

Submission to the Review of the Australian Cultural Policy



On behalf of National Exhibition Touring Support (NETS) Australia

Introduction

National Exhibition Touring Support (NETS) Australia supports the intent of *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, and has clear alignment with its emphasis on First Nations leadership, equitable access, strong cultural infrastructure and audience engagement.

The introduction of *Revive* has constructively shaped NETS Australia's work in developing *National Touring Standards for Exhibition Touring* and an online information portal to assist Australia's galleries share their exhibitions and cultural product both within and independently of our touring programs.

To fully realise this vision of a shared national enterprise, the National Cultural Policy must now explicitly recognise and support both touring delivery and the networks of small-to-medium galleries and arts organisations that connect with and deliver to communities across Australia.

About NETS Australia

NETS Australia is a coordinated network of seven state and territory-based exhibition touring agencies – Museums & Galleries of New South Wales, Artback NT, Museums & Galleries Queensland, Country Arts SA, Contemporary Art Tasmania, National Exhibition Touring Support (NETS) Victoria, and Art on the Move (WA) – working in partnership with Australian public galleries on the delivery of touring exhibitions, public engagement programs, education and professional development opportunities, nationwide.

The network is dispersed, small, and responsive; comprising 14.3 full-time equivalent staff nationally. It leverages strategic partnerships with artists, arts-workers, First Nations arts and cultural centres, major institutions, collectors, and regional galleries to provide access to the nation's best contemporary visual culture. In 2025, NETS Australia travelled **43 exhibitions** to **96 venues** (76 regional and 11 remote locations) engaging more than **350,000 visitors** and providing paid employment for **343 artists and arts workers**.

NETS Australia's submission to the Review responds to each of *Revive's* five pillars, and is followed with a table of recommendations referencing the five pillars:

1. First Nations First

NETS Australia strongly advocates for the strategic employment of First Nations project personnel within touring agencies. Smaller public galleries are often under-resourced and

may lack First Nations staff or cultural expertise. Dedicated First Nations roles within touring agencies would:

- increase First Nations employment, leadership capacity and participation;
- support regional galleries to build cultural safety and awareness training;
- ensure cultural material is handled, interpreted and presented respectfully and appropriately across different language regions and Countries;
- support access to and understanding of First Nations cultural material and knowledge for regional and remote audiences; and
- strengthen long-term relationships between First Nations communities and galleries in regional and remote areas.

These measures align directly with the *First Nations First* pillar of *Revive* but will require sustained and targeted operational investment beyond short-term project funding.

In 2025, NETS Australia’s exhibitions showcased 199 First Nations artists, who made up 58% of all artists in our touring programs. This reflects our strong commitment to First Nations artists, communities and cultural material.

2. A Place for Every Story

Touring exhibitions are central to ‘A Place for Every Story’s’ aspiration to ensure all **communities can see themselves reflected in Australia’s cultural life**. Touring enables Australian stories – particularly those from diverse, place-based and underrepresented communities – to access audiences from across urban to remote Australia; as well as to reach international contexts where **Australian contemporary practice contributes to global cultural dialogue**. Our public galleries and museums often play an important role as cultural hubs, safe spaces and meeting places; serving communities that are culturally diverse, economically varied and socially marginalised. Without sustained investment in touring infrastructure, these audiences remain excluded from meaningful engagement with contemporary visual culture.

In NETS Australia’s 2025 sector survey, 78.1% of survey respondents identified their motivation for hosting a touring exhibition as ‘Exposing local audiences to new or different ideas’.

3. Centrality of the Artist

The ‘**Centrality of the Artist**’ is **dependent on the ecosystem that sustains artistic careers** over time. NETS Australia, public galleries, and small-to-medium visual arts organisations play a critical role in placing Australian artists at the centre of cultural life – by commissioning new work, touring exhibitions, and creating sustained opportunities for artists to be seen, employed, and be contextualised. Through curated touring programs, our organisations build long-term career pathways, supporting artists beyond initial production to include presentation, interpretation, market opportunities and professional development, while ensuring their work reaches new and different Australian audiences.

For many artists – particularly those outside capital cities or working in experimental, socially engaged, or culturally specific practices – engagement with public galleries and small-to-medium arts organisations represents their primary source of professional income, visibility, and sector connection. These organisations employ artists directly through exhibition fees, commissions, talks, residencies, and educational programming,

while also supporting the curators, technicians, writers and arts workers who enable artists' practice.

Exhibition touring amplifies this impact by extending the life of artists' work, strengthening their profile, and embedding their practice with communities across the country. A National Cultural Policy that truly centres artists must recognise, protect and resource this infrastructure, to ensure the organisations that champion Australian artists can offer fair employment, support sustainable careers, and cultivate meaningful connection.

In 2025, NETS Australia provided paid employment for 343 artists and arts workers.

4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure

'Strong Cultural Infrastructure' is **essential for a resilient arts ecology** and NETS Australia recognises that sector strength must be grounded in fair work, collaboration, and long-term sustainability. Along with the physical assets, cultural infrastructure includes soft infrastructure – the people and expertise required to deliver programs and services that are essential to sustaining a vibrant, viable arts sector.

NETS Australia endorses the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) *Code of Practice* and its advocacy for fair remuneration. We strongly support appropriately remunerated opportunities for artists and arts-workers.

The small-to-medium arts sector depends on a skilled and stable workforce. Many staff in the sector are underpaid when benchmarked against comparable counterparts from the public and private sectors and major collecting institutions. This inequity contributes to workforce attrition and loss of expertise and often follows on training and experience gained through the small-to-medium sector.

Parity across employment conditions is critical to retaining skilled arts workers and to long-term sustainability. Reductions in state funding with the defunding of key arts organisations has intensified the challenge in recent years. This has placed additional strain on the small-to-medium arts organisations that are increasingly expected to absorb additional responsibilities without commensurate resource allocations.

In NETS Australia's 2025 sector survey, 21.3% of respondents reported that the requirements of hosting a touring exhibition were too arduous on their staff/volunteers, reflecting skills and staff shortages in the sector; while 27.3% reported that their venue did not meet the environmental standards required to host an exhibition.

A National Cultural Policy committed to strong cultural infrastructure must address these systemic inequities by supporting fair pay, secure employment and sustainable funding; and by enabling organisations to support artists, serve communities and retain the workforce upon which the sector and Australia's arts ecology depend. This pillar also requires greater investment in our cultural facilities to ensure they are fit for purpose and meet best practice industry standards for the safe, inclusive display of Australia's visual arts and moveable cultural materials.

5. Engaging the Audience

Small-to-medium arts organisations play a vital role in engaging audiences across Australia, particularly in non-metropolitan communities where they are often the primary or sole cultural providers.

NETS Australia occupies a distinctive position within the regional sector, developing many touring exhibitions in close consultation and partnership with these organisations, including a significant number based in regional areas. The organisations are supported to realise their cultural ambitions, share our country's diverse stories, and strengthen audience engagement through bespoke public programs and activities.

NETS Australia agencies all prioritise access, inclusion and relevance, to ensure that audiences outside metropolitan centres can experience and engage with significant contemporary visual culture. NETS Australia also gives strong emphasis to public and education programming and sector development, building audience capacity, supporting lifelong learning, and delivering broad and lasting benefits to communities and the arts sector nationwide.

Currently, state-based legislation for Working with Children checks and compliance is incompatible and non-transferable. For national touring exhibitions that include artist and or curator-led public engagement activities, those involving children or other vulnerable people, currently requires complex administration that is inefficient, expensive and often concludes by not engaging with those critical audience segments. The **development of national standards for Working with Children legislation** to enable the transfer of compliance and checking registrations/licenses interstate, or similar, would **facilitate and expand the exchange of culture and education experiences for regional audiences**.

Within the scope of 'Engaging the Audience', touring exhibitions of digital artworks, alongside online public programs, play an increasingly important role in building digital literacy and reaching remote communities. NETS Australia supports policy measures that foster alternative modes of cultural engagement while strengthening environmentally sustainable touring practices and ethical sector standards.

Despite longstanding recognition of touring as a powerful mechanism for audience development and cultural equity, funding for exhibition touring has not kept pace with demand or production costs. The 2002 *Myer Report* explicitly recommended increased support for touring exhibitions to improve access in regional Australia, yet more than two decades later, this **structural underinvestment persists, undermining sector capacity and workforce sustainability**. This is compounded by the discontinuation of Creative Australia's *Contemporary Touring Initiative* program and inequities within the Australian Government's *Visions of Australia* program.

Analysis of the past 21 *Visions of Australia* rounds shows a significant concentration (18.6% or \$4,810,190) of funding flowing to the major National Collecting Institutions, with the National Gallery of Australia alone receiving \$2,388,247 of the national *Visions of Australia* allocation across all rounds. Small-to-medium organisations, for whom *Visions of Australia* is the sole viable mechanism to support national touring, are required to compete directly with organisations that already benefit from substantial baseline funding, infrastructure, and access to alternative touring and international engagement streams such as the *National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program*. This imbalance weakens the policy intent of 'Engaging the Audience' and 'A Place for Every Story' by constraining the voices, organisations and communities that touring is meant to serve.

Australia’s capacity to present contemporary visual art on the global stage is significantly constrained by the **absence of dedicated funding for international touring**. While Creative Australia provides targeted international support streams for music and the performing arts, there is **no equivalent mechanism for visual arts exhibitions** and related programs. As a result, small-to-medium touring agencies and visual arts organisations seeking to tour internationally are forced to apply through the *Organisations Projects* category, where international touring must compete with core artistic, operational, and domestic priorities. This structural gap disadvantages the visual arts sector, limits long-term planning, and creates an inequitable funding landscape across artforms.

A National Cultural Policy committed to equity, access, and creative ambition should address this imbalance by establishing a dedicated international touring program for the visual arts, aligning with existing support for other artforms, while reflecting the sector’s distinct timelines, costs, and modes of engagement.

Towards a Sustainable and Thriving Touring Ecology

Recommendations:

Pillar	Recommendation	Detail
1	Invest in First Nations leadership within touring agencies and regional galleries through dedicated, funded positions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase First Nations employment, leadership, and participation. • Build cultural safety and awareness in regional galleries. • Ensure respectful handling and presentation of cultural material. • Improve access to First Nations cultural knowledge in regional and remote communities. • Strengthen long-term relationships between First Nations communities and galleries.
1, 4	Strengthen sector infrastructure through longer-term funding cycles, increased base operational support, and training.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise peak bodies as vital to a healthy, thriving Australian arts ecology: they are job creators for artists/artworkers, facilitators, enablers and amplifiers that increase the return on the Government’s investment in organisations and projects in urban, rural, regional and remote communities. • Invest in training initiatives to address skills shortages including but not limited to First Nations, technical/installation, collection management, public programming.

1, 2, 3,
4, 5

Increase investment for regional touring and access.

- While touring costs have risen dramatically, *Visions of Australia* funding as remained relatively static (averaged out at \$1.2million per round across last 21 Funding Rounds).
- Create **equitable funding programs** by offering two distinct national touring funding programs – the *National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program* for the national institutions, and *Visions of Australia* for all other visual arts and cultural heritage organisations developing and touring cultural material.
- Expand *Visions of Australia* to **three rounds per year** and allow for the inclusion of **contingencies as an eligible budget item**.
- Implement a ***Visions of Australia Quick Response Program*** to enable funded organisations/projects to access funding to address extenuating or unforeseen situations such as venue cancellations requiring exhibition storage, natural disasters disrupting tour itineraries, the addition of new tour venues, and increases in fuel and transportation costs.
- Touring exhibitions of digital artworks, alongside online public programs, play an increasingly important role in building digital literacy and reaching remote communities. NETS Australia supports policy measures that **foster alternative modes of cultural engagement** while strengthening environmentally sustainable touring practices and ethical sector standards.
- As leaders in touring, exhibitions and programming need to be **inclusive of our diverse communities**, including First Nations peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse audiences, people with disability, LGBTIQ+, young people and older Australians.

1, 2, 3, 5

Develop international touring fund

- Implement **targeted international funding streams** to showcase Australian arts and culture to international audiences and foster exchange.

4, 5	<p>Adopt international best practice, including federal programs for collections care, travelling exhibitions and digital access.</p>	<p>Look to comparable countries that have embedded museums, galleries and the protection of moveable cultural heritage into national cultural policy frameworks. E.g. Scotland’s Culture Strategy and Museums and Galleries Strategy 2023–2030 recognise museums and galleries as essential community infrastructure and commit sustained investment to collections care, workforce development, environmental sustainability and inclusion.</p>
1, 3, 4	<p>Ensure fair pay and sustainable workforce conditions across Australia’s arts ecosystem.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in small to medium arts sector to ensure benchmarked, fair pay and workforce conditions. This includes ensuring organisations have adequate paid staff numbers to safely deliver sustainable workloads. • Invest in workforce development including education, training and skills development to grow the sector pipeline, foster career pathways and enable succession planning.
4	<p>Embed environmental sustainability and ethical practice across cultural production and touring systems.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the visual arts sector to respond responsibly to climate change and to align with broader public policy goals. • Create opportunities for innovation in digital touring, hybrid programming and low-impact audience engagement models. • Ensure environmental responsibility including provision of carbon off-sets as an eligible expense in funding programs, is considered alongside audience reach, access, inclusion and artistic quality.
1, 3, 4, 5	<p>Develop meaningful, up-to-date sector datasets.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the Australian Bureau of Statistics to work collaboratively with the creative and cultural sector to develop meaningful, up-to-date datasets. Reliable economic and participation data are essential to understanding the sector’s contribution

and informing effective long-term policy planning.

5

Adopt national standards for Working with Children compliance and checking

- State-based legislation for **Working with Children Checks and Compliance is currently incompatible and non-transferable;** creating unnecessary administrative complexity and expense for national touring exhibitions with public programs engaging artists working across multiple states and territories.