

Submission to the Public Consultation on Australia's Next National Cultural Policy

Dr Jane Mulcock
Esperance, Western Australia



Mr Ken Mills
Esperance, Western Australia



24th May 2026

Submission to the Public Consultation on Australia's Next National Cultural Policy

1. Background

This submission is made based on our shared experience in the operation of a regionally-based arts organisation in Esperance Western Australia (JM 12 years as Executive Officer, KM 6 years as Chairperson and a further 2 years as Finance Director).

The town of Esperance where we are located has a population of approximately 14,000. It is situated on the south coast of Western Australia, 700km south-east of Perth and 390km from Kalgoorlie, the nearest regional centre.

Throughout our involvement we have embraced the principles of Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD), working to create opportunities for participation in the arts for community members who may not otherwise connect with arts groups or activities. This approach aims to provide opportunities for people from all backgrounds to participate in collaborative community projects while developing cultural knowledge and new skills through activities that run over extended periods and require ongoing commitment. In CACD, the role of an artist facilitator is to collaboratively assist participants to give form to their creativity. This is a two-way process, with the facilitator also learning from the participants about their experience, interests and priorities. In this way participants become teachers while learning. This is very different to the passive role of an audience member attending a single event, even if the audience experience is enriching and enjoyable. Being an active participant entails ongoing interactions and exchanges, coordination, trust, progressive skills development, and establishment of rich social connections over time.

The effectiveness of this approach in delivering benefits to the community was recognised with the award of both the inaugural Carmen Lawrence Award for Community Building in 2019 and the 2021 WACOSS award for Outstanding Community-Led Collaboration Leading to better Community Outcomes. Despite this record of demonstrated achievement, the organisation has struggled to survive, with funding for its core operations subjected to cuts in successive funding rounds despite ongoing increases in operating costs.

Strategies implemented under '*Revive*' have not so far done anything to improve the lot of the organisation or its staff and program participants. We urge that the value of the CACD approach is given specific recognition and support, avoiding the need to compete with other artforms for the limited funding opportunities that are available.

2. The National Cultural Policy Pillars

2.1 Pillar 1 – First Nations

We strongly support the importance of truth-telling as a strategy towards achieving a greater recognition of the experiences of First Nations people, and of the accumulated trauma and disadvantage that has been carried across generations. We believe that a First-Nations led and controlled approach can be effectively supported by adopting CACD approaches.

We are also strongly opposed to the various forms of cultural appropriation that were described in '*Revive*' (pp. 32-33) especially in relation to collective community cultural property that is not

protected under current individual creator-focussed Intellectual Property laws. We accordingly urge the implementation of provisions to address these issues.

2.2 Pillar 2 – A Place for Every Story

Hearing the stories of diverse community members is a way to foster understanding, break down barriers and enhance community connections. By bringing together people from different backgrounds to share in activities and learn together, CACD approaches provide a means to facilitate sharing in a safe situation. As an initial step, our organisation implemented a ‘Taste of the World’ event highlighting the culinary culture of over 20 nationalities present in the town. This event has received an overwhelming positive response from community members, and has increased awareness of the extent of cultural diversity within the community that would otherwise have remained largely hidden. It has also generated pride among the participating cultural groups.

2.3 Pillar 3 – Centrality of the Artist

‘Revive’ stated that “Funding bodies should continue to affirm the principle that artists should be paid for their work, including through recognition of Awards, mandated rates of pay and codes of practice” (p. 53), and recommended the inclusion of Award coverage for the arts sector. While we strongly agree that there is a need for appropriate rates of remuneration, merely establishing such rates is meaningless when arts organisations are not funded to the extent necessary to enable the mandated rates to be paid.

It is our experience that funding bodies are extremely reluctant (more often outright refusing) to provide funding towards core operating costs such as wages, rent, insurance etc. We have experienced the remuneration of staff at rates well below any award—staff who then also work significant additional unpaid hours out of a commitment to keep their organisation and its projects afloat.

If arts and culture are to flourish, opportunities to pursue careers in these areas must be available without the disincentivising impact financial and other barriers. Educational policies have resulted in schools devoting increased focus to ‘STEM’ subjects at the expense of others including those involving the arts. In the past, local primary schools had thriving music programs. These have been progressively discontinued so that now none remain. Changes made to HECS fees for arts and related qualifications have also provided a deterrent to anyone looking to a qualification and career in the area.

There is a considerable volume of literature detailing the social and health advantages of participation in the arts—advantages which will not be fully realised if opportunities to develop and foster artists are restricted. We urge action to mandate balance in school programs, and to remove subject-based discrimination in tertiary studies.

2.4 Pillar 4 – Strong Cultural Infrastructure

We acknowledge the important role played by our major arts and cultural institutions, while also noting that they are concentrated in major cities where they are not readily accessible to residents of regional areas. Outside the major regional centres, arts activities are more reliant on the availability of skilled personnel—arts workers and artists—than on physical facilities. While the cost involved in supporting and remunerating them is minimal compared to that of a major facility, small increases or decreases can have disproportionately large effects. For example, when our organisation, which was already stretched financially, received a further funding reduction, it was no longer viable to retain a full time position and presence, resulting in the loss of the individual and a reduction in hours of operation and service delivery capacity.

The limited funds available to meet the core operating costs of small arts organisations means that when funding opportunities arise, applicant organisations are thrown into direct competition with each other. Rivalry can then replace cooperation, as one group's gain is likely to be another's loss.

This also places CACD organisations in competition with other art forms. The metrics often used in assessing applications—such as the number of exhibitions, audience numbers and program reach—do not measure the impact of CACD where the emphasis is more on achieving a larger impact on the lives of a smaller number of participants. Where assessors are not familiar with CACD, applications from CACD organisations can be (and often are) viewed less favourably than those from more traditional audience-based artforms.

We recommend that supporting the capacity of arts organisations to meet essential core costs, including payment of appropriate wage rates, should be prioritised in making funding decisions.

In order to raise the profile of CACD and to improve the equity of funding allocations, it is further recommended that CACD be accorded the status of a distinct artform in oversight and planning structures, and that where practical, CACD organisations have access to a specifically targeted funding stream.

2.5 Pillar 5 – Engaging the Audience

As outlined above, the concept of 'audience' for CACD organisations does not fit well. The focus of CACD is on process and participation rather than any form of performance—a program may have impact in improving the wellbeing of participants without having any identifiable audience.

We therefore recommend that specific criteria for the assessment of CACD-based proposals be developed that focus on the impact on social and cultural wellbeing rather than on audiences and social media reach.

3. Conclusion

This submission is based on our extensive and continuous experience in delivering CACD-based programs and observing the positive impact of the social connections they have generated. It also reflects the frustrations that we have experienced in trying to negotiate the funding and systemic obstacles encountered while endeavouring to keep a valuable organisation afloat and viable.

We have highlighted a number of areas where we believe that changes will have strongly positive results, and emphasised the value that can flow to communities from the adoption of a CACD approach. We have recommended strengthening of structures within government and peak arts bodies to give CACD a clear identity and voice.

We commend the focus that is now being placed on improving the position of the arts, artists and arts workers that is demonstrated by the previous '*Revive*' report and this further review. We appreciate the opportunity to present our views and hope they will receive due consideration and support.