



Performing Arts Presenter Associations (PAPA)

The Performing Arts Presenter Associations (PAPA) are a network of membership organisations representing the presenting ecology in Australia with memberships including presenters, venues and producers. A network of peer organisations, PAPA works to provide a collaborative and coordinated approach to identifying and addressing shared strategic priorities and advocacy, in support of their memberships and the performing arts sector nationwide.

PAPA organisations collaborate on joint advocacy priorities, and support and share the work of each organisation's research and data collection, the development and distribution of industry standards, and capacity and market development programs.

The PAPA network comprises:

[PAC Australia](#)

[CircuitWest](#)

[NSW & ACT Performing Arts Centres Association \(NAPACA\)](#)

[South Australian Presenters Association \(SAPA\)](#)

[Stage Queensland](#)

[Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres \(VAPAC\)](#)

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Review 2026

The PAPA network's submission focusses on our current joint work related to safety within the performing arts technical workforce. It draws on the findings of the inaugural National Performing Arts Technical Safety and Workforce Meeting, convened by PAPA at Melbourne Theatre Company on 28–29 October 2025, and is endorsed by all six PAPA organisations.¹

Australia's performing arts technical workforce — the production managers, riggers, lighting and sound technicians, and automation operators who make live performance possible — is experiencing a national safety crisis. This has been building across the entire pipeline from recruitment and training through to retention, but it is now manifesting most acutely in day-to-day workplace conditions.

Converging Pressure Points

Participants at the October 2025 Meeting described a sector in which longstanding structural vulnerabilities have converged with post-COVID impacts, heightened programming expectations and entrenched cultural norms:

- Sector resilience at its limits: rising expectations and diminishing structural support are pushing the system beyond capacity
- Eroding safety margin: near-misses, widespread fatigue and inconsistent practices are increasing the frequency and potential severity of incidents

¹ <https://paca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/National-Technical-Meeting-2025-Insights-Report.pdf>
Performing Arts Presenter Associations (PAPA) – National Cultural Policy Submission

- **Fragile workforce pipeline:** regional shortages, outdated training and limited career progression pathways are weakening the workforce faster than it can be replenished
- **Ambition outpacing capacity:** programming and KPI expectations have grown significantly while staffing levels and planning time have not — the sector is delivering ‘2025 ambition with a 1995 workforce model’
- **Unsustainable presentation models:** cost-driven schedules with tight turnarounds transfer significant risk onto technical teams who often inherit problems created earlier in the production chain
- **Deepening regional inequity:** venues with extremely small teams struggle to meet production and compliance demands, with limited access to training or relief staff

The crisis is compounded by barriers that prevent systemic resolution:

- **Fragmented responsibility:** safety, staffing, training and production oversight sit across multiple entities with no single point of authority, creating gaps where risks fall between organisations
- **‘The show must go on’ culture:** a deeply embedded industry mindset normalises unsafe workarounds, conceals workforce strain and prevents issues from being surfaced early
- **Insufficient empowerment:** less experienced or junior staff are covering high-risk responsibilities without adequate authority to escalate concerns, weakening safety reporting loops
- **Lack of national data:** inconsistent definitions and the absence of consistent near-miss reporting limit visibility of risk across the sector and constrain evidence-based advocacy
- **Government funding settings:** KPIs on venues related to utilisation and output increasingly require delivery beyond available workforce capacity

PAPA proposes a three-horizon reform roadmap. Immediate actions build awareness and empower technical workers. Medium-term priorities test tools and pilot shared training. Long-term efforts establish the national standards, career pathways and cultural shift required for lasting change. Workforce transformation of this nature typically takes 5–10 years to mature across all stages of the pipeline.

Immediate Priority

R1	<p>National Safety Standards for High-Risk Systems</p> <p>Fund the development and sector-wide access to national standards, accreditation requirements and clear competency expectations for high-risk systems — beginning with counterweight flying, theatre automation and rigging. Standards must be scalable to organisational size and location, with particular attention to regional equity.</p>
R2	<p>Sector-Wide Safety Communication and Empowerment</p> <p>Support a coordinated national communication campaign acknowledging the scale of the safety challenge, directed first at venue technical staff and PAPA member organisations. Technical workers must feel seen, supported and empowered to raise concerns safely. This includes circulating existing safety resources and WHS templates across networks and establishing a national ‘Network of Safety Leads’.</p>
R3	<p>Simple Self-Audit Tools</p> <p>Develop and circulate straightforward, accessible self-audit tools to enable venues of all sizes to assess current safety practices, identify immediate gaps and benchmark against sector expectations.</p>

Medium Term (Within 18 Months)

R4	<p>Touring and Programming Safety Review</p> <p>Investigate adjustments to touring practices by auditing key stages of tour development — including the role of touring markets as early intervention points — to reduce risk and improve safety across touring cycles. Develop and test</p>
-----------	---

resource-aware programming templates to help venues assess feasible workforce capacity against proposed program loads.

R5 Education and Training Mobilisation

Source funding and partnerships for safety workshops and train-the-trainer pilots in high-risk areas (flying systems, automation, fatigue management). Develop a light-touch national survey or register of safety practices, training and incidents to inform later advocacy and funding submissions.

Long Term (5+ Years)

R6 National Standards and Licensing Frameworks

Develop and legislate national standards and licensing frameworks for technical theatre work, particularly for automation, rigging and flying systems. Align job progression to nationally recognised qualifications and professional development programs.

R7 Arts as a Profession — Formal Recognition

Formally recognise the arts as a profession by government — including through Centrelink, the ATO and industrial relations frameworks. Reform the industrial award to recognise the professional nature of technical work and set minimum standards for pay and conditions. Harmonise income averaging arrangements for independent practitioners.

R8 Sustainable Workforce Pipeline

Introduce formal traineeship models in performing arts venues (equivalent to apprenticeships in trades), build regional hubs ensuring consistent access to safety training and certification, and establish national induction modules for all technical and venue staff focused on safety culture and risk awareness.

R9 Shared Accountability in Touring System Reform

Embed safety clauses in touring contracts and standardise risk management across all facets of safety across the sector to distribute responsibility appropriately across producers, touring companies, venues and funders.

The cost of inaction — in human, financial and reputational terms — will far exceed the cost of coordinated action. The PAPA network has already demonstrated the depth of engagement and leadership required: the October 2025 Meeting brought together technical experts, venue leaders and peak bodies from across Australia to map the crisis, align on principles and begin developing solutions.

We are not asking government to solve this alone.

We are asking for the investment, policy settings and formal recognition that will allow the sector to do so.

Most importantly, we are asking that the issues identified in this submission are considered across all national cultural policy planning and reform to ensure that the demands placed upon the sector, particularly under the current financial pressures, acknowledge the acute safety issues that manifest if not addressed appropriately.