

Submission to the National Cultural Policy

South West Arts Inc
Regional Arts Development Organisation (RADO)


www.southwestarts.com.au

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About South West Arts

South West Arts (SWA) is the peak Regional Arts Development Organisation for the south-west of New South Wales, covering approximately 74,000 square kilometres and a population of over 35,000 across the six local government areas of Balranald, Berrigan, Carrathool, Edward River, Hay and Murray River. We have been developing arts and culture in this region since 1989 resulting in over 35 years of community-centred, evidence-based creative practice.

Our work spans arts advisory services, participatory programs, professional development, First Nations cultural programs, regional touring, cultural tourism, youth engagement and the management of the ENDFM community youth radio station and Creative Arts Hub in Deniliquin.

More than one third of our regional population engaged with South West Arts programs and services in 2023 alone, with almost 17,000 people engaging in services, programs or projects in 2025. This is what genuine regional arts investment looks like on the ground.

The Need for Regional Recognition

South West Arts acknowledges the foundations laid by Revive: A Place for Every Story, a Story for Every Place, and the increase to the Regional Arts Fund it delivered. However, Revive did not give specific, named attention to regional, rural and remote communities as a distinct policy priority.

For an organisation like ours, serving a region of 74,000 square kilometres of rural and remote communities, this gap is not a minor oversight. It reflects a structural blind spot in national cultural policy that has real consequences for the communities we serve.

We align with Regional Arts NSW's call for the new policy to explicitly foreground the terms Regional, Remote, Rural, Disaster Preparedness, Artificial Intelligence and Climate Change. These are not abstract concerns. They describe the daily operating environment of South West Arts and every artist, arts worker and community organisation we support.

The new National Cultural Policy must name Regional Australia as a core priority, not an implied one, and must resource regional arts infrastructure accordingly.

What Our Region Tells Us: Evidence from the SWA Creative Strategy

South West Arts completed a comprehensive Creative Strategy for 2025-2028, informed by community consultation, sector research, and a detailed SWOT analysis of our region's creative ecology. That analysis surfaces the policy gaps that the new National Cultural Policy must address.

Strengths the policy should build on

Our region has genuine and distinctive strengths: a vibrant network of volunteer-run galleries, museums and cultural organisations; world-class festivals including the Deniliquin Ute Muster, the Riverboats Jazz Food and Wine Festival and Strawberry Fields, which together draw over 50,000 visitors annually; significant First Nations cultural assets including the Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre and the Bullanginya Dreaming installation; and one of the largest permanent festival sites in Australia. These assets are real, they are locally owned, and they are the foundation of a genuine regional creative economy. A National Policy should amplify them, not ignore them.

Weaknesses the policy must address

Our SWOT analysis also identifies structural weaknesses that National Policy is uniquely placed to address. There are no major tertiary institutions offering arts training in our region, and TAFE offerings are limited. There are no structured career pathways for young people wanting to pursue creative industries work, which drives a persistent brain drain as talented young people leave for metropolitan areas. Geographic isolation and a sparse, dispersed population make consistent cultural programming deeply challenging.

Threats the policy must mitigate

The threats facing our region are significant. Volunteer-run organisations, the backbone of cultural life across the south-west, face burnout and succession challenges that threaten their sustainability. Economic constraints driven by climate change, Federal water policies and the decline of family farming are eroding both community morale and the financial base for arts participation. Digital and physical infrastructure limitations cut our communities off from the broader creative economy and competition from larger regional centres continues to draw artists and audiences away.

Opportunities the policy should unlock

Despite these challenges, our SWOT analysis identifies genuine opportunities that policy investment could activate: the expansion of creative industries training and career pathway programs; the revitalisation of key arts institutions; the development of cultural tourism cross-border regional gallery trail along the Murry river corridor; philanthropic investment from solar, mining and agricultural enterprises; and the growth of the ENDFM youth radio station into a sustainable enterprise platform for young regional creatives. These are not aspirational fantasies; they are grounded opportunities that require modest but sustained investment to become reality.

Priority 1: Career and Education Pathways for Regional Youth

This is South West Arts' highest strategic priority, and it should be a national one. Young people in the south-west of NSW are growing up in communities that offer them few visible creative career pathways. They want to tell their stories, produce original music, publish literature, work in digital media and lead their communities, but without structured pathways, they leave.

SWA has directly addressed this through the Horizons: Creative Career Launchpad program, which secured over \$500,000 from the NSW Government through the Regional Youth Incentive Program to deliver a statewide mentoring program for 75 regional young people from across regional NSW. The outcomes demonstrate what becomes possible when regional youth are given real mentoring, real industry connections and real creative agency. This model must be made permanent and nationally funded.

Our ENDFM youth radio station is another proof of concept. Young people are gaining real skills in podcasting, broadcasting, film editing, teamwork and leadership, skills that are directly transferable to the creative industries of the future, including those reshaped by artificial intelligence. Over 285 senior

students and 493 young people have engaged with ENDFM. With greater investment, this platform could grow into a nationally significant model for regional youth creative enterprise.

Arts and music education in regional schools is also in a genuinely poor state. Schools in the south-west are poorly equipped, often without specialist arts teachers, and frequently reduce the time allocated to creative subjects. Young people told us directly during our consultations that schools are not supporting their creativity. A new National Cultural Policy must include a commitment to arts education in regional schools, and to connecting school programs with professional creative pathways.

Priority 2: Soft Infrastructure and the RADO Model

South West Arts is, in practice, the primary professional arts support available to a community of over 35,000 people spread across 74,000 square kilometres, with just two full-time staff. This is not a criticism of our organisation: it is a description of the structural underfunding of regional arts infrastructure across Australia. The RADO network is funded by the NSW State Government, and we are grateful for that investment. However, core operational funding alone cannot deliver the depth of programming our communities need. We rely heavily on federal project grants to support program and service delivery, and it is here that a critical gap exists.

Current federal grant programs are designed to fund direct delivery outcomes such as performances, events, projects, professional opportunities for artists with measurable outputs. What they do not fund is the scaffolding: the relationship-building, the community trust, the professional development, the organisational capacity, and the sustained presence that makes meaningful outcomes possible in the first place. For youth programs, for First Nations partnerships, for rural and remote communities, this scaffolding is not optional. It is the difference between a one-off activity and a lasting change in a community's creative life. Without investment in that foundation, even the best-designed programs deliver outcomes that are shallow and short-lived.

We call on the new National Cultural Policy to explicitly recognise this gap and to reform the design of federal arts funding programs accordingly. Grant criteria should reward sustained community presence, capacity building and scaffolding investment, not just deliverable outputs. Multi-year federal project funding for regional organisations should become the norm, not the exception. And programs targeting youth, First Nations and remote communities in particular should be assessed on the depth and durability of their outcomes, not simply the number of participants or events reported. The returns on this kind of investment, measured in community cohesion, youth employment, First Nations self-determination and long-term regional cultural resilience are among the highest achievable anywhere in the arts funding system.

Priority 3: First Nations Arts and Cultural Self-Determination

The south-west region of NSW is home to 14 First Nations language groups whose Country spans the Riverina Murray landscape. For more than 60,000 years this land has been continuously inhabited, and First Nations culture, both ancient and contemporary, remains central to the region's identity.

South West Arts partners with the Yarkuwa Indigenous Knowledge Centre, the NSW Aboriginal Regional Arts Alliance, and First Nations artists from across the country. Our experience consistently shows that the most impactful First Nations cultural programs are those devised by community, delivered on Country, and connected to specific cultural knowledge and language. Policy that treats First Nations arts as a generic category, misses this entirely.

We have also, despite significant effort, been unable to secure funding for a dedicated First Nations Arts Development Officer for the region. The IVAIS program, which is the primary federal mechanism for supporting First Nations visual arts, is structured primarily as a closed, non-competitive process that prioritises existing funded organisations. It does not readily accommodate organisations like ours seeking to build the foundational scaffolding, the cultural safety structures, the governance frameworks and the workforce development pathways that must exist before a professional Indigenous visual arts industry can be sustained in a region that currently has no Indigenous Art Centre and limited First Nations arts infrastructure. SWA sought IVAIS support to deliver a region-wide, Aboriginal-led Living Strategy Framework covering 10 LGAs and 14 language groups, in partnership with 2 Rivers Pty Ltd and the Aboriginal Regional Arts Alliance. That application was unsuccessful. The region remains without the strategic foundation it needs.

The new National Cultural Policy must address this structural gap. Regions like ours, with significant Aboriginal populations, multiple language groups, and deep cultural heritage, but without existing funded arts infrastructure, are effectively locked out of the funding mechanisms designed to serve them. We call for IVAIS and equivalent federal programs to be reformed to accommodate foundational and developmental investment, not just the support of already-established organisations. Regional organisations, with demonstrated First Nations partnerships should be recognised as credible vehicles for this work.

First Nations arts policy must also be connected to Closing the Gap goals. Cultural practice, language revival, intergenerational knowledge transfer and creative enterprise are not separate from social outcomes. They drive them.

Priority 4: Multicultural Communities and the Art of Belonging

The south-west of NSW is home to a growing number of multicultural community members, including women from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds who have settled in smaller towns such as Deniliquin, Hillston and Balranald. The aftermath of the Farrer by-election has made visible what many in our communities have long felt: that disconnection, social fragmentation and a loss of shared belonging are growing threats to the fabric of regional life. The arts have a direct and evidence-based role to play in addressing this, but only if programs are designed to reach the people who most need them.

National research is unambiguous: just over half of people in regional areas attend arts events, compared to 78 per cent in big cities, and the gap falls hardest on isolated, newly settled and culturally diverse communities. Settlement research consistently finds that women from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds experience acute social isolation, compounded by limited English, limited transport and unfamiliarity with community services. In smaller regional towns, there is often no regular, low-barrier, culturally safe arts programming available to these women at all. This is not an individual failing; it is a structural gap that national policy must address.

South West Arts has developed Culture Caravan: The Art of Belonging in direct response to this need. The program is a mobile, co-designed touring model that visits communities directly, bringing trauma-informed, multicultural facilitation to women who cannot access arts programming through conventional means. Stitching circles and story-sharing sessions use accessible, low-barrier methodologies that require no prior arts experience or English literacy. All sessions are free, delivered in familiar local venues, and co-facilitated by practitioners with deep experience in multicultural community engagement.

The new National Cultural Policy must recognise that multicultural participation in the arts is not a metropolitan issue. Regional communities are growing in cultural diversity, and the social cohesion benefits of inclusive, culturally safe arts programming are arguably more urgent in smaller towns, where informal

community networks are thinner and the consequences of isolation more severe. We call for dedicated federal investment in mobile, co-designed, low-barrier arts programs for multicultural and refugee communities in regional, rural and remote Australia, and for the cultural safety infrastructure needed to deliver them to be treated as eligible, fundable program costs rather than an overhead to be absorbed.

Priority 5: Climate Change, Disaster Preparedness and Community Resilience

The south-west of NSW is no stranger to crisis. In recent years our communities have endured crippling multi-year drought, the cross-border disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and devastating regional floods in both 2022 and 2023. These were not isolated events, they were overlapping, compounding crises that fell hardest on rural and remote communities.

The arts play a documented and significant role in disaster recovery: rebuilding community cohesion, restoring a sense of place, processing collective grief, and creating economic activity in communities that have lost their normal rhythms.

The ACRE (Australia's Creative Rural Economy) project, a 15-year partnership with Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery, Regional Arts Victoria and farming communities across the NSW-Victoria border, has worked through drought, COVID and flood to demonstrate exactly this. The program has delivered residencies, commissions, cross-disciplinary exchanges and community celebrations that have kept rural communities connected when everything else conspired to pull them apart.

Disaster preparedness, however, is almost entirely absent from current arts policy settings. The arts are recognised in recovery, belatedly and usually underfunded, but not in preparedness. Climate change is worsening the frequency and severity of the disasters our communities face. Disaster preparedness must be embedded across every pillar of the new National Cultural Policy, not confined to a recovery stream.

Priority 6: Cultural Tourism as a Regional Economic Strategy

Cultural tourism is one of the most significant and underutilised economic opportunities for regional Australia. The south-west region has assets that draw tens of thousands of visitors annually, the Deniliquin Ute Muster, the Riverboats Jazz Food and Wine Festival, Rainbow on the Plains, Strawberry Fields, the Winter Blues Festival, as well as natural and heritage attractions including Mungo National Park (World Heritage), Ramsar-listed wetlands, and the Bullanginya Dreaming Cultural light scape in Barooga.

The RADO Network's 2024 Cultural Tourism Research Report confirmed that the value of cultural tourism to NSW regional communities is substantially underestimated, and that regional creative organisations need support to develop their tourism offering. SWA's creative cultural mapping work and our partnerships with Destination Riverina Murray are building this capacity locally. A national policy framework that recognises cultural tourism as a creative industries strategy and funds regional capacity to participate in it, would unlock significant economic and cultural benefits.

Priority 7: Digital Access and Artificial Intelligence

Digital connectivity in the south-west of NSW remains inconsistent, and in some communities genuinely poor. This limits artists' capacity to reach audiences, access professional development, market their work, or participate in the digital creative economy. It also limits the capacity of arts organisations like ours to deliver programs efficiently across a vast geographic region.

Artificial intelligence is reshaping the creative economy rapidly, and regional communities are at risk of being left behind. At the same time, AI creates genuine opportunity: regional young people with strong

digital creative skills are positioned to participate in a global creative economy without being required to leave their communities. Our ENDFM program is already building these skills in a regional context. Policy investment in digital infrastructure and AI-ready creative education for regional communities is not a futurist aspiration; it is an urgent equity issue.

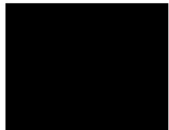
Summary of Recommendations

South West Arts calls on the Australian Government to ensure the new National Cultural Policy:

- Explicitly names Regional, Rural and Remote arts development as a core policy pillar, not an assumed one
- Invests in permanent, nationally funded career and education pathways for regional youth in the creative industries, including expansion of the Horizons mentoring model
- Reforms IVAIS and equivalent federal First Nations arts programs to accommodate foundational and developmental investment in regions without existing Indigenous arts infrastructure
- Invests in mobile, co-designed, low-barrier arts programs for multicultural and refugee communities in regional, rural and remote Australia, recognising cultural safety infrastructure as an eligible program cost rather than an overhead
- Embeds disaster preparedness across all policy pillars, not just recovery
- Recognises cultural tourism as a creative industries strategy and funds regional capacity to participate in it
- Invests in digital connectivity and AI-ready creative education for regional, rural and remote communities
- Recognises the role of the arts in economic transition and embeds creative practitioners in regional planning processes.

For over 35 years, South West Arts has been building a creative future for communities that are often invisible to national policy. Our region has faced drought, flood, pandemic and economic disruption and through all of it, the arts have been a tool for resilience, connection and hope. With the right policy settings, that work can grow.

We urge the Australian Government to ensure the new National Cultural Policy is one that regional Australia can genuinely see itself in.



Kerry-Anne Jones
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