

Submission to Australia's Next National Cultural Policy

Response to the National Consultation on Australia's Next National Cultural Policy

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Executive Summary

Australia's folk, acoustic, Celtic, maritime, world music and community festival sector is one of Australia's most enduring, participatory and economically significant cultural ecosystems.

Across Australia there are approximately 75–90 identifiable folk, roots, Celtic, maritime, bluegrass and community cultural festivals nationally through existing sector listings. When broader multicultural, world music and regional heritage festivals with substantial folk and participatory cultural content are included, the number is likely closer to 100–120 nationally.

These festivals collectively support thousands of artists, technicians, cultural workers, volunteers and small businesses while generating significant economic activity for regional Australia.

Many of these events are volunteer-led, intergenerational and deeply embedded within local communities, demonstrating how cultural participation in Australia is frequently built from the ground up rather than delivered solely through major institutions.

This submission supports and responds directly to the five pillars established in Revive and recommends that Australia's next National Cultural Policy recognise regional festivals and participatory cultural events as essential national cultural infrastructure.

Current Challenges Facing the Sector

Australia's regional and community festival sector is currently facing significant pressures including rising insurance costs, increasing compliance requirements, volunteer burnout, escalating production expenses, reduced regional touring viability and the ongoing loss of grassroots live music venues.

Many volunteer-led organisations operate with limited administrative capacity despite delivering substantial cultural, tourism and community outcomes. Without targeted long-term investment and workforce development, many regional and participatory cultural events face increasing sustainability challenges.

At the same time, these festivals provide important solutions to social isolation, declining regional cultural access and the need for stronger intergenerational and community connection across Australia.

Indicative Sector Statistics

- Estimated number of identifiable Australian folk, roots, Celtic, maritime, bluegrass and community cultural festivals/events nationally: approximately 75–90.

- Broader estimate including multicultural, world music and regional heritage festivals with significant folk and participatory cultural content: approximately 100–120.
- Estimated artists, cultural workers, technicians and facilitators involved annually: 4,000–8,000+.
- Estimated annual attendances across Australia’s folk, roots, Celtic, maritime, multicultural and community cultural festivals: approximately 700,000–1.2 million attendee visits annually.
- Creative Australia’s Soundcheck Report (2024) identified 535 music festivals nationally in 2022–23 and recognised festivals as significant contributors to regional tourism, employment and cultural participation.
- Economic impact estimates referenced in this submission are drawn from publicly available festival reports, regional tourism studies and published media reporting.

Response to the Five Revive Pillars

1. First Nations First

Regional festivals increasingly provide important platforms for First Nations artists, storytellers, dancers and cultural practitioners. The next National Cultural Policy should continue to prioritise First Nations leadership and ensure regional festivals have the capacity to support meaningful First Nations participation and collaboration.

2. A Place for Every Story

Australia’s folk and community festival sector reflects the diversity of Australian cultural life through migrant traditions, oral histories, multicultural music, dance, maritime traditions and participatory community arts.

3. The Centrality of the Artist

Festivals are critical employment and development pathways for artists by providing touring networks, collaborations, workshops, audience development and professional visibility.

4. Strong Institutions

Volunteer-led festivals and community cultural organisations are an essential part of Australia’s cultural infrastructure. Community festivals frequently operate as year-round cultural organisations rather than one-off events and provide long-term cultural continuity, volunteer training and leadership development.

5. Reaching the Audience

Regional festivals ensure arts and culture reach audiences outside metropolitan centres while creating highly participatory cultural experiences through singing, dancing, workshops and community engagement.

Economic and Social Impact

Regional folk and community cultural festivals generate substantial economic activity through tourism, hospitality, accommodation, artist employment, technical production and regional business activity.

Case studies such as Woodford Folk Festival and Port Fairy Folk Festival demonstrate the significant economic contribution these events make to regional communities and tourism economies.

Regional festivals also generate significant social outcomes through volunteer development, community wellbeing, intergenerational participation, youth engagement, regional identity, artist career development and community resilience.

Case Studies

Illawarra Folk Festival (NSW)

Established in 1985 and entering its 40th festival in January 2027, the Illawarra Folk Festival is a volunteer-led regional event involving more than 300 volunteers annually and presenting hundreds of artists across music, dance, workshops and participatory cultural activities.

Peak Festival (NSW)

Peak Festival in Perisher Valley demonstrates how cultural events can activate regional tourism outside peak seasonal periods while providing accessible performance opportunities for Australian artists. Established in 2009

The BUg – Brisbane Unplugged Gigs (QLD)

The BUg demonstrates the importance of grassroots urban cultural programming and presents weekly acoustic and folk performances while creating accessible entry points for emerging artists and touring musicians.

Recommendations

- Recognise regional festivals and community cultural events as essential national cultural infrastructure.
- Establish a National Regional Festivals Fund providing multi-year operational support for volunteer-led and regional festivals.
- Develop targeted regional touring initiatives to support artist mobility and sustainable touring circuits.
- Invest in festival workforce development including tertiary qualifications, mentoring programs and succession planning.
- Create infrastructure grant programs supporting temporary event infrastructure, accessibility improvements and regional venue development.
- Support volunteer-led organisations through governance training, insurance assistance and administrative capacity-building initiatives.
- Recognise participatory cultural activity including singing, dancing, workshops and community music-making as an important component of Australia's cultural ecology.
- Expand support for First Nations-led participation and collaborative programming within regional festivals.
- Support national research into the economic, cultural and social contribution of Australia's regional and community festival sector.

Appendix A — Example Tertiary Program for Festival & Event Management

This appendix proposes a framework for tertiary qualifications focused on Festival and Cultural Event Management to develop the next generation of festival organisers, facilitators and cultural leaders.

Suggested course areas include:

- Festival programming and cultural curation
- Budgeting and financial management
- Volunteer coordination and community engagement
- Production management, sound and lighting
- Risk management and compliance
- Grant writing and sponsorship development
- Artist liaison and touring logistics
- Regional cultural development

Appendix A — Example Tertiary Program for Festival & Event Management

This appendix provides an example framework for a tertiary qualification focused on Festival and Cultural Event Management.

The aim of such a program would be to develop the next generation of festival organisers, facilitators and cultural leaders capable of sustaining and growing Australia's regional and community festival sector.

Suggested Course Structure

Qualification Options:

- 1-Year Diploma in Festival & Event Management
- 2-Year Advanced Diploma / Associate Degree in Cultural Festival Management

Suggested Delivery:

- Two standard university semesters per year
- Approximately 15 contact/study hours per week
- Combination of lectures, workshops, site visits and industry placements
- Practical festival simulations and project-based learning
- Mentoring with working festival organisers and producers

Example Semester Structure (2-Year Program)

Semester 1

- Introduction to Festival & Event Management
- Budgeting & Financial Control for Festivals
- Community Arts & Cultural Participation
- Marketing, Media & Communications

Semester 2

- Programming & Cultural Curation
- Volunteer & Community Management
- Production Management: Sound, Lighting & Staging
- Grant Writing & Sponsorship Development

Semester 3

- Risk Management & Event Compliance
- Artist Liaison & Touring Logistics
- Temporary Structures & Site Infrastructure
- Audience Development & Digital Promotion

Semester 4

- Festival Leadership & Governance
- Regional Cultural Development
- Industry Placement / Festival Internship

- Major Festival Project

Core Skills Developed

- Budget development and financial management
- Festival programming and cultural curation
- Production management, sound and lighting
- Temporary structures and site infrastructure
- Risk management and compliance
- Facilitating grant writing and sponsorship
- Volunteer coordination and community engagement
- Media, publicity and communications
- Artist liaison and touring logistics
- Develop and support tertiary Festival & Event Management courses and provide seed funding programs to support the establishment of new festivals and community cultural events in cities and regional areas. These initiatives should utilise trained festival managers working in partnership with local communities to create new celebrations, participatory cultural events and regional tourism opportunities that generate employment for artists, strengthen community identity and deliver long-term economic benefits to local communities.
- Audience development and digital promotion

Priority Actions

1. Establish a National Regional Festivals Fund
2. Recognise volunteer-led festivals as cultural infrastructure
3. Support regional touring and artist mobility
4. Invest in festival workforce development and tertiary training
5. Strengthen support for participatory and community-led culture
6. Expand regional cultural infrastructure and accessibility support

Conclusion

Australia's regional and community festival ecology represents one of the nation's most important models of participatory cultural life.

These festivals create belonging, sustain artistic careers, preserve cultural traditions, strengthen regional economies and provide accessible cultural participation for audiences across Australia.

A strong cultural future for Australia depends upon sustained investment in regional festivals, participatory culture and the next generation of community cultural leaders, organisers and volunteers.