

MUSIC IN COMMUNITIES AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY CONSULTATION

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AUSTRALIA



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Introduction

Music in Communities Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing development of Australia's National Cultural Policy. As the national peak body representing community music organisations across Australia, Music in Communities Australia advocates for the interests of grassroots music organisations and participants across the country, including bands, choirs, orchestras, ensembles and other community-based music groups. Through leadership, advocacy and sector development, Music in Communities Australia works to strengthen opportunities for lifelong participation in music and to ensure community music is recognised as a vital part of Australia's cultural, social and educational landscape.

Community music-making is one of the most widespread and accessible forms of cultural participation in Australia. Across metropolitan, regional and remote communities, tens of thousands of Australians participate every week in brass bands, concert bands, orchestras, choirs, ukulele groups, community ensembles and other grassroots music organisations. These groups are more than recreational activities. They are essential cultural infrastructure that support artistic development, strengthen communities, improve health and wellbeing, foster social inclusion and contribute significantly to Australia's broader cultural ecosystem.

Despite their impact, community music organisations often operate with limited financial support, relying heavily on volunteers, fundraising and participant contributions. Greater recognition and investment in community music would deliver substantial cultural, social and economic returns.

Community Music as Cultural Infrastructure

Community music organisations provide lifelong opportunities for Australians to actively participate in the arts, regardless of age, background, geography or income. Across cities, suburbs, regional centres and remote communities, these organisations form a vital part of Australia's cultural infrastructure, creating accessible and meaningful opportunities for artistic participation and community connection.

Community ensembles, including bands, choirs, orchestras and other music groups, are often among the most active and visible cultural organisations

within their local communities. They rehearse weekly, perform regularly and contribute to the cultural identity and social fabric of their regions through concerts, festivals, civic ceremonies, commemorations and community events.

These organisations:

- create accessible pathways into music participation;
- preserve and strengthen Australia's musical traditions;
- provide affordable opportunities for lifelong artistic engagement;
- contribute to civic, ceremonial and commemorative life;
- activate community spaces and local events;
- support intergenerational participation and mentorship;
- strengthen regional cultural activity; and
- foster local pride, identity and social cohesion.

Unlike many forms of arts engagement, community music is fundamentally participatory. Participants are not simply audiences or consumers, they are active creators, performers, educators, organisers, volunteers and community leaders. Community music organisations are sustained by thousands of Australians who contribute their time, skills and resources to support cultural activity at a grassroots level.

Importantly, community music also provides a rare intergenerational environment in which people of different ages, backgrounds and experience levels work collaboratively toward shared artistic goals. Young musicians perform alongside experienced players, creating opportunities for mentorship, skills development and social connection that are increasingly uncommon in modern community life.

In many regional and outer suburban communities, community music groups are among the only consistent providers of live cultural activity. They play a critical role in ensuring that participation in the arts is not limited by geography or access to major metropolitan institutions. Their presence helps sustain vibrant local communities and contributes to broader cultural equity across Australia.

Despite this contribution, community music organisations are frequently overlooked in broader arts policy and funding frameworks. Greater recognition of community music as essential cultural infrastructure would better reflect the significant role these organisations play in supporting

participation, cultural development and community wellbeing throughout Australia.

Developing Australia's Future Musicians

Community music organisations play a critical role in developing Australia's future professional and amateur musicians.

For many Australians, participation in a community ensemble is:

- their first practical music experience;
- a bridge between school music and lifelong participation;
- a pathway into tertiary music education;
- or an early stepping stone toward professional careers in performance, education, composition and arts leadership.

Australia's professional music sector is deeply interconnected with its community music sector. Many professional musicians, educators and conductors began their musical journeys in local community ensembles.

Community groups also provide ongoing opportunities for skill development outside formal education systems, particularly for adults who may not otherwise have access to structured music participation.

Investment in community music is therefore an investment in Australia's future creative workforce and long-term cultural sustainability.

Social, Health and Wellbeing Benefits

The benefits of community music extend far beyond artistic outcomes. A growing body of Australian and international research demonstrates that participation in music and other creative activities contributes positively to mental health, social connectedness, physical wellbeing and overall quality of life. Governments and health sectors are increasingly recognising arts participation as an important contributor to preventative health and community wellbeing policy.¹

Participation in group music-making has been linked to:

¹ Creative Australia, *Creating Wellbeing: Attitudes and engagement with arts, culture and health*, accessed 20th May 2026, <https://creative.gov.au/research/creating-wellbeing-attitudes-and-engagement-arts-culture-and-health>

- improved mental health and emotional wellbeing; ²
- reduced loneliness and social isolation; ³
- increased social connectedness and community belonging; ⁴
- stronger intergenerational relationships;
- improved confidence, resilience and self-esteem among young people;
- cognitive stimulation and healthy ageing;⁵
- enhanced inclusion and social cohesion; and
- greater sense of purpose, identity and community participation.

Unlike many individual recreational activities, community music creates sustained social interaction through regular rehearsals, performances, volunteering and collaborative creative activity. These environments foster meaningful long-term social networks and shared identity, which are increasingly important at a time when many Australians are experiencing heightened levels of loneliness, disconnection and mental health challenges.

Community music groups are particularly valuable for:

- older Australians seeking ongoing social engagement and cognitive stimulation;
- young people developing confidence, teamwork and leadership skills;
- culturally diverse communities maintaining cultural connection and expression;
- people living in regional and rural areas with limited access to other cultural activities; and

² Australian Government Department of Communication and the Arts, *Response to Productivity Commission issues paper The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*, accessed May 19th 2026,

https://assets.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/239373/sub082-mental-health.pdf

³ Griffith University, *How can Community Music Help Address Loneliness in Contexts of Social Marginalisation? Insights From Two Music for Social Connection Program*, accessed 20th May 2026, <https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/7aa90531-dec2-4aba-ba59-e2a9e00d22b7/content?>

⁴ Vic Health, *Benefits of group singing for community mental health and wellbeing*, accessed May 19th 2026,

https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Singing_survey_FINAL_with-cover.pdf

⁵ Queensland Symphony Orchestra, *Health and Wellbeing: An Overview of Current Literature*, accessed May 18th 2026, <https://qso.com.au/uploads/QSO-Health-and-Wellbeing-Report.pdf>

- individuals experiencing social isolation, disadvantage or barriers to participation in other community activities.

Research into arts participation and health has also identified measurable physiological and psychological benefits associated with active music participation, including reduced stress, improved emotional regulation and strengthened social bonding. Studies examining group singing and community music participation have found strong links between creative participation, wellbeing and the development of social capital within communities.⁶

The growing international movement toward “arts prescribing” and arts-health programs further reflects recognition of the role creative participation can play in supporting preventative health outcomes and reducing pressure on health systems.⁷ Australian research indicates strong public support for integrating arts participation into broader wellbeing and mental health initiatives.⁸

In this context, investment in community music should not be viewed solely as arts funding. It is also an investment in preventative health, social infrastructure and community resilience. Community music organisations deliver broad public benefit at relatively low cost, largely through volunteer-led structures and local community participation. Strengthening support for these organisations would generate positive outcomes not only for Australia’s cultural sector, but also for health, wellbeing and social cohesion across the broader community.

Current Challenges

Despite their significant cultural, educational and social contribution, many community music organisations face growing financial and operational pressures that threaten their long-term sustainability. While these groups deliver substantial public benefit, the majority operate with limited financial reserves and rely heavily on volunteer labour, fundraising and participant contributions to remain viable.

One of the most significant challenges facing community music organisations is the rising cost of operations. Venue hire, rehearsal spaces, utilities, transport, sheet music licensing, equipment maintenance and public liability insurance

⁶ Vic Health, *Benefits of group singing*

⁷ World Health Organisation, *Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67 What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*, accessed May 20th 2026, <https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/e1cc8536-773d-446f-9822-8ae376f41415/content>

⁸ Creative Australia, *Creating Wellbeing*

have all increased substantially in recent years, placing considerable pressure on organisations that often operate on modest annual budgets. For many groups, particularly those in metropolitan and rapidly growing suburban areas, securing affordable and consistent rehearsal spaces has become increasingly difficult.

Insurance costs have become a particularly significant burden across the community sector, with many volunteer-run organisations reporting substantial increases in premiums and compliance requirements. These rising costs can disproportionately impact smaller organisations with limited administrative capacity and narrow revenue streams.

Many ensembles are also managing ageing instrument inventories and equipment that require periodic replacement or major maintenance. Community bands and orchestras frequently rely on instruments that are decades old, limiting both accessibility and artistic development opportunities. Unlike many other sectors, there are limited dedicated funding programs available to support cyclical replacement of costly musical assets such as percussion, low brass, woodwind and technical equipment.

Volunteer sustainability represents another major challenge. Community music organisations are overwhelmingly operated by volunteers who undertake extensive responsibilities including governance, administration, fundraising, event management, grant applications, music library management, teaching, conducting and logistical coordination. Increasing governance, child safety, financial reporting and compliance obligations have added significantly to this workload over time. As a result, many organisations are experiencing volunteer fatigue and burnout, with a growing reliance on a small number of highly committed individuals to sustain operations.

Funding access remains inconsistent and often inequitable. Many community music groups fall between existing funding categories, too small to compete effectively with large professionally staffed arts organisations but still expected to meet increasingly complex grant and reporting requirements. Short-term project funding models also create challenges for long-term planning and organisational stability, particularly for groups whose primary focus is ongoing community participation rather than one-off artistic projects.

There is also a strong perception across the sector that community music receives comparatively lower levels of government support than other community-based activities, particularly sport and recreation. One of the clearest inequities between community sport and community music in

Australia is not simply the amount of funding available, but the existence of entirely different support structures surrounding each sector.

Community sport is supported by a coordinated ecosystem of government policy, infrastructure investment and long-term participation funding at federal, state and local levels. Most councils maintain dedicated sport and recreation departments, employ sport development officers and allocate substantial annual budgets to the construction, maintenance and upgrading of sporting facilities. State governments regularly administer community sport infrastructure funds worth tens to hundreds of millions of dollars, while national agencies such as the Australian Sports Commission provide strategic leadership, participation initiatives and targeted development programs.

This support extends beyond elite sport. Community sporting clubs commonly have access to subsidised venues, facility maintenance, volunteer development programs, equipment grants, participation initiatives and long-term capital investment pathways. Sporting organisations are also recognised as essential contributors to public health, youth engagement and community wellbeing, which further strengthens their policy position across multiple government portfolios.

By contrast, community music organisations operate within a far less developed support framework. While community music delivers substantial cultural, educational and social benefits, there is no equivalent national infrastructure system dedicated to supporting participation-based music organisations such as brass bands, concert bands, orchestras, choirs and community ensembles.

Many community music organisations:

- rehearse in hired facilities with rising commercial rental costs;
- rely on ageing instrument inventories with limited access to replacement funding;
- operate almost entirely through volunteer labour;
- lack access to ongoing operational funding;
- and compete for small, short-term arts grants that are often project-based rather than focused on long-term sustainability.

Unlike sport, there are few dedicated government funding streams specifically designed for community music participation, infrastructure, instrument renewal, rehearsal spaces or ensemble sustainability. Even where arts funding

exists, it is frequently prioritised toward professional artistic production rather than broad-based community participation.

This creates a structural imbalance in which community music organisations are expected to deliver significant social, educational and wellbeing outcomes without access to the same foundational support systems routinely available to community sporting organisations. Despite strong evidence that participation in music contributes to mental wellbeing, social cohesion, lifelong learning and community connection, community music remains comparatively under-recognised as essential social infrastructure within government policy and funding frameworks.

These pressures are further compounded by broader cost-of-living increases affecting Australian households. Rising participation costs can create barriers for individuals and families experiencing economic disadvantage, particularly where instrument purchase, tuition, uniforms, travel and membership fees are involved. Without targeted support, there is a risk that participation in community music will become increasingly inaccessible for lower-income communities, undermining equity of cultural participation.

These challenges are particularly acute in regional, rural, outer suburban and lower socio-economic communities, where community music organisations often operate with fewer funding opportunities, smaller volunteer bases and reduced access to infrastructure and professional support. At the same time, community expectations of these organisations continue to grow. Many groups are expected to deliver high-quality performances, educational programs, inclusive participation opportunities and community engagement outcomes, despite operating largely through unpaid volunteer effort.

Research into Australia's cultural participation landscape has consistently highlighted the importance of grassroots arts participation and the financial fragility of many community-based arts organisations.⁹ Broader research into volunteering trends has also identified increasing pressure on volunteer-led organisations across Australia, including difficulties attracting and retaining volunteers in increasingly complex operating environments.¹⁰

Without greater recognition and targeted long-term investment, the sustainability of many community music organisations will be increasingly at risk. The loss or decline of these groups would represent not only a reduction in

⁹ Creative Australia, *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, accessed May 21st 2026, <https://creative.gov.au/research/creating-value-results-national-arts-participation-survey>

¹⁰ Volunteering Australia, *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033*, accessed May 21st 2026, <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

cultural activity, but also a loss of important community infrastructure that supports social connection, wellbeing, education and civic participation throughout Australia.

Recommendations

Music in Communities Australia recommends that the National Cultural Policy include:

1. Dedicated Funding for Community Music

Establish targeted federal funding programs specifically for community music organisations and grassroots ensembles.

2. Long-Term Operational Support

Move beyond short-term project funding to provide sustainable operational funding that supports organisational stability and long-term planning.

3. Instrument and Equipment Renewal Programs

Support periodic replacement and upgrading of instruments, music libraries and technical equipment to ensure accessibility and artistic quality.

4. Regional and Accessibility Support

Increase funding streams that specifically support regional, remote and disadvantaged communities to access music participation opportunities.

5. Recognition of Community Music as Preventative Health Infrastructure

Encourage cross-portfolio collaboration between arts, health and community sectors to recognise and support the wellbeing benefits of community music participation.

6. Support for Volunteer Capacity Building

Provide funding and training opportunities that strengthen governance, administration and volunteer sustainability within community organisations.

Conclusion

Community music organisations are fundamental to Australia's cultural, social and civic life. They provide accessible pathways for lifelong participation in the arts, develop future musicians and arts leaders, strengthen local identity and

belonging, and deliver significant wellbeing and social outcomes for communities across the country.

Importantly, community music is not a niche or peripheral activity. It is one of the most widespread and accessible forms of cultural participation in Australia, engaging people of all ages, backgrounds and skill levels in meaningful creative activity. In metropolitan, regional and remote communities alike, community ensembles provide vital opportunities for connection, expression, education and contribution.

Government investment in community sport in Australia is measured in billions of dollars nationally, while community music participation receives only a fraction of that support, despite similarly strong evidence of community wellbeing, social cohesion and participation benefits.

Community music organisations deliver an extraordinary return on public investment and represent a significant opportunity for further social, cultural and community benefit through increased government support. Australia has already seen the substantial positive outcomes that sustained investment in community sport can generate in areas such as community wellbeing, social cohesion, participation and civic engagement. Comparable investment in community music participation presents a similar opportunity to strengthen connectedness, improve wellbeing and expand access to meaningful community participation across Australia.

Community music organisations are facing increasing financial and operational pressures that threaten their long-term sustainability. Without stronger and more coordinated support, many groups will struggle to continue delivering the broad public benefits they currently provide.

A strong National Cultural Policy must recognise community music as essential cultural and social infrastructure. Investment in community music should not be viewed solely as support for the arts sector, but as an investment in community wellbeing, preventative health, education, volunteering, social inclusion and Australia's broader cultural future.

Music in Communities Australia urges the Australian Government to:

- recognise community music as a critical component of Australia's cultural ecosystem;
- establish sustainable and accessible funding pathways for community music organisations;

- support equitable access to music participation regardless of geography or socioeconomic background;
- invest in the long-term sustainability of volunteer-led community arts organisations; and
- acknowledge the significant role community music plays in strengthening Australia's cultural, social and civic fabric.

A vibrant national cultural life depends not only on major institutions and professional companies, but also on the tens of thousands of Australians who gather each week in community halls, rehearsal rooms, schools and local venues to make music together. Supporting community music means supporting participation, connection, creativity and belonging in communities throughout Australia.

Submitted by:

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In addition to her role with Music in Communities Australia, Megan Stapleton holds leadership positions across a range of community music organisations at national, state and local levels, providing broad insight into the opportunities and challenges facing the sector.

Supported by:

Australian Music Association



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Music in Communities Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples and Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise the enduring strength, resilience and cultural contribution of First Nations peoples across generations.



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