

**SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN
GOVERNMENT REGARDING AUSTRALIA'S
SECOND NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY**



Submitted by the National Folk Festival

24 May 2026

1. Executive Summary of Submissions

Pillar 1 - First Nations First

1. **Recommendation 1:** Establish dedicated federal funding streams to support festivals in presenting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and cultural groups from regional and remote communities.
2. **Recommendation 2:** Provide dedicated funding to support culturally safe engagement practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, including cultural support, community participation, and appropriate staffing.
3. **Recommendation 3:** Enshrine Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property Rights into Australian law.

Pillar 2 - A Place for Every Story

4. **Recommendation 4:** Provide explicit recognition of participatory cultural practice, intergenerational transmission, and community-led artistic activity as essential forms of national cultural infrastructure within future federal arts policy and funding frameworks.
5. **Recommendation 5:** Remove institutional exclusions of Folk and participatory cultural practice from contemporary Arts funding frameworks.
6. **Recommendation 6:** Recognise that folk, roots, and acoustic music festivals are of national cultural significance in preserving and developing intangible cultural heritage and that they should be appropriately funded.
7. **Recommendation 7:** Legislate to ensure that Australian stories have high 'discoverability' on streaming platforms and that current streaming video on demand content requirements are expanded to cover music streaming services.

Pillar 3 - Centrality of the Artist

8. **Recommendation 8:** Continue to insist upon conditional funding that requires government funded artistic and cultural ventures to adopt and adhere to minimum workplace safety standards, and meet legislated minimum employment standards.
9. **Recommendation 9:** Continued recognition in the second National Cultural Policy that artists are professional workers who deserve to be paid.

10. **Recommendation 10:** Expanded funding to Creative Workplaces as a trustworthy source of information regarding working in the creative fields in Australia.

Pillar 4 – Strong Cultural Infrastructure

11. **Recommendation 11:** Establish dedicated funding streams supporting emerging and early-career artists within participatory and community-based cultural sectors, including festival-based development and mentorship programs.
12. **Recommendation 12:** Explicit recognition that participatory cultural practice is recognised as nationally significant cultural infrastructure.
13. **Recommendation 13:** Continue and expand Revive Live Funding.
14. **Recommendation 14:** Establish dedicated three-to-four-year funding streams which festivals can apply for.

Pillar 5 – Engaging the Audience

15. **Recommendation 15:** Recognise participatory festivals and community cultural events as significant audience development and cultural participation infrastructure within Australia’s National Cultural Policy.
16. **Recommendation 16:** Establish dedicated support for programs that increase long-term participation in community cultural life, particularly for young people, regional communities, and intergenerational artistic practice.

2. Introduction

The National Folk Festival welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia’s second National Cultural Policy.

Established in 1967, the National Folk Festival is one of Australia’s largest and longest-running participatory cultural gatherings. Each year, the Festival presents approximately 132 acts involving around 894 adult performers and 113 artists under 18 across music, dance, spoken word, and community arts. However, the Festival’s defining characteristic is not simply presentation, but participation.

Across five days, artists, audiences, volunteers, learners, and community participants engage together through workshops, ensembles, dances, sessions, collaborative projects, and informal cultural exchange. For sixty years, the Festival has operated as a living ecosystem of artistic development, intergenerational learning, cultural transmission, and community participation, in which artistic practice, cultural knowledge and community traditions are actively shared, adapted and renewed across generations.

The guiding philosophy of the National Folk Festival is simple: culture is not something people passively consume, but something communities actively make together.

(a) What is Folk Culture?

Folk culture is not a single genre or aesthetic. It is a living framework through which diverse communities' express identity, history, resistance, migration, celebration and belonging.

Folk culture encompasses music, dance, storytelling, craft, and other forms of intangible cultural heritage practiced, shared, and continually renewed within communities across generations. These practices are inherently participatory forms of cultural transmission, with cultural knowledge transmitted through performance, teaching, oral tradition, mentorship, social gathering, and shared creative practice.

This living cultural exchange creates space both for the continuation of tradition and for contemporary artistic innovation. In this context, “tradition” does not refer simply to historical preservation or nostalgia, but to bodies of cultural knowledge, repertoire, artistic practice, and communal experience carried through communities over extended periods of time. This includes songs, tunes, dances, stories, languages, craft practices, and social customs transmitted, adapted, and reinterpreted across generations through active participation. Many of these traditions have histories spanning hundreds or thousands of years, while continuing to evolve in response to contemporary life.

For example, within a festival ‘session’ environment, an older tune bearer may teach a traditional melody that has been carried through a community over generations to a younger musician by ear in a social setting. That younger artist may later arrange and perform the tune for their contemporary ensemble, combining it with influences from their own jazz, classical, experimental music, or contemporary composition background, while still retaining its cultural lineage and identity. In this way, folk practice sustains cultural continuity while also creating space for new artistic expression.

Folk dance similarly operates as a living social practice rather than a static historical form. At festivals such as the National Folk Festival, dances are taught, learned, and shared across generations and communities in real time, allowing cultural knowledge, social customs, and artistic traditions to remain active, accessible, and continually renewed through participation.

Folk culture therefore encompasses both inherited cultural repertoires and the continual creation of new artistic work. New compositions, collaborations, interdisciplinary projects, and contemporary artistic practices exist alongside older traditions, often drawing directly from them. Within folk practice, tradition and innovation are not oppositional; culture remains living and relevant precisely because communities continually reinterpret, adapt and remake it together.

The importance of preserving and supporting the evolution of living folk culture and traditions has been established under international law and is considered ‘intangible cultural heritage’ by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO is a specialized agency dedicated to strengthening international cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture, and information.

In UNESCO’s *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003 – 1. General Provisions, Article 2 ‘Definitions’*, states:

1. *The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.*

2. *The “intangible cultural heritage”, as defined in paragraph 1 above, is manifested inter alia in the following domains:*
 - (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;*
 - (b) performing arts;*
 - (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;*
 - (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;*
 - (e) traditional craftsmanship.*

3. *“Safeguarding” means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.*

Australia is not a State Party to the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. However, it provides a valuable framework for recognising and supporting living cultural practice. Australia also previously examined these issues in the 1987 national inquiry *Folklife: Our Living Heritage*, which emphasised the importance of safeguarding Australia’s living cultural traditions, community practices, and folk arts.

We submit that participatory festivals such as the National Folk Festival play a significant role in safeguarding and transmitting intangible cultural heritage through active cultural participation, intergenerational exchange, and community practice – and that this is deserving of recognition in Australia’s Cultural Policy.

At a time where art is increasingly shaped by algorithmically curated consumption and passive engagement, the National Folk Festival provides a large-scale environment where audiences become participants, participants become contributors, and culture is transmitted through doing together. Workshops, ensembles, dances, sessions, choirs, forums, and informal music-making are not supplementary to the Festival experience; they are central to how folk culture survives, evolves, and remains relevant.

3. Submission - Introduction

The Festival's central submission is that Australia's cultural policy should more fully recognise participatory cultural practice, intergenerational cultural transmission, and community-led artistic activity as essential components of Australia's cultural life and cultural infrastructure (Pillar 4).

As a participatory cultural ecosystem, the National Folk Festival contributes to the safeguarding and transmission of intangible cultural heritage, supports artistic development, strengthens community participation, and creates pathways for audiences to actively engage in cultural practice rather than solely consume it.

The National Folk Festival supports the retention of the five existing pillars of the National Cultural Policy and provides the below recommendations:

4. Pillar One: First Nations First

The National Folk Festival strongly supports the continued positioning of First Nations First as the first pillar of Australia's National Cultural Policy.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are central to Australia's cultural identity and artistic life. Participatory festivals play a vital role in creating opportunities for First Nations artists, communities, and cultural practices to be shared, experienced and sustained through performance, teaching, collaboration, and community engagement.

(a) Structural and Financial Barriers to Participation

Festivals seeking to program Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, particularly from geographically remote regions, face significant structural and financial barriers that are not always adequately recognised within existing funding frameworks.

Travel costs within Australia are substantial, particularly for artists and cultural groups travelling from remote communities. However, the challenge extends beyond transport alone. Many First Nations cultural practices are inherently community-based and may require larger family or kinship groups, additional cultural support, or carers accompanying performers and young people.

Festivals must also ensure that appropriate cultural safety measures, support structures and staffing are in place, and that artists are properly compensated when undertaking cultural responsibilities beyond performance itself. These additional requirements are not supplementary costs; they are essential components of culturally safe and respectful engagement.

(b) Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property Rights

Australian law currently provides limited protection for Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property Rights by way of existing laws. The National Folk Festival strongly believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the custodians of their traditional knowledge and cultural expressions and that this should have separate legal protection.

Recommendation 1: Establish dedicated federal funding streams to support festivals in presenting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and cultural groups from regional and remote communities.

Recommendation 2: Provide dedicated funding to support culturally safe engagement practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, including cultural support, community participation, and appropriate staffing.

Recommendation 3: Enshrine Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property Rights into Australian law.

5. Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

(a) Intangible Cultural Heritage

The National Folk Festival brings together artists and communities from a wide range of cultural traditions. Crucially, however, it also creates opportunities for audiences to actively participate in those traditions through workshops, dance, collaborative performance, storytelling, sessions, and shared cultural practice.

This distinction is important. Participatory festivals do not simply present cultural traditions for observation or consumption; they create environments in which culture is actively practiced, transmitted, adapted, and renewed through community participation and intergenerational exchange.

Despite this, participatory cultural practice remains comparatively under-recognised within Australian cultural policy and funding frameworks, which have historically focused more heavily on presentation-based, institutionally recognised and commercial forms of artistic production.

Festivals such as the National Folk Festival operate as living cultural ecosystems: supporting artistic development, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, fostering community participation, and creating pathways through which cultural knowledge and artistic practice are shared across generations.

The National Folk Festival strongly submits that participatory cultural practice, intergenerational cultural transmission, and community-led artistic activity should be formally recognised within future cultural policy as essential components of Australia's national cultural infrastructure.

(b) Participatory Practice and Failures in Contemporary Arts Funding Frameworks

One area that warrants serious reconsideration within Australian Cultural Policy is the continued institutional distinction drawn between “art music” and “folk music” within some funding frameworks.

Current frameworks such as the APRA AMCOS Art Music Fund support practices including improvisation, experimental music, electroacoustic composition, interdisciplinary practice, sound art, and jazz, while simultaneously excluding “folk music” from

eligibility. Similarly, current Australian federal grant opportunities as provided by Music Australia limit many of its grant opportunities to “contemporary music”, which is defined as:

Australian contemporary music is any genre or subgenre of music currently composed, written, produced by Australians and licensed, recorded, presented, and distributed through commercial and non-commercial activity. For the purposes of Music Australia’s initial investments, the focus will be on musical works that are new, original, and relevant to contemporary Australia.

These distinctions increasingly fail to reflect the realities of contemporary artistic practice. Many contemporary folk-rooted practices already embody the very qualities these frameworks seek to encourage: sophisticated compositional thinking, improvisation, experimentation, intercultural collaboration, oral and embodied pedagogies, and sustained artistic life beyond commercial imperatives.

The distinction therefore cannot meaningfully be understood as one based on artistic rigour, innovation, or compositional complexity. Rather, the distinction reflects inherited institutional hierarchies around which forms of culture are permitted to count as “serious” art.

Historically, institutional art music evolved through conservatorium systems, notation-based authority, concert-hall presentation and fixed authored works, while folk traditions were more often orally transmitted, participatory, improvisatory and collectively shaped. Yet many of the world’s most sophisticated musical systems operate precisely through these methods.

The contradiction becomes particularly visible in contemporary practice, where artists and organisations move fluidly across the institutional boundaries these categories attempt to enforce. The National Folk Festival regularly presents work of substantial compositional ambition, aesthetic depth and interdisciplinary sophistication that would comfortably sit within many “art music” contexts were it not labelled “folk”. Artists such as:

- Tenzin Choegyal, whose practice spans traditional Tibetan lineage, contemporary composition, and collaborations with figures such as Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson;
- ZÖJ, whose work stemming from Persian folk traditions operates firmly within experimental and improvisational practice; and
- collaborative projects such as Gamelan DanAnda with Firetail, which merge Indonesian folk-art music traditions with contemporary jazz and electroacoustic composition.

These examples all demonstrate the inadequacy of simplistic distinctions between “folk” and “art music”.

The National Folk Festival submits that future policy and funding frameworks should move beyond rigid genre-based exclusions and inherited distinctions between institutional and participatory cultural forms. Rather than categorically excluding “folk music” or privileging only practices framed as wholly “new” or institutionally authored, assessment frameworks should instead consider artistic intent, innovation, compositional ambition, cultural significance, community impact and public engagement regardless of whether a practice emerges from folk, classical, jazz, experimental or interdisciplinary traditions.

(c) Content Requirements and Discoverability of Australian Art in Streaming Services

The concept of Pillar 2, ‘A Place for Every Story’ recognises that Australian art is important and that Australian audiences should be able to access Australian art and music. This is key when it has been established that large streaming conglomerates predominantly and algorithmically lead Australian listeners to North American music and stories.

The National Folk Festival appreciates the federal government’s existing efforts to address North American bias in technology, including:

- #Ausify, a Music Australia initiative which encouraged audiences to #Ausify their streaming algorithm; and
- the Federal Government’s *Communications Legislation Amendment (Australian Content Requirement for Subscription Video On Demand (Streaming) Services) Bill* - to guarantee expenditure on new Australian programs and ensure that Australians have guaranteed access to Australian stories.

We submit that Australian content quotas should be expanded to music streaming and with discoverability requirements that profile Australian music on home pages, curated streaming playlists, and search results.

The current requirements under the Australian content under the *Communications Legislation Amendment (Australian Content Requirement for Subscription Video On Demand (Streaming Services) Bill 2025 (Cth)* – are limited to video-on-demand services and do not extend to music streaming platforms. Further, they do not guarantee that the Australian content will be easily discoverable by Australian audiences. In contrast, Canada’s content requirements do not solely cover streaming video on demand services but also music platforms like Spotify – and require that if a user has a Canadian internet protocol address, the services are required to deliver a certain amount of Canadian created content into the search results.

Recommendation 4: Provide explicit recognition of participatory cultural practice, intergenerational transmission, and community-led artistic activity as essential forms of national cultural infrastructure within future federal arts policy and funding frameworks.

Recommendation 5: Remove institutional exclusions of Folk and participatory cultural practice from contemporary Arts funding frameworks.

Recommendation 6: Recognise that folk, roots, and acoustic music festivals are of national cultural significance in preserving and developing intangible cultural heritage and that they should be appropriately funded.

Recommendation 7: Legislate to ensure that Australian stories have high ‘discoverability’ on streaming platforms and that current streaming video on demand content requirements are expanded to cover music streaming services.

6. Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Participatory festivals such as the National Folk Festival play a significant role within Australia's artistic ecosystem. Beyond presenting performances, they provide environments for artistic development, collaboration, mentorship, intergenerational exchange, and long-term career sustainability.

Artists at the Festival engage not only through performance, but also through workshops, ensembles, community collaborations, mentoring, informal knowledge exchange, and cross-disciplinary creative practice. These environments create opportunities for emerging and established artists to develop relationships, experiment artistically and build audiences in ways that extend beyond conventional presentation models. Festivals therefore function not simply as presenters of artistic product, but as active ecosystems of artistic labour, development, and cultural transmission.

(a) Intergenerational Pathways and Emerging Artists

Intergenerational transmission is central to the sustainability of living cultural practice. Participatory festivals create rare environments in which young artists learn directly from established practitioners through collaboration, mentorship, workshops, shared performance, and informal cultural exchange.

The National Folk Festival's Young Folk program provides one example of this role in practice, supporting emerging artists through professional presentation opportunities, artistic networking, and participation within broader community cultural life.

These forms of intergenerational engagement are critical to the long-term sustainability of Australia's artistic and cultural sectors, particularly within community-based and participatory traditions where knowledge is often transmitted through shared practice rather than formal institutional training alone.

(b) Professional Standards and Artist Support

The National Folk Festival supports ongoing federal efforts to strengthen professional labour standards, fair pay, and workplace safety across the arts sector. The Festival additionally welcomes the incorporation of minimum performance fee standards within public funding frameworks and supports continued recognition that artists are professional workers whose labour should be appropriately valued and compensated.

The Festival further recognises the importance of initiatives such as Creative Workplaces in providing practical support, guidance and workplace protections for artists and arts workers navigating increasingly complex professional environments.

Recommendation 8: Continue to insist upon conditional funding that requires government funded artistic and cultural ventures to adopt and adhere to minimum workplace safety standards and meet legislated minimum employment standards.

Recommendation 9: Continued recognition in the second National Cultural Policy that artists are professional workers who deserve to be paid.

Recommendation 10: Expanded funding to Creative Workplaces as a trustworthy source of information regarding working in the creative fields in Australia.

Recommendation 11: Establish dedicated funding streams supporting emerging and early-career artists within participatory and community-based cultural sectors, including festival-based development and mentorship programs.

7. Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

(a) Participatory Festivals as Living Cultural Infrastructure

The National Folk Festival submits that participatory arts festivals should be recognised as national cultural infrastructure as they sustain and develop intangible cultural heritage.

Festivals like the National Folk Festival function not only as a presentation platform, but as a living ecosystem of artistic development, intergenerational learning, participation, community cultural practice, mentoring, collaboration, and cultural transmission.

The proposed return of a pre-Festival Folk School in partnership with the ANU School of Music reflects this broader infrastructural role. The Folk School model positions the Festival not simply as an event, but as a site of structured artistic development, collaboration and intergenerational exchange, linking tertiary students, community participants, and professional artists in shared creative practice.

Such models demonstrate how participatory festivals contribute to artistic education, community engagement, and long-term cultural sustainability beyond conventional performance presentation alone.

(b) Structural Pressures on Festivals as Participatory Cultural Infrastructure and Changes to Grant Conditions

Australian festivals exist in an exceedingly precarious environment:

- cost of living increases impacts audiences - audiences are less willing to spend money attending events, and pre-purchase tickets less frequently (which severely limits advance event planning).
- climate change impacts weather, resulting in rain and/or extreme heat – which deters audiences;
- geopolitical unrest impacts the cost of living and creates difficulties in bringing international artists;
- insurance costs have increased significantly;
- government grants which can be vital to the ongoing success of a festival are increasingly competitive. Further, application processes are lengthy, with months of

waiting to confirm whether you have been successful, which severely impacts the ability for a Festival to strategically plan.

We advocate for the value of Federal Government Arts Funding. The National Folk Festival is a not-for-profit organisation. It is staffed with two employees, contracted Artistic directors and a volunteer Board. The Festival itself is only possible with the assistance of between 820-1000 volunteers who assist in the running of the Festival in exchange for a ticket.

The National Folk Festival is grateful to the Federal government for its Revive Live program. This was a funding stream designed to provide critical financial support to re-establish live music venues and music festivals in Australia. In 2024, the Festival was a recipient of \$120,000 + GST as part of Revive Live. In 2026, we were not successful in securing funding and were consequently required to reduce our budget and programming.

One of the significant structural difficulties with current grant and funding opportunities for organisations like the National Folk Festival that are not supported under the National Performing Arts Partnerships Framework or Creative Australia's Multi-year Investment Program is that the grants the National is able to apply for are often limited to one-off project funding. This can be extremely limited, as often, funding will be confirmed shortly prior to the Festival occurring. This makes it difficult to forward plan, to use the funds to scale including making 'major' changes to the event or improve audience experiences significantly.

Guaranteed three- or four-year funding opportunities for festivals would be of great assistance in allowing festivals to plan and strategise about how to maximise use of the funds.

Recommendation 12: Explicit Recognition that participatory cultural practice is recognised as nationally significant cultural infrastructure.

Recommendation 13: Continue and expand Revive Live Funding.

Recommendation 14: Establish dedicated three-to-four-year funding streams which festivals can apply for.

8. Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Participatory festivals engage audiences differently from many conventional presentation-based cultural models. Audiences are not positioned solely as consumers of artistic work, but as active contributors to cultural life.

Through workshops, ensembles, dances, sessions, choirs, collaborative projects and informal cultural exchange, the National Folk Festival creates environments in which people participate directly in artistic and community practice rather than engaging only as spectators.

This distinction is significant from a cultural policy perspective. Participatory engagement builds artistic confidence, strengthens community connection, supports long-term cultural participation, and creates pathways through which audiences become learners, volunteers, artists, organisers, and ongoing contributors to cultural life.

Participatory festivals also play a significant role in intergenerational cultural transmission. Young people engage directly with artists, peers and older generations through shared practice, mentorship, collaborative learning, and informal cultural exchange.

These experiences help develop long-term pathways into artistic participation and community cultural life, particularly within traditions where knowledge is transmitted socially and collectively rather than solely through formal institutional training.

Participatory cultural environments also contribute to broader forms of social and civic connection. Shared artistic activity creates opportunities for collaboration across generations, cultures and communities, strengthening social cohesion and fostering ongoing engagement in community life through collective creative practice.

Recommendation 15: Recognise participatory festivals and community cultural events as significant audience development and cultural participation infrastructure within Australia's National Cultural Policy.

Recommendation 16: Establish dedicated support for programs that increase long-term participation in community cultural life, particularly for young people, regional communities, and intergenerational artistic practice.

9. Closing Statement

For sixty years, the National Folk Festival has operated not simply as a performance event, but as a participatory cultural ecosystem in which artistic practice, cultural knowledge and community traditions are actively shared, adapted and renewed across generations.

This submission argues that participatory cultural practice should be more fully recognised within Australian cultural policy: not as a peripheral or informal aspect of cultural life, but as an essential form of national cultural infrastructure.

Participatory festivals contribute simultaneously to artistic development, audience engagement, intergenerational learning, community connection, and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. They create environments in which culture remains living, socially embedded and collectively sustained through active practice and exchange.

At a time when cultural engagement is increasingly mediated through globalised digital platforms and individualised consumption, participatory cultural gatherings continue to provide rare and valuable spaces for collective creative experience, cultural continuity, and community participation.

The National Folk Festival respectfully submits that these forms of participatory cultural practice are not supplementary to Australia's cultural life - they are essential to its future – and should be recognised in our National Cultural Policy.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy.

10. Acknowledgement of Country

The National Folk Festival acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters, and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures; and to Elders past and present.

We particularly acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Lands upon which our annual festival takes place, the Ngunnawal Peoples, their Elders past and present and their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of our region and we recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region.