

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

### **From Corrugated Iron Youth Arts**

Corrugated Iron is the Northern Territory's award-winning, leading youth arts company, working with children and young people across theatre, circus and contemporary performance for over four decades. Based in Garramilla/Darwin, Corrugated Iron operates across one of the most geographically dispersed and complex regions in Australia, working with young people across regional, remote and very remote communities across 1.3M square kilometers. Additionally, Corrugated Iron is the only dedicated circus space and pathway for circus artists available in the Northern Territory.

The Northern Territory presents a unique cultural context. There are no tertiary training institutions dedicated to performing arts. For many children and young people, organisations such as Corrugated Iron are the first point of contact and opportunity to encounter live performance, contributing through creative participation and artistic leadership.

The Northern Territory also has one of the youngest populations in Australia, including a large First Nations youth population. In this context, youth arts are not supplementary cultural activity, but as essential, holding space for social, cultural and creative infrastructure where it otherwise would not exist.

Corrugated Iron plays a critical role in the Northern Territory's arts ecology supporting children, young people, emerging and early career artists to create work, develop artistic pathways, build confidence, strengthen connections and participate meaningfully in cultural life. Our work spans from: primary schools with all of school circus curriculum, remote and very remote communities, local and major festivals, employment pathways and spaces where access to arts participation is deeply limited by geography, cost and lack of infrastructure.

We call upon the Australian Government to consider our following recommendations as essential to ensure that regional Australia, children and young people are not overlooked, and furthermore have an opportunity to contribute, towards this new iteration of the National Cultural Policy.

### **Children & Young People Now**

We believe that children and young people are not simply future artists and audiences. They are cultural citizens and active drivers of contemporary artistic practice. They are not waiting to participate in a future; they are actively shaping it in real time, directly contributing to Australia's cultural identity today.

Children and young people make up 29% of Australia's population, yet they are still not properly recognised in national cultural policy as cultural citizens now. Without clear commitment and investment, their rights to access, participate and lead in the arts are under-supported, weakening both their present cultural voice and Australia's future cultural strength.

The next National Cultural Policy presents an opportunity to recognise children and young people and organisations working with them not as peripheral to the cultural sector, but as central to its current vibrancy, long-term sustainability, audience development and workforce development now and into the future.

## **Systemic Barriers for Youth Arts Organisations in Regional and Remote Australia**

The evidence is clear. Participation in the arts supports confidence, belonging, wellbeing, and connection. At a time when many young people are experiencing increasing social isolation, mental health challenges, racism, use of AI, censorship and amplified uncertainty about the future, arts participation offers opportunity for genuine human connection, joy, and collective experiences to grapple with these realities.

This is increasingly important in regional and remote Australia where opportunities are further limited and where youth arts organisations like Corrugated Iron often play multiple roles; pathways into employment, artists, creative producers, community connectors, educators, mentors and cultural infrastructure providers.

The artforms we deliver, particularly circus as a key example, create vital access points into the arts for children and young people who may otherwise be excluded by traditional education pathways. Circus is physically engaged and non-language dependent, making it highly accessible within the Northern Territory's culturally and linguistically diverse context. In settings shaped by structural inequity, it enables young people to experience visibility, value and belonging while building confidence, collaboration, resilience, and care for others. It is a highly effective, evidence-based practice that develops physical literacy, social capability and wellbeing, and aligns strongly with the Australian Curriculum, particularly Health and Physical Education and The Arts.

In a region where structural inequity continues to impact educational outcomes, circus teaches young people that they matter, as individuals and as part of a collective. It makes effort visible, builds confidence and trust, and affirms that every contribution has value. At the same time, it develops discipline, collaboration, resilience, care for others and the capacity to take creative risks together.

Demand for Corrugated Iron's circus curriculum in schools continues to exceed current delivery capacity, with programs delivered across two schools three days per week and engaging students across all year levels, consistently strengthening engagement, wellbeing and academic participation. However, regional and remote youth arts organisations continue to operate within funding and policy systems that do not reflect the realities of place-based delivery outside metropolitan centres. Workforce shortages, high travel and freight costs, limited infrastructure, climate impacts and geographic isolation are compounded by short-term funding cycles and increasing pressure to diversify income, creating structural instability for organisations delivering long-term, relationship-based work with young people.

### **First Nations First**

First Nations leadership and cultural continuity must also sit at the centre of Australia's cultural future. First Nations people make up 30.8% of the Northern Territory's population, compared to the national average of 3.8%. It is essential that we see more active pathways and support towards anti-racism and First Nations self determination to rectify this imbalance in power and leadership throughout the sector.

First Nations populations are also the first to suffer in regional and remote settings, therefore we demand an increase in regional and remote infrastructure that is First Nations-led, created with ICIP treasured at the forefront rather than a baseless statement or afterthought. Without this, we cannot hope to see improved Cultural Safety within society or the artistic spaces within which First Nations work is presented, and where First Nations people are employed.

## **Human Artistic Expression in the Age of Artificial Intelligence**

Corrugated Iron also believes the next National Cultural Policy must recognise the growing importance of live arts and human creativity in an increasingly automated and AI-driven world.

Young people are increasingly seeking spaces for authentic connection, shared experiences, and self-expression. Youth arts provides opportunities for embodied (in real time) creativity, imagination, collaboration and risk-taking that cannot be replicated through automated systems or AI-generated arts and cultural content.

While technology will evolve, the next National Cultural Policy must continue to value artistic labour, original storytelling across all artforms and the importance of human creative practice. This value should extend to arts work and administrative labour, to ensure continued pathways into arts management for young people, and maintenance of a healthy workforce for the arts more broadly. Investment in artists, children & young people, live arts and cultural participation is essential to ensuring Australia retains a vibrant and distinctive cultural future.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Include Children & Young People as a dedicated pillar within the National Cultural Policy, recognising them as active cultural citizens and creative contributors now, not only as future audiences and workforce.
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.
5. Strengthen First Nations-led cultural infrastructure in regional and remote Australia, embedding self-determination, ICIP and cultural safety as core requirements across all cultural investment and delivery, supported by sustained funding and clear accountability to ensure First Nations leadership is embedded
6. Ensure the National Cultural Policy prioritises live, human-led artistic practice and invests in youth arts as essential infrastructure for embodied creativity, collaboration and cultural workforce development that cannot be replicated by AI.

Australia's cultural future is already being shaped by children and young people, creating, performing, gathering and imagining new futures together. There is no question that young people are part of our future, the question is whether a new National Cultural Policy is structured to recognise and invest in what is already happening at adequate levels.