gap has become acute in recent months. Federal travel restrictions, compounded by the current fuel crisis, have meant that the public servants and funded bodies responsible cannot readily reach many of the destinations closest to Cairns. The communities and artists most proximate to this gallery are, right now, the least accessible to the people making decisions about them. If government cannot travel here, it should fund and staff the institutions that are already here to do this work.

Cairns has the geographic location, the existing First Nations cultural relationships, and the institutional infrastructure to host a dedicated program focused on transnational First Nations cultural exchange and Southeast Asian contemporary arts engagement. I ask that the next National Cultural Policy consider a northern cultural engagement program, embedded in one of our existing cultural institutions, with a remit covering First Nations cultural exchange (PNG, the Torres Strait, the Pacific) and Southeast Asian contemporary arts brokerage, integrated into their exhibition and public program calendar. Relationship-building of this kind cannot be delivered on a project-by-project basis and requires funding certainty and a clear government mandate.

The case for a northern cultural engagement program is not parochial. Australia cannot claim genuine cultural engagement with its nearest neighbours while concentrating the institutions responsible for that engagement in its southernmost major cities. Cairns is where this work should happen.

Summary

My four asks are practical, targeted, and addressable within the framework of the next National Cultural Policy. The far north is a cultural powerhouse sitting at the intersection of Australia's most significant geopolitical and cultural relationships. Federal policy should reflect that. I thank the Office for the Arts for this opportunity and welcome further dialogue.