

# **Submission to the National Cultural Policy Review**

## **From the Illawarra Folk Festival**

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David De Santi – currently co-Artistic Director with Kay Proudlove. Artistic Director since 1996. Tel

### **About the Illawarra Folk Festival**

The Illawarra Folk Festival is one of Australia's longest-running community cultural festivals and will celebrate its 40th festival in January 2027. Founded in 1985 in the village of Jamberoo and now held at Bulli Showground on Dharawal Country, the festival has grown into a nationally recognised, volunteer-driven celebration of folk, roots, world, Celtic, multicultural, maritime and community arts practice.

The festival is managed by a volunteer committee of more than 30 people and supported by over 300 volunteers during the event. Across four decades, the festival has presented thousands of artists from Australia and around the world, while providing an essential platform for emerging artists, intergenerational participation, community music-making and cultural exchange.

The Illawarra Folk Festival demonstrates the enormous cultural and economic value generated by community-led cultural infrastructure. Festivals such as ours contribute significantly to regional tourism, hospitality, accommodation, production employment and local business activity, while also strengthening social cohesion, cultural participation and community wellbeing.

### **The Role of Community Cultural Festivals in Australia**

Community arts and folk festivals occupy a unique place within Australia's cultural ecology. They are simultaneously:

- artistic platforms
- training grounds
- preserving institutions
- social gathering places
- intergenerational learning environments
- tourism drivers
- community development mechanisms
- living archives of intangible cultural heritage

Despite this, the folk and community festival sector is often under-recognised within national cultural policy settings and funding frameworks.

Volunteer-led festivals consistently deliver substantial cultural outcomes with limited resources, relying heavily on goodwill, unpaid labour and fragile financial models. Without stronger recognition and support, many festivals face increasing sustainability pressures.

## Response to the Revive Pillars

### First Nations First

The Illawarra Folk Festival supports the principle that First Nations arts and culture must be First Nations led.

Festivals such as ours provide meaningful opportunities for First Nations artists, musicians, storytellers, dancers and knowledge holders to share culture in accessible community settings. These engagements foster understanding, respect and ongoing cultural exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Illawarra Folk Festival has proudly presented a significant range of First Nations artists across its history, reflecting the festival's ongoing commitment to Indigenous storytelling, music and cultural exchange. Artists who have performed at the festival include Alan Dargin, Andrew Gurruwiwi, Archie Roach, Bobby McLeod and the Doonooch Dancers, Christine Anu, Dave Arden, David Spry, Emily Wurramara, Eric | Marrawuy, Gina Williams, Glenn Skuthorpe, Johnny Huckle, Kerriane Cox, Kev Carmody, Kutcha Edwards, Ray Dimakarri Dixon, Shellie Morris, Sue Ray, The Mills Sisters, The Pigram Brothers, The Stiff Gins, Troy Cassar-Daley and Wakakirri.

### A Place for Every Story

The Illawarra Folk Festival reflects the extraordinary diversity of Australian cultural life.

Our programming includes migrant and multicultural traditions, folk music and dance from many global cultures, community choirs and participatory arts, spoken word and oral storytelling, intergenerational performance traditions, regional and local artists, and emerging performers alongside established acts.

### Centrality of the Artist

Artists are at the heart of festivals such as ours. However, many folk and community artists operate within financially precarious conditions.

We strongly support increased direct investment in artists, fair minimum payment standards, regional touring support, superannuation and employment protections, artist development pathways, and greater recognition of participatory and community arts practice.

### Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Community festivals are critical cultural infrastructure.

Australia's cultural ecosystem depends upon volunteer-run festivals, community halls, regional venues, folk clubs, local music networks, temporary event infrastructure and grassroots cultural organisations.

We recommend dedicated operational funding streams for community festivals, infrastructure grants for regional and temporary venues, investment in volunteer training and governance support, simplified grant processes for volunteer organisations, and support for digital archiving and preservation projects.

### Engaging the Audience

One of the greatest strengths of folk festivals is accessibility and participation.

Audiences are not passive consumers. They sing, dance, learn, play instruments, attend workshops and engage directly with artists and traditions.

Festivals create intergenerational engagement, social connection, community wellbeing, regional tourism, lifelong arts participation and cultural exchange.

### **Key Challenges Facing the Sector**

#### **1. Sustainability of Volunteer-Led Festivals**

Volunteer-run festivals are under increasing pressure due to ageing volunteer bases, burnout, rising operational complexity, insurance and compliance costs, and unstable funding models.

#### **2. Lack of Education and Training Pathways**

Australia currently lacks sufficient tertiary and vocational pathways in festival management, community cultural development, event production, volunteer coordination and folk arts practice.

#### **3. Regional and Community Arts Underfunding**

Community festivals deliver substantial economic and social outcomes but often operate with limited resources compared with major metropolitan institutions.

#### **4. Preserving Cultural Memory**

Australia requires stronger strategies for documenting and preserving oral traditions, community music, folk practices, migrant cultural traditions and regional cultural histories.

### **Recommendations**

1. Recognise community festivals as essential national cultural infrastructure.
2. Increase long-term operational support for volunteer-led festivals.
3. Expand funding for regional touring and artist mobility.
4. Support First Nations-led programming and cultural leadership.
5. Develop vocational and tertiary training pathways in festival and community cultural practice.
6. Improve funding access for small and volunteer-run organisations.
7. Invest in preservation and archiving of intangible cultural heritage.
8. Recognise participatory arts and community cultural development as core cultural outcomes.
9. Strengthen support for multicultural and intergenerational arts practice.
10. Ensure policy settings value both the generative and preservative functions of culture.

### **Conclusion**

For nearly four decades, the Illawarra Folk Festival has demonstrated the power of community-led culture to bring people together, preserve traditions, nurture artists and strengthen regional identity.

Australia's cultural future depends not only on major institutions, but also on the grassroots networks, volunteers, artists and communities who sustain culture every day across the country.