

Submission to the next National Cultural Policy

From NT Writers' Centre

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About NT Writers' Centre

NT Writers' Centre (NTWC) supports, develops and showcases writing and storytelling in the Northern Territory. For nearly 30 years we have been promoting authors from the Northern Territory who elevate Australia's diverse cultural identity.

We run the annual NT Writers Festival (NTWF), which is the premiere literary event of the Northern Territory, attracting around 2500 festival-goers each year. This four-day event brings people together to share story, language and culture, as 80 guest writers from around Australia and beyond share their words, perspectives and ideas. Alternating between Darwin, Larrakia Country, and Alice Springs/Mparntwe, NTWF is shaped by place, speaking to and from the heart of the Northern Territory. NTWF reflects the cultural diversity of our community, and amplifies First Nations voices. We are also a leader in Asian engagement, and we make connections in the Asia Pacific region through our Top End program.

The NTWC is the only writers' centre in the NT, and we play a significant role in the national arts sector. In the last 5 years, we:

- Engaged 13,000 Territorians in literary experiences
- Coordinated 400 literary and community events
- Hosted and delivered 5 annual Writers' Festivals
- Employed and supported over 600 writers in their development
- Managed over 2000 literary competition entries

It is important to note the context that we work in. We are a Territory wide organisation, servicing a population of 250,00 people across 1.35 million square kilometres, which is 17% of the Australian continent. We have, remarkably, engaged over 1% of the population in literature in the last 4 years. There are two main centres in the Territory, 1500km apart, taking approx 16 hours to drive between, or a daily flight costing \$900. There are 73 remote Aboriginal communities, and over 20 First Nations language groups across desert, freshwater and saltwater country.

Over 30% of the population speak languages other than English at home. Colonial practices and environmental challenges affect all of us every day. Arts are not financially valued, philanthropy is limited, and only two large philanthropic arts charities operate in the NT, (Tim Fairfax Foundation and Ian Potter Foundation, for whom you must be invited to apply).

Executive summary

Writing is one of the ways a society tells the truth to itself, builds empathy across difference, repairs and renews its social fabric, gives individuals a means of creative fulfilment and meaning-making, and helps a country make sense of its largest challenges, including the climate changes already reshaping Australian life. The conditions under which writing happens in Australia (who can afford to write, who is supported to write, whose stories are heard) are therefore questions of cultural and

democratic significance, not only economic ones. The next National Cultural Policy is an opportunity to take those questions seriously.

NTWC supports the continuation of the five-pillar framework established under *Revive*. We endorse the call from across the books and reading sector for the next National Cultural Policy to include a coordinated National Plan for Books and Reading, and we believe NT Writers Centre and the National Writers' Centre Network (NWCN) are essential to its delivery. The NWCN is cultural infrastructure: a federated network of writers' centres in every Australian state and territory through which emerging writers find their way into a national literary culture.

The next policy must reckon with a hard truth at the heart of our sector. The writers Australia is most likely to lose to economic pressure are the writers a national cultural policy most needs to support: early-career writers, writers from low-income backgrounds, writers from remote and regional Australia, First Nations writers and writers from communities whose stories have been historically under-represented. These are the writers NTWC programs are designed to reach. The infrastructure that catches them and gives them a literary career, including writers' centres, mentorships, fellowships, residencies and online and remote programs, is the same infrastructure this submission asks the next policy to recognise and resource.

Our recommendations, in summary, are that the next National Cultural Policy should:

1. Develop a coordinated National Plan for Books and Reading, and resource Writing Australia at a level commensurate with its remit, ensuring that larger national books-and-reading measures are funded separately rather than from Writing Australia's existing budget.
2. Recognise state and territory writers' centres, together with the National Writers' Centre Network through which they connect nationally, as cultural infrastructure of national significance, and establish through Writing Australia a dedicated multi-year investment stream for services to writers delivered in partnership with the network.
3. Establish enforceable consent, transparency and remuneration standards for the use of Australian writers' work in the training and operation of generative AI systems.
4. Address the ongoing decline in writers' incomes through a coordinated package of measures, including uplift to the Public Lending Right and Educational Lending Right schemes and tax-free treatment of grants and prizes.
5. Establish a First Nations-led framework for writing and publishing, with dedicated investment, ICIP protocols and data sovereignty embedded across the systems that touch First Nations writing.
6. Strengthen the wider literary infrastructure that connects writers and readers, including literary magazines, small and independent publishers, bookshops, public and school libraries and festivals, and invest in reading culture and Australian books in schools, public libraries and discovery channels.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

First Nations storytelling methods are the oldest forms of knowledge preservation and transmission. First Nations writers, languages and cultural knowledge should be central to the next National Cultural Policy, through recognition and through First Nations leadership across the systems that govern writing, publishing, education and reading. Current publishing, metadata, AI and rights systems do not yet adequately recognise the cultural authority of First Nations peoples and communities, and the next policy is an opportunity to address this.

NTWC welcomes the establishment of First Nations Arts within Creative Australia as a structural commitment to self-determination, and recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Encourage the resources to be available for delivering literature opportunities in remote and very remote places, with the understanding that sharing work from remote and very remote places can take up to 4 days of travel and cost over five thousand dollars just for artists to attend metropolitan opportunities.
- Continue to encourage the work of anti racism in non First Nations led organisations so that support and allyship supports the strengths of people, place, communities and country.
- Establish a First Nations-led framework for writing and publishing, with sustained, multi-year investment in First Nations authors, publishers, literary organisations and First Nations-led writing, publishing and reading programs, including in First Nations languages and communities. The framework should resource First Nations leadership pathways across the literary sector, including in publishing houses, festivals, prize juries and editorial roles, so that decision-making power continues to shift in line with the principles of self-determination.
- Embed Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) protocols and data sovereignty across the systems that touch First Nations writing, including Writing Australia, festivals, education, libraries, digital infrastructure, AI training, metadata and rights management. Such requirements should cover consent, attribution, rights management and benefit-sharing.
- Lift the visibility of contemporary First Nations books in schools, public libraries, bookshops, prize culture, author touring and reading campaigns.
- Invest in First Nations writers, illustrators and storytelling and infrastructure, including cultural protocols, community consent, ICIP protections and fair payment for First Nations authors, publishers, Elders and cultural authorities;

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

Our literature needs to reflect the breadth of the peoples who live here: its languages, its regions, its histories, its disagreements, its humour and its hopes.

Across our programs we see this breadth taking shape: regional and remote writers, d/Deaf and disabled writers, LGBTQIA+ writers, and writers working across genres, children's and young adult writing, and emerging publication models.

A Place for Every Story is best served by:

- Continued investment in place-based literary practice: programs that support writers living and working in regional, remote and very remote areas (MM6 and MM7), delivered through writers' centres in partnership with regional councils, libraries and arts organisations.
- Specific support for community-led literary practice by writers from communities whose stories have been historically under-represented, including LGBTQIA+ writers, writers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, First Nations writers, d/Deaf and disabled writers. The Equity: The Arts and Disability Plan 2022–2026 should be continued and treated as a model for similar approaches with other communities.
- Support for literary magazines, small publishers and children's and young adult literature: the principal venues in which new and diverse Australian writing first appears in print, and the work through which the readers and writers of the future are formed.

- Encourage community-led writing practice and increase opportunities for writers to receive payment to engage with readers through participatory activities, presentations and talks.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

NTWC view is that this pillar is the most consequential of the five. A cultural policy is a system of supports for the people who make culture. If these people cannot make a living, the rest of the architecture will collapse.

The conditions of writers' work in Australia are not yet acceptable. Successive surveys of Australian author incomes have shown writers unable to make a sustainable living from their writing, with most authors earning only a small fraction of their income from creative practice. Financial reasons are also the most common cause of membership lapse, telling us that even modest costs are pushing writers out of the development pipeline.

The writers Australia is most likely to lose to these pressures are the writers a national cultural policy most needs to support: early-career writers, writers from low-income backgrounds, writers from regional and remote Australia, and writers from communities whose stories have been historically under-represented. These are the writers NTWC programs are built around. residencies, regional outreach and online access, exists to keep them in the work. The next National Cultural Policy can either consolidate that pipeline or watch it narrow.

NT Writers' Centre recommends:

Fair pay and income

- Continue and expand the work of Creative Workplaces in establishing fair pay benchmarks and minimum standards across the cultural sector, with literature-specific schedules developed in consultation with Writing Australia, the National Writers' Centre Network, the Australian Society of Authors and the broader literary sector.
- Support mechanisms that provide payment to Authors for creation and engagement (including NWCN), contingent on recognised industry rates for authors, illustrators, translators, moderators, workshop leaders and cultural advisers;
- Strengthen Public Lending Right and Educational Lending Right schemes, including indexation that reflects significant increases in the cost of living and an extension of eligibility to digital and audio formats where this has not already occurred.
- Make grants and literary prizes tax-free. Grants and prizes are typically modest and irregular. Taxing them as income reduces their value to writers in precisely the situations where they make the most difference.

Creative rights in the digital environment

The unauthorised use of Australian writers' work to train generative AI systems is the most significant rights issue facing our sector. Writing NSW recommends that the next National Cultural Policy:

- Establish enforceable consent, transparency and remuneration requirements for the use of copyright works in AI training, and reject any new copyright exception that would permit the commercial use of Australian writers' work for AI training without consent or compensation.
- Resource the enforcement and dispute-resolution mechanisms that writers and their representative organisations rely on, recognising that individual writers cannot bear the cost of enforcement on their own.

Beyond these immediate measures, the next policy should ensure that writers are explicitly visible in workforce data, vocational frameworks and the broader economic

policy settings that shape Australian working life, including superannuation, parental leave, mental health support and access to income support between projects. It should also continue investment in arts education in schools and in writer skills development at every career stage, delivered through Writing Australia in partnership with the National Writers' Centre Network.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The literary sector's infrastructure is structurally underfunded relative to its national footprint. The next National Cultural Policy can address this.

A National Plan for Books and Reading, led by Writing Australia

NTWC endorses the call from across the books and reading sector, including the Books Create Australia coalition, for the next National Cultural Policy to include a coordinated National Plan for Books and Reading. Books and reading depend on a connected ecosystem: writers, writers' centres, editors, agents, publishers, booksellers, libraries, festivals, schools and readers. A national plan would make that ecosystem legible to government, identify shared priorities, and give the literary sector a coordinated framework. It should be developed in partnership with the sector and led by Writing Australia, with appropriate cross-portfolio engagement.

The establishment of Writing Australia as a council within Creative Australia is the most significant structural change for the literary sector in a generation. For Writing Australia to fulfil its remit, it requires multi-year funding certainty, scope to act strategically (including the ability to commission research and deliver national programs in partnership with state and territory based organisations), and partnership with the existing literary infrastructure.

Given the scale of the literary ecosystem, Writing Australia cannot reasonably be expected to absorb the cost of a National Plan for Books and Reading from within its existing budget. Larger national investments, including reading promotion, books-and-reading data and metadata infrastructure, export and translation support, and any new sector-wide funding instruments, should be resourced separately. Writing Australia's own funding should remain available to support people, programs and the literary organisations that are its core constituency.

The National Writers' Centre Network as cultural infrastructure

The National Writers' Centre Network (NWCN) is cultural infrastructure. It is a federated network of eight writers' centres, one in every Australian state and territory, that together reach tens of thousands of writers each year through courses, mentorships, fellowships, festivals, professional development, advice and community. The NWCN is the system through which an emerging writer in Wagga Wagga, Broome, Mount Isa, Hobart, Western Sydney, Geelong or Alice Springs can find their first sustained pathway into a literary life. It is the connective tissue between local literary communities and the national literary culture they feed.

This is not a network that needs to be built. It already exists, built over decades through state and territory level investment and connected nationally through the NWCN. But this support is now uneven and increasingly precarious, varying between jurisdictions, vulnerable to changes of government, and in several states contingent on Commonwealth funding. Without Commonwealth recognition and investment, the network's capacity to serve writers consistently across the country cannot be assumed or guaranteed.

We ask to ensure that the NWCN receives investment that recognises the ongoing role the centres' play to provide Australia wide services to writing and nationally significant

programs with discrete areas of expertise and delivery, as part of a connected national infrastructure.

The next National Cultural Policy is the right place to remedy this. NTWC recommends that it:

- Formally recognise state and territory writers' centres, together with the National Writers' Centre Network through which they connect nationally, as cultural infrastructure of national significance, in the same way the policy framework already supports other federated systems such as national collecting institutions and national arts training organisations.
- Establish a dedicated multi-year investment stream for writer development services, delivered through Writing Australia, that complements existing support for the writers' centre network.
- Resource Writing Australia to lead national coordination of writer development in partnership with the NWCN, with the scope and funding necessary to do this work effectively.

Wider literary infrastructure

NTWC urges the next policy to recognise the wider literary infrastructure that connects writers and readers. Literary magazines, small-press publishing and literary festivals are the venues and events in which new Australian writing first reaches readers and where local literary communities gather. Independent bookshops are cultural infrastructure that connects writers with readers and platforms Australian titles through skilled curation, and they face significant cost pressures that warrant policy support. Public and school libraries are essential reading infrastructure, particularly for Australians in regional and remote areas; access to a properly resourced school library remains uneven across the country, and NTWC supports a national framework for school library provision.

Continued support and investment in multilingual and bilingual books and schooling. As 30% of people in the NT speak languages other than English at home, and reading at home starts a love of life long engagement with literature. Children's books in First Nations Languages are essential to learning, preserving language, and need to be in place before reading in English can be offered.. Bilingual schooling and resources need to be prevalent, relevant and need to be accessed at school and in libraries.

Across this infrastructure, climate change is increasingly testing sector resilience. Major Australian literary festivals have been cancelled or rescheduled due to extreme weather, and climate-driven cost pressures on venues, touring and insurance fall hardest on the smallest operators. Multi-year funding with proper indexation, accounting for these pressures, would significantly strengthen sector resilience without large new programs.

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

A flourishing literary culture requires writers, infrastructure and readers and the discovery pathways, formats and habits that connect the two. Australian books face significant discoverability challenges in an environment dominated by global digital platforms. The next policy should:

- Support First Nations audiences to access literary spaces, with investment in content that is relevant, created by First Nations authors, in spaces that are culturally safe and accessible.
- Support the promotion and discovery of Australian books through partnerships with libraries, retailers, schools and digital platforms, and invest in reading promotion

across all ages, recognising that reading culture is formed early and that exposure to Australian writing builds lifelong audiences.

- Support export pathways for Australian writing, recognising both the global appetite for Australian stories and that a substantial share of Australian screen, stage, audio and games content originates in or adapts Australian writing.
- Continue and extend the work of Equity: The Arts and Disability Plan, so that audiences with disability can engage with Australian literature in formats that suit them, and d/Deaf and disabled writers are visible and supported.

Conclusion

The test of the next policy will be the writers it keeps in the work. If it includes a National Plan for Books and Reading, properly resources Writing Australia, recognises the NWCN as cultural infrastructure and provides for emerging writer development through it, addresses the rights and income pressures on writers, and embeds First Nations leadership and Australian readership at its centre, it will leave the writers who most need it measurably stronger than it found them. NTWC welcomes the opportunity to work with the Office for the Arts, Creative Australia and Writing Australia on the next National Cultural Policy.