

Final

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation

24 May 2026

Acknowledgment of Country

This submission acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands from which it is written, the Gimuy-Walubarra Yidinji peoples of Cairns, Far North Queensland and honours all First Nations communities across the continent. Sovereignty was never ceded. We pay respects to Elders past and present, and to the emerging generation of cultural practitioners who carry forward the world's oldest continuous living cultures.

To honour the world's oldest living culture is to honour what it means to be human. For more than sixty-five thousand years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have carried memory, knowledge, story and ceremony across generations, an unbroken thread of human continuity without parallel on earth. To invest in this culture is not merely an economic proposition; it is a measure of our civilisation. A society that protects its deepest roots stands tall. A society that neglects them has forgotten who it is. When we build spaces where First Nations creativity flourishes, where young people carry language and ceremony forward, where the world's most ancient wisdom meets the world's newest possibilities. We declare that memory matters, that beauty is essential, and that humanity's oldest story deserves its fullest telling. What we do for First Nations arts and culture, we do for the soul of this nation. What we do for the soul of this nation, we do for the memory of humanity itself.

Executive Summary

Australia's next National Cultural Policy must move beyond symbolic acknowledgment to adequately funded First Nations cultural infrastructure. This submission identifies the investment required to optimise First Nations arts, culture and creativity, with a focus on Cairns and Far North Queensland and the role of regional First Nations festivals.

International Legal Framework

Australia bears binding obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) to invest positively in First Nations cultural infrastructure, support self-determination, and rectify historical underinvestment. These instruments transform First Nations cultural investment from a discretionary policy choice into a legal requirement.

The Investment Gap

Current national investment in First Nations arts and culture is estimated at approximately \$35-40 million per annum. The investment required to optimise outcomes is **\$235 million per annum**, representing approximately 0.04 per cent of Commonwealth government expenditure. This quantum addresses infrastructure, workforce development, festivals, arts centres, export development, and research.

The Regional Festival Imperative

Regional First Nations festivals such as Shine on Gimuy are essential cultural infrastructure. In Cairns, Council investment of \$1.51 million generated \$38.6 million in economic impact, a 25:1 return ratio, and the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair generated more than \$4.46 million in direct and incremental expenditure in 2025. These are high-performing assets, not discretionary costs.

Opportunity Loss and Gain

The estimated \$195-200 million annual investment gap represents approximately **\$4.875-5 billion in unrealised annual economic impact**. Continued underinvestment carries cultural, social and international costs. Closing the gap would generate more than \$5 billion in annual economic impact, double First Nations creative enterprise revenue by 2036, and position First Nations culture as the defining feature of Australia's 2032 Olympic presentation.

Key Recommendations

1. Adopt a **\$235 million per annum** First Nations cultural investment framework.
2. Fund a major First Nations Cultural Centre in Cairns and a dedicated **First Nations Festivals Fund of \$30 million per annum**.
3. Invest across the full cultural value chain, including workforce development and arts centres.
4. Integrate cultural investment with tourism, education, health and regional development.
5. Embed UNDRIP, ICCPR and ICESCR obligations in the National Cultural Policy and its review mechanisms.
6. Establish public data, evaluation and accountability mechanisms for First Nations cultural investment.

The choice is clear: invest at the level required to realise the opportunity, or continue current settings and accept the opportunity loss. The obligation is clear, the return is substantial, and the opportunity is immediate.

1. Introduction: The Investment Imperative

The establishment of "First Nations First" as Pillar One of *Revive* represented a historic recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are the foundation of Australian cultural policy. The First Nations Board, operational since September 2024, has begun shifting decision-making authority to First Nations leadership. The Office for the Arts has invited comprehensive consultation on First Nations arts and cultural practice, language and cultural maintenance, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, funding access, regional participation, cultural infrastructure, and pathways for First Nations artists and organisations.

Yet policy architecture without adequate investment is architecture without a building. This submission asks the central question for the next National Cultural Policy: what level of investment is required to achieve the outcomes policy promises? It answers by identifying the current baseline, the investment gap, the opportunity loss created by that gap, and the gains that closing it would unlock across multiple sectors. Throughout, it positions regional First Nations festivals not as peripheral programming but as essential cultural and economic infrastructure.

1.1 International Legal Framework as Investment Mandate

Australia's obligations under international law transform First Nations cultural investment from a discretionary policy choice into a binding legal requirement.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), endorsed by Australia in 2009, affirms in Article 5 the right of Indigenous peoples "to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions." Article 11(1) guarantees the right "to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs," including "the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures." Article 12 affirms rights to "manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies." Article 13 addresses intangible heritage, confirming the right to "revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing

systems and literatures." Article 31 further affirms the right "to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions."

These provisions are not aspirational; they impose obligations on States to take positive measures to enable the full enjoyment of these rights. The absence of dedicated, adequately resourced cultural infrastructure constitutes a failure to discharge these obligations.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Australia in 1980, provides in Article 27 that persons belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities "shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language." The Human Rights Committee, in General Comment No. 23, has clarified that this Article imposes **positive obligations** on States to take measures to ensure the protection of minority cultures—not merely to refrain from interference.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), ratified by Australia in 1975, provides in Article 15 the right of everyone "to take part in cultural life." The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has elaborated that this right encompasses both passive access to culture and active participation in creating culture, and that States bear obligations to respect, protect and fulfil this right through positive measures including infrastructure investment.

ILO Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, while not ratified by Australia, represents customary international law standards. Article 2 requires governments to develop "co-ordinated and systematic action" to protect Indigenous rights. Article 4 mandates "special measures" for safeguarding Indigenous cultures. Article 7 affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to "decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being" and to "exercise control, to the extent possible, over their own economic, social and cultural development."

Taken together, these instruments establish an **unequivocal duty to invest**. Australia cannot claim compliance with UNDRIP while First Nations cultural infrastructure projects remain stalled and funding falls short of need. The next National Cultural Policy must name this duty explicitly and resource it adequately.

2. Current Investment Baseline: What Australia Currently Spends

Understanding the investment required for growth requires first establishing what is currently spent. This section aggregates available data across federal, state and local jurisdictions over the period 2021–2026.

2.1 Federal Investment

At the federal level, Creative Australia administers the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts program. The First Nations Board now directs investment in First Nations works of scale. The Commonwealth has committed \$80 million to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Gallery of Australia (ATSIAGA) in Alice Springs and has announced the Ngurra Cultural Precinct in Canberra, currently in scoping.

However, a critical finding of this submission is that **no single, publicly accessible dataset aggregates all Commonwealth investment in First Nations arts, culture and creativity across all departments and programs**. This data opacity is itself a barrier to accountability and must be remedied as a matter of priority.

2.2 State Investment: Queensland

Queensland's *Time to Shine* 10-year strategy has delivered measurable outcomes. In April 2026, eight artists and organisations shared in \$441,246 through Round 1 of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Arts Development Fund, supporting works from the Torres Strait to the Redlands. The Queensland Government has extended \$4.3 million for 17 Indigenous Arts Centres across the state under the Backing Indigenous Arts Multi-Year Fund, supporting two- and four-year funding arrangements.

To contextualise these figures: \$4.3 million for 17 arts centres across an entire state equates to approximately **\$253,000 per centre over the funding period**, or approximately **\$50,600 per centre per annum** over a five-year cycle. By comparison, the Queensland Performing Arts Centre in Brisbane received \$125 million for a single redevelopment. The disparity is not marginal—it is orders of magnitude.

2.3 Local Investment: Cairns Regional Council

Cairns Regional Council invested \$1.51 million through its Major Events Sponsorship Program in 2024/25, supporting 14 events that generated \$38.6 million in economic impact, close to 25,000 visitors, and more than 119,000 visitor nights. The Shine on Gimuy Festival and Dream Aloud—described as events that "celebrate and share First Nations voice and culture"—were among the events supported in both 2023/24 and 2024/25.

This demonstrates that even modest investment, when strategically directed, generates extraordinary returns. The Council's \$1.51 million investment yielded a **25:1 economic return ratio**. This is not a cost; it is a high-performing asset.

2.4 The Investment Gap

Despite these investments, the gap between current funding and demonstrated need remains vast. First Nations cultural infrastructure projects remain stalled nationally—Tarrkarri in Adelaide, for example, has been a vacant lot since 2018 despite a projected commitment of \$200-400 million. Artists report that they often self-fund work to get it stage-ready. Presenters cite financial risk as a major deterrent to programming First Nations work. Skills gaps also persist in off-stage roles including stage management, design, technical production and producing.

The current investment level is **insufficient to sustain the existing sector, let alone to optimise its growth**.

3. The Regional Festival Imperative: Shine on Gimuy and the Four Nations

Regional First Nations festivals are not peripheral to the cultural ecosystem, they are essential infrastructure that serves creators, audiences and communities simultaneously. The Shine on Gimuy Festival in Cairns exemplifies the artistic, cultural, creative and economic value that festivals generate, and the transformative potential of adequate investment.

3.1 The Four Nations: A Gathering of Peoples

The Shine on Gimuy Festival brings together the four principal First Nations of the Cairns and greater region—the Gunggandji, Yidinji, Djabugandji (Djabugay) and Yalanji (Kuku Yalanji) peoples in a showcase of arts, culture and creativity that is both a celebration of living culture and an assertion of enduring sovereignty. This gathering matters because each nation brings distinct language, story and relationship to Country.

The Gunggandji people of Yarrabah speak Gunggay, a language tied to that coastal landscape. The Yidinji people, one of the largest groups in the Cairns area, comprise eight clans across the coastal and tablelands regions. The Djabugandji (Djabugay) people hold the rainforest and the sea, with knowledge grounded in land, waters, flora, fauna, seasons and weather. The Kuku Yalanji people

carry the cultural authority of the Daintree region. When these four nations come together in festival, they demonstrate the interconnectedness reflected in the 2025 theme, KINSHIP.

The Cultural Guides Committee of Shine on Gimuy represents these nations- Yidinji, Gunggandji, Djabugay, Kuku Yalanji, and Mbabaram peoples-with Elders, Cultural Lorekeepers and arts practitioners overseeing all aspects of the festival to ensure cultural safety and relevance to First Nations histories, protocols and the contemporary world. This governance structure is significant. It means the festival is not curated by outsiders looking in, but shaped by the knowledge holders of the very cultures being shared. When Michelle Yeatman, a Gunggandji woman from Yarrabah, projects her ceramic works as part of the Artstory Light Walk and gifts them back to the Yarrabah Arts and Cultural Precinct, she is not merely exhibiting, she is enacting cultural continuity.

3.2 The Festival as Artistic and Creative Showcase

The Shine on Gimuy Festival transforms Cairns, traditionally known as Gimuy, into a celebration of First Nations art and storytelling. The festival transforms public space, with the Artstory Light Walk featuring large-scale light installations, animations and soundscapes that offer audiences an immersive experience of interconnectedness and culture through contemporary Indigenous art.

This artistic program is significant at multiple levels. It demonstrates that First Nations cultural expression is not confined to traditional forms but moves confidently across media, projection art, dance, music, ceramics, digital media to create a nighttime celebration on the banks of Trinity Inlet that honours Country and culture. Under the artistic direction of the late Rhoda Roberts AO, a Bundjalung woman, and the guidance of the Cultural Guides Committee, the festival gives voice to the oral Indigenous heritage of the region and offers a unique and evocative experience of the First Nations peoples of Gimuy.

Critically, the festival provides what the *Creating Art Part 1* research identified as essential: "powerful platforms for reaching new audiences for First Nations arts." It does so in a culturally safe context where First Nations artists control the narrative, determine the programming, and set the terms of engagement.

3.3 The Cultural Value of Festivals

The cultural value generated by festivals such as Shine on Gimuy extends beyond the artistic program to encompass cultural transmission, language revitalisation, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) analysis demonstrates a relationship between First Nations festival attendance and measures of empowerment, community connectedness and wellbeing. The research found that First Nations people who attend First Nations festivals are more likely to feel able to have a say within their community, more likely to feel able to get support outside their household, and more likely to report happiness.

The Interplay Project, conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation with remote communities, found that practising culture is the key to improving wellbeing for Aboriginal people in remote Australia, and that empowerment and spirituality are pathways between practising culture and wellbeing. Festivals are sites where this cultural practice occurs at scale, where community gathers, and where the interconnections between culture, empowerment and wellbeing are generated and reinforced.

For the four nations-Gunggandji, Yidinji, Djabugandji and Yalanji-the festival is a demonstration of cultural continuity and sovereignty. It is a declaration to the region, the nation and the world that these are living cultures with vibrant contemporary expression and ancient roots. It is an act of cultural transmission, with Elders and emerging artists sharing space, knowledge and creative practice.

3.4 Why Festivals Matter: The Creator, Audience, and Community Framework

Festivals are not merely events, they are strategic infrastructure within the cultural ecosystem. Their significance operates across three interconnected domains.

Creators

Festivals give First Nations artists what the broader arts economy often denies them: a platform where their work is the main event, not a token inclusion. The *Building Audiences* research found that almost half of surveyed mainstream presenters saw financial risk as the main deterrent to programming First Nations work, and about one-third programmed only one First Nations work per season. Festivals reverse that dynamic. They create dedicated spaces where First Nations work is central, audiences attend specifically for those cultural experiences, and the brand recognition mainstream presenters often require can be built.

Shine on Gimuy provides this platform while ensuring that artists retain cultural control. The Cultural Guides Committee model ensures that cultural protocols are respected, that Elders guide content, and that the economic benefits flow to the communities whose culture is being shared. For Michelle Yeatman, the festival provided a platform for her ceramic works to reach new audiences, with the works subsequently gifted back to the Yarrabah Arts and Cultural Precinct, a model of artistic presentation that honours cultural ownership.

Audiences

Festivals function as audience development infrastructure. They attract audiences who may be new to First Nations arts, offering an accessible entry point through the festival atmosphere- food, music, spectacle, gathering- that reduces the perceived barriers to engagement with cultural content. The **Towards Equity** research found that Australians in remote areas are more likely to attend the arts to improve their wellbeing.

For non-Indigenous audiences, festivals such as Shine on Gimuy offer an encounter with First Nations culture that is immersive rather than didactic, experiential rather than abstract. The Artstory Light Walk creates an environment in which audiences experience interconnectedness and culture directly, through light, sound and storytelling on Country.

Regional Communities

For the regional communities of Far North Queensland, festivals generate economic, social and cultural returns that compound over time. The economic data is instructive: Cairns Regional Council's Major Events Sponsorship Program generated \$38.6 million in economic impact from \$1.51 million investment in 2024/25, a 25:1 return ratio. The Cairns Indigenous Art Fair generated more than \$4.46 million in direct and incremental expenditure for the Cairns region economy from its 2025 event.

But the community value of festivals extends beyond economics. Festivals are sites where cultural practice occurs at scale, where community gathers, and where the interconnections between culture, empowerment and wellbeing are generated and reinforced. For a region with a First Nations population exceeding 16 per cent and a pronounced youth demographic whose median age is approximately 23 years versus 38 for non-Indigenous, festivals provide intergenerational spaces where young people connect with culture, with Elders, and with creative career possibilities.

3.5 The Festival Imperative

The investment case for festivals is clear. A dedicated First Nations Festivals Fund of \$30 million per annum, as proposed in this submission, would support events such as Shine on Gimuy to scale, to tour, to commission new works, to employ more First Nations artists and arts workers, and to build the audiences that sustain the broader First Nations cultural economy. The alternative, continued reliance on modest local government support without dedicated Commonwealth investment, is a guarantee

that the potential of these festivals remains unrealised, and that the opportunity loss documented throughout this submission continues to compound.

Festivals are not a luxury. They are essential cultural infrastructure that serves creators, audiences and communities simultaneously. They are sites where the world's oldest living cultures are celebrated, shared and sustained. The four nations of the Gimuy region deserve a festival platform resourced to match the depth of the cultures it showcases. The evidence supports the investment. The obligation under UNDRIP, ICCPR and ICESCR requires it.

4. Participation Rates and the Growth Imperative

4.1 Current Participation

Creative Australia's *Towards Equity 2* report confirms that First Nations Australians are "core to the energy of the sector" yet remain "underrepresented, under-resourced or under-compensated for their work." Arts and cultural engagement is "embedded in the daily lives of First Nations Australians", yet this high engagement does not translate into commensurate institutional support, career pathways, or economic returns for practitioners.

The *Creating Art Part 1* report documents that prior to COVID-19, First Nations dance and theatre makers were "touring work internationally to great acclaim," yet face persistent barriers: financial risk perception among presenters, tokenistic programming practices, skills gaps in technical and producing roles, and insufficient resourcing for mentoring and cultural consultant roles. Connection to community is "a vital and inherent characteristic of the work of First Nations artists," requiring sustained investment in community engagement infrastructure.

4.2 The Growth Opportunity

The growth opportunity is quantifiable. The tourism data demonstrates that demand for First Nations cultural experiences is strong and growing. Tropical North Queensland's First Nations tourism sector is experiencing record growth, with international visitor spending rebounding to nearly \$1.1 billion. Queensland hosts Australia's highest number of Indigenous-owned and -led tourism products.

The Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games represent a once-in-a-generation platform for First Nations cultural presentation to a global audience. The Queensland Government is prioritising First Nations cultural programming in the lead-up through the *Time to Shine* strategy. If adequately resourced now, First Nations arts and culture will be positioned as the centrepiece of Australia's international cultural diplomacy during the Games, and beyond.

The Destination 2045 strategy targets a \$4 billion Queensland events calendar, with \$2 billion from regional events. First Nations cultural festivals and experiences are essential to achieving this target. The Cairns Major Events Sponsorship Program's 25:1 return ratio demonstrates that First Nations events are not a subsidy case, they are an investment proposition.

4.3 The Participation Target

This submission proposes that the next National Cultural Policy adopt a measurable target: **double First Nations participation in the creative workforce and double First Nations creative enterprise revenue by 2036**. This aligns with the Closing the Gap framework and provides a benchmark against which investment adequacy can be assessed.

5. The Investment Required: Quantum and Allocation

5.1 National Investment Quantum

Based on the analysis of current investment, the demonstrated gap, and the growth opportunity, this submission identifies the following investment quantum as the minimum required over the next five years to optimise First Nations arts, culture and creativity:

The minimum annual investment required over the next five years is **\$235 million**, comprising **\$100 million** for cultural infrastructure, **\$50 million** for creative workforce development, **\$30 million** for festivals and presentation platforms, **\$25 million** for Indigenous Arts Centres, **\$20 million** for cultural export development, and **\$10 million** for research and data. Against current estimated investment of approximately **\$35-40 million per annum**, this leaves an annual gap of approximately **\$195-200 million**.

This \$235 million annual investment represents approximately **0.04 per cent of Commonwealth government expenditure**, or roughly the cost of a single major transport infrastructure project. It is not unaffordable, it is un-prioritised.

5.2 Far North Queensland Allocation

Within this national framework, Far North Queensland requires a dedicated regional allocation of **\$75 million** for a major First Nations Cultural Centre in Cairns, **\$15 million per annum** for regional creative workforce development, **\$5 million per annum** for festival and event platform support including Shine on Gimuy, and **\$5 million per annum** for Indigenous Arts Centre uplift across Cape York and Torres Strait.

5.3 Investment Logic

This quantum reflects five factors: the demographic weight of First Nations peoples, especially in Far North Queensland; the economic returns already demonstrated by existing investment, including Cairns' 25:1 event return; the infrastructure gap created by decades of underinvestment; the opportunity presented by Brisbane 2032 and Destination 2045; and the obligations imposed by UNDRIP, ICCPR and ICESCR.

6. The Multiplier Effect and Return on Investment

The multiplier effect describes how an initial investment generates successive rounds of economic activity that exceed the original expenditure. In First Nations cultural investment, that effect operates across economic, social and cultural dimensions.

6.1 Economic Multiplier

The proposed \$235 million annual investment generates direct economic activity through artist fees, construction contracts, venue operations, and event expenditure. This direct expenditure becomes income for workers and businesses, who in turn spend on goods and services—generating indirect economic activity. These secondary recipients spend in turn, generating induced economic activity.

Using a conservative multiplier of 1.8 (below the 2.0-2.5 range often estimated for cultural investment in regional economies), the \$235 million investment generates approximately \$423 million in total economic output. When combined with the 25:1 event return ratio demonstrated in Cairns—where \$1.51 million generated \$38.6 million in direct economic impact—the total economic contribution of optimised First Nations cultural investment reaches into the billions annually.

Economic Multiplier by Investment Type

By investment type, the proposed annual program would contribute approximately **\$180 million** from cultural infrastructure, **\$80 million** from workforce development, **\$75 million** from festivals and events, **\$42.5 million** from arts centres, **\$40 million** from export development, and **\$15 million** from research and data, producing an estimated total contribution of **\$432.5 million**. These multipliers are conservative and sit well below the 25:1 event return ratio already demonstrated in Cairns.

6.2 Social Multiplier

Investment in First Nations cultural infrastructure generates social returns that compound over time. A young First Nations person who accesses creative training, secures cultural employment, and builds a career becomes a mentor for subsequent cohorts, generating intergenerational social mobility. Cultural centres that host language programs, ceremony, and knowledge transmission strengthen cultural identity across entire communities. The social multiplier converts a single investment decision into cascading social outcomes that persist across decades.

6.3 Cultural Multiplier

Each First Nations artwork, performance, festival or cultural product generates cultural value beyond its immediate presentation. Works that tour build audiences for subsequent works. Artists who achieve recognition create pathways for emerging practitioners. Festivals that succeed demonstrate the market to presenters who have hesitated. The cultural multiplier transforms individual investments into sector-wide transformation.

6.4 Return on Investment: The Cairns Evidence

The Cairns Regional Council Major Events Sponsorship Program provides strong local evidence of return on investment. In 2024/25, **\$1.51 million** in Council investment supported 14 events that generated **\$38.6 million** in economic impact, close to **25,000** visitors, more than **119,000** visitor nights, and a **25:1 return ratio**. The Cairns Indigenous Art Fair generated more than **\$4.46 million** in direct and incremental expenditure from its 2025 edition.

These figures are not theoretical projections, they are audited outcomes from existing investment. Scaling this investment nationally would generate returns proportionate to the increased quantum, adjusted for regional variation.

7. Direct and Indirect Benefits Framework

Investment in First Nations arts, culture and creativity delivers direct and indirect returns across five domains: creative, social, economic, environmental and political. The immediate effects are increased artistic output, employment, infrastructure use, audience growth and compliance with legal obligations. Over time, those effects compound through stronger cultural transmission, better wellbeing outcomes, regional economic diversification, Traditional Ecological Knowledge transmission, and enhanced soft power.

Domain	Direct benefits	Indirect benefits
Creative	More artistic output, stronger presentation platforms, skills development, operational cultural sovereignty	Sector-wide transformation, audience diversification, innovation, cultural continuity, a sustainable pipeline

Social	Employment, youth pathways, community gathering spaces, wellbeing gains	Health co-benefits, reduced disengagement, stronger identity, educational engagement, intergenerational healing, community cohesion
Economic	Cultural tourism revenue, event economy growth, construction jobs, creative enterprise growth, arts centre stability	Multiplier effects, regional diversification, supply-chain growth, export income, transferable skills, Brisbane 2032 legacy
Environmental	Cultural landscape management, sustainable cultural tourism	Traditional Ecological Knowledge transmission, low-carbon development, Country-centred planning, stewardship
Political	International compliance, Closing the Gap contribution, self-determination in practice	Reputation gains, soft power, reconciliation, policy leadership, bipartisan continuity

8. Opportunity Loss and Gain

8.1 Opportunity Loss: The Cost of Underinvestment

Continued underinvestment in First Nations arts and culture imposes measurable economic, cultural, social and international costs.

Using Cairns Regional Council's 25:1 event return ratio as a conservative benchmark, the \$195–200 million annual investment gap equates to approximately **\$4.875-5 billion in unrealised annual economic impact**. The loss is not only economic: it also constrains language revitalisation, cultural transmission, youth pathways, health co-benefits and Australia's ability to present First Nations culture on the world stage ahead of Brisbane 2032.

8.2 Opportunity Gains: The Return on Optimised Investment

Closing the investment gap would generate economic, cultural, social and international gains.

Optimised investment could generate more than \$5 billion in annual economic impact, double First Nations creative enterprise revenue by 2036, strengthen cultural continuity and sovereignty, improve wellbeing and youth engagement, and position First Nations culture as the defining feature of Australia's Brisbane 2032 presentation and wider soft-power strategy.

9. Human Impact: What Underinvestment Means in Practice

This section translates the economic and policy arguments above into lived consequences. It shows what continued underinvestment means for material conditions, cultural transmission and employment, and what changes when the investment gap is closed.

Current Reality

In Cairns and Far North Queensland, underinvestment shows up as economic exclusion, infrastructure poverty, constrained cultural transmission and blocked employment pathways. First Nations households are overrepresented in the lowest income quartile, the region still lacks a

dedicated First Nations cultural centre and production facility, and skills gaps in technical and producing roles continue to restrict advancement while weak procurement settings allow value to leak away from First Nations enterprises.

Transformative Potential

The proposed investment directly addresses those conditions by creating economic alternatives, structured employment pathways, regionally based training, dedicated cultural infrastructure, stronger procurement settings, and spaces where language, ceremony and knowledge can be carried forward by the region's young population.

From Opportunity Loss to Opportunity Gain

In practical terms, closing the gap would shift the region from self-funded development, tokenistic programming and stalled infrastructure to a functioning cultural ecosystem with dedicated festivals, an operational cultural centre, stronger incomes, viable careers and visible compliance with Australia's cultural rights obligations.

10. Recommendations

The recommendations below are designed for direct incorporation into the next National Cultural Policy.

10.1 Investment Quantum

Adopt a **\$235 million per annum** First Nations cultural investment framework, allocated across infrastructure (\$100M), workforce development (\$50M), festivals (\$30M), arts centres (\$25M), export development (\$20M), and research and data (\$10M).

10.2 Regional First Nations Cultural Infrastructure

Allocate **\$100 million over four years** for a major First Nations Cultural Centre in Cairns and associated regional infrastructure, workforce development and festival support. Require co-design with Traditional Owners and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, consistent with ILO 169 Article 6 consultation requirements and UNDRIP Article 7 self-determination principles.

10.3 First Nations Festivals Fund

Establish a dedicated **First Nations Festivals Fund of \$30 million per annum** to support events such as Shine on Gimuy. Recognise festivals as essential cultural infrastructure and high-performing economic assets with demonstrated returns, including the 25:1 ratio recorded in Cairns.

10.4 Funding Equity and Transparency

Commission an independent audit of Commonwealth cultural infrastructure expenditure over the past two decades, disaggregated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous recipients. Set a minimum First Nations investment target calibrated to population share and adjusted for historical underinvestment, consistent with ILO 169 Article 4 special measures obligations. Require public reporting through annual Closing the Gap and cultural policy processes.

10.5 Value Chain Investment

Fund all five stages of the cultural value chain-creation, development, production and presentation, distribution, and supply and consumption. Establish dedicated development funding so promising works can reach presentation readiness, addressing the current need for artists to self-fund development.

10.6 Creative Workforce Investment

Establish regionally based training hubs, with Cairns as a priority location for North Queensland. Address skills gaps in stage management, design, technical production and producing; increase support for mentoring and cultural consultant roles; develop programs for the youth demographic in Far North Queensland; and establish a nationally coordinated cadetship and fellowship program for First Nations cultural workers.

10.7 Cross-Sectoral Integration

Integrate First Nations cultural investment with tourism, education, health, regional development and trade portfolios to maximise returns across all domains. Recognise that First Nations arts and culture is not a siloed portfolio but a cross-cutting economic and social asset.

10.8 Procurement Reform

Require First Nations-led consortia as preferred proponents for all Commonwealth-funded First Nations cultural infrastructure projects, consistent with UNDRIP Article 7 and ILO 169 Article 7. Strengthen Indigenous procurement policies to prevent "Black cladding" and ensure genuine First Nations control from design through operation.

10.9 Brisbane 2032 Readiness

Establish a dedicated First Nations Cultural Program for the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games, funded and operational from 2026, to position First Nations culture as the defining feature of Australia's international presentation.

10.10 International Obligations Compliance

Explicitly reference Australia's obligations under UNDRIP, ICCPR Article 27 and ICESCR Article 15 in the National Cultural Policy as the legal foundation for First Nations cultural investment. Establish a periodic review mechanism, with First Nations participation, to assess policy compliance with international human rights obligations.

10.11 Data and Evaluation

Establish a comprehensive, publicly accessible dataset aggregating all federal, state and local First Nations cultural investment. Commission a longitudinal study tracking participation rates, career trajectories and economic outcomes in the creative industries. Adopt the measurable target of doubling First Nations participation in the creative workforce and doubling First Nations creative enterprise revenue by 2036.

10.12 Stalled Projects

Fund the completion of stalled First Nations cultural infrastructure projects. Each delay compounds cumulative disadvantage and extends Australia's failure to take positive measures for cultural rights protection.

11. Conclusion

The question before this consultation is not whether to invest in First Nations arts and culture. The question is whether Australia will invest at the level required to realise the opportunity, or continue at current levels and accept the opportunity loss.

The evidence in this submission is clear. First Nations cultural investment generates extraordinary returns: economic (including the 25:1 return demonstrated in Cairns and \$432.5 million in total output from a \$235 million investment), cultural (sustaining and transmitting the world's oldest continuous living cultures), social (wellbeing, cohesion and youth engagement), environmental (Traditional

Ecological Knowledge and sustainable tourism), and political (international legal compliance, soft power and reconciliation). Current national investment of approximately \$35–40 million per annum is grossly inadequate. The proposed \$235 million per annum represents about 0.04 per cent of Commonwealth expenditure, an extremely small share of the national budget for an asset that defines Australia's identity to the world.

The Cairns and Far North Queensland region demonstrates both the cost of underinvestment and the potential of getting this right. With a First Nations population exceeding 16 per cent, a youth demographic ready for creative careers, a tourism market generating \$1.1 billion in international spending, and festivals such as Shine on Gimuy-bringing together the Gunggandji, Yidinji, Djabugandji and Yalanji peoples-delivering 25:1 returns, the region is a microcosm of the national opportunity.

Every year of delay compounds the opportunity loss. Every dollar of underinvestment means cultural knowledge not transmitted, creative careers not launched, tourism revenue not realised, health costs not avoided, and international obligations not met. The estimated \$4.875-5 billion in unrealised annual economic impact is not an abstraction. It is the measurable cost of policy failure.

The next National Cultural Policy must name the investment required, allocate it, and be accountable for its delivery. First Nations First cannot remain a pillar in name only. It must become the principle that governs investment decisions, infrastructure priorities, and workforce development-adequately funded, strategically directed, and rigorously evaluated.

The opportunity is now. The obligation is clear. The return is certain.

Invest. Empower. Transform.