

Culture, Community and Place: Lane Cove Council Submission on Australia's New National Cultural Policy

Council's submission reflects what culture means to Lane Cove, how Council has invested in it for more than two decades, and what is needed from a National Cultural Policy to sustain it.



Kaleidoscope Festival at Lane Cove Plaza - Courtesy of Teresa Tan (2025)

Lane Cove Council Overview

Lane Cove Council sits on Cameraygal Country on Sydney's lower north shore and is a community of more than 41,000 people across 10.5 square kilometres, bordered by 16 kilometres of river foreshore. Lane Cove is a diverse, multilingual community with over 40% of residents born overseas, with Cantonese, Mandarin and Spanish among the top languages spoken at home alongside English.

Culture is central to life in Lane Cove and to community identity. In 2004, Lane Cove was one of the first councils in New South Wales to produce a Cultural Action Plan, a document that won a Local Government Award for excellence. Twenty years on, cultural priorities are embedded across Council's integrated planning framework, facilities, festivals and everyday community life. This submission reflects what has been learned through that practice, what Lane Cove values, and what is needed from the National Cultural Policy to sustain the range of cultural programs .



1 Gallery Lane Cove - Lane Cove Art Award 2025

1. What culture means to Lane Cove

Culture in Lane Cove is about more than arts programming. It is about identity, belonging and participation in everyday life.

Council's Community Strategic Plan focuses on three core ideas:

- creating opportunities for people to participate creatively,
- strengthening belonging and social connection, and
- celebrating the diversity of the community while building shared local identity.

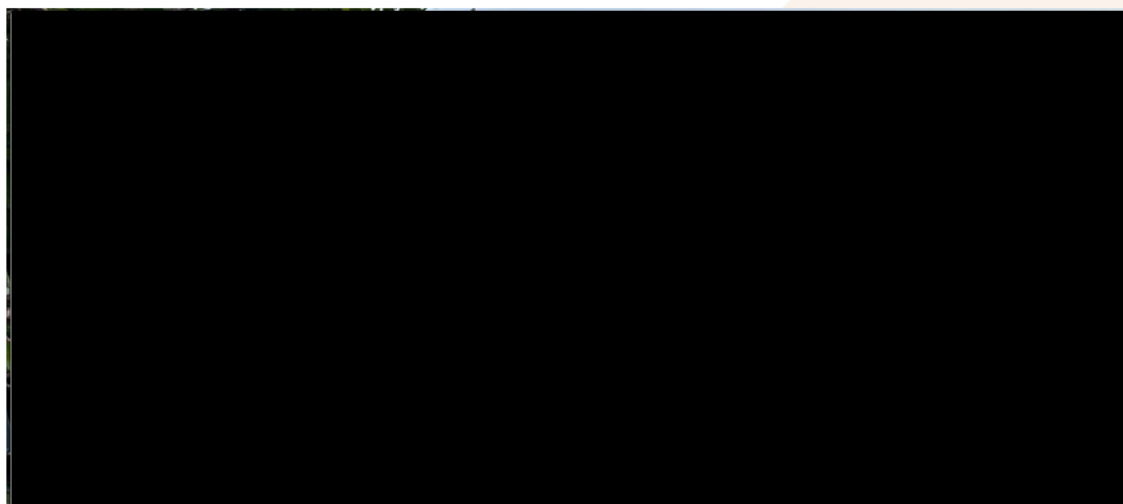
These are not aspirational statements. They are backed by facilities, programs, partnerships and festivals that Council funds and delivers. These priorities are reflected in

real infrastructure, long-term investment and ongoing operational delivery across the community.

Culture in Lane Cove happens through:

- A significant cultural venue portfolio including a dedicated indoor theatre-style performance space, museum, award-winning outdoor stage, plug-and-play performance locations in parks, rehearsal spaces for community bands, choirs and theatre groups, three libraries, and accessible civic spaces across the LGA
- Specialist financial support for creatives through Cultural Venue Hire Grants, subsidised Performer Rates, and ongoing funding arrangements for cultural programming and community access initiatives
- An established annual cultural festivals program delivering more than 100 events and performances, including Lane Cove Festival in partnership with Sydney Fringe Festival - the largest independent arts festival in NSW
- A commitment to managing and expanding a public art portfolio of more than 70 place-based artworks alongside a significant Civic Art Collection
- Provision of creative studios for independent artists and community art education through Gallery Lane Cove + Creative Studios, alongside sound and film studio access, digital fabrication facilities including 3D printing, and monthly makers markets
- Dedicated creative spaces and programs for young people, including rehearsal and creative workshop spaces, as well as early education programs with extensive arts-based learning and pioneering Bush Kids programs focused on creativity, sustainability and connection to nature
- Ongoing funding support for the Aboriginal Heritage Office, helping promote First Nations culture, heritage conservation and community education across the region
- Long-term support for Different Degrees, all abilities theatre program that has operated in Lane Cove for more than 15 years and provides genuine creative leadership and performance opportunities for people living with disability

This work is practical, place-based and deeply community-facing. It builds social connection, supports local identity and improves everyday access to culture. However, it is also becoming increasingly expensive and complex for local government to sustain without broader structural support.



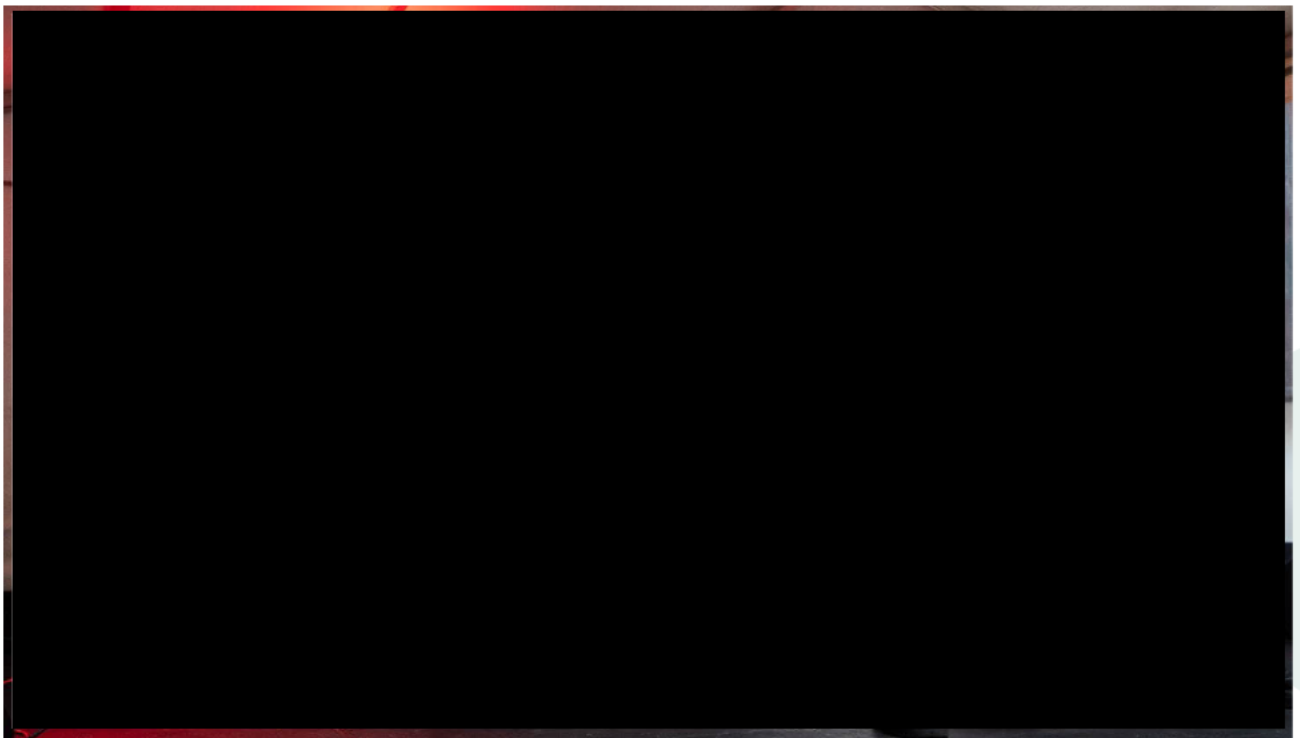
The Canopy Concerts Series 2025

3 The Reality of Local Cultural Delivery

Local government is no longer simply supporting culture in many communities. Councils like Lane Cove have become the primary cultural provider. In Lane Cove, Council plans, builds, operates and programs cultural infrastructure directly, often without ongoing State or Federal operational funding. As government investment in community-based cultural delivery has declined and become increasingly centralised around larger institutions like the Opera House and the National Gallery, local government has progressively filled the gap, sustaining grass-roots cultural activity, local creative opportunities, heritage programs, festivals, community arts and accessible participation.

While this locally driven model delivers enormous community value, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain as operational costs, compliance requirements and community expectations continue to grow. The future sustainability of Australia's cultural sector will require renewed investment and stronger partnership across all tiers of government, particularly in locally delivered cultural infrastructure and community-based programs where participation actually occurs.

The biggest challenge facing the cultural sector is not lack of creativity or demand. It is sustainability. Local government is carrying increasing responsibility and funding and operating a growing amount of Australia's cultural infrastructure and programming, often without matching operational support from other levels of government. This is a vital part of the cultural ecosystem and without it the national offer will deteriorate. There has been a noticeable shift of responsibility toward local government over the past two decades which aligns with investment Lane Cove Council has made in infrastructure and program delivery.



K-pop dancers at Lunar New Year in St Leonards

4 Challenges for Locally Delivered Culture

4.1 Operational funding: the gap between building and running

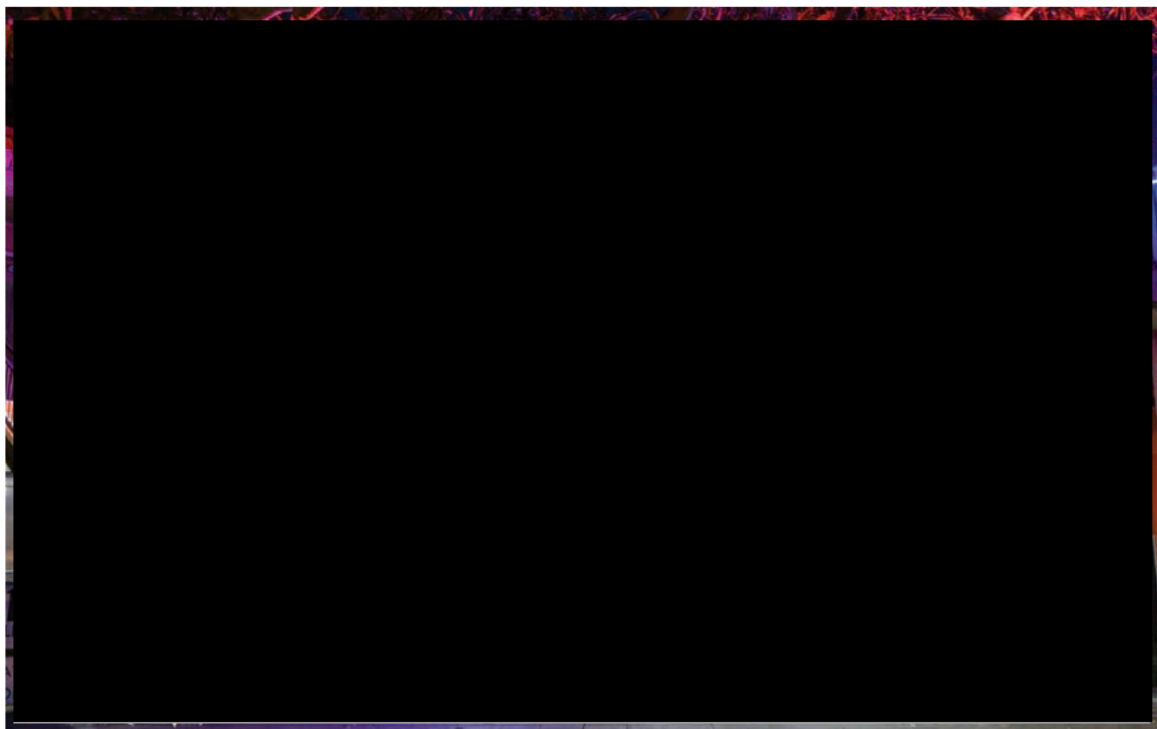
Capital funding without operational funding is one of the most significant structural pressures facing local government cultural delivery. Lane Cove Council has leveraged its property portfolio and developer contributions to deliver cultural infrastructure, but building facilities is only part of the challenge. Operating them in a rate-capped environment, where costs are escalating and compliance requirements are growing, is where the real pressure lies. Venues, galleries and museums require staffing, maintenance, programming, compliance, accessibility upgrades, marketing and renewal investment on an ongoing basis. Without operational support from other levels of government, local government carries that burden alone.

Key point: Capital grants that do not include operational funding create a long-term liability, not just community benefit in communities.

Case study: Gallery Lane Cove + Creative Studios

Gallery Lane Cove + Creative Studios illustrates this directly. Council recently received a request for an additional \$100,000 in operational funding simply to keep the gallery open. This is not a one-off anomaly; it is the result of sustained and compounding cost pressures that have been building across the organisation for several years.

On the cost side, award rate increases of 5.75% in 2023 and 3.75% in 2024 have flowed through to staffing budgets that were already stretched. Artist fees have risen as the sector rightly moves toward fair payment for creative work. Logistics, freight and installation costs have increased with broader inflation. Compliance requirements across WHS, accessibility standards and public venue obligations continue to add administrative and operational cost with no corresponding funding support.



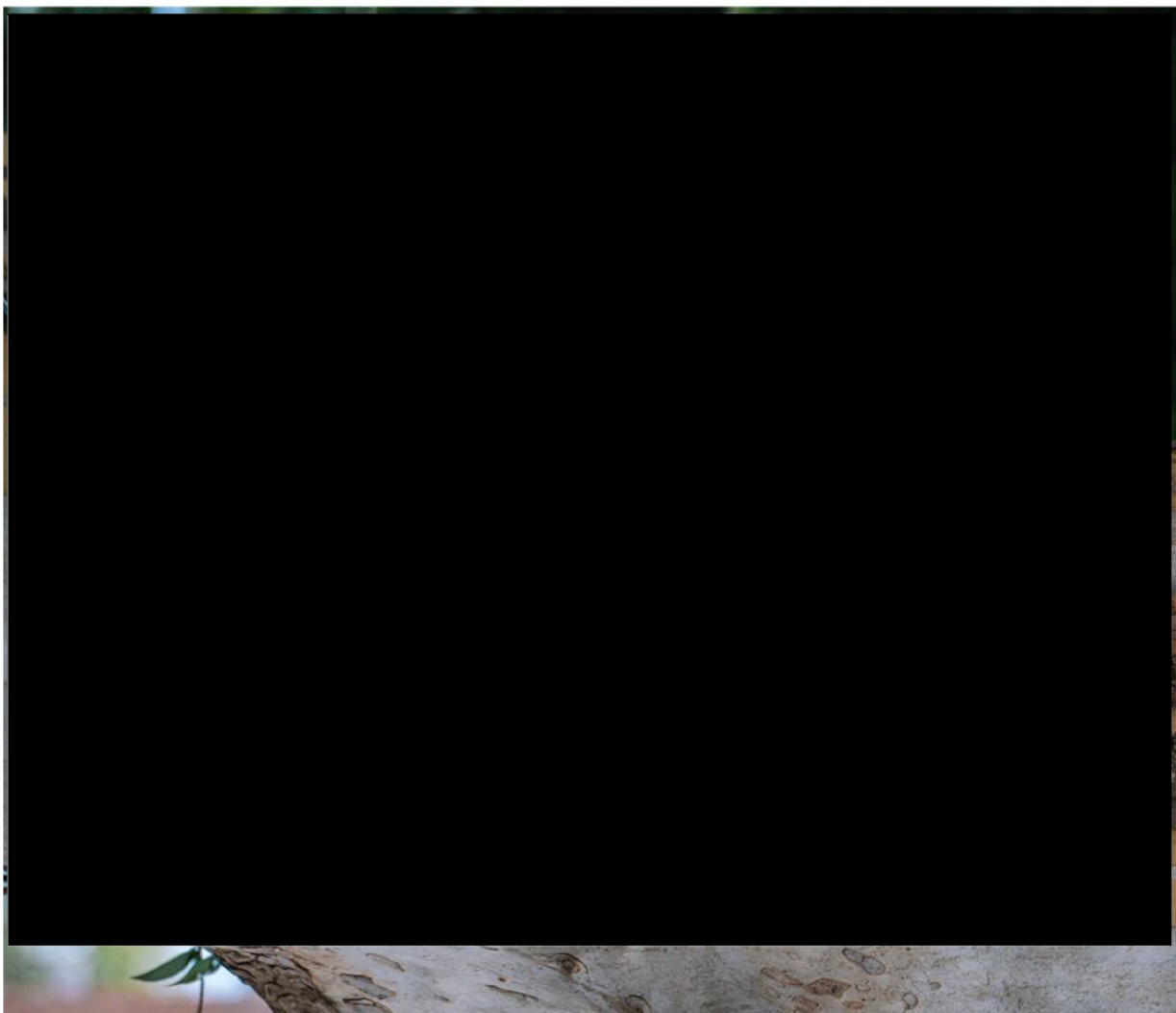
Gallery Lane Cove and Creative Studios

On the revenue side, the picture is equally challenging. Retail and program sales have softened as cost-of-living pressures reduce discretionary spending in the community. The Creative Kids Voucher program, which previously drove both participation and income, has

ended - removing a reliable demand and revenue stream that the gallery had come to depend on. No equivalent program has replaced it.

The result is a facility caught between rising costs it cannot control and declining revenues it cannot easily recover. The gallery now requires a fundamental rethink of its business model, not because it has been poorly managed, but because the external environment has shifted significantly and the funding model has not kept pace.

This is the predictable consequence of a system that invests in cultural infrastructure without committing to sustain the operations that bring it to life. Bricks and mortar can be funded through developer contributions and capital grants. Staffing, programming, compliance and renewal cannot. Until operational funding is treated as essential infrastructure not a discretionary add-on community galleries like Gallery Lane Cove will continue to face this cycle. Council budgets are being stretched, and cultural funding is often seen as discretionary against rising costs of asset renewal and technological changes.



Christmas Beetle Painted By Gwiyaala Artist Collective

4.2 Regulation: an increasing burden on small-scale cultural activity

Compliance and regulatory frameworks, while necessary, are placing a growing and disproportionate burden on community groups, independent artists and smaller cultural organisations. The cumulative effect can unintentionally discourage the grass-roots cultural activity that is most directly connected to local participation.

Key point: Regulation designed for large venues and professional organisations does not scale down well and the cost falls hardest on those with the least capacity to absorb it.

Case Study: Pottery Lane Performance Space

Pottery Lane Performance Space is a clear example of the challenges. Independent musicians performing at Pottery Lane faced a combination of venue insurance requirements and mandatory award rate technician costs that make performance financially unviable. Ticket revenue does not cover artist costs, let alone produce income. Rather than allow this to continue, Council introduced a reduced 70% off the commercial fees for independent performers (Performer Rate) to encourage local activity and support artists, an 80% discount for not-for-profit organisations such as Lane Cove Theatre Company. We do not require use of AV companies to reduce artist costs and have had to fund repairs and resets for complex AV equipment regularly because of that.

Council has also provided cultural groups with free storage and rehearsal spaces. The Lane Cove Concert Band now accesses rehearsal space in exchange for performing at civic events, a model of mutual support.

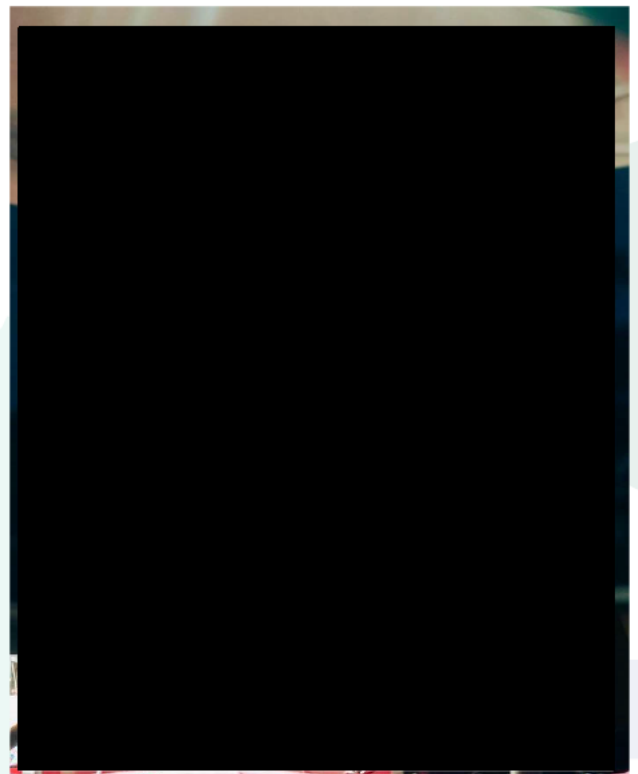
4.3 Inclusion programs: high value, fragile foundations

Programs supporting disability inclusion, young people, emerging artists and culturally diverse communities consistently deliver significant social value - and are consistently among the most financially vulnerable. They tend to rely on short-term funding, volunteer effort and local subsidy, with little structural support from State or Federal programs.

Key point: The programs that reach the communities most at risk of cultural exclusion are the least protected by current funding arrangements.

Case Study: Different Degrees

Council's partnership with Different Degrees, which delivers inclusive theatre for people with disability, faces ongoing uncertainty as changes to NDIS arrangements affect participant eligibility and attendance. As the program shifts toward participants with higher support needs and funding packages fluctuate, the organisation must continuously adapt, managing compliance requirements while trying to serve local creatives.



Council supports Different Degrees through venue access, staff support and performance opportunities. Last year's involvement in the Sydney Fringe Festival re-energised both participants and the coaching team. The challenge now is how the program evolves to include greater diversity of participants while remaining financially viable.

Case Study: Young People

Youth programs face similar pressures. Council has stepped back from some funding arrangements where program conditions conflicted with a youth-led approach and the principle of meeting young people where they are. Council provided arts opportunities through the Synergy Youth Centre program including music rehearsal space, crafting and maker spaces and performance opportunities. Youth artists are further supported through Council-funded events hiring groups through Synergy to help them establish a public profile and earn performance fees. The Youth Orchestra operates on free rehearsal space that Council provided, without which it could not function, supported by volunteer leadership and grant funds to ensure that these young musicians get a diversity of playing experiences. These local opportunities unfunded by other levels of government are an important part of arts education and experience. Additional funding for targeted programs for young people to ensure sustainability of cultural practice is vital.



4.4 Cultural storytelling to promote inclusion

Lane Cove is a genuinely multicultural community, 40% of residents were born overseas, with Cantonese, Mandarin and Spanish among the most commonly spoken languages at home alongside English. Council has made a deliberate investment in cultural programming that reflects and celebrates this diversity. A curated film club program engages agencies including Queer Screen, First Nations, Bollywood and Chinese filmmakers, bringing stories to the screen that are rarely seen in mainstream cultural venues. Screenings are paired with facilitated discussion, creating space for genuine connection across the community, not

passive consumption but active cultural exchange. Bollywood screenings serve Lane Cove's significant South Asian and Southeast Asian communities, recognising that culture that reflects your own life and heritage is not a niche offering, it is inclusion in practice.

Beyond film, Council supports a growing range of community-led cultural expression: poetry slams, CALD music performances, and larger festivals that activate Council's venues and public spaces. Navratri, Holi and Diwali celebrations, and the Kaleidoscope Festival promoting cultural diversity, have become genuine community anchors events that draw diverse audiences together and affirm that Lane Cove's cultural identity is plural, not singular. The Canopy has become an important venue for this kind of programming, providing an accessible and welcoming setting for community-led cultural activity.

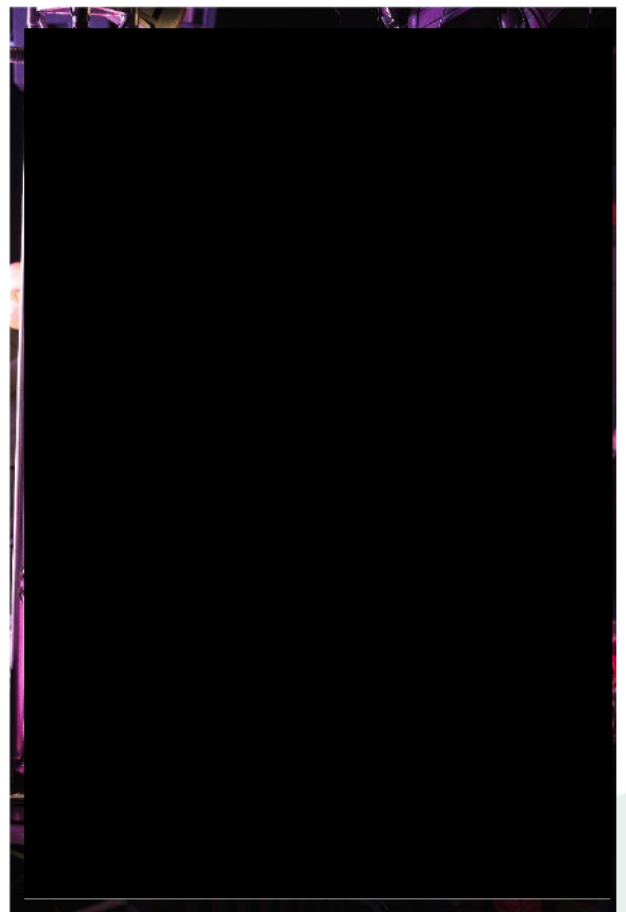
The challenge is a growing appetite for cultural and curated events and how this can be adequately resourced. Council is currently absorbing the full cost and administrative burden of delivering and facilitating programs that, by their nature and their reach, serve a function well beyond the boundaries of a single local government area. Licensing arrangements, WHS obligations on volunteers working alongside Council, coordination demands, and the resource intensity of facilitated programming all fall to Council with no commensurate support from State or Federal government. As community demand grows and the program expands in ambition, Council's capacity to sustain the coordination role from a fixed budget is increasingly constrained.

The solution is not for Council to withdraw. These programs are working. The solution is investment through grants that are genuinely accessible to local government, improved licensing arrangements, reduced administrative burden and appropriate WHS obligations in relation to volunteers supporting Council-run cultural activity. Community-led cultural programming of this kind does not need to be managed entirely by Council but the transition to self-managing community groups requires ongoing capacity building, not just encouragement. That transition takes time, resources and trust, and it will not happen without deliberate investment from other tiers of government.

The work is being done. The cost and the risk are sitting with Council. That is not a sustainable model for anyone. There are practical, local solutions to systemic problems that should not require individual councils to reinvent from scratch.

Case Study - First Nations Heritage and Education with the Aboriginal Heritage Office

Lane Cove Council is a founding partner of the Aboriginal Heritage Office (AHO), a joint initiative with North Sydney, Willoughby, Ku-ring-gai and Northern Beaches Councils established to protect Aboriginal sites and promote Aboriginal history and heritage across the region. The AHO operates across three areas: site management, Council support and community education. It monitors more than 1,000 Aboriginal heritage sites across the partner council areas - sites that cannot be replaced and once lost, are gone forever.



The AHO's community education program delivers free presentations, walks, talks and activities for schools and community groups, helping residents understand the Aboriginal history of the local landscape and view it through an Indigenous perspective. For Lane Cove, this is a direct and meaningful contribution to reconciliation through culture — not through policy statements, but through on-Country experience, shared knowledge and community connection.

This partnership model demonstrates what is possible when local government commits to sustained, place based First Nations cultural delivery. It also illustrates the resource reality: the AHO depends on ongoing Council contributions from five partner councils to function. There is no State or Federal operational funding underpinning it. The National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to change this by providing accessible funding for partnership models like the AHO that deliver genuine outcomes at the local level, on Country, where it matters most.

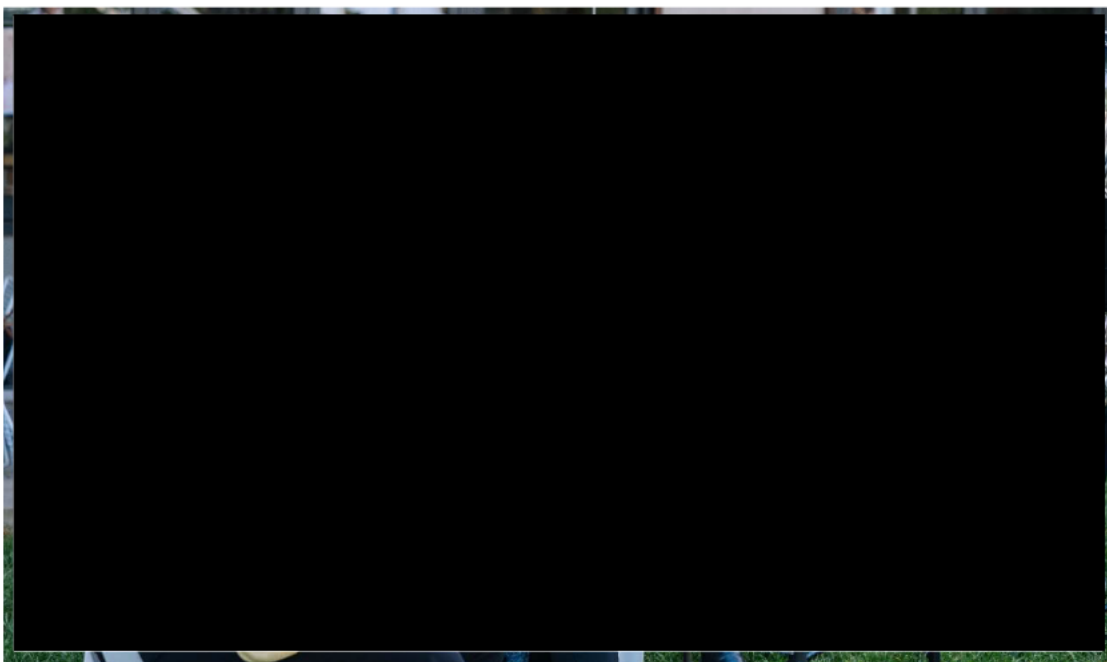
2. What should be in the National Cultural Policy

5.1 Recognise local government properly

Councils are already delivering culture every day. Recognise Local Government as a Core Cultural Tier. Establish direct funding pathways and formal recognition of councils as key delivery partners not just recipients of trickle-down support from State and Federal programs.

5.2 Support operations, not just buildings

Infrastructure funding alone is not enough. Ongoing operational support is essential if facilities are to remain accessible, inclusive and sustainable. Provide ongoing operational support for community cultural facilities, local organisations and inclusive and specialist programs. Capital investment without recurrent funding creates unsustainable assets.



Lane Cove Concert Band

5.3 Measure participation, not prestige

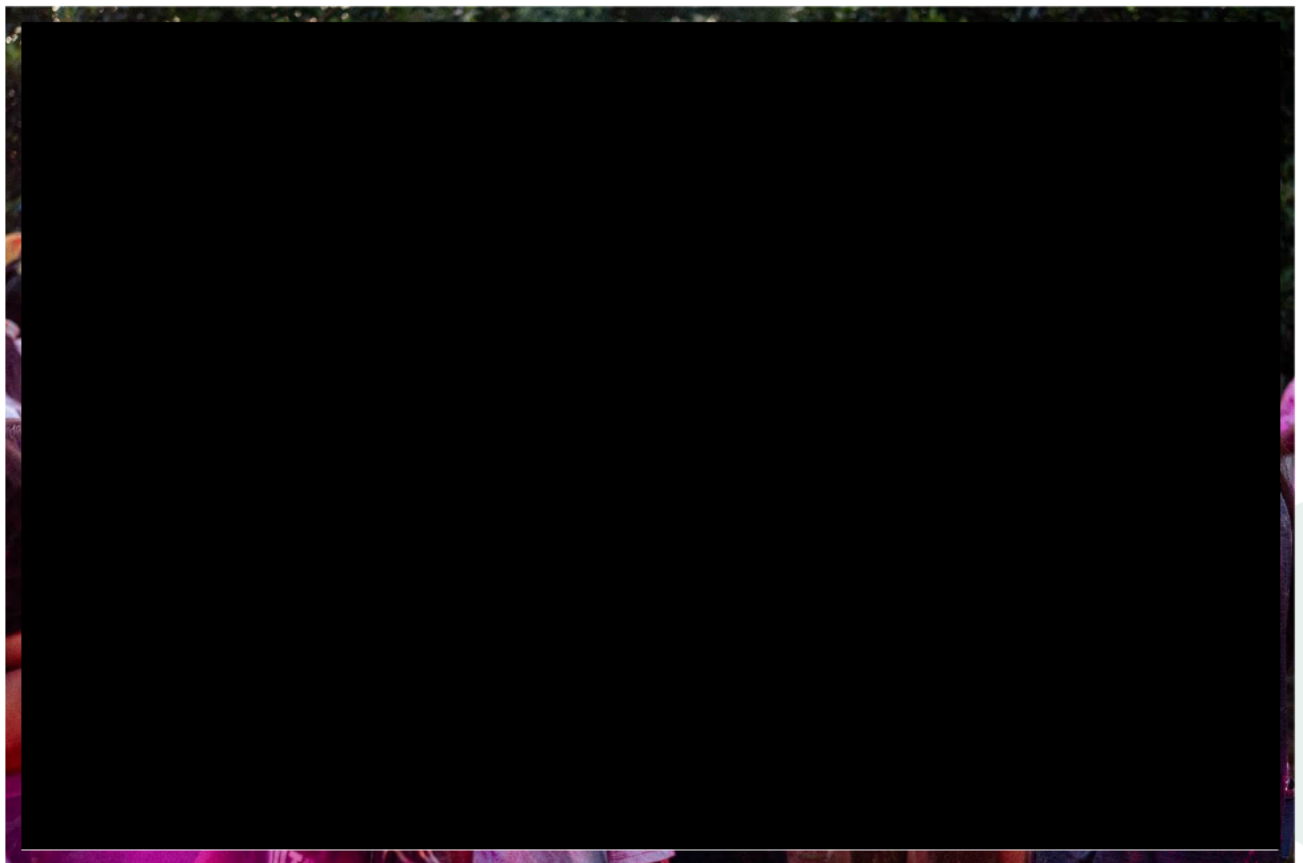
Shift the focus to participation and access. Measure cultural success based on who is participating, the diversity of audiences reached, and equity of access not solely on the prestige of funded organisations or outputs. Success should be measured by:

- who is participating,
- who feels welcome, and
- whether culture is accessible in everyday life.

Not simply by the scale or prestige of major institutions or as a subset of tourism.

5.4 Protect inclusive and community-based programs

Programs for disability inclusion, youth engagement and community participation need stable, long-term support.



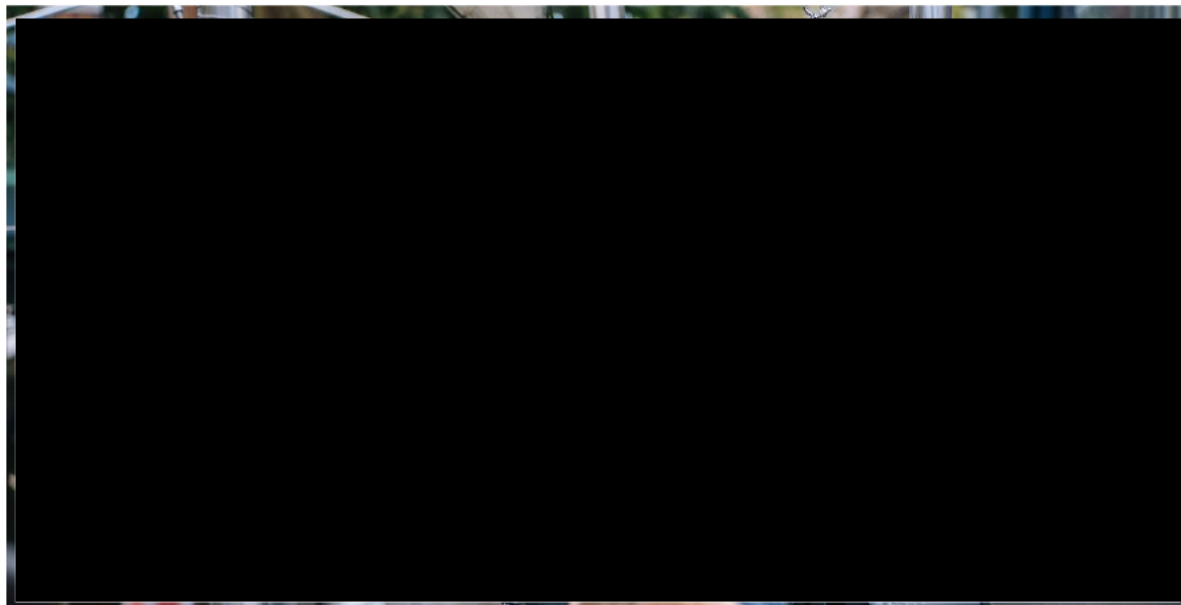
Holi Celebrations at The Canopy

5.5 Simplify regulation for community delivery

Ensure compliance frameworks are proportionate, consistent and designed with small organisations and community delivery in mind, reducing barriers to live performance, events and grass-roots cultural activity.

5.6 Invest in place-based First Nations partnerships

Councils can play an important role in reconciliation through local cultural partnerships and programming. Accessible funding pathways are needed to support this work meaningfully at the community level. Strengthen First Nations cultural delivery at the local level. Provide accessible, place-based funding for First Nations cultural partnerships, and ensure councils can participate meaningfully in reconciliation through culture not just through policy statements.



DJ Nacho Pop at Lane Cove Plaza

5.7 Support Local Creative Economies

Introduce local commissioning funds, affordable creative workspace initiatives, and professional development and digital capability programs particularly for independent and emerging artists.

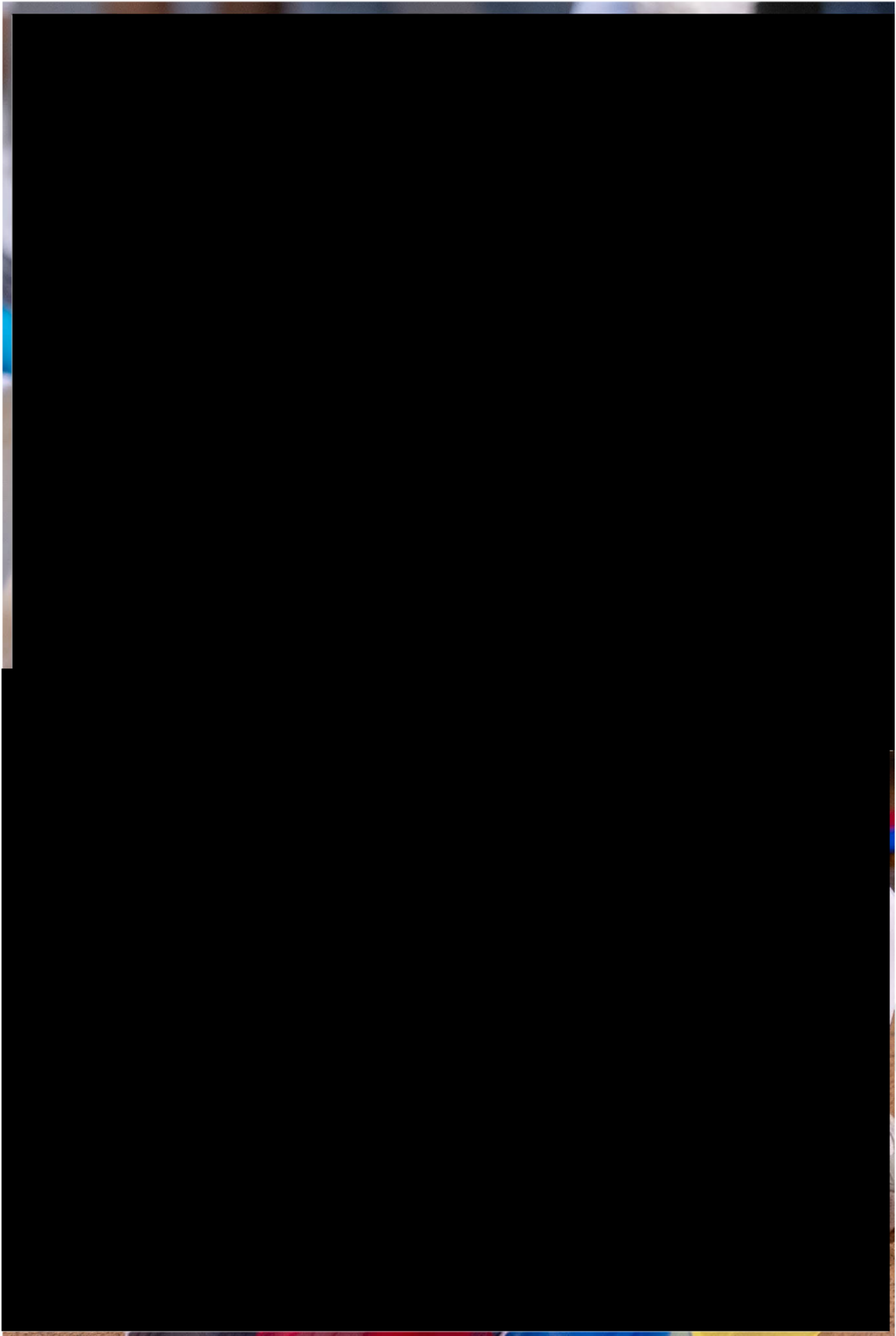
6 Conclusion

The future of Australia's cultural sector will increasingly be shaped at the local level. In Lane Cove and councils across the country, cultural infrastructure is already being built, maintained and programmed through local investment connecting artists and communities in ways that national institutions cannot replicate.

With targeted and sustained support, this model can expand significantly. Without it, there is a real risk that access to culture becomes uneven, over-centralised, and less inclusive of the diversity that makes Australian communities distinct.

A strong National Cultural Policy must recognise this reality and invest in a genuinely distributed model: locally delivered, nationally supported cultural outcomes for all Australians.

Lane Cove Council welcomes further dialogue with the Australian Government on the role of local government in realising the vision of the National Cultural Policy.



Korean Drummer at Lunar New Year