

National Cultural Policy Submission – May 2026

Alysha Herrmann | [REDACTED] & [REDACTED], South Australia

Submitting as: artist / arts worker / educator / youth worker / community organiser / individual

About me

I came to the arts over twenty years ago as a disconnected and very angry high-school dropout & teenage parent who thought the arts was a waste of time and money. A youth arts project in my small hometown when I was 19 caught me in its net and gave me the skills and courage to change my life.

I am now an arts leader, arts-worker, and multi-disciplinary artist with experience across formal and informal roles in the arts, education, social enterprise, business, regional development and community development. My work has won and been nominated for multiple arts awards, including the Arts South Australia Geoff Crowhurst Ruby Award and Australia Council Kirk Robson Award. My networks and experience span from delivering grassroots youth arts development in tiny regional communities to leading ambitious multi-state creative projects with multiple partners. I have held formal salaried roles in the arts, but much of my work has been self-generated as an independent artist, bringing together resources, collaborators, and other stakeholders around my own vision and the needs of my communities.

I grew up in regional South Australia, with some short stints in regional Victoria and NSW. My adult life has been invested in regional South Australia, and the Riverland region in particular. I am currently based in Peterborough, a small economically disadvantaged town in the Mid North region of South Australia, where I juggle my creative practice alongside fulltime employment as a high school teacher.

Alongside my own creative work, I am also the co-founder of Part of Things (established 2019). Part of Things is an ideas hub, small co-working space, and unfunded arts organisation based in Barmera (5345) with current projects in Mount Gambier (5291), Port Lincoln (5606), Peterborough (5422) and in the Riverland region of South Australia (5345, 5341, 5344, 5342).

I am one person doing the work of several: teaching fulltime, maintaining independent creative practice, nurturing Part of Things, and trying to model for the young people I work with that a creative life in regional Australia is possible. I love this work. I am also exhausted by the structural conditions that make it so hard. This submission is written from inside that lived reality, with the genuine belief that policy can make a real difference.

Challenges and Opportunities:

I was the beneficiary of amazing mentors, youth workers and leaders when I was a lost and disconnected young person and I have never forgotten the significance of the right question and the right opportunity and the right creative experience at the right time. Yet, the pathways, infrastructure, and support for young people as artists and cultural leaders has been steadily eroded and ultimately decimated over the past twenty years, with no signs of slowing down. Youth arts and arts education (across the lifespan) are critical foundations of a healthy arts ecosystem in general, and more specifically, an arts ecosystem that is not driven by a single story. In other words, a well-resourced youth arts sector and robust arts education at every level ensures that Australian artists and audiences from all walks of life and backgrounds can tell and experience our stories.

Many of the sentiments and concerns I expressed in my submission to the Revive consultation in 2022 remain true. I said then:

- Youth arts (arts *with and by* young people and professional artists) deserve its own pillar as a foundation that sits across and feeds every part of the sector, and there should be an appropriately resourced Young People and Culture Framework
- The pipeline from school to arts practice to arts career doesn't exist in regional communities without deliberate investment.
- Too many First Nations artists are being asked to be all things to all people without proper and fair remuneration

These things all remain true while conditions for most of the artists and communities I work with have worsened. Arts education is disappearing from regional schools across the country. Independent artists who carry the ecosystem without the infrastructure are burning out and leaving the sector entirely. Funding continues to flow through metro organisations to regional communities, bypassing the people who actually live and work here. Community-led organisational models like co-operatives are largely invisible in policy and funding frameworks, with support disproportionately funnelled to larger organisations.

There are many challenges, but I see opportunities too. When I look at the young people and communities I work with – diverse, curious, and often with no arts background and limited access to any kind of arts infrastructure – I see an appetite for creative expression that needs somewhere to go. When I look at Part of Things and the modest but meaningful outcomes we've achieved so far with almost no resources, I see a model for community-led arts and cultural development that is already making an impact. When I look at the growing regional population (up 6.3% since 2020 – ABS, 2026), I see a creative constituency that is consistently underestimated.

The opportunity in this policy is to treat regional Australia not as a delivery problem, but as a creative ecosystem that deserves direct investment, tailored infrastructure (NOT more buildings), and genuine recognition. What is already happening in regional Australia without adequate support is remarkable. Imagine what becomes possible with the right support?

First Nations First

I am surrounded by staunch and skilled First Nations artists and on the ground I see them being asked to educate, advise, consult, and lead without fair and sustained remuneration; tokenistic reconciliation gestures from organisations/groups that lack cultural understanding to back them up; and a funding bureaucracy that regional and remote First Nations artists must navigate with fewer resources than everyone else.

I echo what I said in 2022: watered-down quotas are not enough. Tokenistic Reconciliation Plans are not enough. First Nations artists need paid leadership roles, paid and long-term collaborations, and First Nations self-determination in how support reaches communities. We need the people designing that support to understand what regional and remote First Nations communities actually need – which is different from each other, and from metro counterparts, and from what metro frameworks often assume.

A Place for Every Story

A place for every story has to include regional Australia as a place where stories are made, not just received, with well-supported CACD practices embedded to achieve this. Projects led by metro organisations continue to parachute into our communities without really considering impact, legacy, or equity. Local artists who could have led work from the start (who have the relationships, the cultural knowledge, and will still be here next year) are overlooked because they do not meet

arbitrary definitions of readiness, but there are no pathways or infrastructure for them to meet these metro-defined standards of readiness.

We need postcode aware design and recognition that place-based, community-led work has a different value proposition than touring product, and both require tailored support.

A place for every story must also start in the classroom. In regional communities across the country, senior Drama, Music, and Visual Art classes are quietly disappearing as timetables shrink and generalist teachers are stretched to cover what specialists used to do. I teach arts subjects in a regional high school. I am also a practising professional artist. That combination is much rarer than it should be, not because practitioners don't want to teach, but because there is no policy infrastructure that makes it sustainable to do both. Creative Australia's own research argues that arts education should be available "from the first day of school to the last day at work." That is not the reality I see and it will not become reality without explicit policy commitment.

We need arts education named and funded explicitly as cultural infrastructure, with funded pathways for practitioner-teachers in regional schools to maintain their practice. Many others have already suggested a national artist in schools program modelled and funded equitably to the National Student Wellbeing Program (evolved chaplaincy program) and I echo this. We also need a dedicated youth arts funding stream that is quarantined and not absorbed into general programming or deprioritised when budgets tighten. Without a robust youth arts sector, our entire arts sector becomes smaller, weaker, and less diverse.

Centrality of the Artist

I repeat what I said in 2022: Art is work and artists are workers. The conditions have gotten worse since then, not better, especially for independent artists, and for CACD artists in particular. Funding cuts, cost of living pressure, small-to-medium sector shrinkage, and the emergence of AI as a direct threat to creative livelihoods have combined to make the question of how artists sustain themselves more urgent than ever.

The honest version of my life at present: I work fulltime as a high school teacher to pay the bills and co-fund Part of Things so that I can make creative opportunities possible for others. I make my own art in the margins. The policy says artists are central. The funding system treats us as optional. You cannot be central to culture while spending most of your waking hours doing something else just to survive, which is the case for the vast majority of independent artists. Right now, the artists who maintain fulltime practice are disproportionally those with commercial work, financial safety nets, or geography that provides regular access to opportunities. That is structural inequality with cultural consequences.

We need to trial a basic income pilot for artists, and multi-year fellowships that provide time, not just money. Art prizes and fellowships should be made tax exempt. Arts funding restored to *at least* 2013 levels, adjusted for inflation.

I also want to name the importance of freedom of expression for artists. We've all seen the quote "art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." Artists need the safety and support to have difficult conversations through art. This kind of truth-telling, perspective-shifting, community-challenging practise is how we grow, grieve, reckon, and imagine. A National Cultural Policy that doesn't explicitly protect artistic freedom will eventually be used against the artists it claims to support.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Cultural infrastructure in regional Australia is not buildings. It is the teachers keeping arts experiences alive with no resources. It is the informal and formal co-operatives making creative work happen in the margins. It is the CACD practice saving lives. It is the relationship between an artist and a place, built over years, that no visiting residency program can replicate. As researchers Barnett and O'Connor have argued: cultural infrastructure includes *"funding mechanisms, education and training schemes, and shared norms on which collective cultural life is built"*, without it, all talk of cultural rights is abstract.

Pay artists first. Pay them to be in public spaces, pay them to be in schools, pay them to be in non-arts businesses and organisations and unexpected places. Advocate and support local councils to have arts policies. Name and fund organisational models that sit outside of the large traditional orgs.

I also want to name schools in regional communities as critical cultural infrastructure, the classroom, the timetable, the school building. For many of the young people I work with, school is the only place they will encounter a professional arts practitioner before they turn 18. This is infrastructure and it deserves to be named as such, resourced as such, and protected as such.

Engaging the Audience

Audience engagement in regional communities is not a touring problem. It is an access, identity, and belonging problem. When people don't see themselves in the work, they don't show up. When the work arrives from somewhere else and leaves again, it doesn't build anything. The projects I have seen with the greatest impact were not the ones with the largest audiences, they were the ones where community members became makers, not just receivers. Impact measurement needs to reflect this.

Four in five young Australians attend arts events. One in two connect with cultural and community through arts and creativity. The appetite is there. In regional communities, the supply side is not meeting it. The answer is not more touring, it's investment in local capacity: local artists, local organisations, local schools. Any funding model that counts bums on seats above all else will always disadvantage regional communities where the number of seats is smaller. We need different measures of what matters.

HAVE I MENTIONED THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF FUNDING YOUTH ARTS? A robust, properly resourced youth arts framework with dedicated, quarantined funding (that can't be absorbed into "general" when things get tight) is not a 'nice-to-have'. It is the foundation. It is where future artists discover themselves. It is where future audiences are formed. Every pillar of this policy needs it.

In summary, what I want to see:

- Arts education named and resourced explicitly as cultural infrastructure
- A serious basic income pilot for artists and arts workers
- Multi-year fellowships and income support mechanisms for independent artists (especially regional artists who do not have access to other cultural infrastructure because of our geography)
- A quarantined Youth Arts funding stream and dedicated Youth Arts Framework that sits under *every pillar*
- Explicit protection of artistic freedom, with a clear policy position against "social cohesion" being used to silence challenging work
- Impact measures that go beyond attendance
- A funded national artist-in-schools program

- First Nations-led design of the support that reaches regional First Nations artists and their communities.
- Explicitly recognise CACD within the new cultural policy as a distinct and essential field of creative practice and core cultural infrastructure
- Embed a national body dedicated to CACD within Creative Australia to lead coordination, advocacy, research and sector development.
- Shift to long-term, place-based and relational investment models for CACD practice (including Youth Arts).

My submission is focused on Youth Arts, but it's important to note that this practice is grounded in, and inextricably linked to, **Community Arts and Cultural Development** (CACD). I strongly support and endorse all the key recommendations from the [#revivecommunityarts](#) statement. I especially want to highlight the following: “CACD is how communities come together in times of change, crisis and recovery. Through creativity, aesthetic enrichment, ideas, and cultural practice, CACD builds belonging, appreciation of difference, voice and connection—things policy alone can't achieve. We need the next iteration of REVIVE to recognise and resource this work so no community is left behind”.

Cold knuckles and warm knees/ water disappearing behind silhouette trees/ I am held by this place/ caught, loved, trapped/ this all or nothing future mess that I spin for myself/ while floodlights chase the moon, and leaves sing tomorrow's joy/ a truck turns the corner while I sleep/ reaching for this one small memory I want to keep//

Tiny poem by Alysha Herrmann from Writing the River Rising
(15 February 2024 to 25 March 2024)

Alysha Herrmann | Peterborough, South Australia [REDACTED]
www.alyshaherrmann.com | [REDACTED]

I give permission for this submission to be published and attributed to me.