

Submission: Towards a New National Cultural Policy

Prepared by Australian South Asian Centre (ASAC) - May 2026

1. Support for a New National Cultural Policy

Australian South Asian Centre (ASAC) welcomes the development of Australia's next National Cultural Policy and commends the government's commitment to building on the foundations of Revive. A consecutive national policy is an important signal that arts and culture are understood as essential, ongoing infrastructure, not a periodic investment.

Revive made meaningful progress, particularly in centering First Nations voices, supporting artists as workers, and building broader sector infrastructure. We support its continuation and evolution.

Our submission focuses on one area that has been overlooked: the structural under-representation of Culturally and Racially Marginalised people (CARM). As an organisation focused on the South Asian community, we view this through the lens of Indian and South Asian women; however, the data and structural dynamics discussed can apply to all CARM women in the arts.

2. About Australian South Asian Centre (ASAC)

ASAC creates space for South Asian women's creativity, culture and leadership, with a membership community of 180+ members and a growing portfolio of productions, programs and institutional partnerships. ASAC is a Melbourne-based organisation with not-for-profit (DGR-1) status founded in 2020.

ASAC's members and focus are women who live in Australia with South Asian heritage. Primarily this includes India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan.

In five years, with no core or ongoing funding and a largely volunteer team contributing on average 100 hours per week — ASAC has:

- Produced 83 events reaching 9,300+ attendees across Australia, predominantly people of colour
- Produced Brown Women Comedy's 71 shows across 9 locations including Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Edinburgh, and six regional towns in Victoria and New South Wales
- Received 6 million+ unique social media impressions
- Empowered 50+ women through workshops in stand-up comedy, spoken word and poetry
- Worked with established institutions such as Melbourne Theatre Company, Bunjil Place and Public Galleries Association Victoria
- Been featured in 20+ media features including ABC News, SBS, The Age and ArtsHub

Published original research and advocacy on ethnic diversity in Australia's comedy and performing arts sectors

We speak from direct experience of what it takes to build cultural infrastructure for communities not yet reflected in mainstream Australian arts, and of the systemic barriers that make this work harder than it needs to be.

3. The Challenge: Ethnic Diversity Is the Missing Metric

Australia is changing. Its arts sector isn't keeping up.

The South Asian diaspora is now Australia's fastest growing migrant group. A major demographic shift has emerged in Australia, with people born in South Asia becoming the country's largest foreign born group, surpassing those born in England for the first time in modern records. Yet South Asian women remain profoundly under-represented — not only as artists on stages and screens, but in the curatorial, programming and leadership roles that determine whose stories get told and whose don't.

We acknowledge genuine progress in other areas of representation. Gender equity targets, disability access frameworks, and First Nations self determination in arts funding are examples of the sector beginning to hold itself accountable. But when it comes to ethnic and cultural diversity, there is a striking absence of data collection, clarity, mandatory reporting, or accountability mechanisms at the national level.

You cannot improve what you do not measure. Without baseline data on the ethnic backgrounds of artists receiving funding, programmers making decisions, and audiences being reached, structural exclusion continues invisibly and the communities most affected have no evidence base from which to advocate.

CASE STUDY — Melbourne International Comedy Festival 2024

In 2024, ASAC conducted an analysis of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival — Australia's largest cultural ticketed event, drawing approximately 770,000 audience members annually. We reviewed 650+ show listings. The findings revealed:

- 650+ shows reviewed
- Of 650+ shows, only 19 women of colour had solo performances across the entire festival (**3%**)
- 2 South Asian Australian women performed a solo show (**0.30%**)

A comparable absence of ethnic diversity was observed at other major festivals in the same year — Adelaide Fringe and Sydney Comedy Festival

4. The Stakes: Art, Exclusion and a Divided Australia

Australia is becoming more diverse. It is also becoming more divided. Anti-immigration sentiment is rising. Racism directed at South Asian, Southeast Asian and African communities is documented and growing. In this context, the question of who gets to tell stories, and whose stories get told on Australia's stages, is not merely a cultural question. It is a social and political one.

Arts and culture are among the most powerful tools available for building empathy across differences, challenging stereotypes, and creating the conditions for social cohesion. When a non-South Asian audience member sees a South Asian woman on stage telling a story about her family, her identity, her experience of Australia — something shifts. Shared laughter, shared recognition, shared humanity. This is what culture does that policy alone cannot.

But this only works if diverse communities are actually on the stage and in rooms where decisions are made about them. When cultural institutions program for a narrow slice of Australia, when the stories told are predominantly those of one cultural group, they do not just exclude communities from representation. They actively limit the capacity of all Australians to understand each other. In an era of growing division and diminishing public discourse, this is a failure with real social consequences.

Australia's cultural institutions, stages, festivals and galleries should be the spaces where we encounter each other across differences. The next National Cultural Policy must take seriously the responsibility of cultural institutions not just to reflect Australia's diversity, but to actively build the social fabric that diversity requires.

"The stage became a platform for shared laughter and understanding, and I realised how much in common Aboriginal mothers, Aunties and Grandmothers have with Indian mothers, Aunties and Grandmothers."

— Review, *Brown Women Comedy 2024*

5. Being Clear On Diversity Labels: CALD vs CARM / PoC

A critical distinction is missing from most metrics on diversity in Australian arts. Creative Australia's own 2024 diversity report acknowledges that CALD is "increasingly contested and many consider it no longer fit for purpose. Despite this, it continues to be used as a measurement tool in reporting on Australia's cultural makeup as more nuanced approaches are explored".

CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) is a broad administrative category that encompasses Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds. It includes communities from Southern and Eastern Europe — Greek, Italian, Spanish — many of whom have been part of Australian cultural life for two or more generations and are now well-represented across arts organisations, festivals and funding bodies (comparative to newer waves of migrants).

CARM (Culturally and Racially Marginalised) and People of Colour (PoC) is a more specific term that recognises the additional layer of racial marginalisation experienced by communities of colour — including South Asian, Southeast Asian, East Asian, African, Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander communities. These communities face not only cultural and linguistic barriers but also racial stereotyping, discrimination, and a near-total absence from positions of cultural leadership.

Using CALD as the primary diversity metric in arts policy effectively obscures this distinction. An organisation can report strong CALD representation while remaining entirely white. Funding bodies can point to diversity programs that have not materially changed the representation of racially marginalised communities.

Australia's migration patterns have shifted dramatically over the past three decades. The post-war waves of European migration that shaped mid-twentieth century multicultural policy have

given way to a new era — the fastest-growing migrant groups are now from South Asia, Southeast Asia and China. When we speak of diversity in the arts, we must be specific about which communities remain excluded, and why. The sector should adopt the term Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) to distinguish communities facing racial marginalisation from the broader CALD category, or allow self-identification of ethnicity. We encourage the next National Cultural Policy to formally adopt this distinction, bringing federal policy in line with emerging sector practice and ensuring that diversity frameworks do not inadvertently obscure the specific barriers faced by communities of colour.

Generic phrases such as “culturally diverse” and “multicultural communities” or “diverse people” should not be used for data collection purposes as they do not capture nuance.

6. Institutional Under-Representation at Major Arts Industry Performing Arts Markets and in Funding

The most significant diversity gap in Australia’s cultural sector is not on the stage. It is in the rooms where decisions are made — programming offices, curatorial teams, boards, and industry marketplaces where decisions are made about what work gets resourced, toured, and seen. Who is in these rooms determines what Australia’s cultural landscape looks like. Currently, they are overwhelmingly white spaces, making decisions for predominantly white audiences.

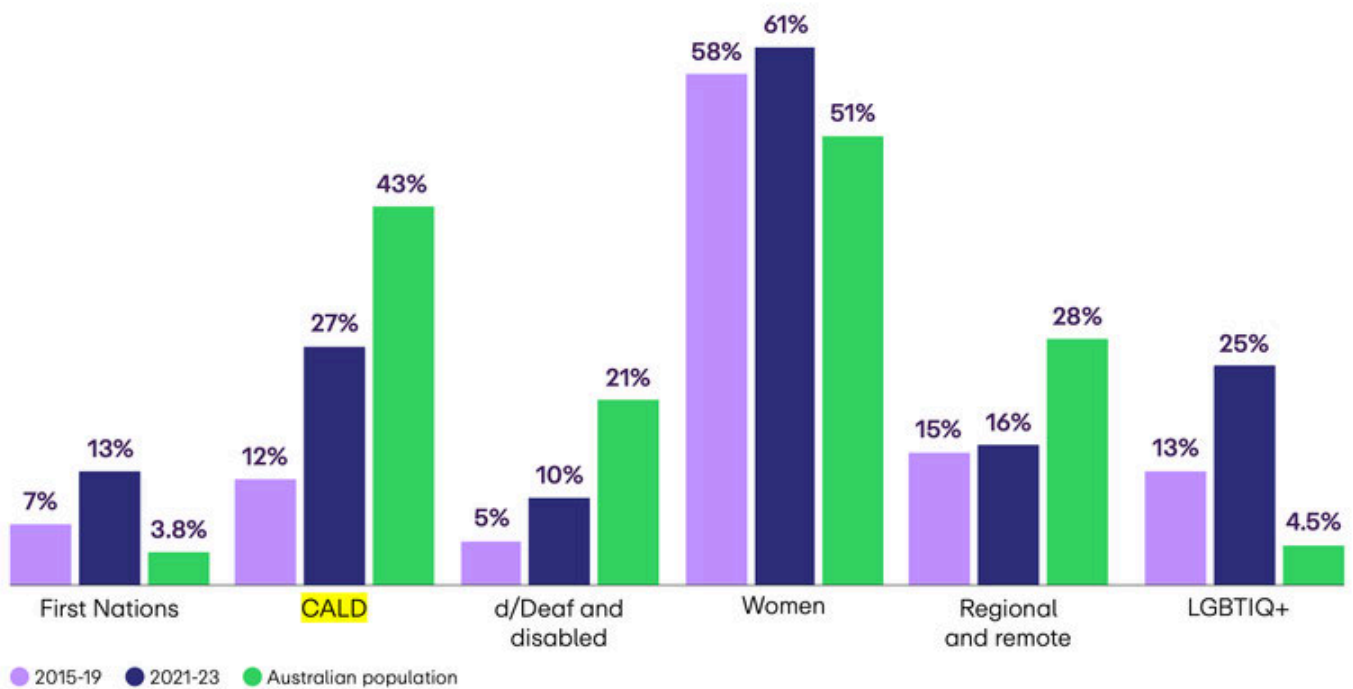
The industry marketplaces

Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM) is the key flagship national marketplace where presenting organisations, council and government funded theatres decide what work (plays, music, shows) they will program and invest in across Australia’s stages. In 2026, there were approximately four to five women of colour in the entire room of 500+ delegates.

At Showcase Victoria, the annual marketplace where council-owned venues decide what performing arts to program across Victoria, only one Indian creative work was presented and three South Asian women attended among 250 delegates.

Under-representation as Funding Recipients

Figure 10: Diversity of individual project investment recipients, 2015–19 and 2021–23

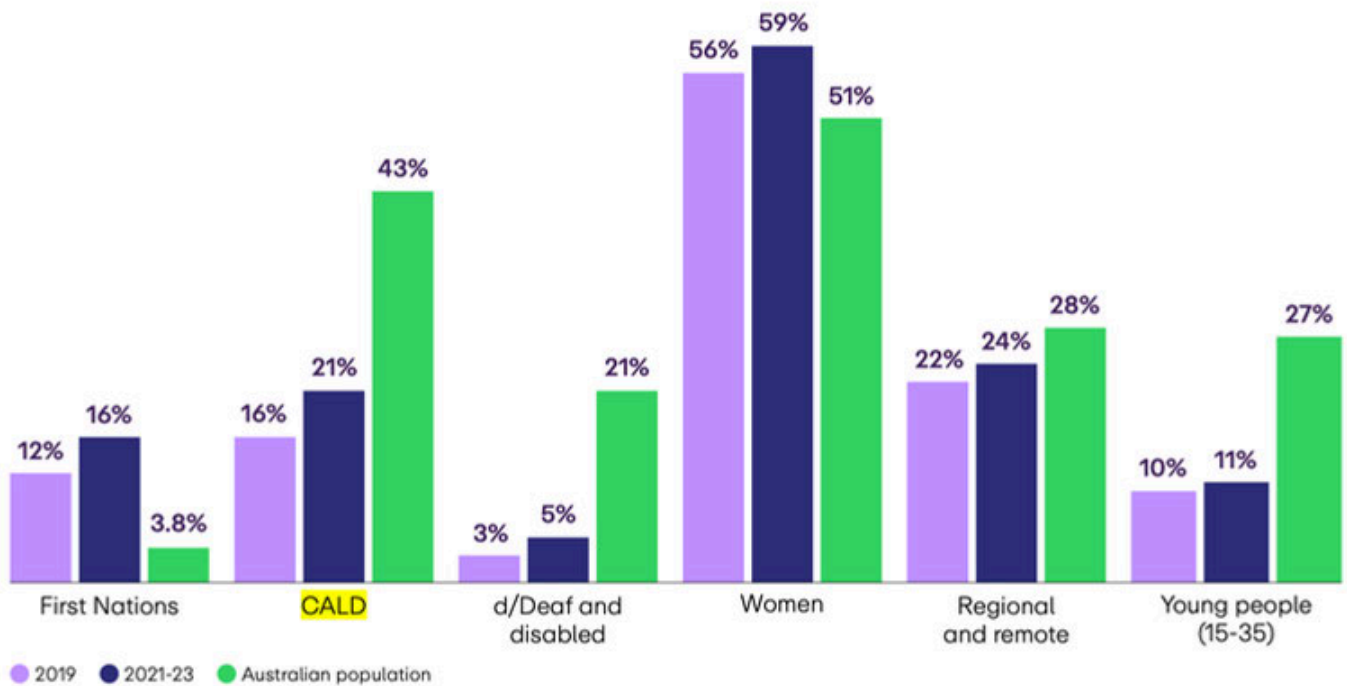


Note: Includes contextual population estimates, which are not always directly comparable. **Source:** Data reported by Creative Australia individual applicants for project investment, 2015–19 and 2021–23 (average representation rates across years). In 2015–19 there were 3,706 applications approved and in 2021–23 there were 1,186 applications approved. See [Key terms and population estimates](#) for population data sources.

Creative Australia's *Towards Equity 2* diversity report (2024) found that CALD people **receive only 27% of individual project grants** — against a **population benchmark of 43%**.

Board and governance

Figure 8: Diversity in leadership of multi-year investment organisations, 2019 and 2021–23



This under-representation extends to governance. Arts boards hold decision-making power over funding, programming direction and institutional strategy — and they remain overwhelmingly non-diverse. Diverse artists may be invited onto stages, but rarely into the rooms where decisions are made. Meaningful change requires not only diverse programming, but diverse leadership and governance. Creative Australia’s *Towards Equity 2* diversity report (2024) found that CALD people occupy just 21% of leadership roles in funded organisations

Mainstream access and suburban segregation

Access to mainstream stages remains one of the most significant barriers for CARM artists. While diverse work is often celebrated in community or suburban contexts, it is rarely programmed within flagship venues or major cultural institutions in central metropolitan areas. Work is pushed to the suburbs, into community spaces, or into dedicated “multicultural programming” slots — rather than being integrated into the core artistic offering of our major institutions.

The same pattern plays out across other creative industries. In literature, South Asian Australian writers face publishers and agents applying commercial yardsticks designed around a default Australian readership — meaning stories of South Asian joy, triumph and cultural richness are considered less viable than stories of suffering or strife.

“The people who judge the relevance, the value, whether this is going to bring money — have yardsticks that are designed for the average Australian Caucasian reader. Unless we have strong representation in the decision-making process, people who do not understand or value the culture will judge our stories.”

— Uma, South Asian Australian author

What needs to change

Major industry events and marketplaces receiving government support should be required to demonstrate meaningful CARM participation — among delegates, not just on stage. Subsidies should be made available to enable CARM arts workers to attend, regardless of seniority. Funding bodies should invest in leadership and professional development pathways that actively bring racially marginalised workers into programming, curatorial and governance roles. The sector should be required to report publicly on the ethnic diversity of its workforce, leadership and programming — not just its box office.

7. Social Cohesion and Multicultural Funding

The Victorian Government has introduced social cohesion as an accountability measure for multicultural funding. When communities are systematically excluded from cultural representation — when they do not see themselves on stages, in programming decisions, or in positions of cultural leadership — the erosion of trust and belonging is inevitable. Genuine social cohesion requires genuine inclusion, and that demands structural change.

Social cohesion has become a reporting requirement for multicultural funding, but you cannot measure it while ignoring the conditions that erode it. Social cohesion is not possible without genuine inclusion at the decision-making table.

The Victorian Multicultural Review found that community organisations are increasingly being called upon to provide leadership and support as social division grows — yet lack the resources to do so sustainably. This is ASAC’s reality. We are doing the work of building social cohesion through comedy, storytelling, community events and institutional partnerships — on volunteer hours and project funding that runs out. That is not a sustainable model for social infrastructure.

8. Comedy as Culture: Mainstream Art Form, Marginalised in Policy

Stand-up comedy is one of the most mainstream, accessible and culturally resonant art forms in Australia. Major comedy festivals attract hundreds of thousands of audience members. Comedy reaches people who may never attend a gallery or a mainstage theatre — including newly

arrived migrants, working-class communities, and young people from diaspora backgrounds. Yet comedy is consistently overlooked by arts funding bodies.

The infrastructure gap is structural, not incidental. A solo theatre show can access funding for a dramaturg, a set designer, a lighting designer, a composer, script development time, and extended rehearsal periods. A stand-up comedian is expected to develop their material alone in pub back rooms at 9pm, in front of predominantly male audiences who did not come to see them, before anyone takes their work seriously enough to invest in it.

This is not a neutral development environment. Practising material in late-night pub gigs is not accessible to women managing caring responsibilities. It is often not safe for women who reside outside of the CBD and need to take public transport home. It is not the environment in which comedians exploring identity, culture, family and belonging find their audiences or develop their voice. The result is fewer women in comedy, and far fewer women of colour.

Comedy is also a uniquely powerful vehicle for social commentary and cross-cultural understanding. In an era of rising division and diminishing public discourse, the ability to name difficult truths through laughter, to make an audience feel seen, and to make a different audience understand, is a genuine cultural asset. It deserves to be treated accordingly.

“Being a part of Brown Women Comedy allowed me to connect with other Indian people who had similar experiences to me. Unlike most of the men in comedy I know, I did not dream of doing comedy as a child — because I was unaware that being an Indian woman in comedy was something I could do.”

— Guneet, Comedian, Sydney

“The notions that women aren’t funny, and brown people aren’t funny, perpetuate throughout the comedy industry at every level — producers, comedians, agents, audiences — meaning brown women like myself are often disregarded and excluded.”

— Ru, Comedian, Sydney

The next National Cultural Policy should explicitly recognise stand-up comedy as a culturally significant art form worthy of investment, and ensure that development funding, residency programs and touring support are accessible to comedians — particularly those from under-represented communities — on terms that reflect the actual conditions of how comedy is made.

9. Case Studies

Case Study 1: Brown Women Comedy — Demonstrating Demand, Constrained by System

Brown Women Comedy (BWC) is now Australia's largest platform for South Asian and women of colour comedians. Since 2022, it has grown from a single Melbourne show to a national and international touring production: 71 shows, 9 locations, 5,000+ audience members, 25+ media reviews in 2024, and a four-star Edinburgh Fringe run.

This growth has happened almost entirely without core or recurring government funding. BWC has been sustained by box office, competitive project grants and volunteer support for years. What BWC demonstrates is not just that diverse comedy audiences exist — it is that they are hungry, loyal, and currently underserved by Australia's cultural infrastructure.

In 2025, ASAC's BWC regional tour brought the show to Colac, Dubbo, Wodonga, Shepparton, Wagga Wagga and Griffith. Audiences told us they had never seen performers who looked like them on a regional stage. Venue staff reflected that they had minimal existing channels to engage meaningfully with diaspora South Asian communities and few options when programming for them. This is not a problem individual organisations can solve on a project budget. It requires systemic investment.

"They often live in the shadows and it was good to see them express themselves freely." — Griffith Regional Theatre attendee

"Powerful. And necessary. Thank you for coming out to us!" — Riverlinks, Shepparton attendee

The structural barrier is clear. ASAC has applied multiple times for Playing Australia / Touring Victoria (Creative Australia and Creative Victoria's touring grant) and for several organisational grants under Creative Australia and Creative Victoria. Our applications have been confirmed by venue partners, praised in feedback for quality — yet unsuccessful 90% of the time. Each application cycle costs significant uncompensated time. Meanwhile, the structural conditions making diverse work harder to tour — limited presenter networks, no diaspora audience data, limited diversity requirements in programming — remain unchanged. Funding individual shows is not the same as building a system that supports them.

Case Study 2: Melbourne Theatre Company — What Partnership Can Look Like

In 2025, ASAC was engaged by Melbourne Theatre Company as the community outreach and engagement partner for *The Wrong Gods*, a production by playwright S. Shakthidharan. ASAC curated the community night guest list — 200+ first- and second-generation South Asian creators, entrepreneurs and professionals, 95% women — and engaged eight South Asian women freelancers to execute the event.

This case study demonstrates what is possible when a major cultural institution actively seeks and budgets for community expertise. It also demonstrates that this expertise currently sits

outside the institution — in small, under-resourced community organisations. The next policy should create incentives for major institutions to build these partnerships into core operating practice, not treat them as one-off initiatives.

10. Recommendations for the Next National Cultural Policy

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

- **Explicitly include ethnic and cultural diversity in the policy's definition of inclusion.** Ensure inclusion frameworks name ethnic and cultural diversity alongside gender, disability and First Nations self-determination.
- **Introduce mandatory ethnic diversity data collection and reporting.** Require publicly funded arts organisations and major festivals to collect, report and publish data on the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of artists and organisations funded and employed.
- **Formally adopt CARM / People of Colour as a distinct data collection category (or enable self-identification followed by CARM analysis).** Replace reliance on CALD as the primary metric so racially marginalised communities are visible in the data.
- **Introduce socioeconomic data collection alongside ethnic diversity reporting.** Ensure cultural funding and participation is reaching Australians across all income levels, not only those with the financial means to access arts and culture.
- **Provide sustained core funding for cultural organisations led by and for the community they serve.** Organisations led by people of colour that are doing the heavy lifting of engaging diverse audiences need multi-year core funding, not only project-by-project competition.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

- **Create dedicated pathways for diverse artists to develop sustainable careers.** Support mentorships, residencies and co-production programs specifically designed for under-represented artists, producers and creatives from CARM backgrounds.
- **Recognise comedy as a culturally significant art form.** Ensure development funding, residencies and touring support are accessible to comedians and producers of comedy, particularly those from under-represented communities

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

- **Fund the intermediary organisations that connect communities to institutions.** Create a dedicated funding stream for community organisations that act as trusted bridges between diaspora communities and cultural institutions.
- **Reform grant processes to reduce barriers for small, diverse-led organisations.** Mandate simpler, more accessible pathways and multi-year operational funding for volunteer-led and small community organisations.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

- **Build diaspora audience development into festival and venue funding requirements.**
Require major festivals and venues to demonstrate through reporting active engagement with CARM audiences and to invest in the community relationships and outreach infrastructure needed to reach them.

11. Closing

Australia's cultural story is richer than its stages and institutions reflect. ASAC has spent five years proving that South Asian women's stories are compelling, that audiences are hungry for them, and that community-led organisations can build the infrastructure to support them. What we cannot do alone is change the structural conditions that make this work so hard. That is what national cultural policy is for.

We ask the government to use this next chapter to close the gap between the diversity of Australia's population and the diversity of its stages, its decision-making rooms, and its cultural institutions — not with tokenism, but with data, accountability, and a genuine commitment to the idea that every story means every story.

This submission was prepared by Daizy Maan on behalf of Australian South Asian Centre (ASAC), with consultation from members of ASAC | May 2026 | australiansouthasiancentre.com |

Contact: 