



National Cultural Policy Submission

May 24, 2026

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stARTs North-West (SNW) was previously known as the Burnie Arts Council Inc (BAC). Our organisation is one of the oldest continuously running regional arts organisations in Australia (possibly the oldest). We are based on the North-West Coast of Tasmania, our home being Burnie (pop 19 000).

Our activities have always aligned with the original vision of Miss Dorothy Helmrich OBE, who established the Regional Arts Network. She envisaged a nation where people living in regional, remote and rural Australia could contribute, participate and enjoy the arts on an equal level to those in metropolitan areas.

SNW is now 78 years old. Those who led the organisation in decades past have contributed significantly to the establishment of a rich cultural landscape in Burnie, with a diverse range of offerings for both participants and patrons.

This depth of arts activity has become an important part of Burnie's identity. In the early 2000's, the city adopted the tagline of the 'City of Makers', reflecting the importance of Burnie's makers and creators.

This healthy cultural ecosystem has resulted in Burnie having an inordinate output of successful creative alumni. In 2025 BAC/SNW published not one, but two books profiling Burnie artists and cultural practitioners. The first was *Dream Burnie*, authored by Justin Heazlewood. The second was *Burnie Creatives*, compiled by Heather Wild and Lyndal Thorne. Around 330 artists are featured across both books.

The focus of our organisation's activity over the past few years has provided a unique opportunity for insight about the place of art and culture in a regional centre such as Burnie. Alongside the writing of the books, we also celebrated our 75th Birthday and refreshed our name and branding – contemporising the formal moniker of 'council' to stARTs North-West.

These insights can be summarised as:

- Excellence in the arts is not diminished by its being in a regional area
- Arts and culture bring cohesiveness to a community and have multiple social, health and wellbeing benefits.
- Individuals with vision, passion and drive can develop outstanding and enduring initiatives provided they have strong support from either a) community and/or b) some level of governmental resourcing.
- Cultural infrastructure is important.

The relevance of these insights to a National Cultural Policy lies in understanding the strengths and robustness of what has been achieved in Burnie, whilst identifying the risks to this as we look to the future.

stARTs North-West believe a National Cultural Policy should provide a framework that supports the activity of the arts and artists across all parts of Australia. A successful policy – once enacted - will return both tangible and intangible benefits to the nation’s populace. This submission uses Burnie’s arts and cultural landscape as a case study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RESOURCING

The outstanding events, cultural initiatives and long-term organisations that exist in Burnie are undeniably founded on a huge input from volunteers.

In decades past, they may have been able to be sustained through volunteer labour and whatever limited income streams could be derived from ticket sales and/or membership fees.

History shows, however, that these institutions experienced great leaps forward when there was an influx of resourcing. A successful grant or philanthropic windfall, for example, transformed a ‘great community event’ to a professional and lasting program (bringing with it all the attendant benefits outlined above).

Organisations can no longer subsist on inconsistent funding or volunteer labour. Volunteering Tasmania predicts a 42% shortfall in volunteers by 2029. Compliance costs are escalating. Arts workers contributing professional skills to an event or organisation need to be paid a commensurate wage.

A national arts policy needs to address resourcing the arts sector. This is of particular importance in Tasmania. The state government has not materially increased arts funding since 2016/2017 financial year. The state 2026/2027 budget has reduced the arts budget by 4 million dollars. Success rates for arts Tasmania grants are already sitting as low (or below) 20%. Arts organisations across the state are finding it difficult to survive. A recent Facebook call-out by a respected arts consultant identified over 35 organisations / events which have closed in Tasmania in recent years due to lack of funding. This is a substantial erosion of opportunity, activity and learning pathways.

The diminishing funding pool at a time of escalating costs is a huge risk to the arts ecosystem of regional Tasmania. This needs to be a focus of the National Arts Policy.

SUCCESSION PLANNING

As mentioned previously, volunteers and community input have driven many of Burnie’s most successful organisations and events.

Tasmania, however, has the oldest population of any Australian state, and is also the fastest ageing population in the country. This trend, plus the predicted volunteer shortfall, is a significant risk to arts activity and engagement levels in regional Australia.

Succession planning is an ongoing challenge.

SNW recommends a three-pronged approach to the National Arts Policy to address this risk

- a) enhance pathways for multi-generational participation in the arts and/or
- b) provide measures to support and encourage volunteering input (and training) and/or
- c) Build capacity through supporting governance and leadership development

ART FOR ARTS SAKE

Whilst acknowledging that many arts organisations and venues need to be financially sustainable, the increased imperative to cover costs is impacting venue programming.

It is disappointing to see regional arts venues (many run by local municipal councils), increasingly including populist fodder in their subscription seasons. Tribute bands do sell tickets, and that is important.

Equally important, though, are original productions. Australian companies telling Australian stories. Works which have clearly gone through adequate levels of development, refinement and collaboration, production and rehearsal, etc, etc. These offerings are now rare highlights amid a swathe of commercial fare.

This trend impacts the industry, diminishing the strength of (particularly) our live performance and theatre sector. It is becoming increasingly difficult to develop new works. Single-person casts are becoming the norm – for economic rather than creative reasons.

Audience development is also at risk. In the heyday of the Regional Arts network, when Tasmanian Regional Arts was a viable and important part of Tasmania's cultural infrastructure, a diverse range of shows and acts were supported to travel to regional areas. The audiences of Burnie – and the surrounding areas – benefitted immensely from this framework.

The artists we profiled in *Dream Burnie* and *Burnie Creatives* frequently acknowledged how exposure to quality performances and artists were pivotal experiences. They could often pinpoint the exact 'moment' during a particular performance, or when seeing a specific musician or piece of art when their career path was set.

A National Cultural Policy needs to take the heat out of the urgency of 'bums on seats / numbers through doors.' A homogenous approach to arts - due to a survival - is not a healthy approach to the arts.

PATHWAYS

One of the theories to emerge (in the wake of the release of *Dream Burnie* and *Burnie Creatives*) as to why Burnie has produced such an impressive legacy of successful arts alumni is about *opportunity*.

For a small regional centre, Burnie has provided a wealth of opportunity across all artforms.

Aspiring students could easily find a school, tutor, society or mentor to develop their talent. These teachers, and the foundational experiences provided by Burnie's creative community, were consistently referred to by our creative alumni as the reason for their successful career trajectories. Any level of ambition was validated. The bios presented in *Dream Burnie* and *Burnie Creatives* prove that these ambitions are within the grasp of budding regional artists.

Arts education, however, is suffering in a crowded school curriculum. Many schools in Tasmania do not have permanent visual arts and music teachers. This is an incomprehensible situation, given the abundance of world-wide research about the overall neurological benefits to young learners from arts education.

Tasmania has also just axed all TAFE courses which are pathways into the cultural and creative industries (Fashion and Textiles, Design, Screen and Media and Visual Arts).

Resourcing arts educations in schools and supporting post-compulsory education in the arts is vital for the growth and sustainability of Tasmania's arts sector.

INDIVIDUAL ARTS PRACTICE

Provision of training and skills development has been covered in the above sections.

In the Creative Australia commissioned *Artists as Workers: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia* (2024), Throsby and Petetskaya highlight that only 9% of artists can subsist on their creative practice alone. This was down from 23% in 2016. In the past two years it has likely dropped further, due to cost-of-living pressures and the budget constraints being experienced by the industry in general. Most artists require supplementary income, and even with all income sources combined, the average artists wage is (or was, in 2024), 26% below the workforce average.

In addition to the economic difficulties which inherently come with choosing a career in the arts, there is the added burden of needing to be your own publicist, business manager, website developer and social media guru. These are not skills which every artist has or desires to learn. 'Building a profile,' however, is deemed a necessary condition for a professional artist. To engage an external professional to undertake these duties is beyond the financial capacity of all but a small percentage of freelance artists.

It is time for Australia to seriously consider a Universal Basic Income (UBI) for artists. It was trialled for three years in Ireland. There were numerous benefits identified from the pilot. In economic terms, the scheme recouped more than it cost. It has now been made permanent (though on a small scale).

Choosing a career in the arts should not consign an individual to a life of precarity and poverty. Implementing a UBI scheme is now a proven and contemporary method for supporting practicing artists.

A National Cultural Policy needs to address the capacity for an artist to earn a living wage for a valued and highly skilled profession.

SNW COMMENT ON THE FIVE PILLARS OF THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY (if not already covered previously)

First Nation Stories:

Truth telling is essential. First Nation stories are vital. They have had little prominence in the conventional (colonial) version of arts and cultural history which has been discussed in this submission.

SNW encourages support and initiatives which allow for the telling of our First Nations stories, particularly those of Tasmanian Aboriginals. Support for preserving cultural practice and tradition also needs to be prioritised. These funding streams should be separate from general arts funding.

A Place for Every Story:

SNW questions if there really is a place for every story? For this to be fully realised, adequate

resources need to be available to the organisations and individuals who can facilitate and encourage the telling of ALL the stories.

Given our location, the Regional Arts Fund has been very important and funded some wonderful projects. It is a hugely competitive funding round, however. If there is a place for every story, additional funding is required for bodies such as RAF.

Centrality of the Artist: For many artists, creative work is vocational in the deepest sense. They have a gift, an internal compulsion and a unique skill-set (generally arrived at after 1000's of hours of practice). Society benefits from what they do. A country with a positive and successful approach to cultural policy will enable artists who choose to work in the creative sector to also be able to survive financially.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure: The past 15 years have been tumultuous in terms of Burnie's cultural institutions and venues. Their rise and fall, closures, cuts and refurbishments have directly impacted the Burnie community and the city's reputation as a centre for the arts. Since the last round of cuts and closures in mid-2021, for example, the Burnie Regional Art Gallery has been predominately closed. Very few public arts programs were conducted during a four to five-year period. This is a gaping hole in the ongoing educational and participation levels of this community in the visual arts area.

Important events have been lost due to the reduction in infrastructure.

The renovation of the Burnie Arts centre (courtesy of an 18-million-dollar federal grant) has just been completed. The reopening has brought about a palpable sense of optimism in the future of the arts in the city. Infrastructure matters, particularly in regional centres. It is important that such infrastructure is supported, operational costs are well managed, and that the spaces are accessible to the general community and affordable for grassroots organisations.

Engaging the Audience: This, again, is dependant on resourcing. Australia needs to be telling our stories. We need to be sharing them with the rest of the world. We need to be utilising and embracing appropriate technology and platforms to achieve the reach and profile our stories deserve.

It is important to acknowledge, in closing, that regional stories matter. Burnie has an impressive diaspora of artists working all around the world in prominent creative positions. We have developed events which garner international attention. This is due to the ecosystem that has been nurtured and supported in this area for decades. SNW has an unease about the future – that there are risks to the 'pillars' which have created such a strong grounding for *our* arts community.

Thank you for considering the recommendations provided above. A strong National Cultural Policy will support creative communities throughout the country, but there are urgent priorities which need to be addressed.