

Revive submission

This is intended as a personal submission from an arts administrator with the privilege of working alongside a very wide range of arts organisations from across the country. It is a perspective on two of the pillars in the policy and is not intended as a critique of any other parts. It asks that while framing a vision of the future of the artistic life of the country, the revised policy meets the cultural sector not just where we want it to be, but also where it is today. It is predicated on two assumptions. The first is that we are in a time of organisational upheaval that requires urgent action. The second is that for most organisations, revenue funding from the public purse will remain largely stagnant in the next few years.

The lesser pillars

Of the five pillars in Revive, my sense has been that the first three, 'First Nations First', 'A Place for Every Story' and 'Centrality of the Artist', are where the energy and passion have been most apparent. The last two, 'Strong Cultural Infrastructure' and 'Engaging the Audience', has felt somewhat like the poor cousins. Of course, I understand why this is the case. They can appear technocratic, managerial, or less immediately connected to the more visionary elements of cultural policy. This submission is a plea to recognise that, more than ever, these two areas require urgent attention.

If Australian arts and culture are to thrive in the next decade, the next stage of cultural policy will need to engage more directly with the very pressing economic, operational and organisational conditions that allow creative work to succeed in a much more complex environment.

Australian cultural organisations are currently working in a rapidly changing environment that brings both opportunity and risk. Audience behaviour is shifting, digital platforms are reshaping how people discover and engage with culture, costs and workforce pressures remain significant, and expectations from funders, partners, sponsors, artists and communities are evolving in quite radical ways. These conditions create real challenges for many organisations, but they also open up new possibilities. The question is how the sector builds the capability, confidence and shared intelligence required to respond to this environment effectively.

Put simply, existing cultural organisations are operating in a more complex environment, and responding properly to that environment is a complex and costly undertaking. These are not one-off project costs, they are recurring overheads that sit year on year in the P&L - skilled staff, digital capability, audience development, data analysis, fundraising capacity, commercial expertise, governance, compliance and operational resilience. It seems unlikely that government will be able to meet these needs through core funding, particularly when new money is often directed towards new priorities. Government agencies therefore have an important role to play in helping organisations become better operationally and financially resilient.

At present, much of the sector operates in a highly fragmented way, with organisations often attempting to solve structural challenges individually despite facing many of the same pressures and opportunities. This is evident in a number of interconnected ways: in skills and training gaps; in the misalignment between state and federal networks, priorities and funding mechanisms; in the widening brief of cultural organisations without a corresponding expansion of resources; and in the growing need for shared capability across audience development, digital engagement, discoverability, data, sponsorship, governance, workforce planning and emerging technologies.

What sort of agency delivers the last two pillars?

This raises a question about the architecture of cultural policy delivery itself. Existing arts funding agencies play a significant role in shaping cultural priorities, supporting artists and organisations, encouraging new practice and driving policy objectives. But this raises a question about the delivery of the last two pillars of Revive: are agencies primarily constituted around arts funding, cultural development and public investment best equipped to lead the more practical industry interventions now required by the sector?

In many other areas of Australian public policy, governments recognise that industries require action that help build markets, gather intelligence, develop skills, attract investment, respond to disruption and coordinate activity across jurisdictions. These are practical and technical industry-development functions. This is more clearly understood in the areas of screen and music, but the wider cultural sector now needs to ask whether the ambitions contained in 'Strong Cultural Infrastructure' and 'Engaging the Audience' can be achieved without a new approach. This would require a nationwide perspective on the economic and operational capacity of the sector: how organisations understand audiences, build recurring income, strengthen business models, use data, attract partners and respond to workforce pressures.

This is not an argument against existing funding agencies. Whether the necessary function sits within existing agencies, is developed as a specialist unit, or operates as a parallel sector-support body is a matter for further consideration. But the function itself needs to be clearly identified, properly resourced and staffed by people with the relevant expertise.

This includes driving not only stronger organisational capability at an individual company level, but also a more comprehensively collective approach across the nation. Other industries increasingly rely on aggregated intelligence and coordination to respond to technological, economic and behavioural change. The arts sector will likely require similar capabilities in the years ahead.

There are significant opportunities. Australians are highly culturally engaged and new communities continue to connect with organisations in exciting ways. There is enormous potential for a radical reengineering of the interconnectivity of the arts on a national level that unlocks new sources of income and relevance.

The next stage of cultural policy should, in my opinion, retain Revive's strong commitment to its first three pillars, while considering the best mechanism to genuinely and practically address the goals of the other two in a way that is commensurate with the scale or importance of the challenge.

A policy that supports creative expression but does not adequately address the machinery required to sustain it, is destined to fail. I believe we all know that the machinery is straining. But we also know that the work that Australian artists create in our venues and communities is brilliant, innovative and hugely accessible. We owe it to them to build the machinery that allows their work to thrive.

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