

## **REVIVE Western Edge's Submission**

We are Western Edge, the longest standing theatre company working across Melbourne's vast and vibrant western suburbs. We tell Australia's new stories as a coalition of powerful artists, storytellers and cultural witnesses. We are a company of young voices, and we are diverse.

Artistically, we create brilliant, courageous and subversive theatrical performances that challenge the mainstream establishment with a new creative culture and process. Our stories are grounded in our culturally diverse, refugee and migrant diaspora. Our work is embedded in community and carried out in local art spaces around the West.

Western Edge has been in the west for almost 30 years as a modest youth arts company with deep community roots. We have developed specialty community arts expertise over decades of navigating daily the disproportionate challenges entrenched in the region. Marginalisation, intergenerational and intersectional adversity is part of our everyday arts environment, exacerbated by the geographical vastness and isolation of the region and the historical sparseness of government investment.

By moving at the speed of trust in our communities over decades, we have built a vertically integrated arts ecosystem in Melbourne's West. We engage our youngest artists through school and community arts programs; we offer training, employment and leadership opportunities for emerging artists; and we create supportive pathways to professional work within the Western Edge and wider arts industry networks. This full circle model is our practical response to the underrepresentation of diverse voices and lived experience on Australian stages, screens and leadership roles at every level of the arts sector.

Four years ago, Western Edge underwent the biggest transformation of our history. Since then, we have tripled our revenue, expanded to a highly competent and majority IBPOC core team, doubled our artistic team, undertaken a major Board transition and developed strong financial and governance foundations. Embodying diverse leadership and community representation, our Chair, Deputy Chair, an Executive Director, an Artistic Director, 100% core staff and 100% of our Lead Artists and Support Artists identify as belonging to multicultural and marginalised communities. To achieve this meaningful representation across the company requires significant scaffolding and resourcing and will require continued investment.

Our company is inherently international with strong connections to the diaspora communities from Africa, Asia, The Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Pacific Islands.

We continue to step into our power as artistic and cultural leaders spearheading the culture of art making in Australia. As Melbourne becomes Australia's largest city, the West is taking its place as an ambitious region of creative and economic importance, powered by vibrant youth culture, ongoing immigration and unbeatable drive. We are hopeful, embody possibility and excitement and represent the ambitious, vibrant future of Australia.

*"Imagination is the first step to real and tangible long lasting change and everyone at Western Edge brings their own potency of experience, practice and craft therefore we are creating communities of confidence and creativity. What is special is that we can leave come back and evolve together. What you learn doesn't just serve you but everybody that you know. What you know is good for everyone you know. It subverts who is the most dignified creator because we all are".* **Western Edge 2026 Lead Artist**

Western Edge endorses the **National Youth Arts Network** and the **National Alliance of Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) organisations and independent practitioners National Cultural Policy submissions.**

**Community Arts and Cultural Development is a collective practice that sits at the intersection of creativity, community and public value, cultivating social cohesion, strengthening resilience, and enabling meaningful cultural participation in communities experiencing both opportunity and increasing complexity.**

As a member, Western Edge welcome the review of the REVIVE National Cultural Policy as a critical moment to ensure that Australia's cultural framework reflects the full breadth of creative practice shaping our nation. Through this submission, we seek to highlight the essential role of Community Arts and Cultural Development as the social and relational cultural practice that enables communities to participate in, shape and sustain cultural life—making REVIVE's vision of "a place for every story" achievable in practice.

By relational practice, we refer to long-term, trust-based, community-led creative processes that build connection, participation and collective capacity. Known across Australia through traditions of community arts, community arts and cultural development, socially engaged practice, applied arts and arts for social change, this work has a long and significant history of enabling diverse communities to express, shape and sustain the cultural life of the nation.

Drawing on lived experience across regional, remote and metropolitan communities, and informed by national research and policy priorities, we offer both evidence and practical recommendations to strengthen the next cultural policy's capacity to deliver on equity, access, participation and cultural democracy.

We look forward to contributing constructively to this process and to working with the government to ensure that no community is left behind in Australia's cultural future.

### Key Recommendations summary

1. **Formal Recognition**

Explicitly recognise Community Arts and Cultural development within the new cultural policy as a distinct and essential field of practice.

2. **Establish a National CACD Entity**

Embed a national body dedicated to CACD within Creative Australia to lead coordination, advocacy, research and sector development.

3. **Increased investment in CACD practice**

Supporting local arts initiatives that strengthen social cohesion and foster belonging in Australian communities

4. **Invest in Workforce & Practice Sustainability**

Support training, mentoring, wellbeing and trauma-informed practice frameworks specific to the needs of CACD practice.

5. **Reform Funding Models**

Shift to long-term, place-based and relational investment models for CACD practice.

6. **Embed CACD Across Policy Areas**

Position CACD across health, disaster management, climate adaptation, justice, education and regional development.

7. **Strengthen Research & Evaluation**

Further develop national CACD data, impact measurement and evidence frameworks.

8. **Equity of Access**

Ensure equitable access to funding, resources and participation nationwide.

### Recognising Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD)

To deliver on REVIVE's vision of *"a place for every story,"* the government must invest in the people, practices and relationships that ensure those often invisible stories are seen, heard and valued. **Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) is that infrastructure and must be recognised, resourced and embedded as the cornerstone of Australia's cultural future.**

## What is CACD?

Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) is a nationally embedded, practice-led field of arts and cultural activity that leads to **social cohesion, resilience and collective wellbeing**.

Through long-term, place-based and relational arts practice, CACD enables communities to:

- Respond to complex social, environmental and economic challenges
- Process lived experience
- Be creative
- Experience aesthetic enrichment
- Gain knowledge, ideas and insight
- Engage with and appreciate diverse cultural expressions
- Break down barriers and build connections and trust
- Challenge prejudices
- Present creative experiences to audiences which inspire, challenge and provoke perceptions, building greater understanding and awareness for those most marginalised, and present voices rarely heard on the mainstage
- Through participatory engagement grow new audiences for Australia's creative sector, many of whom would not otherwise attend theatre performances or visual art exhibitions

It operates across arts, health, education, justice, community services, disaster management, climate adaptation and social policy—delivering outcomes that extend far beyond traditional cultural metrics.

Our vision of social cohesion is a diverse, connected and socially healthy nation where cultural and creative practice is recognised as **essential infrastructure** supporting cultural, social, ecological, economic and civic harmony.

## The Gap in REVIVE

Despite its national reach and impact, CACD is **not explicitly recognised within the current REVIVE policy framework**.

This absence limits:

- Visibility of a critical cross-sector creative practice
- Effectiveness of policy outcomes related to inclusion, access and participation

- Capacity to mobilise creative practice in response to compounding national challenges (social fragmentation, economic inequality, climate, disaster)

Without CACD, REVIVE risks overlooking the **primary mechanism through which many Australians meaningfully engage with arts and culture.**

This gap is particularly significant in light of national policy and research priorities that emphasise:

- Equity and inclusion (e.g. *The Arts and Disability Associated Plan*, 2024)
- Cultural diversity and representation (*Towards Equity 2*, 2026)
- Audience diversification and participation (*Leading Change*, Deakin University & Creative Australia, 2024)
- Youth engagement (Creative Industries Youth Advisory Group)
- Multicultural participation (Australian Government Multicultural Framework Review response)
- Community and First Nations led Climate adaptation and recovery - National Climate Risk Assessment <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/climate-change/policy/adaptation/ncra>

Collectively, these frameworks identify participation, representation and access as central policy challenges—**all of which CACD directly addresses in practice.**

### **Structural Under-recognition and Under-resourcing of CACD**

Despite its central role in delivering public value, CACD remains **structurally under-recognised and under-resourced within national funding frameworks.**

Analysis of the *Creative Australia Annual Report 2024–25* indicates CACD receives approximately \$13–15 million in total investment within an overall funding pool of approximately \$237.4 million, representing only ~5–6% of total national arts investment. It sits well below major artforms like Music ~18 and Visual Arts ~14%. On face value, this positions CACD as a minor category within the cultural economy. However, this figure is **structurally misleading.**

CACD is not a niche artform—it is a **cross-cutting methodology** underpinning work across First Nations arts and culture, theatre, music, dance, visual arts, literature, digital media and community-led initiatives. As a result:

- Community-engaged practice is funded across multiple panels
- Outcomes are embedded within broader programs (including First Nations, multi-year funding and cross-sector initiatives)
- There is **no consistent mechanism to track or report CACD-aligned investment**.

This produces a systemic distortion:

### **Undercounting**

Community-engaged practice is dispersed and not consistently identified across funding streams, masking its true scale and reach.

### **Undervaluation**

With only ~5–6% explicitly labelled, CACD appears marginal—reinforcing the perception that it is peripheral rather than foundational, and constraining the case for proportional investment.

### **Policy Misalignment**

This contradicts national commitments to access, participation, equity and cultural democracy embedded across REVIVE and associated frameworks, weakening their implementation.

### **Why This Matters**

This is not simply a reporting issue—it has **material policy consequences**.

- What is not counted is not prioritised
- What is not visible is not scaled
- What is not recognised is not sustained

At a time when Australia is seeking to:

- Increase arts participation (National Arts Participation Survey, 2025/26)
- Address systemic inequities in access and representation
- Strengthen social cohesion and community resilience

The under-recognition of CACD **limits the effectiveness of national cultural policy itself**.

Recent mapping work (*Where Community Meets Creativity, 2025*) demonstrates the breadth of CACD activity across Australia, particularly in:

- Regional and remote communities

- Disaster-impacted areas
- Diverse and marginalised populations

Yet this scale of activity is not reflected in funding visibility, measurement frameworks, proportional investment or policy architecture.

As outlined in this submission, CACD provides the **relational infrastructure** that enables communities to connect, adapt and respond—particularly in contexts of social change, climate disruption, and recovery. Without increased, clearly identified and trackable investment, this infrastructure remains fragile, limiting both its impact and its capacity to meet growing national demand for community-driven solutions to complex challenges.

### **Policy Implication**

If government is serious about cultural inclusion, social cohesion and equitable access, CACD must be:

- Recognised as **core cultural infrastructure**, a cornerstone of Australia’s cultural future not a marginal category
- **Equitably invested** alongside other artforms within Creative Australia, ensuring inclusive, community-led cultural practice is valued and resourced on an equal footing.
- **Properly measured** across all funding streams, not confined to a single panel
- Resourced in proportion to its **cross-sector impact and national reach**

Until CACD is accurately counted, it will continue to be underfunded. And while it remains underfunded, Australia’s cultural system will continue to fall short of its commitments to **equity, participation and inclusion**.

### **What CACD Delivers**

Through its community centred creative process, CACD delivers outcomes across multiple policy domains:

#### **Social**

- Improves social cohesion
- Increases sense of belonging
- Improves mental and physical wellbeing
- Strengthens relationships and trust

- Bridges social difference without erasing it
- Produces innovative and transformative solutions to challenges faced by communities
- Creates safer, inclusive spaces for expression and connection where people feel valued
- Increases sense of safety and security

### **Economic**

- Builds local economies through creative participation
- Develops skills and workforce pathways
- Builds resilience

### **Civic**

- Advances democracy
- Amplifies community voice
- Builds civic trust and participation
- Enables culturally responsive policy design
- Builds shared identity and civic participation

### **Environmental**

- Inspires environmental stewardship and supports First Nations led environmental stewardship
- Deepens ecological understanding
- Supports climate response and adaptation
- Activates place-based sustainability practices

### **Outcome:**

CACD builds the creative **relational infrastructure** that enables communities to mobilise, adapt and thrive.

### **How CACD Works**

CACD is not a single artform—it is a **creative methodology** grounded in:

- Equity and access
- Community-led decision making
- Cultural democracy
- Long-term relationship building

- Lived experience as expertise
- Trauma informed practice

It is:

- Place-based
- Intersectional
- Cross-sectoral
- Responsive and adaptive

It prioritises **ongoing engagement over one-off delivery**, ensuring sustained impact.

### **Alignment with REVIVE Pillars**

CACD strengthens all five pillars of REVIVE:

#### **1. First Nations First**

- Supports self-determined cultural activity, storytelling and long-term cultural relationships
- Builds respectful, long-term relationships with First Nations community and organisations

#### **2. A Place for Every Story**

- Ensures all voices – particularly underrepresented communities - are visible and valued
- Activates storytelling as a tool for inclusion and equity

#### **3. Centrality of the Artist**

- Recognises community artists as essential cultural workers
- Supports practice that is collaborative, relational and socially embedded
- Actively invests in arts career pathways for emerging artists and arts workers of diverse backgrounds

#### **4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure**

- Positions CACD as social infrastructure

## 5. Engaging the Audience

- Moves beyond audiences to participation and co-creation
- Reaches diverse audiences that experience barriers to participation in the arts
- Builds lifelong cultural engagement through belonging and agency

### Priority Communities

CACD plays a critical role in engaging:

- First Nations Communities
- Children and young people
- Refugee and migrant communities
- d/Deaf and disabled communities
- LGBTQIA+ communities
- People of Colour
- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- Communities experiencing racism and marginalisation
- Regional and remote communities
- Disaster-impacted communities
- It ensures these communities are **not just included in, but actively shaping cultural life reflective of lived experiences.**

### Key Recommendations

#### 1. Formal Recognition

Explicitly recognise CACD within the new cultural policy as a distinct and essential field of creative practice and core cultural infrastructure.

#### 2. Establish a National CACD Entity

Create a national body within Creative Australia to:

- a. Advocate for the CACD sector
- b. Develop and safeguard CACD practice frameworks
- c. Coordinate national collaboration amongst CACD practitioners
- d. Lead research, evaluation and data collection to further understand and communicate the impact of CACD

- e. Strengthen cross-sector partnerships
- f. Amplify community voice in policy
- 3. Increased investment in CACD practice**

Invest in local place-based arts initiatives that:

  - Strengthen social cohesion
  - Foster belonging in Australian communities
  - Build local capacity and agency
  - Promote well-being and Inclusion
- 4. Invest in Workforce & Practice Sustainability**

Invest in:

  - a. Training, mentoring and professional development specific to CACD practice
  - b. Support for emerging and established CACD practitioners
  - c. Professional supervision and wellbeing frameworks specific to CACD practice
  - d. Recognition of frontline, trauma-informed practice
- 5. Reform Funding and Measurement Systems**
  - **Introduce** cross-program tracking of CACD-aligned investment
  - **Report annually on** total community-engaged funding (direct + embedded)
  - **Shift from short-term project funding to** long-term, place-based investment models for CACD practice
  - **Resource** the relational and ongoing nature of CACD practice
- 6. Embed CACD Across Government Policy**

Position CACD as a **cross-government delivery mechanism** across:

  - a. Health and wellbeing
  - b. Disaster preparedness and recovery
  - c. Climate adaptation
  - d. Social services and Justice
  - e. Regional development
  - f. Education and community development
- 7. Strengthen Research & Evaluation**
  - a. Invest in and support activation of national CACD data collection and impact measurement
  - b. Build Partnership with research institutions

- c. Align with national datasets (participation, equity, diversity)
- d. Ensure CACD informs evidence-based policy

## 8. Equity of Access

Guarantee equitable access to:

- Funding and resources
- Cultural participation opportunities
- Networks and infrastructure

Particularly for:

- First Nations communities
- Regional and remote communities
- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- Disabled and marginalised groups
- Children and young people

## Why This Matters Now

Australia is facing:

- Social fragmentation
- Increasing climate instability
- Rising inequality
- Compounding disaster impacts

These are not just policy challenges—they are **relational challenges**.

CACD provides the creative, relational and community-led infrastructure required to respond. Social cohesion is not a fixed outcome — it is an aspirational ongoing goal. CACD practice achieves outcomes across the cultural, social, environmental, economic, and civic policy domains that help move Australian society towards this goal.

Through creativity, cultural practice and collective expression, CACD:

- Builds a sense of belonging and connectedness
- Deepens understandings and appreciation of others
- Strengthens trust
- Enables voice and agency

These are relational outcomes that represent the human infrastructure of a healthy society and ones that can not be achieved by policy alone.

### **Conclusion**

CACD is how communities come together in times of change, crisis and recovery. Through creativity, aesthetic enrichment, ideas, and cultural practice, CACD builds belonging, appreciation of difference, voice and connection—things policy alone can't achieve. We need the next iteration of REVIVE to recognise and resource this work so no community is left behind.

To realise the vision of REVIVE, it must be **recognised, resourced and embedded as a cornerstone of Australia's cultural future.**

**The Youth Arts industry** specialises in giving young Australians a voice in our world. Youth Arts is a living cultural practice through which children and young people produce artistic works of excellence and contribute actively to Australia's social and cultural life. It's a sector that encompasses youth-led and co-created work, emerging artist development, participatory and community-engaged practice, arts education and school engagement, early childhood audiences, socially engaged and CACD practice, pre-professional pathways and workforce development.

Youth Arts organisations sit at the intersection of culture, community, and the professional arts sector, delivering measurable benefits to cultural diversity and innovation, educational outcomes, mental health, social cohesion, and resilience. We are also where many of Australia's artists, performers, writers, and cultural leaders develop their practice, take risks, and experiment. Without sustained investment in Youth Arts, Australia risks the cultural participation of a generation and the long-term vitality of the national arts sector itself.

Our work brokers relationships within communities and starts conversations that connect them with one another, with service organisations, and with adults in their lives. Research conducted in Australia and across the world demonstrates significant benefits for educational outcomes, community building, and improved mental health and resilience.

As Youth arts organisations we also a critical part of Australia's cultural ecology and artistic pipeline. We are often the first place where young people encounter serious artistic practice, develop creative voice, technical skills, collaboration and leadership, and begin pathways into the broader arts sector. Many artists, performers, writers, directors and cultural leaders who later contribute to major companies and institutions begin their journeys in youth arts settings. Our organisations therefore function not only as community engagement programs, but as essential training grounds and talent incubators for the future of Australia's cultural life. Sustained investment in youth arts is an investment in the long-term vitality, diversity, and sustainability of the national arts sector.

As Youth Arts companies in Australia, we share an understanding that improving the lives of young people can positively change generations of Australians. The youth arts sector specialises in facilitating opportunities for young people to be and feel seen and heard. Our program development and delivery actively prioritise the needs and empowerment of First Nations, culturally and/or linguistically diverse, regional and remote, socially disadvantaged and differently abled young people.

There is a need to invest in initiatives that get young people interacting with each other and the wider community. Young people need to be recognised within Australian society, with opportunities to share their own stories, listen to others, and build relationships across generations.

An investment in Australia's Youth Arts industry should be included among initiatives to address the nation's deteriorating mental health and support in community-building.

If we are to have a vibrant storytelling industry into the future, it cannot be done without investing in Youth Arts.

Our Key Recommendations:

1. Include Children and Young People as a pillar of the national cultural plan.
2. Establish a sustained national funding stream for children and young people's arts organisations that recognises their role in artistic development, cultural leadership, and as a critical pipeline for the future arts workforce and major cultural institutions.
3. Establish a separate cross-portfolio funding stream for youth arts participation and engagement, co-managed alongside Health, Education, Employment, Youth Justice and Social Services, to support programs that improve wellbeing, social connection, learning, inclusion and community participation through arts engagement.
4. Establish a standing Youth Advisory Committee for Creative Australia that is managed independently by the Youth Arts sector, and reflects the diversity of young Australians, ensuring they have a direct voice in cultural decision-making.